

SAFE SANCTUARIES

Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church

Approved by Annual Conference May, 2009

A. God's Call to the Church

God has called us to make disciples of Jesus Christ with concern that our ministries safely protect our children, youth, and vulnerable adults from abuse and exploitation.

Jesus taught that *“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,”* (Mark 9:37 NRSV) and *“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 NRSV)

The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church state that “...children must be protected from economic, physical, and sexual exploitation and abuse.” 2008, The Book of Discipline paragraph 162 C.

At each child’s baptism, we affirm our responsibility to their safety by our congregational response, pledging:

“With God’s help, we will so order our lives after the example of Christ, that this child, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.” (From *The Book of Worship, Baptismal Covenant, Congregational Pledge II*)

As Disciples, we affirm Christ’s commandment to love our neighbors. We also serve as witnesses of Christ’s power to transform lives.

Building on these foundations, we recognize that our faith calls us to offer hospitality and protection to all persons. We especially lift children, youth and vulnerable adults, as well as those committed to ministering to them as volunteers and employees in this present age.

In response to God's call, The North Central New York Annual Conference has established mandatory Safe Sanctuary policies in order to: (1) prevent abuse from happening in our churches; (2) affirm we are a place where children can feel safe in disclosing abuse; and (3) protect volunteers and employees that minister to our children, youth and vulnerable adults.

B. Safe Sanctuaries Policy Application

The policies and procedures set forth below have been established by the Annual Conference for all ministries. They are mandatory. They are not inspirational, but set minimum standards to protect children, youth and

vulnerable adults from abuse and exploitation. Without exception, these policies and procedures apply to all local churches and Annual Conference ministries, and those who serve within.

C. DEFINITIONS

“Abuse” means harm or a threat of physical or emotional harm to a child or vulnerable adult by a parent, guardian, or other person. Abuse includes: (a) the infliction of physical or emotional injury by other than accidental means; (b) the creation of a risk, or allowing the creation of a risk, to a child by other than accidental means; (c) committing or allowing to be committed an act of sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, or prostitution upon the child.

“Child” or **“children”** or **“youth”** means any person who has not reached his/her eighteenth birthday.

“Exploitation” means obtaining or using another person’s resources, including but not limited to funds, assets, or property, by deception, intimidation, or similar means, with the intent to deprive the person of those resources.

“Sexual abuse” includes, but is not necessarily limited to, any contacts or interactions in which the parent, guardian, or other person allows, permits, or encourages the use of the child for the purposes of sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or another person.

“Sexual exploitation” includes, but is not limited to, a situation in which a parent, guardian, or other person allows, permits, or encourages the child to engage in an act which constitutes prostitution under New York law; or a parent, guardian, or other person having custodial control or supervision of a child or responsible for his/her welfare, allows, permits, or encourages the child to engage in an act of obscene or pornographic photographing, filming, or depicting of a child as provided for under New York law.

“Supervision” means to oversee or direct a ministry or activity.

“Vulnerable Adult” means a person whose mental or physical condition makes them susceptible to abuse.

D. SAFE SANCTUARIES STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

Local churches and all other Annual Conference ministries shall implement the following policies and procedures to protect children, youth and vulnerable adults. This includes adopting a written Safe Sanctuary Policy which specifically sets forth standards for: (1) screening clergy, staff and volunteers; (2) supervision of all ministry activities; (3) reporting abuse, and (4) response.

SCREENING PROCEDURES.

Careful screening is one way to prevent abuse and exploitation of children, youth and vulnerable adults. (It can be both time consuming and expensive, but it is 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, youth, and vulnerable adults.] Clergy are not exempt from the screening procedures. Other inquiries related to clergy appointment or ordination are not acceptable substitutes. The integrity of the Annual Conference's Safe Sanctuaries Policy requires full clergy participation and compliance.

1. All clergy, paid employees and volunteers who have regular and direct contact with children, youth and vulnerable adults shall:

a. Complete and deliver an application and/or questionnaire, which shall provide, at a minimum: standard contact information; voluntary disclosure of past criminal history; experience and qualifications related to the subject ministry; and two non-relative references. Screening is not complete if full contact information for the references is not provided; and

b. Authorize, in writing, a criminal conviction search.

2. The local church or other Annual Conference ministry shall complete a criminal conviction search for all clergy, paid employees and volunteers who have regular and direct contact with children, youth and vulnerable adults. The search shall be performed using the web-based program offered by the Annual Conference's insurance carrier, Church Mutual Insurance Company, or other approved equivalent. In the event that the search reveals a criminal conviction, the ministry leader shall immediately consult with the supervising Pastor and/or District Superintendent.

3. Persons who have a break in volunteer or paid service of one or more years shall resubmit the background screening information. Background checks shall be repeated at least every three (3) years for all paid staff; and volunteers who have regular and direct contact with children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

4. Except for records related to prior criminal matters, all records shall be kept in a secured, locked location. There will be a system in place that gives access to those who need these records. It is recommended that these records be kept by the church in perpetuity. All records in any way related to an individual's prior criminal history shall be kept confidential and maintained by the Annual Conference in consultation with the District Superintendent.

5. Persons shall demonstrate an active relationship with the local church for at least six (6) months before being allowed to be in a supervisory role in activities for children, youth or vulnerable adults. In the case of new staff hires, references deemed adequate by the hiring supervisor may replace the six month waiting rule.

