

# WOODLAWN UNITED METHODIST CHURCH SAFE SANCTUARIES POLICY

Approved by the Administrative Council on  
June 2008  
Revised December 2011

## Introduction

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, beginning in April 1996, adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of child sexual abuse in the church. The adopted resolution includes the following statement:

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 in 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 and sexual exploitation, and abuse." (Paragraph 162C)

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children. Child sexual abuse, exploitation and ritual abuse 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 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. (From The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church – 2008: copyright 2004 by The United Methodist Publishing House, pp. 245-247)

Therefore, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference adopts this policy and its accompanying procedures to demonstrate our absolute and unwavering commitment to the physical safety and spiritual growth of all our children, youth, senior citizens, and at-risk adults. Every congregation within the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference is expected to uphold this policy as its minimum standard in establishing safe sanctuaries for all God's children.

## Statement of Covenant

In all of our ministries with children, youth, and adults, we are committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each person 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 Hymnal, p. 44).

## Definitions of Abuse

- ❖ Physical abuse – abuse in which a person deliberately and intentionally causes bodily harm to a child.
- ❖ Emotional abuse – abuse in which a person exposes a child to spoken and/or unspoken violence or emotional cruelty.
- ❖ Neglect – abuse in which a person endangers a child's health, safety, or welfare through negligence.
- ❖ Sexual abuse – abuse in which sexual contact between a child and an adult (or another older and more powerful youth) occurs.
- ❖ Ritual abuse – abuse in which physical, sexual, or psychological violations of a child are inflicted regularly, intentionally, and in a stylized way by a person or persons responsible for the child's welfare.
- ❖ Abuse of vulnerable adults – ritual, emotional, or sexual abuse of any person over 19 years of age with physical, mental and/or developmental disabilities.

## **The Church at Risk**

Any organization involved with young people is a place where abuse could occur. Several factors make local congregations, districts, and annual conferences more susceptible to risk:

- ❖ Churches behave as relatively trusting organizations, relying upon their members and their leaders to conduct themselves appropriately. Sometimes this trusting attitude persists even in the face of questions or reports of misconduct.
- ❖ Churches are notoriously inactive when it comes to screening its volunteers and/or employees who work with children and youth. Often, no investigation is done at all before total strangers are welcomed aboard.
- ❖ Churches routinely provide opportunities for close contact and for close personal relationships with children. Indeed, these are nurtured and encouraged as we try to live out the gospel message.

## **Consequences of Abuse**

- ❖ When one child is abused within a church or Christian program, many victims are created, including the child, the congregation, the child's family, and often the family of the abuser.
- ❖ The congregation becomes a victim after abuse is revealed and relationships are fractured. It may also suffer for a long time when civil or criminal litigation ensues as a result of the abuse.
- ❖ Of foremost importance is the child who has been harmed and for whom care must be provided.
- ❖ In addition, paragraph 2702 of the 2008 Book of Discipline names child abuse, sexual abuse, sexual misconduct, and sexual harassment as chargeable offenses for clergy and lay members.

## **STATEMENT OF POLICY**

No congregation or annual conference can afford, either financially, ethically, or morally to fail to implement strategies for the reduction and prevention of any and every kind of abuse. Therefore, it shall be the policy and covenant of the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church to do everything in our power to prevent physical, emotional or sexual abuse against children, youth, and adults with developmental disabilities involved in any ministry sponsored by the Annual Conference or in any of our local congregations.

Further, we are called to minister to those persons who are experiencing abuse and to those who have been victims of abuse in the past. To that end we covenant to be aware of our legal responsibilities and to comply with those responsibilities and go beyond those responsibilities when necessary to act justly in the best interest of those who have been abused or those who are most vulnerable to abuse.

Careful screening is the best way to reduce the risk of abuse of children, youth and vulnerable adults. It can be time consuming and expensive, but well worth the effort and peace of mind that comes with having the most reliable, committed and experienced staff and volunteer in place for every program that involves children, youth and vulnerable adults.

