

# SAFE SANCTUARIES

## Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church

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#### LOCAL CHURCH POLICY FOR THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN, YOUTH AND VULNERABLE ADULTS

#### PREAMBLE:

When the disciples tried to keep the children away from Jesus, he was quick to respond, “Let the children come to me.” Jesus taught that children were to be included and provided for within the community of faith. Today, the church may be the only place where some children find the unconditional love and care they so desperately need to grow and thrive. As Christians, we must take our responsibilities to our children very seriously. We fail in our responsibilities if we neglect to take adequate precautions against abuse in our churches. It is unlikely that we can completely prevent child abuse in every situation, but it is possible for us to greatly reduce the risk by following a thorough practical policy of prevention. This policy attempts to do just that for local church. It is based on our understanding of the widespread problem of abuse throughout our country.

Every 15 seconds a child is abused or neglected.<sup>1</sup> Often abuse occurs in settings where children, youth or vulnerable adults should have been able to feel safe -- homes, schools, camps, and most sadly the church. In more than three quarters of the reported incidents of child abuse, the victim was related to or acquainted with the abuser.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this policy is to protect all the children that come to us, to protect both our paid and volunteer staff from potential false allegations of abuse and to limit the extent of legal liability of local church.

Presented herein is a comprehensive plan that will include all the areas of the issue: **Screening, Supervision, Reporting Procedures and a Response Plan.**

These delineated policies are the MINIMUM necessary precautions for protecting children. Local church will endeavor to monitor updates and recommendations by The United Methodist Church and may modify these procedures.

## DEFINITIONS:

“**Adult**” means a person over 18 years of age or older.

“**Child abuse**” as defined under Pennsylvania Child Protective Services Law means any of the following:

- “(i) Any recent act or failure to act by a perpetrator which causes non-accidental serious physical injury to a child under 18 years of age.
- (ii) An act or failure to act by a perpetrator, which causes non-accidental serious mental injury to or sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a child under 18 years of age.
- (iii) Any recent act, failure to act or series of acts or failures to act by a perpetrator, which creates an imminent risk of serious physical injury to or sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a child under 18 years of age.
- (iv) Serious physical neglect by a perpetrator constituting prolonged or repeated lack of supervision or the failure to provide essentials of life, including adequate medical care, which endangers a child’s life or development or impairs the child’s functioning.

No child shall be deemed to be physically or mentally abused based on injuries that result solely from environmental factors that are beyond the control of the parent or person responsible for the child’s welfare, such as inadequate housing, furnishings, income, clothing and medical care.”<sup>3</sup>

“**Child**” means any person under the age of 18.

“**Vulnerable adults**” for the purposes of this policy will be adults whose mental or physical condition makes them susceptible to abuse.

“**Children’s activities**” means any activity or program in which children are under supervision of staff persons or volunteers.

“**Staff person**” means any person employed by Local church or programs using its facilities who is responsible for children’s activities. This person has regular and direct contact with children, must be 21 years or older and is counted in the 2-adult rule.

“**Ministry Team Leader**” means any person who supervises a children’s activity. This person has regular and direct contact with children, must be 21 years or older and is counted in the 2-adult rule.

“**Volunteer**” means any adult, who assists in conducting children’s activities under the supervision of a staff person and/or Ministry Team Leader, has regular and direct contact with children and is counted in the 2-adult rule.

“**Helper**” means anyone who aids in ministry and is not counted in the 2-adult rule including a youth ages 14 - 18.

“**Persons required to report child abuse**”<sup>4</sup> means persons, who, in the course of their employment, occupation, or practice of their profession<sup>5</sup>, come into contact with children. Such persons include, but are not limited to, medical professionals, school administrators, teachers and nurses, social services workers, day-care center workers, mental health professionals, peace and law enforcement officers.

“**Staff person in charge of a children’s activity**” means the church employee responsible for the conduct of this activity.

In the case of non-local church programs operating on church property, the duties of the “staff person in charge of the children’s activity” shall be carried out by the non-local church lead staff or volunteer.

“We” means local church.

## SCREENING PROCEDURES:

Careful **screening** is one way to prevent the abuse of children and vulnerable adults. It can be time consuming and expensive, but well worth the effort in peace of mind that the most reliable, committed and experienced staff and volunteers are in place for every program that involves children.

