

# **Policy for the Prevention of Abuse of Children, Youth, and Vulnerable Adults South Carolina Annual Conference The United Methodist Church**

Updated: 5-27-2016

## **Introduction**

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, in April 1996, adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of child sexual abuse in the church. The resolution was readopted in 2004 and 2008. The adopted resolution includes the following statement:

Jesus also said, “As for whoever causes these little ones who believe in me to trip and fall into sin, it would be better for them to have a huge stone hung around their necks and be drowned in the bottom of the lake” (Matthew 18:6). Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to the little one, the children. The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church state that “children must be protected from economic, physical, emotional and sexual exploitation and abuse” (§162C).

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children. Child sexual abuse, exploitation, and ritual abuse occur in churches, both large and small, urban and rural. The problem cuts across all economic, cultural, and racial lines. It is real, and it appears to be increasing. Most annual conferences can cite specific incidents of child, youth, and vulnerable adult sexual abuse and exploitation within churches. Virtually every congregation has among its members (adult) survivors of early sexual trauma.

Such incidents are devastating to all who are involved: the child, the family, the local church and its leaders. Increasingly, churches are torn apart by the legal, emotional, and monetary consequences of litigation following allegations of abuse.

1. “Ritual abuse” refers to abusive acts committed as part of ceremonies or rites; ritual abusers are often related to cults, or pretend to be.
2. God calls us to make our churches safe places, protecting children and other vulnerable persons from sexual and ritual abuse. God calls us to create communities of faith where children and adults grow safe and strong. (From The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church—2008, pp.240-242. Copyright©2008 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.)

Other scriptures remind us of the need to care for vulnerable adults such as the elderly. “Honor your Father and Mother as the Lord, God has commanded you” is one of the Ten Commandments outlined in Exodus 20. Jesus, from the cross, saw to the care of his mother, a vulnerable adult in that context (John 19.25-27). Vulnerable adults are adults who for physical, cognitive, emotional or other reasons, are unable to advocate for themselves. Bullying is a new problem in our society that also requires our attention if we are to maintain safe spaces in our ministries and our churches. Our faith in Jesus Christ compels us to make the protection of children, youth, and vulnerable adults in our care a priority. Thus, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, we adopt this policy for the prevention of abuse in our church.

## **Purpose**

Our conference’s purpose for establishing this Abuse Prevention Policy and accompanying procedures is to demonstrate our absolute and unwavering commitment to the physical safety and spiritual growth of all of our children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

## **Statement of Covenant**

Therefore, as a Christian community of faith and a United Methodist annual conference, we pledge to conduct the ministry of the gospel in ways that assure the safety and spiritual growth of all our children,

youth, and vulnerable adults as well as all workers with children, youth and vulnerable adults. We will follow reasonable safety measures in the selection and recruitment of workers; we will implement prudent operational procedures in all programs and events; we will educate all of our workers with children, youth, and vulnerable adults regarding the use of all appropriate policies and methods (including first aid and methods of discipline); we will have a clearly defined procedure for reporting a suspected incident of abuse that conforms to the requirements of state law; and we will be prepared to respond to media inquiries if an incident occurs.

### **Procedures**

Because it is our fervent hope and prayer that sexual abuse or any other form of abuse (physical, neglect, emotional, financial, or bullying) will not occur in our District and Conference programs, we must put into place sufficient mechanisms to reduce the risk of abuse of children, youth, vulnerable adults, and those who work with them. For that purpose, our ministries shall implement the following procedures in District and Conference ministry programs and events.

Because Clergy members of the South Carolina Conference are leaders within our covenant community, and because they have constant opportunities to supervise and be in contact with children, youth, and vulnerable adults, all clergy under active appointment in our annual conference shall have criminal background checks completed through the Office of Clergy Services every three years.

**Recruiting/Screening Workers** Careful screening is one way to prevent the abuse of children, youth and vulnerable adults. It can be time consuming and expensive, but well worth the effort in peace of mind that the most reliable, committed and experienced staff and volunteers are in place for every program that involves children, youth and/or vulnerable adults.

The MINIMUM standards are:

**A.** All persons that are employed or volunteer to serve in a supervisory capacity in conference programs involving children or youth shall be at least 21 years old and at least five years older than the oldest child or adult and shall:

- Demonstrate an active relationship with a local church of at least six months before being allowed to be in a supervisory role\* in children or youth activities
- Complete a Covenant Form
- Complete an application form and provide three character references.
- Be interviewed by the Director of the ministry/ program.
- Complete the background check process
  1. Complete the background check release form
  2. Complete the background check order form
  3. Complete the background check report form

*\*18-20 year olds will not function in a supervisory capacity.*

**B.** All persons that are employed or volunteer to serve in a supervisory capacity in conference programs involving vulnerable adults shall be at least 21 year old and shall:

- Demonstrate an active relationship with a local church of at least six months before being allowed to be in a supervisory role\* in children or youth activities
- Complete a Covenant Form
- Complete an application form and provide three character references.
- Complete the background check process as outlined above.

