

Safe Sanctuaries Policy
St. Matthew UMC
Greenville, South Carolina

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. Matthew 18:5-7 states “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, 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. Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes.”

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 the 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. Often abuse occurs in settings where children, youth or vulnerable adults should have been able to feel safe – homes, schools, camps, and most sadly 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 who 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 the local church. Presented herein is a comprehensive plan that will include all the areas of the issue.

St. Matthew United Methodist Church adopts this policy for the prevention of child abuse in our church. Any outside group using church facilities will be given a copy of St. Matthew’s Safe Sanctuaries policy and must sign a Statement of Compliance.

DEFINITIONS:

- **“Adult”** means a person 18 years of age or older.
- **“Supervisory Adult”** means a person 21 years of age or older who is in charge of the event.

- **“Assisting Adult”** means a person 18 years of age or older who is serving to meet the 2 adult rule. Anyone serving alongside the supervisory adult is considered an assisting adult
- **“Helper”** means anyone under 18 who aids in ministry and is not counted in the 2 adult rule.
- **“Child”** means any person birth through elementary school age.
- **“Youth”** means any person in middle school or high school. Youth who turn 18 during their senior year of high school will be considered a child until high school graduation, or the end of that school year.
- **“Vulnerable adults”** for the purposes of this policy will be adults whose mental or physical conditions makes them susceptible to abuse.
- **“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.

A. Purpose

Our purpose for establishing this Safe Sanctuary policy and accompanying procedures is to demonstrate our commitment to the physical, emotional and spiritual safety of all our children, youth and vulnerable adults.

B. Covenant Statement

St. Matthew United Methodist Church hereby pledges to conduct the ministry of Jesus Christ in ways that assure the physical and emotional safety and spiritual growth of all of our children, youth, and vulnerable adults as well as all of our workers with children, youth and vulnerable adults. We will follow reasonable safety measures when selecting and recruiting workers; we will implement appropriate operational procedures in all areas of programming and care; we will train our workers with children, youth and vulnerable adults on our procedures and policies, and we will have a clearly defined procedure for reporting a suspected incident of abuse consistent with South Carolina state law.

C. Recruitment and Selection Guidelines

1. Age

- a) Volunteers and paid staff working with children and youth in primary positions of authority (Supervisory Adult) must be at least 21 years of age and at least 5 years older than the age of the persons they are working to serve. St. Matthew will not use anyone under 21 as a primary position of authority (Supervisory Adult).
- b) Volunteers and paid staff working with children and youth and serving as the Second Adult alongside a Supervisory Adult must be at least 18 years of age and at least 5 years older than the age of persons they are working to serve.
- c) All volunteers serving as the Supervisory Adult, Second Adult or Assisting adult over 18 must go through the Safe Sanctuary application process.

2. Six month rule

- a) Volunteers must have been an active participant at St. Matthew UMC for at least 6 months.
- b) Exceptions may be made for persons transferring in good standing from another congregation. (Only with approval of the Sr. Pastor)

3. Application

Applicants must complete and sign an application and the related waivers giving permission to check references and background information.

4. Background Checks

Criminal background checks shall be made of all clergy, paid staff, and volunteer adults who have supervisory responsibility for children, youth, or vulnerable adults (i.e. youth group leaders)

5. Prior Convictions

Approval criteria include, but are not limited to:

- a) No conviction of any crime against a child, youth, or vulnerable adult.
- b) Any individual who has had a DUI in the last five years may not transport children, youth or vulnerable adults.

6. Holy Conversation (Interview)

Applicants may be interviewed for suitability for the work they desire to do. This interview is an opportunity to build relationships within the church.

7. Confidentiality of information

The Office Administrator will keep confidential all information received in the applicant selection process and all confidential records will be kept in a secure area. The pastor and church staff are responsible for the implementation of these policies as well as the maintenance of confidential records.

8. Recheck

St. Matthew reserves the right to recheck volunteers at any time. All volunteers shall be rechecked for criminal history after 5 years of the initial check.