1. All Staff, Ministry Team Leaders and volunteers who have regular and direct contact with children shall be required to fill out a **Volunteer Screening Form** that shall include but is not limited to:
  - a. Standard contact information
  - b. Experience and qualifications for the position
  - c. Voluntary disclosure of past criminal history and allegations of criminal history
  - d. Waiver of confidentiality allowing the church or non-church organization to secure the background checks necessary for the position being applied for
  - e. Listing of 3 non-related references. This list shall have complete contact information for all references. This portion of the application process is considered incomplete if full contact information for the references is not provided.
  - f. A completed PA Child Abuse History Clearance form (CY113 3/95) dated less than one year prior to the application.
  - g. A completed PA Request for Criminal Record Check (SP 4-641/97) dated less than one year prior to the application
  - h. For local church children’s ministries, persons shall demonstrate an active relationship with Local church for at least six months before being allowed to be in a supervisory role in children’s activities. In the case of new staff hires, references deemed adequate by the hiring supervisor will replace the six-month waiting period.
2. Persons who have a break in service of one or more years shall submit to screening procedures. **The local church reserves the option to repeat background checks** of persons who have had 5 or more years of service.
3. All forms and reference reports shall be kept as a part of an applicant’s confidential personnel file.<sup>7</sup> All forms shall be kept in a locked file on church premise. Detailed notes on a designated form shall be for all reference checks, which shall also be included in the personnel file. All applications and related forms must be completed.<sup>8</sup>
4. Non-local church programs shall maintain their own personnel files. The local church reserves the right to obtain an explanation of the non-local church’s record-keeping process and, upon written request of the Lead Pastor, to be given copies of documents applicable to programs conducted at the local church.

5. The staff person in charge of the children's activity(ies) is responsible for reviewing this policy with each applicant during an interview prior to service.

## **SUPERVISION:**

**Supervision** procedures are designed to reduce the possibility of abuse to the children or vulnerable adults and to protect staff persons and volunteers from unwarranted accusations. Again, these are **MINIMUM** standards and each children's activity may adopt more stringent requirements as necessary

1. **Training** is a requirement for all Staff persons, Ministry Team Leader and Volunteers working with children in church children's activities. An educational component of the Safe Sanctuaries Program will be part of the Application Packet and Interview. Thereafter, the minimum training would be an annual orientation that includes information regarding this Policy, procedures for supervision, as well as information on how to identify and report child abuse.
2. Minimum supervisory standards will include the **"two-adult rule"**. The two-adult rule requires that no matter the size of the group, there will always be two unrelated adults present. This may include the presence of an adult "roamer" who moves in and out of rooms.<sup>9 10</sup>
3. **No child will be left unsupervised** while attending a the local church children's activity.
4. Each room or space where children are being cared for shall have a window in the door or the door shall be left open such as a restroom. **All activities should occur in open view.**
5. Should the children's activity be **an outdoor program** or occur in a setting which makes it difficult to comply with this Policy, the staff person in charge of the activity shall take appropriate measures to make sure that the setting suits the activity, and **the children are properly supervised.**
6. **Registration** materials for activities in which children are outside of the direct supervision of their parents/guardians shall require signed written permission forms.
7. All participants who can understand a covenant shall sign a **participation covenant.**<sup>12</sup> This covenant can be in the form of clear, posted or printed rules that are explained to the participants at the outset of the program.
8. No person shall supervise an age group unless he/she is **AT LEAST 18 years** of age or older<sup>11</sup> and is 5 years older than the children being supervised.
9. Accurate **participation records** shall be maintained for all children's activities. At a minimum, these records should list the date and hours of the activity, its location, the names of the children participating (including whether any were dismissed early and the times of such dismissals), and the names of the adults involved directly in the activity and other supervisors on site that day.

## **REPORTING:**

Once an incident of child abuse occurs or allegation of an incident is made, it is crucial that it be dealt with speedily and in a clearly outlined manner.

1. The Staff person, Ministry Team Leader, Volunteer or Helper who observes alleged abuse or to whom such alleged abuse is reported is required to **report the incident immediately to the staff person in charge of the children's activity.**
2. The staff person in charge of the children's activity in which the alleged abuse was observed or disclosed **shall immediately attempt to obtain necessary information** such as the name of the alleged victim and his or her address and family information.
3. Upon receiving such information, **the staff person in charge of the children's activity will call the Pennsylvania Childline & Abuse Registry (1-800-932-0313)<sup>13</sup> to make a report.**<sup>1</sup> The staff person in charge of the children's activity shall then send the completed PA CY47 form to the local Children and Youth Services agency. This line of reporting shall be followed in all such incidents.
4. **The Lead Pastor is to be informed immediately before or subsequent to the making of a report.**
5. Any person who is the object of the report will be required to **refrain from all children's activities until the incident report is resolved.**
6. In any removal of a person from any children's activities, **care should be taken to handle this in a discreet manner**, recognizing that an investigation is still being conducted.

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of the Boy Scout or Girl Scout programs conducted at LLUMC, the "staff person in charge" shall be deemed to be the LLUMC liaison to this program.

