



Child Abuse Prevention Policy

Open Hearts United Methodist Church

Since 2007, churches in the South Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church have sought to provide and implement Safe Sanctuaries practices. Each local church must maintain a Safe Sanctuaries policy and review it annually. The 2016 General Conference of the United Methodist Church adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of child sexual abuse in the church:

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes (a) child...welcomes me." (Matthew 18:5). Children are our present and our future, our hope, our teachers, our inspiration. They are full participants in the life of the church and the realm of God.

Jesus also said, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones...it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6). Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to the little ones, the children. The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church state that "children must be protected from economic, physical, emotional and sexual exploitation and abuse."

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children. Child sexual abuse, exploitation, and ritual abuse (abusive acts committed as part of ceremonies or rites, often related to cults or pretend to be) occur in churches large and small, urban and rural. The problem cuts across all economic, cultural and racial lines. It is real, and it appears to be increasing. Most annual conferences can cite specific incidents of child sexual abuse and exploitation within churches. Virtually every congregation has among its members the adult survivors of early sexual trauma.

Such incidents are devastating to all who are involved: the child, the family, the local church and its leaders. Increasingly, churches are torn apart by the legal, emotional and monetary consequences of litigation following allegations of abuse.

God calls us to make our churches safe places, protecting children and other vulnerable persons from sexual and ritual abuse. God calls us to create communities of faith where children and adults grow safe and strong.

– The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church

Thus, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, Open Hearts UMC adopts this policy for the prevention of child abuse in our church:

I. Purpose

The purpose for establishing this Child Abuse Prevention Policy and accompanying procedures is to demonstrate our total and unwavering commitment to the physical, emotional and spiritual safety of all of our children, youth and vulnerable adults.

II. Covenant Statement

Open Hearts UMC hereby pledges to conduct the ministry of Jesus Christ in ways that assure the physical and emotional safety and spiritual growth of all of our children, youth and vulnerable adults – as well as all of our workers with children, youth and vulnerable adults. We will follow reasonable safety measures when selecting and recruiting workers; we will implement appropriate operational procedures in all areas of programming and care; we will train our workers with children, youth and vulnerable adults on our procedures and policies; and we will have a clearly defined procedure for reporting a suspected incident of abuse consistent with South Carolina state law.

III. Theological Reflection

We adopt this policy in accordance with the statement we as a congregation make at each baptism – that we will “nurture children and youth in the Christian faith and life and include them in our care.” With this policy, we renew our baptismal pledge to “live according to the example of Christ” and surround children and youth with a “community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God, and be thus confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.” (*Baptismal Covenant II, United Methodist Book of Worship*).

IV. Volunteer and Staff Recruitment and Selection Guidelines

- A. **Age** – Volunteers and paid staff who work with children, youth and vulnerable adults in any position of authority must be at least 21 years of age and at least 5 years older than the age of the persons they are working to serve. Any youth ages 16 and up can serve alongside a supervising adult in nursery or children’s ministry settings.
- B. **Church affiliation** – Volunteers and paid staff who work with children, youth and vulnerable adults must have been an active participant in regular worship and another ministry at the church for at least 6 months.
- C. **Working with children, youth and vulnerable adults** – A satisfactory background check must be completed before volunteers and paid staff work with children, youth and vulnerable adults in the church.
- D. **Application** – Applicants must complete and sign an application form (staff) or information form (volunteers) and the related waivers giving permission to check references and background information. (Criminal background checks will be made of all clergy, paid staff and volunteers who have supervisory program responsibilities for youth and children.)
- E. **Recommendation Checks** – Church leaders will check three references for each primary worker. The references will be performed by phone, by mail or in person.
- F. **Confidentiality of Information** – The church will keep confidential all information received in the applicant selection process. Selection information will be marked as such and stored in a locked location with limited access only by church staff and others with a need to know.
- G. **Required Forms and Signatures** – In addition to staff application and reference forms, all applicants will sign an “Authorization and Request for Criminal Background Check” form.

V. Staff Supervision Guidelines

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- A. **Two-adult rule** – Whenever possible, two adults will be present during classroom activities, activities away from church facilities, and when transporting children, youth and vulnerable adults. If this is not possible, at least one adult will be assigned as a “rover” to walk the halls and regularly look in on teachers and the groups they are leading. Whenever possible, teachers will be assigned in teams of two or more per Sunday School hour to every class of children, youth and vulnerable adults. When feasible, both male and female leaders should be present. If the group stays overnight at the church, or if a church-sponsored group leaves the premises, two or more leaders will be present and will include at least one male and one female, if the group is mixed gender. See additional specifications for youth overnight outings in Section V.G. of this document.
- B. **Nursery Procedure** – All legal guardians using the church nursery will observe check-in and checkout procedures as outlined in the nursery policy manual. (Infant through 3 years old)
- C. **Open-Door Policy** – Further protection for children, youth and vulnerable adults requires that an open-door policy be followed. The legal guardian of the children served, clergy, administrative and professional staff of the church have the right to visit unannounced and observe any children’s or youth activity, classroom or church-sponsored program at any time.
- D. **Outside Access** – There must be access to a telephone or cell phone when a group is at or away from the church facility. The church office or an authorized church representative will be given this number prior to a group’s departure from church property.
- E. **Doors and Windows** – All classroom and office doors will have a window or visibility from the hallway, or will remain open while occupied. Windows will be kept free from adornment, and exterior windows will be locked at all times. Doors without visibility from the outside will be replaced with doors with windows when replacement is needed.
- F. **Outings Away From Church Property** – Legal guardians of all children and youth participating in out-of-town and overnight outings must sign a written consent form and a notarized medical release form, both of which may be completed for a one-year period, but must be renewed annually. In no circumstance is one adult (other than the children, youth and vulnerable adults) to take a child or children on an overnight outing alone. On youth overnight outings, a 1-to-7 staff-to-youth supervision ratio will be observed. Female staff will supervise female youth in their sleeping quarters, and male staff will supervise male youth. Married couples will observe the female/female and male/male sleeping arrangements. With the exception of a legal guardian/child combination, a staff and youth will not occupy the same bed or sleeping bag.
- G. **Gifts** – Volunteers and paid staff who work with children, youth and vulnerable adults will not give gifts to individual children, youth and vulnerable adults. Because gift-giving can be a form of buying loyalty or silence, gift-giving should be done on a group basis and only on special occasions. Gifts should be modest and appropriate to the occasion.
- H. **Training** – Prior to working with children, youth and vulnerable adults, workers must undergo child protection safety training. The Safe Sanctuaries policy will be evaluated regularly, and training will be offered to persons working with children, youth and vulnerable adults. The training will be extended to the leadership team members and paid staff. Trainings will be held on a regular basis.