Although it is our fervent hope and prayer that child sexual abuse does not occur in our programs, we must put into place sufficient mechanisms to reduce the risk of abuse of children, youth, and those who work with them. For that purpose, our ministries shall implement the following procedures in congregation, district, and conference ministry programs and events. Local congregations may adopt their own policy provided the policies and procedures meet these minimum standards. Local congregations not adopting a policy shall be governed by this policy.

## **STANDARDS, CRITERIA, and RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **Minimum Age**

The following standards for authority figures (whether volunteers or staff) are designed to separate authority figures from the group they are serving by age or enough years to reinforce recognition of the authority figure's role.

1. Authority figures – defined as the primary leaders of youth and children's activities
  - a. To work with youth (grades six and above), the authority figure must be a minimum of age 19 and it is recommended they are at least four years older than the youth involved.
  - b. To work with children (infants-fifth grade), the authority figure must be a minimum of age 18.
2. Assistants – defined as persons who lend aid to the authority figure and act at the direction of the authority figure, including volunteers, interns, and camp counselors. Whether working with youth or children, assistants must be:
  - a. A minimum of 12 years of age and four years older than the participants, and
  - b. In the judgment of a staff member, competent to assist in the activity.
  - c. An assistant less than 18 years of age may not be counted as an adult in the child/adult ratios.
  - d. An assistant less than 18 years of age may not lend aid unless two authority figures are present.

### **Two Adult Rule**

A minimum of two non-related adults should be utilized in all programming with children, youth, and at-risk adults. When it is impossible to staff with two non-related adults, there should be an additional adult serving as a floater with visual and physical access to all areas.

### **Open-Door Policy**

Classrooms or child care rooms should be open to visitation at any time without prior notice by staff, parents, or other volunteers.

### **Sign-In and Sign-Out Procedures**

Sign-in and sign-out procedures should be in place for all ministries for and with children in the local church.

### **Visitation Policy**

Adults wanting to visit Children and/or Youth functions must meet the following criterion:

- ❖ The adult responsible for their child/youth may attend a program without being a registered volunteer or leader per the discretion of the ministry coordinator. The adult must sign in with their child while in attendance. They may not count in the two non-related adult ratio for working with children or youth. They may not serve as a regular volunteer or leader until all other criterion is met.
- ❖ Any adult wishing to observe or volunteer with children's/youth ministry that does not have children/youth in the program may visit after meeting the 6th month rule and background check per the discretion of the ministry director. One with aspirations to continue as a leader must be trained in Woodlawn UMC's Safe Sanctuaries Policy.
- ❖ The ministry director has final authority in accepting or rejecting an adult's involvement in ministry to children, youth, or vulnerable adults.

### **Six Month Rule**

It is required that an adult wishing to serve as a leader/volunteer must meet a six-month rule before serving in the areas of children and youth ministry. This means that all volunteers demonstrate an active relationship in good standing in a local congregation or campus religious organization for a minimum of six months. Persons not meeting this minimum requirement may serve only in an assistant capacity with two other non-related adults.

## **Adult/Child Ratios**

All ratios must be understood in light of first having two adults present at all times. Adults and authority figures should never be alone with a child or youth. This can include, but is not limited to an automobile while taking a young person home, a classroom with windowless or locked doors, or a cabin at camp.

State codes are required for day care centers and school-based programs and are a strong standard for all programs to follow. This includes Sunday school, mid-week, and summer programs.

*Florida State Codes for child care:*

- ❖ Birth to 1 year – 1 Adult to 4 Children
- ❖ 1 to 2 years of age – 1 Adult to 6 Children
- ❖ 2 to 3 years of age – 1 Adult to 11 Children
- ❖ 3 to 4 years of age – 1 Adult to 15 Children
- ❖ 4 to 5 years of age – 1 Adult to 20 Children
- ❖ 5 years and older – 1 Adult to 25 Children
- ❖ Mixed Age Groups:
  - When children 2 years of age and older are in care, the staff-to-children ratio shall be based on the age group with the largest number of children within the group.
  - In groups of mixed age ranges, where children under 1 year of age are included, one staff member shall be responsible for no more than 4 children of any age group.
  - In groups of mixed age ranges, where children 1 year of age but under 2 years of age are included, one staff member shall be responsible for no more than 6 children of any age group.

