

Safe Sanctuary Abuse Prevention Policy Washington Street UMC

April 2023

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*

*In the policy that follows, when the term **vulnerable adult** is used, it is the intent of this policy to define a vulnerable adult as:*

Someone who is aged 18 years or older who is or may be in need of community care services by reasons of mental health or other disability, age-related condition or illness and is **or** may be unable to care for themselves, or unable to protect themselves against significant harm or exploitation.

Thus, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, Washington Street United Methodist Church adopts this policy for the prevention of child abuse and the protection of vulnerable adults in our church:

I. Purpose

The purpose for establishing this Safe Sanctuary 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

Washington Street United Methodist Church 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 and youth in any position of authority must be at least 16 years of age and at least 5 years older than the age of the persons they are working to serve.

B. Church affiliation – Volunteers and paid staff who work with children, youth, and vulnerable adults either must have been an active participant in regular worship and another ministry at the church for at least 6 months, **or** have been employed by the Washington Street Child Development Center for at least 6 months, or have gone through an interview with a staff member.

C. Working with children, and youth, and vulnerable adults– A satisfactory background check must be completed before volunteers and paid staff work with children, and 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.

E. Reference Checks – References for each primary worker (paid adult or leader) will be performed by phone, mail, email or in person.

F. Background Checks – Criminal background checks will be made of all paid staff and all persons who volunteer with children, and youth, and vulnerable adults. A background check will be conducted every three years. Background checks are conducted by the S.C. Conference for all clergy every three years.

G. Prior Convictions – Individuals who have been convicted of physical or sexual abuse or neglect may not volunteer with or work in any church-sponsored activity or program for children, and youth, and vulnerable adults.* Individuals who have been convicted of financial crimes will not handle money. Individuals who have been convicted of DUI in the past 5 years will not drive persons of any age.

** If you are aware of individuals in this category, please contact the senior pastor.*

H. Interview – All applicants may be interviewed for suitability for the work they desire to do. Interviews will be conducted by the leader of the program in which the applicant will work or by persons designated by the program leader. A team of interviewers may be used. Church policy and guidelines should be discussed during the interview.

I. Child Abuse Survivor Applicants – Adult survivors of childhood physical or sexual abuse need the love and acceptance of this church family. A person’s experience with abuse and their recovery process may be pertinent to their suitability as ministry workers with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. Applicants who are survivors of abuse should discuss this in confidence with the person who conducts the confidential interview. If an applicant is uncomfortable doing so, he or she may have the interview conducted by a pastor.

J. 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.

K. 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

A. Two-adult rule – Two non-related adults should be present during *children and youth* classroom activities, activities away from church facilities, and when transporting children and youth. If this is not possible while on church property, 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. Rovers should be used in cases when there are other programs happening concurrently in the building but should not be relied upon for those times when youth or children’s activities are the sole program e.g. youth group. Whenever possible, teachers will

be assigned in teams of two or more per Sunday School hour to every class of children and youth. When feasible there should be one same gendered adult for each gender 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. Two screened adults should not leave church property before all young people have left any program or event. See additional specifications for youth overnight outings in Section V. -G. of this document.

In those circumstances when a young person must unavoidably be supervised by only one screened adult, it is our practice that the screened adult should supervise the young person in a hallway with a camera or outside the church in a parking lot with a camera. Under these circumstances, the general rule requiring the presence of two screened adults is suspended and the sole screened adult is responsible for exercising their best judgment for the participants' well being. Camera locations are in the T section of hallways on the main level of the church as well as the main parking lot and entry way.

B. Nursery Procedure – All legal guardians using the church nursery will observe check-in and checkout procedures as outlined in the nursery.

C. Classroom/Activity Visitation Policy – Further protection for children and youth requires that a classroom/activity visitation policy be followed per this policy. The legal guardian of the children served, clergy, administrative, and professional staff of the church all have the right to visit unannounced and observe any children's or youth activity, classroom, or church-sponsored program at any time.

D. 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 that block visibility into the room 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.

E. 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.

F. Individual Counseling – One-on-one interactions with children, and youth and vulnerable adults are sometimes necessary and appropriate, but care must be taken that they be conducted in an environment that provides visibility by other adults. If at all possible, another adult is to have knowledge of staff members' whereabouts and with whom they are meeting. All incidents of suspected abuse and neglect revealed during the session will be reported in accordance with Section VI of this policy.