SUPERVISION

Supervision procedures designed to reduce the possibility of abuse or exploitation of children, youth or vulnerable adults, and to protect staff persons and volunteers from unfounded accusations.

1. Appointed clergy shall regularly review and be familiar with public sex offenders registries maintained by New York State law enforcement agencies.
[\[http://criminaljustice.state.ny.us/nsor/search_index.htm\]](http://criminaljustice.state.ny.us/nsor/search_index.htm)
2. **Training** is a requirement for all staff and volunteers working with children, youth or vulnerable adults. An initial educational component of the Safe Sanctuaries programs and policies is required prior to any adult having direct supervision of children, youth and vulnerable adults with documentation to include signatures reflecting receipt of policies by participants to be kept in the records of the supervising staff person. Thereafter, the minimum standard would include documentation of an annual review of the Safe Sanctuaries policies, procedures for supervision, and current information on how to identify and report child, youth or vulnerable adult abuse.
3. Minimum supervisory standards will include the **“two adult rule”**. This rule requires that, regardless of 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/ministry activities.
4. Written attendance records shall be kept for all ministry events/activities involving children and youth. These records shall include, at a minimum, the date and names of all participants.
5. **No child, youth or vulnerable adult will be left unsupervised** while attending a ministry event/activity.
6. **All ministry activities should occur in open view**. Each room or space where ministry activities/events occur must be open to public view. This may require enclosed spaces such as classrooms having a viewing window, a glass panel in the door, a ½ door configuration or an open door.
7. Registration materials should be collected for every ministry program activity.

8. Ministry activities involving transportation shall require written and signed permission from parents/guardians.
9. No person shall supervise an age group unless he/she is AT LEAST 18 years of age and is AT LEAST 5 years older than the children/youth being supervised.

REPORTING

Reporting is required by any staff or volunteer that personally witnesses an incident of abuse or exploitation, when an allegation of an event of abuse or exploitation is made to staff or a volunteer by a third party and/or when a child or vulnerable adult discloses abuse or exploitation to a staff member or volunteer. It is crucial that reporting be immediate and the allegations dealt with as soon in time as possible to the incident or disclosure.

1. The staff person or volunteer who observes alleged abuse or to whom such abuse is reported or disclosed, or who suspects abuse is required to report the incident/suspected abuse **immediately** to the person in charge of the ministry/activity. Upon receiving the information, the person in charge of the ministry/activity shall **immediately** call the New York State Child Protective Services Hotline at (800) 342-3720. The Pastor in charge and immediate staff supervisor are to be informed immediately before or subsequent to the making of a report.
2. The person in charge of the ministry/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/her address and family information.
3. If the accused is the appointed clergy, supply pastor or a member of his/her family, the allegations shall be immediately reported to the District Superintendent. The District Superintendent shall immediately report to the proper authorities as set forth in paragraph 1 above. The District Superintendent will take responsibility and act according to the established rules in The Book of Discipline with respect to claims against the pastor. If the District Superintendent is not available, the incident should be reported to the Bishop's office in Rochester, New York.
4. All clergy are included in mandatory reporting as required by The Book of Discipline.

Book of Discipline paragraph 341.5

All clergy of the United Methodist Church are charged to maintain all confidences inviolate, including confessional confidences, except in

cases of suspected child abuse or neglect or in cases where mandatory reporting is required by civil law.

5. After the person in charge of the ministry/activity has reported the suspected abuse to the proper authorities, the appointed clergy/supply pastors are to report the incident immediately to the District Superintendent. If the District Superintendent is unavailable, the incident should be reported to the Bishop's office.
6. The person in charge of the ministry/event must keep a written report of the steps taken by the Church in response to the reported abuse. The report should be kept brief and contain only factual information relevant to the situation. This report should be kept in a secure place. It should be written or typed to prevent it from being changed.

RESPONSE PLAN

A quick, compassionate and unified response to an alleged incident of abuse is expected. All allegations will be taken seriously. In all cases of reported or observed abuse there shall be cooperation with all official investigating agencies.

1. All media requests for statements should be directed to the Annual Conference Director of Communications.
2. Immediately, and with dignity and respect for the sacred worth of the accused, remove the accused from further involvement with children, youth or vulnerable adults and advise the accused there has been an allegation of abuse. Details of the allegations of the abuse should not be discussed with the accused at the time of the removal. In any removal of a staff member or volunteer from any activity/ministry, care should be taken to handle the removal in a discreet manner, recognizing that there will be an investigation by either state or church authorities, or both.
3. When it has been alleged that a member of the church staff or volunteer, has committed an act of abuse or exploitation, the staff member or volunteer shall be required to refrain from all ministry/activities with children, youth and vulnerable adults until the incident has been fully resolved by the appropriate state authorities and/or in accordance with The Book of Discipline.
4. Notify the parents/guardians of the victim and take whatever steps are necessary to assure the safety and well being of the child, youth or vulnerable adult until the parent(s)/guardians arrive. **NOTE:** If one or both of the parents is the alleged abuser, follow the advice of the authorities concerning notification of others.

5. Take all allegations seriously and reach out to the victim and the victim's family. Show care and support to help prevent further hurt. Extend whatever pastoral resources are needed. Remember that the care and safety of the victim is the **first** priority. Respond in a positive and supportive manner to the victim and the victim's family.
6. The church should provide a supportive atmosphere to all those who are affected, offering both objectivity and empathy as it seeks to create a climate in which healing may take place.

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