Note: For additional information contact the Florida Department of Children and Families.

## **Participants Who Are Physically or Mentally Impaired**

- ❖ Those needing constant and individual assistance or supervision – 1 leader to 1 participant
- ❖ Those needing close, but not constant, assistance or supervision – 1 leader to 2 participants
- ❖ Those needing occasional assistance – 1 leader to 4 participants
- ❖ Those needing minimal assistance – 1 leader to 5 participants

## **Overnight Programs**

Overnight events include summer camps, retreats, mission trips, lock-ins, or any event that extends through the evening. The adults staying with the young people must always be the same gender as the young people. The adults must never share a bed with a young person and should not be alone in the room with a young person at any time.

- ❖ Grades 1-3 – 1 adult to 8 young people
- ❖ Grades 4-8 – 1 adult to 10 young people
- ❖ Grades 9-12 – 1 adult to 12 young people

## **Motel/Hotel Settings**

- ❖ A hotel should be selected that has rooms opening to the interior (i.e. closed hallway) of the building. Where possible, select adjoining rooms on a single hallway.
- ❖ When two adults cannot be assigned to a room housing youth, the youth should be roomed separately from the adults. If adjoining rooms are available with doors that can be left in the open position, a single adult in each of the adjoining rooms is acceptable.
- ❖ An adult should not share a bed with a young person including their own child.

- ❖ Where adults need to be assigned to separate rooms, it is recommended that one adult room be located between every two youth rooms on the hall.
- ❖ Adults should develop a rotating schedule allowing for the hallways to be monitored throughout the night.
- ❖ If room checks are needed, they should involve two adults of the same gender as the room residents.

### **Transportation**

- ❖ All drivers should be screened in the same manner as other leadership for an event including a review of their motor vehicle record.
- ❖ When private vehicles are used to transport young people for programmed church-related events, leaders should ensure that appropriate insurance is being maintained by both the church and the private driver.
- ❖ All drivers must be 21 years of age or older.
- ❖ Where possible, it is recommended that two adults be placed in each vehicle or the vehicles teamed in minimum groups of two that stay together at all times.
- ❖ The trustees or bus committee should be requested to establish safety policies and guidelines for the operation of church-owned vehicles. These should be strictly followed at all times.
- ❖ On all planned overnight trips, a signed, permission slip with medical authorization should be on file. In the absence of such a form, the adult should call an authorized parent or relative to pick up the child.

### **Mentoring**

Mentoring programs or other efforts to pair young people with caring adults are often credited with being the key to a young person's success in life. Therefore, mentoring programs should follow these guidelines:

- ❖ Provide basic screening and background checks for all adults who will be working with children and youth.
- ❖ Establish clear written guidelines for settings, boundaries, and the environment where the mentoring will occur.
- ❖ Providing training for all adults (or youth, if they will be working with children) who are interested in being mentors.
- ❖ Make it clear that all persons are expected to following congregation and conference guidelines for reducing the risk of abuse.
- ❖ Outings should be in public places with routes and time frames agreed upon in advance, and known to all. Outings with several mentors and young people are preferred.
- ❖ One-to-one mentoring or tutoring should take place in a group setting, such as one large room rather than individual rooms spread throughout the church building.

### **Counseling**

Counseling should be practiced by the staff of Woodlawn UMC and in a gender specific manner. At any counseling session with children, youth, or adults of the other gender, any non-windowed door of the room used should remain open for the entire session. Ideally, the session will be conducted at a time when others are nearby, even if they are not within listening distance. A counseling session should never be held in secret, even if the person being counseled makes that request.

Whenever someone seeks counseling, it is important to determine in the initial meeting if the counselor is actually qualified to address the needs effectively. If not, the person should be referred to another counselor.

## **Interpersonal Boundaries**

Adult workers with youth and children must be attentive to:

- ❖ Appropriate dress codes
- ❖ Appropriate use of language
- ❖ Appropriate demonstrations of affection and encouragement. (i.e. an adult leader should never initiate a hug and should always be the one to end the hug.)

