

**SAFE SANCTUARIES POLICY**  
**First United Methodist Church**  
**Hazlehurst, GA**

Safe Sanctuaries is the name commonly given by United Methodist Annual Conferences and local churches to their individual efforts to make conference, district, and local church programs welcoming and safe for children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

Child abuse is a well-documented fact in our society. Hardly a week goes by that each of us does not read or hear a horror story of how a young person or vulnerable adult has been violated by some trusted person in authority. Most of this abuse happens outside the church setting, but some of it does occur while persons are engaged in ministries of the church.

As a church, we must make every reasonable effort to protect the children, youth, and vulnerable adults who are in its care so that nothing damages their life. This is part of what it means to “so order our lives after the example of Christ that, surrounded by steadfast love, [each person] may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal” (UMC, Baptismal Covenant III).

While a church cannot guarantee the safety of every person, every church can be responsible for reducing and eliminating circumstances that can lead to harm or injury. Developing and implementing a Safe Sanctuaries policy is a first-step in protecting our young and most vulnerable.

This proposed policy would become effective immediately with full compliance expected by January 1, 2009.

**I. Preamble**

Children hold a special place in God’s family. Jesus taught that children were to be included and provided for within the community of faith. When the crowd tried to devalue children and keep them away from Jesus, he was quick to respond, “Let the children come to me for to such belongs the Kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16). Children hold a special place in our Church’s family. In the Baptismal Covenant, professing members assume a holy responsibility “to 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” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 44). Our promise places solemn responsibility on each person to help children grow in the knowledge of God’s love and as whole persons. As Christians, we take our responsibility to nurture children very seriously. We acknowledge the “sacred trust to maintain an environment that is safe for people to live and grow in God’s love. Sexual misconduct in the church and ministry settings impedes the mission of Jesus Christ. Leaders have the responsibility not

only to avoid actions and words that hurt others, but also to protect the vulnerable against actions or words which cause harm” (Resolution 36, *The Book of Resolutions*, 2004).

The spiritual consequences of doing harm are significant. The victim’s physical and emotional pain and suffering as well as a loss of trust and faith are barriers to the abundant life Christ desires to give. Jesus took these negative consequences so seriously that he warned against impeding the faith of others by saying, “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).

Neglecting to take adequate precautions against child abuse in our churches is one of the ways we fail in our nurturing responsibilities. While it is unlikely that we can completely prevent child abuse in every situation, it is possible for us to greatly reduce the risk by following a thorough, practical policy of prevention and supervision. This policy attempts to do just that for the Church ministries that work with children, youth and vulnerable adults (see definitions Section III).

It is the purpose of this policy to:

- A. protect the children, youth and vulnerable adults that participate in the ministries of the church;
- B. protect our staff, both paid and volunteer, from potential false allegations of abuse; and
- C. protect all the various ministry assets of the church for making disciples of Jesus Christ.

## **II. Scope of the Policy**

- A. This policy and its provisions shall apply to all adults, volunteer or staff persons, whether laity or clergy, who have any direct or indirect contact with children, youth, or vulnerable adults who participate in any activities or events sponsored by the South Georgia Conference and/or its Districts.
- B. This Conference policy will be implemented immediately following its adoption, with full compliance required by January 1, 2009, for all Church.
- C. The South Georgia Conference policy shall be applicable at all Church activities involving children, youth and vulnerable adults.

Church events are those events sponsored, promoted or financially supported by the Church. Examples include, but are not limited to, the following: Sunday School, Nursery Services, Mid-week programming, and over trips.

## **III. Definitions**

The following terms are defined for the specific purpose of this document.

- A. "Adult" ... The adult definition is used to define an adult as it relates to supervision, screening, reporting and responding within the conference policy. "Adult" means a person 18 years of age or older, who engages in supervisory responsibility. The term does not apply to program participants.
- B. "Adult Monitor" is an adult who frequently moves in and out of rooms or activity areas adding additional supervision where two adults (not spouses) are not available to care for the children.
- C. "Assistant Who is a Minor" are persons under 18 years of age who help with activities (e.g., crafts or recreation) but are not in a supervisory role. An "Assistant Who is a Minor" does not satisfy the two unrelated adults rule.
- D. "Certifying Officer" is the individual who receives applications, conducts background checks, assesses results, verifies requirements are met, and certifies a person for supervision of children.
- E. "Child abuse" is a harmful act against any person under 18 years of age that presents themselves in the following forms or types:
  - 1. Verbal Abuse – Any verbal act that humiliates, degrades or threatens any child or youth.
  - 2. Physical Abuse – Any act of omission or an act that endangers a person's physical and mental health. In the case of child or youth physical abuse, this definition includes any intentional physical injury caused by the individual's caretaker. Physical abuse may result from punishment that is overly punitive or inappropriate to the individual's age or condition. In addition, physical abuse may result from purposeful acts that pose serious danger to the physical health of a child or youth.
  - 3. Sexual Abuse – Child or youth sexual abuse is the sexual exploitation or use of minors for satisfaction of sexual drives. This includes, but is not limited to:
    - a) incest,
    - b) rape,
    - c) prostitution,
    - d) romantic involvement with any participant,
    - e) any sexual intercourse, or sexual conduct with, or fondling of an individual enrolled as a child or youth in Church sponsored activities,
    - f) sexualized behavior that communicates sexual interest and/or content. Examples of sexualized behavior include, but are not limited to: "displaying sexually suggestive visual materials, making sexual comments or innuendo about one's own or another person's body, touching another person's body, hair or clothing, touching or rubbing oneself in the presence of another