D. Supervision Guidelines

All meetings of children, youth and vulnerable adults affiliated with St. Matthew United Methodist Church will be governed by the following Guidelines:

1. Two Adult Rule

Minimum supervisory standards will include two, Safe Sanctuary approved adults. This applies to classroom activities, activities away from the church facility, and when transporting children and youth. Whenever possible, we will strive to have teachers in teams of two or more per Sunday school hour to every class of children or youth. An adult “roamer” who moves in and out of several different rooms satisfies the requirement to have two adults present in Sunday school, youth fellowship, and similar classes and activities where several classes are taught simultaneously.

2. Rule of 3

- a) Children and youth should never be one on one in isolation with each other or with any one adult.
- b) For counseling exceptions see counseling, Section D, p5, paragraph 7.

3. Nursery Checkout procedure

All parents utilizing the church nursery will observe the check-in/check-out procedure.

4. Open Door Policy

Protection of children, youth and vulnerable adults requires that an “open door policy” be followed. This policy means that the parents of the children and youth served, the clergy, administrative and professional staff of the church have the right to visit and observe the activity, classroom, or church-sponsored program at any time, unannounced.

5. Outside Access

There must be access to a phone/cell phone when groups are at or away from the church facility. The church office or authorized church representative will be given this number prior to the group's departure from the church property.

6. Doors and Windows

All classroom and office doors will have a window of visibility from a hallway door. These door windows will be kept free from adornment. There must be a line of sight into a room from outside the room at all times and line of hearing where possible.

7. Individual counseling

One-on-one interactions are sometimes necessary and appropriate but care must be taken that they be conducted in an environment that provides visibility. If at all possible, another adult is to have knowledge of the staff member's whereabouts and with whom they are meeting. Children and youth receiving individual counseling should be told they are free to discuss any aspects of the counseling process with a parent or other adult. If suspected abuse and neglect are revealed during the session, it will be reported in accordance with section E of this policy. No one should ever be one on one in isolation. See Section D, paragraph 2, page 4.

8. Touch

Physical affections should be appropriate to the age of the child or youth. (For example, it is generally appropriate for a four-year-old to sit in a nursery worker's lap and give a kiss on the cheek, but it is not appropriate for a teenager and youth leader to behave this way.)

- a) Touching should be initiated by the child or youth. It should be a response to the child's need for comforting, encouragement, or affection. It should not be based upon the adult's emotional need.
- b) Ideally, touching and affection should only be given when in the presence of other children's ministry or youth workers. It is much less likely that touch will be inappropriate or misconstrued as such when two adult workers are present and the touching is open to observation. This is especially important when diapering a baby or helping a young child change clothes or use the restroom.
- c) Touching behavior should not give even the appearance of wrongdoing. A ministry worker's behavior must foster trust at all times; it should be above reproach.
- d) A child's preference not to be touched should be respected. Affection will not be forced upon a reluctant child.
- e) Church workers must promptly discuss inappropriate touching or other questionable behavior by other workers with their ministry leader, staff member or a pastor.

9. Outings Away From Church Property

All children and youth participating in out of town and overnight outings must have written consent form and a medical release form. (Medical release forms must be notarized and are good for a one year period before having to be renewed.) .

- a) If the group stays overnight at the church, two or more leaders must be present and must include at least one male and female if the group is mixed gender.
- b) If the group leaves the premises, two or more leaders must be present.
- c) There must be access to a phone/cell phone when groups are away from the church property.
- d) Female staff will supervise female children and youth in their sleeping quarters and male staff will supervise male children and youth in their sleeping quarters.
- e) Married couples will not stay together but observe the female/female and male/male sleeping arrangements.
- f) With the exception of a parent/child combination, a staff or volunteer will not occupy the same bed or sleeping bag.
- g) No youth shall drive to events. They must drive to the church and then ride with the group. Exceptions to the driving rule will be made with a notarized parent permission letter.

10. Gifts

No staff, either paid or volunteer, are to give gifts to an individual child or youth without the prior knowledge of the parent(s) or responsible clergy. Gifts may not be elaborate but should be modest and appropriate to the occasion.

11. Training

Prior to working in the youth or children department, workers must complete and comply with our Safe Sanctuary training. Training will be conducted yearly for our church leadership and on an as needed basis for new volunteers.