G. 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 these are effective for a one-year period and must be renewed annually. In no circumstance is one adult to take children, youth, or vulnerable adults on an overnight outing alone.

On youth overnight outings, a 1-to-7 adult-to-youth supervision ratio will be observed. Same gendered staff will supervise same gendered youth. Married couples will not be permitted to sleep in the same bed in a room where other youth are sleeping. With the exception of a legal guardian/child combination, a volunteer and a child or youth will not occupy the same

bed or sleeping bag. Drivers on outings away from church property must be at least 23 years old and have a motor vehicle record check on file in the church office prior to travel. Only approved drivers will drive young people on church outings even in short circumstances e.g. picking up food or going to get gas.

- H. **Gifts** – Volunteers and paid staff who work with children and youth will not give gifts to individual children or youth. 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.
- I. **Training** – Prior to working with children and youth and vulnerable adults, workers must undergo child protection safety training. The Safe Sanctuary policy will be evaluated every 5 years and training will be offered to persons working with children and youth on a yearly basis. The training will also be extended to Church Council members, SPRC, Trustees and paid staff.
- J. **Healthy Boundaries** – No adult should engage in hand holding, back rubbing, hugging, sitting on laps, or other physical touching with any child over the age of 7 with the exception of any legal guardian/child relationship. No adult is permitted to enter into a romantic relationship with any young person. Disagreements between volunteers should never be held in front of children or youth. All volunteers are responsible for deterring or redirecting negative conversation about other adults from either volunteers or youth. All screened adults are responsible for redirecting foul language or other negative speech from young people.
- K. **Inclusive Language Promise** – We will make every effort to integrate transgender and/or non-binary volunteers and students into our program and counsel all volunteers and students on what acceptance and inclusion looks like in our community. All people will be referred to in the way they request by all who participate. We will not tolerate bullying of any kind and promise to report bullying to the appropriate staff member.

VI. Internet and Social Media

- A. Persons who are photographed at church-related activities will be provided the opportunity to sign a photo release form giving permission to post photos on the church website, social media, bulletin boards or other public forums.
- B. Do not tag or refer to by name any child, youth or vulnerable adult on any social media platforms.
- C. Do not photograph children, youth or vulnerable adults who are wearing nametags or can be identified by any other labeling.
- D. Leaders will only use church-affiliated social media accounts – rather than personal accounts – when communicating with children and youth.
- E. Adult leaders should use BCC (blind carbon copy) when communicating with a group of youth via email so that each person only sees their own email address.
- F. There should be no one-on-one electronic conversations between an adult and a child or youth. Conversations and messages should go out to the entire group. If a youth initiates

such a conversation, the adult should preserve the communication so that it can be reviewed later should the need arise. How to preserve these communications will be part of our Safe Sanctuary training. Another alternative is that volunteers adopt a two adult to one child communication rule wherein one other adult is included on a group text with a child.

VII. 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 involved with the activity and the senior pastor.
 - c. Immediately Fill out an Incident Report.
- B. The senior pastor or designated clergy staff will:
 - a. Contact the family of the alleged victim in the incident(s)
 - 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:

- A. 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.
- B. The person who initially reported the alleged misconduct or abuse, or to whom the allegation was revealed, will:
 - a. Inform the Staff-Parish Relations Committee chairperson.
 - b. In cases involving alleged abuse, call the appropriate local law enforcement agency.
- C. The SPRC chairperson will inform the district superintendent.

D. 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.

E. The bishop may activate the Conference Response Team to help the church with next steps.

VIII. 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*).

Verification of Reading of Policy Statement – Upon receipt of this policy statement, volunteers and paid staff who work with children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults will read and sign the statement at the end of this policy document confirming that he or she has read the Safe Sanctuary Abuse Prevention Policy and agrees to abide by its stipulations.

Certification of Receipt

I certify that I have read and agree to abide by this **Safe Sanctuary Abuse Prevention Policy** of Washington Street United Methodist Church in Columbia, S.C.

Name: Position:

(please print) (please print)

Signature: Date: