SAFE SANCTUARIES®

Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church

West Ohio Conference
The United Methodist Church
Recommended Practices and Procedures
for West Ohio Local Churches

Introduction

Jesus cared about the vulnerable among us—children, elderly, those in poverty, immigrants, people in prison, widows and orphans, people with physical and mental illness. And so shall we. Abuse often happens in places where vulnerable populations feel safe—like in homes, schools, camps, residential care settings, and even churches. People who have been abused may also feel more comfortable sharing what has happened to them in a loving environment, like the church.

Knowing the Statistics:

Children: According to the National Children’s Alliance (2015) 90% of child abuse occurs by a family member, with 39% being parents. Additionally, 23% of child abuse occurs by someone under the age of 18.

Elderly: Approximately 1 in 10 people age 60+ have experienced some form of elder abuse, estimating only 1 in 14 cases being reported (National Council on Aging, 2019). Almost 60% of elder abuse and neglect occurs by a family member.

The intent of the Safe Sanctuaries Policy is to: 1) prevent such abuse from happening in our churches; 2) be a place where children, youth, and vulnerable adults can feel safe in disclosing abuse; and 3) protect the loyal volunteers and employees who minister to vulnerable populations. This policy sets forth the recommended practices and procedures in the areas of:

- Screening
- Supervision
- Responding & Reporting
- Liability Insurance & Policy Review

Statement of Covenant

As a Christian community of faith and a United Methodist church, we pledge to engage in the ministry of the Gospel in ways that seek to assure the safety and spiritual growth of all of our children, youth, vulnerable adults and those who serve with them. We seek to follow reasonable safety measures in the selection and recruitment of workers; and to implement prudent operational procedures in all ministry activities and events.
Definitions

“Abuse” means harm or a threat of physical or emotional harm to another person. Abuse includes:
1. The infliction of physical or emotional injury by other than accidental means
2. The creation of a risk, or allowing the creation of risk.
3. Committing or allowing to be committed, an act of sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, or prostitution.

“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 limited to, any contact or interaction in which the parent, legal guardian, or other person uses or allows, permits, or encourages the use of the child, youth, or vulnerable adult 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, legal guardian, or other person allows, permits, or encourages a child, youth, or vulnerable adult to engage in an act which constitutes prostitution under Ohio law. Sexual exploitation also includes, but is not limited to, a situation in which a parent, legal guardian, person having custodial control or supervision, or person who is responsible for the welfare of a child, youth or vulnerable adult; allows, permits, or encourages the child, youth or vulnerable adult to engage in an act of obscene or pornographic photographing, filming, or depicting of a child as provided for under Ohio law.

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

“Vulnerable Adult” means a person eighteen (18) years of age or older who is unable to protect him or herself from abuse, neglect, or exploitation by others because of a physical, mental, or emotional impairment.

Screening

Careful screening is one potential way to prevent the abuse and exploitation of children, youth, and vulnerable adults. Background screenings have the capacity to create peace of mind by showing that the staff and volunteers working with children, youth, and vulnerable adults, have no known record of abuse.

We recommend staff and volunteers who may have regular or direct contact with children, youth, or vulnerable adults:

A. Complete a volunteer application including:
   i. Standard contact information
   ii. Experience/qualifications for the position
      1. It is recommended that Volunteers demonstrate an active relationship with the local church for at least six 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 period.
   iii. Voluntary disclosure of past criminal history, including any criminal charges and/or convictions
   iv. Authorization allowing the church to secure a criminal background screening to be conducted and/or to contact references.
   v. Listing of 2 non-relative references. This list should 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.)
B. Complete a criminal background screening*

*Background screenings should include a criminal records check and may include review of other desired records including county, motor vehicle, employment, alias names, and a search of the national sex offenders registry.

i. West Ohio suggests the following measures of completion:


ii. Each conviction should be evaluated in view of all the facts, including the date of the conviction, the nature of the offense, the position sought, applicable law, and the obligations imposed by Amended Senate Bill 187. Organizations with a presence in Ohio should comply Ohio Revised Code 109.572(A)(1) should generally disqualify a person from having unsupervised access to children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

iii. It is recommended that criminal records checks be repeated at least every five years (better every three years) for all staff, including clergy, and volunteers. Persons who have a break in volunteer or paid service of one or more years may be required to undergo a new background screening.

1. A national criminal records check is highly recommended if the volunteer/staff person has lived outside the state within the past 5 years and/or lives near the border of another state.
2. It is important that all records be kept in a secure location that is accessible to church leadership. It is recommended that these records be kept by the church in perpetuity.

Supervision

Supervision procedures are designed to reduce the possibility of abuse or exploitation of children, youth, and vulnerable adults, and to protect staff and volunteers from unfounded accusations. The following are recommended as useful guidelines. Careful judgment should be exercised in all supervisory situations.

1. Training is recommended for all staff and volunteers working with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. An initial educational component of the Safe Sanctuaries Policy, including its procedures and practices, is to be implemented prior to any adult having direct supervision of children, youth, or vulnerable adults. Thereafter, it is recommended that when criminal records checks are repeated (at least every five years, better every three years) volunteers re-take the educational component of the Safe Sanctuaries policy training.

