



# SAFE SANCTUARIES<sup>®</sup>

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**Reducing the Risk of  
Abuse in the Church**

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**West Ohio Conference**  
The United Methodist Church

# SAFE SANCTUARIES<sup>®</sup> Revision Process Explanation

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Our biblical faith and our United Methodist Social Principles affirm that God has called us to create communities of faith where children, youth, and vulnerable adults can be safe and grow as disciples of Jesus. The West Ohio Conference Safe Sanctuaries Task Force has been charged with revising the Safe Sanctuaries Standards of the Conference. It is a complex charge as we are a beautifully diverse Conference. In West Ohio, we have churches that worship 10 or fewer to some that worship over 1000 weekly. We have urban, suburban, rural, town and country, and county seat congregations. There are churches composed of persons who may speak different languages and who are acclimating to our culture. West Ohio also has churches that engage in camping, Volunteer in Mission Teams, ministries with returning neighbors, and a host of other multi-generational ministries that may require special consideration when it comes to implementing their Safe Sanctuaries Policy.

Our Task Force is composed of people who represent the diversity of our annual conference. We have members from various racial and ethnic backgrounds; women and men; rural, urban, suburban; smaller and larger congregations; laity, Deacons, and Elders. From the Conference, we have Task Force members who are knowledgeable about ministry with persons who are vulnerable, returning to our communities following legal issues, acclimating to Western culture, and have experience and knowledge around an assortment of other special interests and concerns. We have intentionally tried to represent a broad spectrum of the diversity that makes up our Conference. Our diversity is a gift, and we celebrate it.

The West Ohio Annual Conference is presenting a Safe Sanctuaries Policy with recommended practices and procedures. Each local church is responsible for writing, implementing, training, submitting, and annually reviewing an appropriate Safe Sanctuaries Policy. Community groups, insurance companies, and those who are part of your church can be affected by changes made to your Safe Sanctuaries Policy. The expectation of the Conference is that all churches regardless of size, location, ethnicity, culture or background will seek to implement these practices and procedures in a manner reasonably permitted by their resources and circumstances. Support documents will be provided through the conference website. These documents are designated to assist churches that need and want more guidance with specific ministry opportunities. Supporting documents offer a variety of resources including, but not limited to Safe Sanctuaries and: transportation, retreats, ministry with returning neighbors, camping, mission teams, and several other areas where churches seek guidance from the Conference. It is our prayer, that you will find in this policy, help for your church in your ministry location.

## *Recommended Practices and Procedures for West Ohio Local Churches and Congregations*

### Introduction

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National research indicates that a report of child abuse occurs every 10 seconds and abuse of vulnerable adults is prevalent and continues to increase. While reporting is on the rise, there is still much abuse that goes undetected and unreported. Often, abuse occurs in places where children, youth, and vulnerable adults feel safe – homes, schools, camps, residential care settings, and even churches. In over three quarters of reported cases, the victim was related to or acquainted with the abuser. 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 our children, youth, and vulnerable adults. This policy sets forth the recommended practices and procedures in the areas of:

- Screening
- Supervision
- Reporting
- Response Plan

### Statement of Covenant

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As a Christian community of faith and a United Methodist congregation, 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, and vulnerable adults as well as those who work 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

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**“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

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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.

1. We recommend that all staff and volunteers who may have regular or direct contact with children, youth, or vulnerable adults undergo a background screening including:
  - a. Standard contact information
  - b. Experience/qualifications for the position
  - c. Voluntary disclosure of past criminal history, including any criminal charges and/or convictions
  - d. Authorization allowing the church to secure any background screening to be conducted and/or to contact references.
  - e. 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.)*

2. Criminal records check recommendations:
  - a. Good: state-level criminal records check.
  - b. Better: National criminal records check.
  - c. Best: A national criminal records check with fingerprinting of workers and volunteers before they begin work.
  - d. All clergy persons serving in positions that may allow regular or direct contact with children, youth, or vulnerable adults should undergo a background screening.
  - e. 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.
3. 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. However, offenses listed in R.C. 109.572(A)(1) should generally disqualify a person from having unsupervised access to children, youth, and vulnerable adults.
4. 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. 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.
5. 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.
6. Organizations with a presence in Ohio should comply with Amended Senate Bill 187.

## Supervision

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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, training includes documentation and a review of the Safe Sanctuaries Policy, including procedures for supervision and current information on how to identify and report child, youth, or vulnerable adult abuse. This review should occur annually.
2. Minimum supervisory standards should include the “two-adult rule” or the “rule of three”.
  - a. The two-adult rule requires that, regardless of the size of the group, there will always be two unrelated adults present. This may include the presence of an assigned adult ‘roamer’ who moves in and out of rooms and places where ministry activities or events occur.
  - b. When transporting children, youth, or vulnerable adults for a church ministry event or activity, an additional adult should accompany the driver in the vehicle.

- c. Unrelated adults is defined as two people who do not live in the same household.
  - d. The “*rule of three*” can be followed for ministries with youth, age 12 and older. 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.
3. Children, youth, and vulnerable adults are to be supervised while attending a ministry activity or event.
  4. 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.
  5. Before the start of every activity or event, appropriate contact information should be collected.
  6. Ministry activities and events involving transportation should require written and signed permission from parents or legal guardians.
  7. 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.
  8. No person shall supervise an age group unless they are at least eighteen years of age and at least three years older than the children or youth being supervised.
  9. 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.
  10. 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.

## Reporting

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Safe Sanctuaries reporting is required by any staff or volunteer who personally witnesses an incident of abuse or exploitation or when an allegation of such an incident is made by a child, youth, or vulnerable adult. It is crucial that reporting be immediate and the allegation(s) dealt with as soon as possible to the incident or disclosure.

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.

If any of the above situations occur, the following steps will be taken:

1. If the victim is in immediate need of medical attention, the appropriate medical assistance will be obtained. If the alleged perpetrator is onsite and danger is perceived, local police authorities will be called.
2. Upon securing medical attention for the victim and ensuring the safety of the environment, the staff person or volunteer must report the incident immediately to the person in charge of the ministry or activity using the Report of Suspected Incident of Child Abuse with his/her age, reason for suspected abuse and any other helpful information to the investigation. The senior pastor (or church council leader) will ensure contact is made with Child Protective Services for Ohio Health and Family Services. However, if the volunteer also happens to be a mandatory reporter, the volunteer should, at a minimum “co-report” with the senior pastor. 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.

3. 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.
4. The senior pastor (or church council leader) shall immediately call the superintendent of the district in which the church resides and report the allegations.
5. 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.
6. Further communication or steps taken with the staff, congregation, community, or media shall only be taken after consultation with the District Superintendent and the Conference office.
7. The person in charge of the ministry activity or event must 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. It should be written in ink or typed to prevent it from being changed and kept in a secure location.

## Response Plan

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

1. 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 shall 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.
2. 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.
3. When it has been alleged that a staff member or volunteer, has committed an act of abuse or exploitation, the staff member or volunteer shall 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.
4. Take all allegations seriously. 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 whatever pastoral resources are needed. Remember that the care and safety of the victim is the first priority. The church should seek to provide a supportive atmosphere to all those who are affected, offering both objectivity and empathy as it seeks to create a climate in which healing can take place.



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*[westohioumc.org/conference/safe-sanctuaries](http://westohioumc.org/conference/safe-sanctuaries)*