## **Home Visitation**

When visiting a young person in their home, the two non-related adult rule still applies. If a young person drops by unannounced at the home of an adult volunteer or staff person, the visit should be conducted in the front yard or moved to a local restaurant. Home visits by students in a nonrelated adults home is discouraged unless the visit is a part of a specialized event conducted with other youth and sanctioned volunteers (the 2 non-related adult rule still applies for all church functions). Educating young people of these requirements before they visit is most beneficial.

## **Cyber Issues**

- ❖ Firewalls on computer systems at churches need to be in place and kept up to date.
- ❖ Volunteer and Employees should maintain Christian principles when using social networking sites, especially when referencing church and Alabama-West Florida Conference events.

## **Social Media Guidelines**

1. Use prudent judgment in the time you contact students through social media. The "home phone rule" is a basic rule of thumb to use – normally do not text, chat, or email back-and-forth with students at a time you would not normally call their home phone line, i.e. before 8:00 AM or after 9:00 PM.
2. Each children/youth volunteer shall maintain appropriate personal boundaries and adhere to the following standard regarding their social media privacy settings.
  - a. Always use Christ-like values on networking sites
  - b. Be consistent with all students, across all social media platforms. (i.e. use positive language, no drama, no triangulating, no complaining, no derogatory comments etc.)
  - c. Review your own accessible content and photos frequently for inappropriate content.
  - d. If a student texts or messages you after hours and it's not an emergency, wait until morning to reply
3. If you choose to utilize any social networking site to communicate with students, other youth workers must have full access to all of your profiles and correspondence.
  - a. Volunteer should make parents aware of the use of social network platforms in communicating with their child/student.
  - b. When possible, communication should be sent to entire groups, on their wall or in public areas - not in private messages – this includes images
  - c. When ongoing communications are private (i.e. Emails, FB Messages, Texting, etc.) – Who they are with and their frequency should be disclosed to the parent or ministry coordinator
  - d. Volunteer will make all communication with a child/student available for review if there is a question of appropriateness of a communication to the ministry coordinator which may include but not be limited to full access to the communication in question.
4. Group, Individual or Page activities
  - a. All language used and content posted, should be Christ-like and for encouragement

- b. Any social media groups affiliated with youth or children's ministry that are not under the direct control of the ministry coordinator, must include the ministry coordinator in the group
  - c. Pictures of students may only be posted on the web after written consent has been given by a guardian of the student. A student's name must not be tagged or included in a caption by the adult posting the picture. If a student is included in a picture as a part of a church function, the ministry coordinator must be tagged. The ministry coordinator has final say-so in the appropriateness of pictures uploaded by volunteers or leaders of children or youth.
  - d. Respect the dignity of every person depicted in an image. Think before you post anything that may be viewable by children, students or parents of those with whom you are in ministry.
  - e. Mandatory reporting laws will be followed if an inappropriate communication is discovered
5. Any inappropriate material posted in your online groups should be deleted and addressed or reported if necessary.
  6. Content, including images, that appears on student pages or groups that are not sponsored by the church are NOT within the purview of the children and youth ministry of Woodlawn UMC. If a student posts something inappropriate but not illegal, Woodlawn UMC nor the adult volunteer are responsible for disciplinary action.
  7. Video Chatting with student is strongly discouraged – if you must, be aware of what you're wearing and of your surroundings.
  8. Transcripts of on-line chats (video or text) should be saved.
  9. Adult volunteer and leaders' emails/messages/posts should communicate facts not feelings. When the content of received email raises concerns or questions, share it with a member of your Pastoral team, or ministry coordinator.
  10. Phone conversations and face-to-face meetings are the preferred mode of communication, when responding to emotionally driven communication or pastoral emergencies. In any case, the ministry coordinator should be contacted and the two non-related adult rule still applies.