2. Children, youth, and vulnerable adults are to be supervised while attending a ministry activity or event.

a. Those providing supervision of children, youth, and vulnerable adults should be at least eighteen years of age and at least three years older than children or youth being supervised.

b. Minimum supervision standards include the “two-adult rule” and/or the “rule of three”:

i. The *Two-Adult Rule*  
The two-adult rule states there will be, at a minimum, at least two unrelated adults* present for any ministry event. This may include the presence of an assigned adult ‘roamer’ who moves in and out of rooms and spaces where ministry events occur.

ii. The *Rule of Three*  
The “rule of three” states there will always be a minimum of three unrelated people together for ministry events; this can be two youth and one adult, or one youth and two adults. The “rule of three” can be followed for ministries with youth, age 12 and older.

c. Alignment with best practices for determining appropriate ratios for sufficient care of children, youth, and vulnerable adults during ministry events are strongly encouraged.
3. Hosting Events
   a. Before the start of every activity or event, appropriate contact information should be collected.
   b. All ministry activities and events should occur in open view. Each room or space where ministry activities or events occur should be open to public view. For example, enclosed spaces such as classrooms could have a viewing window, a glass panel in the door, a ½ door configuration, or an open door.

4. Transportation & Overnight Accommodations
   a. When transporting children, youth, or vulnerable adults for a church ministry event or activity, an additional unrelated adult should accompany the driver in the vehicle.
   b. Ministry activities and events involving transportation should require written and signed permission from parents or legal guardians.
   c. When a ministry involves an overnight situation, a ministry plan including travel plans and sleeping arrangements should be made available in writing to and should be signed by the parents or legal guardians prior to the event.

5. Counseling
   a. Those who are not a professionally licensed counselor in the State of Ohio should limit confidential conversations to three sessions. These sessions should follow all aspects of the Safe Sanctuaries Policy. If the problem has not been resolved after three sessions, the child, youth, or vulnerable adult should be referred to a professional licensed counselor.
   b. All clergy will abide by Ohio law in relation to providing pastoral counseling (ORC 4757.41).

**Response Plan**

A quick, compassionate, and unified response to a reported incident of abuse is expected. In all cases of reported or observed abuse there shall be cooperation with all official investigating agencies.

1. Take all allegations seriously.

2. Care for Victim: If the victim is in immediate need of medical attention, the appropriate medical care will be obtained.

3. Attend to Alleged Perpetrator: If the alleged perpetrator is on-site and danger is perceived, call local police authorities.
   a. Immediately, yet 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 removal. In any removal of a staff member or volunteer from a ministry activity or event, 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.

4. Activate Chain of Notification: Activate the Chain of Notification immediately to prepare the local church, district, and conference to provide the best care and support to the victim and their family. The Chain of Notification is as follows:
   a. The staff person or volunteer is to report the incident immediately to the person in charge of the ministry or event; providing reason for suspected abuse and any other helpful information.
   b. The person in charge of the ministry will immediately contact the senior pastor or church council leader. At this point in the Chain of Notification a report to Child or Adult Protective Services should be made (See #5).
      i. If the pastor is the alleged perpetrator, the church council leader will be notified in place of the pastor.
   c. The pastor (or church council leader) will immediately call the superintendent of the district in which the church resides and report the allegations.
   d. The district superintendent will immediately report the situation to the Assistant to the Bishop and Communications Director at the West Ohio Conference office, as set forth in the Crisis Communications Guidelines for the West Ohio Conference.
e. Notify the parents or legal guardians of the victim. Take whatever steps are necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of the victim until the parent/legal guardian(s) arrive. However, if one or both of the parents/legal guardians is the alleged perpetrator, follow the advice of the authorities concerning notification.

f. If notification of the allegation has not yet been communicated with the alleged perpetrator do so at this point in the notification process. When it has been alleged that a staff member or volunteer, has committed an act of abuse or exploitation, the staff member or volunteer will be required to refrain from all ministry activities and events with children, youth, and vulnerable adults until the incident has been fully resolved by the appropriate civil authorities and in accordance with The Book of Discipline.

g. Further communication or steps taken with the staff, congregation, community, or media will only be taken after consultation with the District Superintendent and the Conference office.

5. Make the Report: Every person covered by the Safe Sanctuaries policy is mandated by the policy to report known or suspected abuse up the chain. It is crucial that reporting be immediate and the allegation(s) dealt with as soon as possible to the incident or disclosure. The pastor (or church council leader) will ensure Child or Adult Protective Services (CPS/APS, respectively) are contacted.

a. All clergy, staff, and volunteers are included in mandatory reporting in the cases of suspected abuse or neglect as required by The Book of Discipline and Ohio law (ORC 4757.41).

b. For volunteers who are mandatory reporters by profession, the first phone call may be to CPS/APS, then the Chain of Notification will be activated.

   i. Mandatory reporters by profession, in the State of Ohio, include: clergy, attorneys, occupational therapists, counselors, teachers, nurses and doctors, child care workers, social workers, and so forth.

c. When making a report by telephone, it is advisable that it be conducted in the presence of an objective witness. The witness can verify the report has been made and who made the report. All reports should be documented and securely filed.

6. Document:

a. Written Documentation: The person in charge of the ministry activity or event will keep a written report of the steps taken by the church in response to the reported abuse. The report should be brief and contain only factual information relevant to the situation; written in ink or typed; and kept in a secure location.

b. Working with Media Requests: All media requests for statements should be directed to a designated church spokesperson who will work in conjunction with the District Superintendent and the Conference Crisis Communication Team. The spokesperson will update the District Superintendent of any media inquiries. The West Ohio Communication Office is available at any time for consultation and to provide advice for handling media or other community inquiries.

7. Continued Care and Healing:

a. Reach out and respond in a positive and supportive manner to the victim and the victim’s family. Show care and support to help prevent further hurt. Extend pastoral resources as needed. Remember that the care and safety of the victim is the first priority. The church should seek to have a care and safety plan in writing.

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**Liability Insurance & Policy Review**

1. The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church requires the trustees of each local church to secure adequate liability insurance to cover the risk associated with its ministries. The Board of Trustees shall review annually the adequacy of the property, building, and personnel coverage.

2. The West Ohio Conference requires churches to submit information on new and updated Safe Sanctuaries policies annually via the Annual Policy Review Form.