- Be interviewed by the Director of the ministry/ program.

*\*18-20 year olds will not function in a supervisory capacity.*

*C. Camps and Retreats may utilize 18 year-olds as employed or volunteer leaders of younger children when combined with adequate training of the Conference policies and procedures and in keeping with American Camp Association guidelines for training and supervision.*

**D.** All staff persons and volunteers with a break in service of one or more years will re-submit to the screening procedures for new participants. Otherwise, every adult will complete a new criminal background check every 3 years.

**E.** All forms and reference reports shall be kept as a part of an applicant's personnel file.

**F.** All applications and related forms must be completed prior to service.

**G.** In the event that a reference follow up is accomplished by phone, detailed notes of the conversation should also be included in the personnel file.

**H.** For all Conference activities, the care of records will be maintained by the Office of Connectional Ministries of the Annual Conference. Staff, volunteer and paid, records for Camps and Retreat Ministries will also be maintained by this ministry.

**I.** When the Conference is hosting an event for which the local church is responsible for chaperones, all communications regarding the event will contain language specifying these procedures as MINIMUM BASIC GUIDELINES for all adults serving as chaperones at the event.

### **Training**

Training must become a mandatory component of each event's design. The executive committee or designated design team shall be responsible for assuring that adequate insurance for the specific event and/or activities either from the Conference or the District is in place. The Design Team must also have a person available at the event who is trained and certified to receive any report of allegations of abuse and follow through according to the conference guidelines and the requirements of South Carolina state law. All workers/leaders shall be trained annually in safety, first aid, and abuse prevention. Each event shall have at least one person certified in CPR and First Aid from a nationally recognized body such as American Red Cross.

Training shall include information, explanation, and discussion of:

- The Annual Conference policy
- Behaviors or other indicators which may signal problems
- Requirements of SC state law for reporting incidents of abuse
- Procedures for response to incidents or allegations of abuse and for reporting such incidents

All persons serving as event coordinators or directors shall complete certification training for processing allegations and reports of child, youth, and vulnerable adult abuse.

All workers and leaders will sign a covenant to abide by the Conference policy at the conclusion of each training prior to an event.

## Regular Operations for Programs and Events

1. Minimum supervisory standards will include the “two-adult rule.” The two-adult rule requires that no matter the size of the group, there will always be two unrelated adults present. This requirement may be fulfilled with one adult in the room and a **second adult with unobstructed line of sight and sound** to all children who monitors each room as long as children are present. For Vulnerable adults, have at least 2 leaders present in order to make it most likely that proper assistance for first aid, or care can be given.
2. SC state law defines children as persons under the age of 18. These persons do not count as adults.
3. If both boys and girls are participants, then the adult leaders shall include both men and women.
4. No person shall supervise an age group unless he/she is AT LEAST 5 years older than the persons with whom he/she is working. The only exception for this rule is for camp counselors working with senior high youth who have been properly screened and trained according to the guidelines of the American Camp Association in a setting accredited by the ACA.
5. The number of workers required for each event (above the minimum of two) will be determined by the number and age of the participants and the nature of the activities.
6. Unauthorized visitors are persons who are not properly registered, screened, and checked by the leader of the event. These persons will not be allowed with the group.
7. Children and youth participants will not be allowed to leave the designated meeting area without permission/supervision.
8. During children and youth ministry events, one-on-one activities shall not be conducted “behind closed doors” or in isolated areas away from trained supervisory persons.
9. All ministry events will be carried out in locations where this policy can be implemented and with safe and age-appropriate equipment.
10. Each room or space where children youth or vulnerable adults are being cared for shall have a window in the door or the door shall be left open. All activities should occur in open view. Should the children’s activity be an outdoor program or occur in a setting which makes it difficult to comply with this Policy, the staff person in charge of the activity shall take appropriate measures to make sure that the setting suits the activity.
11. Registration materials for activities in which children and youth are outside of the direct supervision of their parents/guardians shall require signed written permission forms which include pertinent health information in order to participate. All adults attending conference events will fill out pertinent health information with contact of care giver.