## **RECRUITING, SCREENING, AND TRAINING**

### **Recruiting and Screening Volunteer and Paid Staff**

- A. All persons employed or volunteering as an authority figure for children/youth shall:
  - a. Complete Application/Commitment Form.
  - b. Provide three character references. It is recommended that the three references be contacted on all applicants having access to children, youth and vulnerable adults. One of the references must be the applicant's pastor (clergy person's District Superintendent) and the other two must be non-relatives.
  - c. Be interviewed by the director of the ministry or program.
  - d. Consent to the following background checks:
    - i. Multi-state criminal and sexual offender check based on social security number
    - ii. Motor vehicle records (for those who will be transporting children, youth, or at-risk adults)

*The Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference recommends back- ground checks be run through the Trak-1 company. A background check is valid for two years. If the individual changes physical ad- dresses, the background checks must be run again.*

- e. Demonstrate an active relationship with the local church.
- f. Have the experience and qualifications for the position.

- g. Attend training by the church and/or annual conference in maintaining the Safe Sanctuaries Policies.
- B. All persons employed (i.e. non-program staff) or volunteering as an assistant for children/youth shall:
  - a. Complete an Application/Commitment Form.
  - b. Be interviewed by the director of the ministry or program.
  - c. Provide three character references.
  - d. Consent to the following background checks:
    - i. Multi-state criminal and sexual offender check based on social security number
    - ii. Motor vehicle records (for those who will be transporting children, youth or at-risk adults)
  - e. Attend training provided by the local church or annual conference.
- C. In the event a substitute worker needs to be brought in under last minute circumstances, that person must:
  - a. Complete an Application/Commitment form.
  - b. Provide a character reference who can be contacted immediately by the director.
  - c. Complete a basic orientation/training provided by the director or other supervisor before working.
  - d. Consent to the following background check:
    - i. Multi-state criminal and sexual offender check based on social security number.
- D. Unfavorable background checks or a refusal to complete the screening procedures:
  - a. Volunteers or Staff (other than clergy):
    - i. The person shall be notified with a "Notice of unfavorable back- ground check" form or notified by Trak-1 if applicable.
    - ii. If the unfavorable report is a volunteer the Pastor and/or director of the ministry shall meet with the person to discuss the report.
    - iii. If the unfavorable report is a staff person the Pastor/Staff Parish Committee Chairperson shall meet with the person to discuss the report and a letter shall be placed in the person's file.
    - iv. Review process may consider the following factors:
      - 1. The nature and seriousness of the crime
      - 2. The relationship of the crime to the purpose of the congregation
      - 3. The age of the person at the time of the commission of the crime
      - 4. The time elapsed since the person's crime
      - 5. Any charge that deals with sexual abuse or child abuse shall prevent the person from working with children and/or youth.
    - v. Documentation of action taken should be placed in the person's file.

### **Training Staff and Volunteers**

The church should ensure that regularly scheduled (i.e., at least annual) training focused on current issues of child protection is available to and received by those working with children and youth. Attendance at this training should be required of all paid staff members and adult volunteers who work with children and/or youth. Documentation of attendance should be kept from year to year so that if an incident occurs, the church has proof that they followed the policy. (Note: Many insurance companies are mandating training and its frequency.)

The training should include:

1. The definitions and signs of child abuse.
2. The church's policy and procedures on child abuse and the reasons for having them.
3. The need to maintain a positive classroom environment, including appropriate discipline and age-level characteristics.



4. The appropriate behavior for teachers and leaders of child/youth events.
5. Child abuse reporting responsibilities and procedures.
6. Definitions of appropriate interpersonal boundaries (ways of touching students, appropriate language, etc.)
7. All forms used by the church for application, background checks, reporting, and teacher files.

## **REPORTING ABUSE**

### **Reporting Abuse or Alleged Abuse in Florida**

All cases of suspected abuse must be reported to the Florida Abuse Hotline. Volunteer must first report any suspicious activity to the ministry coordinator. The ministry coordinator will then report directly to pastoral staff. Program staff will report incidents. Initial reports should NOT be made to the county/local branch of the Florida Department of Children and Families. The Florida Abuse Hotline may be reached at **1-800-96-ABUSE**. Reports may be faxed in, however, the preferred option for the Florida Department of Children and Families is for persons to call the Florida Abuse Hotline and talk to a Hotline counselor.