- I. **Verification of Reading of Policy Statement** – Upon receipt of this policy statement, volunteers and paid staff who work with children, youth and vulnerable adults will read and sign a statement confirming that he or she has read the Child Abuse Prevention Policy.

VI. Response By Church Workers To Allegations of Abuse

If a suspected incident of abuse or neglect occurs at the church or is revealed to a volunteer or paid staff person at a church-sponsored activity, the following steps will be taken:

- A. The adult in charge of the activity will:
 - a. Ensure the safety of the child, youth or vulnerable adult and tend to his or her immediate needs, as the situation dictates.
 - b. Inform the pastor.
 - c. Fill out an Incident Report.
- B. The pastor will:
 - a. Contact the family
 - b. Immediately remove the accused from further involvement with children, youth and vulnerable adults – with dignity and respect for the sacred worth of the person.
 - c. Inform the district superintendent and the church's insurance company.
 - d. Determine, in consultation with the district superintendent, what to tell key church leaders and the congregation and devise a plan to help the church move forward.
 - e. Consult with the conference communications coordinator for assistance in dealing with media inquiries and preparing statements.
 - f. Act as the only point of contact for any media inquiries, or designate one other person to do so. All other church staff and volunteers will refer any media requests to the pastor or his or her designee.
- C. The person who initially reported the suspected incident of abuse or neglect, or to whom the allegation was revealed, will call the appropriate local law enforcement agency.

If the pastor is suspected or accused of sexual misconduct or abuse, these steps will be taken:

- D. The safety of the victim of the alleged misconduct or abuse will be ensured, and his or her immediate needs will be tended to, as the situation dictates.
- E. The person who initially reported the alleged misconduct or abuse, or to whom the allegation was revealed, will:
 - a. Inform the Leadership Team chairperson.
 - b. In cases involving alleged abuse, call the appropriate local law enforcement agency.
- F. The Leadership Team chairperson will inform the district superintendent.

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- G. The district superintendent will inform the bishop and, in consultation with the SPRC chairperson, they will decide whether the pastor will be removed from the pulpit until the investigation is completed and resolved.
- H. The bishop may activate the Conference Response Team to help the church with next steps.

VII. Conclusion

In all of our ministries with children, youth and vulnerable adults, this congregation is committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each child, youth and vulnerable adult will be “surrounded by steadfast love...established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.” (*Baptismal Covenant II, United Methodist Book of Worship*)



Internet and Social Media Policy

Incredible ministry can take place using modern technology but, as with all forms of ministry, there are inherent risks involved with the use of electronic communications. Following these procedures can minimize those risks, and adults working with children and youth will be instructed in their use.

Obtain permission from a parent or guardian

In addition to general permission to participate in a church ministry, adults working with children and youth will obtain written parental permission in advance before:

- Posting photos and videos of participants on any church website and social media, or sharing photos and videos in any way, including but not limited to email, text message and messaging apps.
- Communicating directly with an individual child or youth (beyond overall group messaging) in any way, including but not limited to phone, email, text message and messaging apps.
- Sharing any participant's full name or contact information.

Guidelines for communication with children and youth

- If communicating by email, place email addresses in the BCC (blind carbon copy) field so recipients see only their own address when a message is received.
- All information will be delivered as a group or with a parent copied. There will be no one-on-one conversation between an adult and a youth.
- Conduct all communication in a professional manner.
- If a child, youth or vulnerable adult shares an individual communication with an adult, the adult should preserve the communication so it can be reviewed later, should the need arise.

Safety measures for using social media

- Set privacy settings to limit who can see your profile.
- Do not submit a "friend request" to a child or youth.
- Avoid relationships with children and youth via social networking sites, unless an actual relationship (ministry, family friendship, etc.) already exists.
- Do not post anything on social media that you would not publish in a church bulletin or newsletter.
- Educate children and youth about these guidelines, and encourage them to follow them.

Safety measures for sharing photos electronically

- Obtain permission to use photos.
- Refrain from using names or identifiable information.
- On social media, tag only adults.

Administration of official church social media

- Each social media account or group will have a minimum of two unrelated administrators who are either church leaders or adult volunteers engaged in the ministry.
- Social media will be monitored frequently to allow for quick responses in the event urgent or crisis concerns are posted.
- Examine photos for vulnerable/compromising situations and make sure they uphold your mission.
- Any inappropriate material posted to church social media or group will be deleted and addressed.