person, kissing, and sexual intercourse” (Resolution 36, *The Book of Resolutions 2004*).

4. Ritual Abuse – Any act of physical, sexual, psychological violence or manipulation inflicted on a minor, intentionally and in a stylized way, by someone or multiple people that appeals to a higher authority or power to justify the abuse.

NOTE: This includes any acts utilizing electronic means that could be construed as verbal, physical, sexual, or ritual abuse.

- F. “Child abuse” in this policy also includes abusive acts against vulnerable adults. “Vulnerable adults” are any person 18 years of age or older with diagnosed diminished physical, mental or emotional capacities.
- G. “Child” or “Children” or “Minor” means any person(s) under the age of 18.
- H. “Children’s activities” means any activity or program in which persons under the age of 18 are under supervision of staff persons or volunteers.
- I. “Conference Crisis Team” is composed of the Resident Bishop, the Director of Connectional Ministries, and the Director of Communications. Others will join the consultation process depending on the situation (i.e., the Conference Chancellor, the District Superintendent in whose district the incident occurred, the Conference Pastoral Counselor, etc.). The Conference Crisis Team will assist in determining and implementing a comprehensive response to a crisis.
- J. “Safe Sanctuaries” is the name commonly given by United Methodist Annual Conferences and local churches to their individual efforts to make conference, district, and local church programs welcoming and safe for children and youth.
- K. “Staff person” means any person employed by the Church who is responsible for children’s activities (as defined above).
- L. “Staff person in charge of a children’s activity” means the Church employee responsible for the supervision of this activity, such as the Minister of Students and Families, or Nursery Worker.
- M. “Supervisor” means any staff person or volunteer who leads, directs, counsels, teaches, mentors, chaperones, transports or assists in programs and activities related to children, youth, or vulnerable adults.
- N. “Volunteer” means a person 18 years of age or older who assists in conducting children’s activities.
- O. “Vulnerable adult” means any person 18 years of age or older identified by a caregiver, staff person in charge or him/herself as an individual unable to take care of him/herself, or unable to protect him/herself against significant harm or exploitation due to diagnosed diminished physical, mental or emotional capacities.
- P. “We” means First United Methodist Church, Hazlehurst Georgia.
- Q. “Youth” means persons 20 years of age or younger who are strictly

participants, holding no supervisory responsibility, in a conference or district sponsored activity.

#### IV. Screening Procedures

- A. We propose these **MINIMUM** screening standards:
- All adults, volunteer or paid persons, whether laity or clergy, who have any direct or indirect contact with children, youth, or vulnerable adults who participate in any activities or events sponsored by the South Georgia Conference and/or its Districts shall be required to submit an application that includes:
1. Standard contact information.
  2. Experience and qualifications for the position.
  3. Documentation of an active relationship with the local church for whom they will be offering leadership of at least six months before being allowed to be in a supervisory role in children's activities (summer camp staff will be expected to have at least six month active relationship with a local church or a campus ministry).
  4. Signed voluntary disclosure of past criminal history and allegations of criminal history.
  5. Listing of 3 non-related personal 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.
  6. Waiver of confidentiality allowing the criminal background checks necessary for the position. The criminal background check should include a local, state and national search of the applicant's criminal record. (In the case of the Conference Summer Camps, the Associate Director of Life Span Ministries will conduct the search. In the case of Conference Retreats or District Events, each local church will conduct the search for applicants. See Certifying Officer in Section F below).
- B. If any of the reports raise questions about the fitness of the applicant to serve, the application will be disapproved and the person will not be placed in service. For example, persons having a criminal history of any of the following types of offenses shall not be allowed to serve in any ministry with children, youth and vulnerable adults:
1. If the applicant (paid or unpaid) is found to have been involved in any activity in which the applicant abused or exploited children, youth or vulnerable adults, the applicant shall not be approved. Any conviction of a crime against children, youth, or vulnerable adults shall disqualify any applicant.
  2. Child abuse, whether physical, emotional, sexual, neglectful or ritual shall disqualify any applicant.
  3. Violent offenses, including murder, rape, assault, domestic violence, etc., shall disqualify any applicant.