12. Verification of Reading of Policy Statement.

Upon receipt of the this policy statement, the volunteer or paid staff person will read and sign a statement that he/she has read St Matthew United Methodist Church's Safe Sanctuary Policy and will be considered Safe Sanctuary Approved.

E. Response by Church Workers to Allegations of Abuse

As caring Christians, we are committed to protect and advocate for children, youth, and vulnerable adults participating in the life of the church. The church is entrusted to provide an emotionally safe, spiritually grounded, healthy environment for children, youth, and adults in which they are protected from abuse. It is our legal and moral responsibility to report suspected

abuse whenever it comes to our attention regardless of where that abuse takes place. We shall report suspected abuse to stop potentially existing abuse and to prevent further abuse. To report abuse is to witness to the world of the love and justice of God. Reporting abuse is a form of ministering to the needs of those crying out for help. If abuse occurs, it is our intention to act as an advocate for all affected persons, providing support, information, assistance and intervention. We seek to provide a supportive atmosphere, offering both objectivity and empathy as we seek to create a climate in which healing can take place.

If abuse is suspected by, observed by or disclosed to a volunteer and/or paid staff member of the church, that person shall report the incident immediately to the pastor or designee. (If the accused is the pastor, see information below.) The following procedure will go into effect:

1. Ensure the protection of and tend to the immediate needs of the child, youth, or vulnerable adult as the situation requires.
2. IMMEDIATELY contact the Senior Pastor and Supervisory Adult, or the adult in charge of the event.
3. The pastor will immediately call 911.
4. The pastor will notify the parents of the victim and take whatever steps are necessary to assure the safety of the child/youth until the parent(s) arrive.
 - a) It is important to emphasize that the proper authorities must be notified even if the parent(s) does not wish the incident to be reported.
 - b) If one or both of the parents is the alleged abuser, the proper authorities will be contacted.
5. The pastor will make sure DSS has been contacted. This is a requirement of the law. (Note: Do not attempt an investigation. This should be left to professionals who are familiar with these cases.) Written documentation will be given to the pastor and/or Chair of the Staff Parish Committee as soon as practically possible.
6. After having reported the suspected abuse to the proper authorities, the pastor will report immediately to the church's attorney, the church's insurance company, and the district superintendent. The district superintendent will report the allegation to the bishop's office.
7. If the accused is working in a volunteer or paid position with children or youth in the church, with dignity and respect for the sacred worth of all persons involved, the accused will be immediately removed from further involvement with children and/or youth.
8. Once the proper authorities have been contacted and the safety of the child or youth is secured, the pastor or other designated person may tell the accused that a report has been made. If the accused is a volunteer or paid staff of the church, that person shall be relieved temporarily of his or her duties until the investigation is finished. If the accused is

a paid staff person of the church, arrangements should be made to either maintain or suspend his or her income until the allegations are cleared or substantiated.

9. Any contact with the media should be handled by a pre-determined spokesperson. Care will be taken to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of all involved. The spokesperson should generally convey that the matter is under investigation and any comments made prior to the conclusion of the investigation would be premature.
10. A written report of the basic information shall be kept to ensure on-going ministry to, and advocacy for, victims and others involved. A form for this purpose shall be available in the church office. The report shall be brief and contain only factual information relevant to the situation. It shall be filed in a secure place in order to ensure confidentiality. It shall be written in ink or typed to prevent it from being changed. The church must also file a copy of the report with the bishop's office of the South Carolina Conference where it shall remain confidential.
11. Cards with emergency numbers and contacts will be distributed to all persons working with children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

If the pastor is the accused party:

1. The Supervisory Adult will ensure the protection of and tend to the immediate needs of the child, youth or vulnerable adult as the situation requires.
2. The Supervisory Adult will immediately notify the chair of the Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC).
3. The SPRC chair will immediately call 911.
4. The SPRC chair will follow the same procedures as listed in the prior section with the addition of contacting the District Superintendent. The District Superintendent will guide the SPRC chair in how to further carry out responses to the allegations.