

WEST OHIO CONFERENCE SAFE SANCTUARIES

STATEMENT OF UNDERSTANDING GUIDELINES

Throughout scripture, God has called justice-involved persons into Kingdom-building ministry. Saul the murderer became Paul the missionary. Today, he is still calling forth disciples from behind bars, and the West Ohio Conference believes welcoming our neighbors returning from an incarceration experience is a primary mission field for growing God's Kingdom. At the same time, we recognize that within our faith communities are victims of crime and other vulnerable populations that are at higher risk of being victimized. The following guidelines are suggestions for creating safe spaces, healing relationships, and restorative justice opportunities when a returning neighbor is being led to a particular faith community. These guidelines supplement the recommendations outlined in the Conference's revised Safe Sanctuaries Guidelines and Polices. These State of Understanding Guidelines are not prescriptive. Rather, use them as a framework for welcoming and including returning neighbors into the body of Christ.

1. **See the returning neighbor as a vulnerable person.** Returning neighbors, particularly those who are registered sex offenders, are at increased risk for suicide, depression, homelessness, and victimization once they return to a community. In addition, the likelihood of victimizing another person again increases when an individual is excluded from a healthy, caring community. Re-integration after incarceration is a vulnerable transition period, and the more a returning neighbor is surrounded by supportive community that encourages "the right things," the less risk the returning neighbor poses in harming themselves or another individual.
2. **Review current Safe Sanctuaries policies with your leadership team.** Where does your church need to make changes in expected behaviors for ALL members to protect ALL members? For example, bathroom behaviors -- is inappropriate for one child and one adult, who is not the child's parent, to be in a community bathroom together.
3. **Form an accountability team around the returning neighbor, also known as a "Community of Care."** A safe, trust-building community is vital to the successful reintegration for returning neighbors, especially registered sex offenders. The team should develop an understanding of the challenges facing the returning neighbor and be willing to assist the returning neighbor with self-agency, healthy and appropriate boundaries, and continued spiritual development as a disciple of Jesus. The team is not put in place to monitor the returned neighbor. Rather, the team is equipped to guide and disciple the returned neighbor into the life and fellowship of the church and community. The Community of Care is there to provide a place for the returning

neighbor to heal and restore their whole identity as a Child of God. In addition, the team exists in a relationship of mutuality with the returning neighbor, understanding that this entire process is intended to be an avenue of discipleship formation for all involved.

4. **Equip a Community of Care member to be a mentor for the returned neighbor.** The mentor and returned neighbor may self-select each other or the Community of Care may appoint a person to be a mentor. This relationship is vital to on-going discipleship and accountability. The mentor and mentee hold each other accountable and are held accountable within the Community of Care. A mentor must have demonstrated the ability to build trust in relationships, be consistent in their presence, and gracefully hold themselves and others accountable. See Appendix A for characteristics of a good mentor.
5. **Walk with returned neighbor through their parole/probationary period (community supervision).** The Community of Care, along with the returning neighbor, understands the parameters of the returning neighbor's parole/probation. A member of the Community of Care -- preferably the returned neighbor's mentor -- goes with the returning neighbor to their parole/probation meetings as supportive presence. The Community of Care works with the returning neighbor and the church's leadership to establish healthy and appropriate boundaries based on the returning neighbor's parole/probationary requirements and parameters.
6. **Develop a Statement of Understanding that addresses:**
 - a. *Conditions of Community Supervision.* The Statement of Understanding is unique to each person. This protects the returning neighbor from violating their community supervision requirements and protects them from false accusations.
 - b. *An expectation that the returning neighbor will be part of a Community of Care.* A Statement of Understanding recognizes that a Community of Care provides a safe space for spiritual development, support, and the promotion of pro-social thinking and behavior, and it reduces their risk for re-offending. The Community of Care should not be established solely as a reactionary response to a returning neighbor's presence. Instead, Communities of Care, or small groups, should already be part of the church's discipleship culture, and participation in a small group is an expectation of everyone. If being in community with fellow believers is not part of a church's culture, then, the church is not ready to walk with a returning neighbor.
 - c. *The church's community behavioral expectations as outlined in the church's Safe Sanctuaries policy.* This means that many conversations need to occur with the returning neighbor about the underlying meaning about behavior expectations

and how to handle situations when the returning neighbor finds himself/herself in a compromising situation that he/she did not initiate.

- d. *Action items for spiritual development* (i.e. attend Bible Study), *reconciliation* (i.e. attend a victim awareness class), *and self-agency* (i.e. join a Reentry support group). Ultimately, the outcome for any discipling relationship is spiritual and life transformation. Many returning neighbors do not know how to walk the life of a disciple on the outside. They need help in putting theory into practice, so that they continue on the path of reconciliation and good citizenship.

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Appendix A: Qualities of a Good Mentor

- Called to mentoring ministry
- Looks beyond mentee's past to find positive potential that can be developed
- Good discernment; not easily manipulated
- Speaks the truth in love
- Possesses tolerance and patience with growth process; trusts God for life transformation
- Balances empathy for mentee's failures with being an encourager
- Insight and wisdom for maintaining balanced lifestyle.
- Willingness to share encouraging personal experiences
- Ability to guide mentee to grounding scripture and Christian literature for faith journey
- Strong personal connection to a local church and discipleship small group