4. Persons having a criminal history of DUI or DWI conviction within the five (5) years immediately prior to the application shall not be allowed to act as a driver.
5. Persons having a criminal history of a drug related conviction within the five (5) years immediately prior to the application shall not be allowed to directly or indirectly supervise children, youth or vulnerable adults.
- C. During the first year of this policy's implementation (from June 1, 2008 through January 1, 2009), all current staff persons and volunteers will begin submitting to the screening procedures prescribed by this policy.
- D. After January 1, 2009, no person will be allowed to supervise children without being completely screened, trained and having agreed to follow the minimum supervisory standards. After June 1, 2008, the following persons will submit to screening: any new volunteer or staff person; any volunteer or staff person with a break in service of one year or more; and any person for whom it has been five (5) or more years since their last criminal background check.
- E. Great care shall be taken in establishing the protocols for conducting the review of the application, the reference checks, reviewing the criminal background check, verifying the required training, and maintaining the personnel records for each applicant. The certifying officer should be carefully selected and assisted in establishing the process they will use to certify persons working with their children, youth and vulnerable adults. Results of screens shall be kept under lock and key and revealed on a "need-to-know" basis. All forms and reference reports shall be kept as a part of an applicant's secured personnel file maintained by the certifying officer. The certifying officer is responsible for reviewing and following up on each application prior to service. All applications, related forms, and requirements must be completed prior to service. In the event that a reference follow up is needed, detailed notes of the conversation should also be included in the personnel file.

## **V. Minimum Supervisory Standards**

Conscientious and intentional supervision of participants and adults is the second step for providing a holy place of safety for children, youth and vulnerable adults. These supervisory procedures are designed to reduce the possibility of abuse to the children, youth or vulnerable adults and to protect staff persons and volunteers from unwarranted accusations. Again, these are **MINIMUM** Supervisory Standards. Each children's activity may adopt more stringent requirements as necessary. **MINIMUM** Supervisory Standards require:

- A. All staff persons and volunteers working with children, youth or vulnerable adults in Church activities receive an annual Safe Sanctuaries orientation. This orientation will include information regarding the Safe Sanctuaries Policy, the minimum standards of supervision, the signs of possible abuse, and the process for reporting suspected child abuse. This training may be received at one of the Conference-sponsored training events held across

- the Annual Conference or may be conducted locally following the training outline provided by the Church.
- B. All children's activities utilize the "two-adult rule" when supervising children. The two-adult rule requires that no matter the size of the group, there will always be two adults (not spouses) present. It is expected that there will be at least one male and at least one female adult supervisor when there are male and female participants. This may include the presence of an adult monitor who frequently moves in and out of rooms to supervise the activities. An assistant who is a minor shall not supervise other children regardless of age differentiation and therefore would not satisfy the two-adult rule.
  - C. No adult (age 18 or older) shall supervise an age group unless he/she is **AT LEAST** 5 years older than the children or youth with whom he/she is working.
  - D. Each room or space where children are being cared for shall have a window in the door or the door shall be left open. All indoor activities should occur in open view. 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 adapt practices and procedures to the setting so all are properly supervised.
  - E. Registration materials for activities in which children are outside of the direct supervision of their parents/guardians shall require signed written permission forms, which include pertinent health information, in order to participate.
  - F. All participants who can understand a covenant shall sign a participation covenant wherein each person states their understanding of the rules and their agreement to follow the rules. Adult staff and volunteers will have a covenant that includes a reminder of the Safe Sanctuaries minimum supervisory requirements that serve as a protection for all involved.
  - G. At events that require overnight accommodations, participants will be supervised by adults. At least two (2) leaders should be present in every room occupied by a participant. If necessary for participants to share a room with a leader, leaders shall sleep in separate beds from participants, so long as any one leader shall not be alone with any one participant. Recognizing lodging accommodations may be restricted in some situations; one leader is adequate, so long as any one leader shall **NOT** be alone with any one child, youth or vulnerable adult.

Additional considerations:

- To achieve compliance with the Safe Sanctuaries policy it may be necessary to combine groups; recruit, train, and reference additional volunteers; or cancel an event.
- Recognizing that there is safety in numbers, children and youth will be instructed to use the "buddy system" wherein children are required to remain with at least one other partner at all times for help and protection.

- It is also strongly encouraged that there be present at least one leader who is trained and certified in First Aid and CPR at all Church events.
- Any one-to-one mentoring, consulting, or counseling involving children, youth or vulnerable adults shall be conducted in sight of another leader or in a public venue.