## RESPONSE PLAN:

A quick, compassionate and unified response to an alleged incident of child abuse is expected. All allegations will be taken seriously. In all cases of reported or observed abuse in a children's activity, the entire staff of that activity shall be at the service of all official investigating agencies.

1. **The Media Director of the Central Pennsylvania Conference or his/her designee, is the only person/s authorized to make statements to representatives of the media.** All requests for statements should be directed to the Lead Pastor.
2. **Training** in how to handle media requests should be a regular part of staff training. A spirit of cooperation in helping the media find the "official spokesperson" is often helpful.
3. In response to all allegations of child abuse, the staff person in charge of the children's activity shall make the initial contact with the Childline and Abuse Registry.
4. If the allegation is against a Local church staff person, Ministry Team Leader, Volunteer or Helper or if it occurred in the course of a children's activity, the staff person in charge of the children's activity and the **local church Crisis Management Team** shall be contacted immediately. The Local church Crisis Management Team will be activated.
5. **Even in the event that the allegation concerns activities or persons outside any relationship to a local church related event or activity**, procedures in number 3 shall be implemented. An example of this would be a child telling a teacher about abuse by a relative during the prior year. If this report were made to the teacher in the course of his or her duties as a teacher, then the incident report should be filed with the staff person in charge of the children's activity within 24 hours.
6. If the allegation is against a staff person, Ministry Team Leader, Volunteer or Helper, the custodial parent will be notified immediately and a face-to-face meeting with the parent will be scheduled.
7. In either case, **pastoral support** will be available to all persons involved with the incident as indicated.

## REFERENCES:

<sup>1</sup> Joy Thornburg Melton, Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1998) Rev. Melton is an ordained deacon the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church who is both a Christian educator and a lawyer. Discipleship Resources, P.O. Box 840 Nashville, TN 37202-0840, [www.discipleshipresources.org](http://www.discipleshipresources.org). Also available from Cokesbury Bookstores, [www.cokesbury.com](http://www.cokesbury.com).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Pennsylvania Child Protective Services Law 23 Pa.C.S.A.6303. Note that this section of state law also provides that, “If, upon investigation, the county agency determines that a child has not been provided needed medical or surgical care because of seriously held religious beliefs of the child’s parents, guardian or person responsible for the child’s welfare, which beliefs are consistent with those of a bona fide religion, the child shall not be deemed to be physically or mentally abused. The county agency shall closely monitor the child and shall seek court-ordered medical intervention when the lack of medical or surgical care threatens the child’s life or long-term health.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 6311(a), (b).

<sup>5</sup> However, Pennsylvania law also includes a “clergy-communicant” privilege, 42 Pa.C.S.A 5943 which states, “ No clergyman, priest, rabbi or minister of the gospel of any regularly established church or religious organization, except clergymen or ministers who are self-ordained or who are members of religious organizations in which members other than the leader thereof are deemed clergymen or ministers, who while in the course of his duties has acquired information from any person secretly and in confidence shall be compelled, or allowed without consent of such person, to disclose that information in any legal proceeding, trial or investigation before any government unit.” Those local church staff persons or volunteers to whom this policy applies who believe they have received information regarding child abuse which might be covered by this section of PA law should seek legal counsel.

<sup>6</sup> Samples are found in Chapter Nine of Safe Sanctuaries. Employment counsel to CPC UMC has suggested certain modifications.

<sup>7</sup> Files kept regarding volunteers will be accorded the same status as personnel files of staff persons with any applicable exceptions required by the *Discipline* regarding clergy volunteers.

<sup>8</sup> Sample forms may be found in Chapter Nine of Safe Sanctuaries. Employment counsel to PCP UMC suggested certain modifications to these models, copies of which the Nursery School Director has.

<sup>9</sup> Melton 31-32.

<sup>10</sup> Abusers thrive on secrecy, isolation and their ability to manipulate victims. When abusers know they will never have the chance to be alone with potential victims, they will quickly lose interest. The two-adult rule also protects local church staff persons and volunteers from false allegations.

<sup>11</sup> While in some situations, younger counselors and aides may provide excellent help, people under the age of 18 cannot be expected to have developed the maturity and judgment that is needed to be fully responsible for younger children. Putting children in charge of children invites disaster.

<sup>12</sup> The covenant is a statement in which the participants and leaders/chaperones agree to: take part in the ministry; give their best efforts to the ministry; respect the other participants and leaders; treat others as well as they would wish to be treated.

<sup>13</sup> 1-800-932-0313

Policy based upon that developed by CPC UMC Safe Sanctuaries Task Force and adopted by CPC UMC Annual Conference June 9, 2000 and CPC Board of Trustees on 3/13/00.