

# St. Matthew UMC Safe Sanctuaries Policy

## Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church

### 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. 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.

"**Abuse**" means a person: (a) inflicts or allows to be inflicted upon the child physical or mental injury or engages in acts or omissions which present a substantial risk of physical or mental injury to the child, (b) commits against a child, or allows to be committed against a child in such person's care, a sexual offense as defined by the laws of South Carolina or engages in acts or omissions that present a substantial risk that such a sexual offense would be committed against the child, (c) fails to supply the child while in such person's care with adequate food, clothing, shelter, or supervision appropriate to the child's age and development, or (d) encourages, condones, or approves the commission of delinquent acts by the child and the commission of the acts are shown to be the result of the encouragement, condonation, or approval.

"**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**” means persons, who, in the course of their employment, occupation, or practice of their professions, 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. 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. 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.

4. 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.
5. The church may, but is not required to, rely on the South Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church to conduct any or all background checks of staff persons and volunteers in accordance with its policies and procedures.

### **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. 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. An adult "roamer" who moves in and out of several different rooms satisfies the requirement to have two unrelated adults present in Sunday school, youth fellowship and similar classes and activities where several classes are taught simultaneously.
2. **No child will be left unsupervised** while attending a local church children's activity. The level of supervision shall be reasonably appropriate for the age of children participating in the activity. For example, this policy does not require that children over the age of [4?] be accompanied by two adults to the restroom.
3. Each room or space where children are being cared for shall have a window in the door or the door shall be left open, except for restroom use [by children over the age of [4?]] where privacy is appropriate. **All activities should occur in open view.**
4. 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.**
5. **Registration** materials for activities in which children are outside of the direct supervision of their parents/guardians shall require signed written permission forms.
6. All participants who can understand a covenant shall sign a **participation covenant**. 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.
7. No person shall supervise an age group unless he/she is **AT LEAST 18 years** of age or older and is 5 years older than the children being supervised.

### **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 SC Department of Social Services (Greenville County) at 467-7750 to make a report.**
4. **The Senior 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.

### **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. **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.
2. 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 Department of Social Services.
3. 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.
4. **Even in the event that 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. Example: 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.
5. 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.
6. In either case, **pastoral support** will be available to all persons involved with the incident as indicated.