## **VI. Reporting**

- A. Once an incident of child abuse occurs or allegation of an incident is made, it is crucial that it be dealt with promptly and in a clearly outlined manner. We will take seriously all allegations received. The supervisor or volunteer who observes alleged abuse or to whom such alleged abuse is reported shall report the incident immediately to the staff person in charge of the children's activity. The staff person in charge of the children's activity in which the alleged abuse was observed or disclosed shall provide immediate care to ensure the safety and well-being of the victim. Further, the staff person in charge of the children's activity will obtain necessary information such as, the name of the alleged victim, his or her address and family contact information, the nature of the allegation, and the name of the alleged perpetrator. Also, the staff person in charge of the children's activity will contact his/her supervisor or the next person in the supervisory chain immediately.
- B. The staff person in charge of the children's event and the supervisor will consult to determine the appropriate next steps of response. The District Superintendent and Conference Crisis Team will be contacted to join in the consultation to support a comprehensive response to this incident.
- C. Following the consultation, the staff person in charge of the children's activity will implement a response plan formulated in the consultation. If the allegations fall within the list of child abuse offenses found in the Georgia code 19-7-5, which requires mandatory reporting, the staff person shall make a report to the proper authorities. The staff person in charge of the children's activity will cooperate fully with the investigation. The parents of the child shall be contacted and informed of the alleged incident and appropriately assisted by the staff person in charge of the children's activity.
- D. The person suspected of abuse (respondent) shall, for the safety and well-being of all involved, be removed with dignity from further contact with children, youth or vulnerable adults until an appropriate investigation has taken place. In the event that the respondent is the staff person in charge of the children's activity, the report should be made to the Staff Parish Relations Committee Chair who will place the staff person on paid leave of absence during the investigation, will ensure the safety of the participants and leaders, and will provide for the administration of the event.
- E. If the allegation concerns activities or persons outside any supervisory relationship to a Church related event or activity, the staff person or supervisor in charge of the Church activity will consult with his/her supervisor immediately. If the allegations fall within the list of child abuse

- offenses found in the Georgia code 19-7-5, which requires mandatory reporting, the staff person in charge of the children's activity will make the initial contact with the Department of Family and Children's Services in a timely manner. For example, if a child tells a Church staff person or supervisor about being abused by a relative during the prior year, the staff person or supervisor receiving the statement will make a report to the staff person in charge of the children's activity. The staff person in charge of the children's activity will report this incident to his/her supervisor and a report will be filed with the proper authorities as the situation dictates.
- F. The staff person or supervisor in charge of the children's activity will carefully and contemporaneously document all information received and all actions taken in follow-up of the allegation.

## **VII. Response Plan**

- A. 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 cooperate with all official investigating agencies and appropriate conference officials.
- B. The senior pastor will immediately contact the District Superintendent to notify him/her of the situation. After initial contact has been made, the staff person in charge of the children's activity will work with Conference Crisis team to assess the incident and determine the appropriate comprehensive response to this situation. This consultation will continue as the response is implemented.
- C. The Conference Crisis Team will designate the official spokesperson for this incident. This designated person is the only person authorized to make statements to representatives of the media. All requests for statements should be directed to the Conference Communications Director, who will provide access to the spokesperson. Those answering phones or receiving in-person inquiries for information will politely refer all those seeking information to the Conference Director of Communications.
- D. Pastoral care and support will be available to all persons involved with the incident. The Conference Pastoral Counselor may be called to assist in providing care. The Conference Sexual Ethics Response Team may be deployed by the Bishop if it is determined that their service would be helpful.

## **VIII. Accountability**

Because we highly value protecting the children, youth and vulnerable adults that participate in the ministries of the church, protecting our staff both paid and volunteer from potential false allegations of abuse, and protecting all the various ministry assets of the church for making disciples of Jesus Christ, we expect full implementation of this policy.

- A. The Staff Parish Committee will insure that the Church staff has fully implemented this policy by January 1, 2009; as well as meeting the benchmarks set forth in the document.
- B. Each Church staff member is ultimately responsible for insuring that the volunteers have met the minimum requirements for his/her area of responsibility and that all the rules stated in this document are adhered to.

## **IX. Amendments**

Following adoption of this policy by the Church Council:

- A. Any changes made to this document would require approval by the Church Council.

Following adoption of this policy by the Charge Conference session:

- A. Editorial changes that clarify the policy without changing its requirements may be made by the Church Council.
- B. Substantiative changes that alter the requirements outlined in this policy must be presented to the Charge Conference for approval.

Note: The policies were developed utilizing the resources developed by the Reverend Joy Thornburg Melton.

*Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church*

*Safe Sanctuaries for Youth: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in Youth Ministries*