

2024 West Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church Recommended Guidelines for Creating a Safe Sanctuaries™ Policy for Local Congregations

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. As a Church and denomination, we have not always lived into our commitment to minister with the marginalized without causing harm. Acknowledging this an important step toward reconciliation while ministering to those Jesus calls us to requires us to create safe spaces for all of God’s people. In doing so we create policies that are specific to the congregations and communities in which we serve.

The intent of any Safe Sanctuaries Policy should be to:

- prevent abuse from happening in our churches;
- create environments where children, youth, and vulnerable adults can feel safe in disclosing abuse; and
- protect volunteers and employees who minister with vulnerable populations.

This document sets forth the recommended practices and procedures in the areas of:

- Introduction
- Statement of Covenant
- Definitions
- Screening
- Supervision
- Responding & Reporting
- Safety of Facilities
- Liability Insurance & Policy Review
- Best Practices & Sample forms

All local churches within the West Ohio Conference are required to have a Safe Sanctuary policy which outlines how each of the above-mentioned areas are cared for.

INTRODUCTION & STATEMENT OF COVENANT

It is recommended that each local church provide an introduction which outlines the purpose of the local policy. The policy to which a local congregation agrees to abide should connect directly to their context, including awareness and acknowledgment of previous harm to vulnerable populations by the Church. The covenant is to create a ministry that is life giving for all people involved.

DEFINITIONS

It is recommended to include any definitions which may be helpful for individuals to understand your local policy. The list below is not exhaustive to what could be used for individual contexts.

- **Abuse** means harm or a threat of physical or emotional harm to another person. Abuse includes:
 - The infliction of physical or emotional injury by other than accidental means
 - The creation of a risk or allowing the creation of risk
 - Committing or allowing to be committed, an act of sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, or prostitution.
- **Adult** means any person at least eighteen years of age.
- **Appropriate** means conduct that one understands would be acceptable and permissible by a parent or guardian.
- **Child** refers to a person under eighteen years of age.
- **Parent or guardian** means any parent, stepparent, foster parent, grandparent, or appointed guardian with general responsibility for the health, education, or welfare of a child or vulnerable adult.
- **Sexual contact** means the intentional touching of the intimate parts or the clothing covering the intimate parts of a youth, child, or vulnerable adult.
- **Sexual exploitation** means allowing, permitting, or encouraging a vulnerable adult, child, or youth to engage in prostitution, photographing, filming, or creating electronic or computer-generated images depicting a child, youth, or vulnerable adult engaged in actual or suggestive sexual conduct.
- **Sexual harassment** means any sexual advance or demand either verbal or physical, which is perceived by the recipient as demeaning, intimidating, or coercive.
- **Staff** means any employee of the ministry. This can include both paid and unpaid staff members but is particularly used in reference to paid employees.
- **Volunteer** means a person who participates as a leader or assists a leader in activities relating to any event or ministry without compensation.
- **Supervision** means to oversee or direct a ministry or ministry activity or event.
- **Unrelated Adults**-Adults who are not biologically related, spouses, or individuals in a cohabitating environment.

- **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 physical, mental, or emotional impairment.
- **Youth** refer to a person between the ages of thirteen and seventeen.

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. It is recommended that staff and volunteers may have regular or direct contact with children, youth, or vulnerable adults:

1. Complete a volunteer application including:
 - a. Standard contact information
 - b. Experience/qualifications for the position
 - i. 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.
 - ii. Full disclosure of past criminal history, including any criminal charges and/or convictions.
 - iii. Authorization allowing the church to secure a criminal background screening to be conducted and/or to contact references.
 - iv. Listing of two 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. 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 offender's registry.

 - i. West Ohio suggests the following measures of completion:
 - Good: State-level criminal records check.
 - Better: National criminal records check.
 - Best: National criminal records check with fingerprinting.
 - 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.
 - 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 securely 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 both onsite, offsite, and within digital spaces. Careful judgment should be exercised in all supervisory situations.

1. Annual 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, or 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 five years older than children or youth being supervised.
 - b. Minimum supervision standards include the “two-adult rule” and/or the “rule of three:”
 - **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.
 - **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.
3. Alignment with best practices for determining appropriate ratios for sufficient care of children, youth, and vulnerable adults during ministry events are strongly encouraged.
4. 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 within an unobstructed 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. 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.
6. Counseling
- a. Those who are not professionally licensed counselors 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. The following are recommended steps to be taken when responding to an incident. Realize that some of these steps may be managed simultaneously.

1. Take all allegations seriously.
2. Care for Victim: If the victim is in immediate need of medical attention, appropriate medical care will be obtained.
3. Attend to Alleged Perpetrator: If the alleged perpetrator is onsite 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 manage the removal in a discreet manner, recognizing that there will be an investigation by either state or church authorities, or both.
4. 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.
 - 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.
 - c. Mandatory reporters by profession, in the State of Ohio, include: clergy, attorneys, occupational therapists, counselors, teachers, nurses, and doctors, childcare workers, social workers and so forth.
 - d. 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 that has been made and who made the report. All reports should be documented and securely filed.
5. 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 #4).
 - c. If the pastor is the alleged perpetrator, the church council leader will be notified in place of the pastor.
 - d. The pastor (or church council leader) will immediately call the superintendent of the district in which the church resides and report the allegations.
 - e. 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.
 - f. 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 or legal guardian(s) arrive. However, if one or both parents/legal guardians is the alleged perpetrator, follow the advice of the authorities concerning notification.
 - g. 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.

- h. 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.

6. Document everything

- 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.

SAFETY OF FACILITIES

Safe physical spaces that support the work of Safe Sanctuaries are an important part of creating inclusive ministries. The following are recommended practices for the physical spaces within and outside of local congregations:

1. Inside the Building

- Lighting which provides well-lit hallways and rooms to provide clear visibility.
- Windows in each door within the church should provide clear lines of sight into the space.
- If possible, consideration of family or non-gendered restrooms should be available and it would be ideal for at least one restroom to have a bench-style or adult changing surface with privacy for those who may require such accommodation.
- Any keys for facilities should be documented and access to facilities outside of worship hours should be carefully maintained.
- Clear directional signage should be visible for children, youth, and vulnerable adults.
- Spaces clear of clutter and set aside for children, youth or vulnerable adults should be created with the needs of these demographics.

2. Outside the Building

- Parking areas should be well marked.
- Any outside area should be well lit.
- Outside structures should be kept locked when not in use. Any keys to such structures should be documented.
- Clear and visible signage should be in the parking area and at the entrances of the building.

3. Building Usage

- A schedule of building usage should be available to staff/key volunteers.
- Procedures and agreements for both ministry groups and outside groups should be maintained and kept on file.
- It is recommended that all outside groups should sign a lease agreement which includes:
 - Name of group and 501(c) (3) status
 - Certificate of insurance naming the local church as the place of event.
 - Exact location and time facility is being used by the group.
 - Names the person who will be given access to keys or who will lock and unlock the facility for use by the outside group.
 - Agreement to follow Safe Sanctuaries policy.
 - A copy of the local safe sanctuaries policy should be provided as well as training on the local policy.
 - Signature of the responsible party of outside group and local church representative.

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. Upon review, it is recommended that local policies provide the name of the insurance company as well as contact information and level of liability 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. It is recommended that each local policy includes a date of adoption as well as the latest review date if no changes are made.