## Cell Phones & Social Media Use

Creating a safe sanctuary in today’s virtual world goes beyond physical building of the church and must include intentional thought into how adults in ministry interact with children, youth, and vulnerable adults in this virtual world that includes the use of cell phones and social media. To that end:

1. Text messages sent from the adult(s) in a leadership capacity should only be sent in a group/mass text manner.
2. Should an adult in leadership receive a private text from a child, youth, or vulnerable adult that seems to be questionable, they should immediately end the conversation in the virtual realm and offer opportunities to have the conversation in person and in compliance with this policy (i.e. with another person present, in an office with windows, etc.)
3. Adults in leadership should communicate with parents before (or instead of) texting/calling children or youth.
4. Adults in leadership must not use social media, blogs, or personal Websites to harass, bully, or intimidate children, youth or other staff members. Behaviors that constitute harassment or bullying include, but are not limited to, comments that are derogatory with respect to race,

religion, gender, sexual orientation, color, or disability; sexually suggestive, humiliating, or demeaning comments; and threats to stalk, haze, or physically injure another staff member, volunteer, child, or youth.

5. In order for adults in leadership to post photos on social network sites, prior written permission must be granted by a parent/guardian. When posted, PHOTOS MUST NOT BE TAGGED with names or location indicators. All photos must be appropriate and within the spirit of the mission of our ministry.

## **Reporting**

- All reporting of alleged incidents or actual incidents of child, youth, or vulnerable adult abuse must strictly follow South Carolina law.
- A worker who has reasonable cause to suspect that child, youth abuse or vulnerable adult abuse has occurred should secure the safety of the person, if possible, and then immediately report the incident to the Director/Supervisor of the ministry event. It is never the responsibility of a worker with children or youth, vulnerable adults to investigate allegations of abuse. The Director/Supervisor will then follow all appropriate procedures for reporting to the child's parents or guardian or care giver, authorities of the Annual Conference and/or district, and local law enforcement or child protective service agencies.
- Persons who are the objects of the report will be required to refrain from all activities involving children and youth, or adults until the incident report is resolved. In any removal of a person from any activities, care should be taken to handle this in a discreet manner, recognizing that an investigation is still being conducted.

## **Response Plan**

- A quick, compassionate and unified response to an alleged incident of abuse is expected. All allegations will be taken seriously. In all cases of reported or observed abuse in a children, youth or adult activity, the entire staff of that activity shall be at the service of all official investigating agencies.
- The Conference Director of Connectional Ministries, or his/her designee, is the only person/s authorized to make statements to representatives of the media. All requests for statements should be directed to the Director of Connectional Ministries. Training in how to handle media requests should be a regular part of Conference staff training. A spirit of cooperation is exhibited by directing the media to the "official spokesperson."
- If the allegation concerns activities or persons outside any relationship to a Conference related event or activity, it is the responsibility of the staff person in charge of the Conference activity to make the initial contact with law enforcement or child protective services.
- An example would be a youth telling a Conference camp counselor about abuse which was perpetrated by a relative during the prior year. If this report were made to the counselor in the course of his or her duties as a camp counselor, then an incident report should be filed with the camp's director within 24 hours.
- If the allegation is against a Conference staff person or volunteer or if it occurred in the course of a Conference children or youth activity, the staff person in charge of the children's activity and the Director of Connectional Ministries shall be contacted immediately. The Director of Connectional Ministries will advise the Director of Administrative Services who will notify the Conference's insurance carrier.
- In either case, pastoral support will be available to all persons involved with the incident as indicated.

## **Local Church Policy:**

A local church policy for the prevention of abuse would include the following minimum components:

1. Procedures for recruiting, screening (including national criminal background checks) and training of all workers with children, youth, and vulnerable adults with the same components as the conference policy (p. 2-3 of this document).
2. Operating procedures including the same components as the conference policy (p. 3-5 of this document).
3. A statement regarding sleeping arrangements of adults and youth during overnight trips.
4. Annual training of paid and volunteer workers that includes review of the policy and first aid/CPR training.
5. Severe weather/Disaster response plan.
6. Regular monitoring of equipment to ensure adequacy, safety, and good repair.
7. Adequate insurance coverage.
8. Procedures for insuring that non-church programs involving children and youth, and adults that occur on church property comply with church policies.
9. Incident reporting procedures in compliance with SC state law that include the components of this policy (p. 5)
10. A response plan that includes care for all parties involved and identifies the official spokesperson of the local church.

### **Conclusion**

In all of our ministries with children, youth, and vulnerable adults, this annual conference is committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each person will be “surrounded by steadfast love, . . . established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal” (“Baptismal Covenant II,” United Methodist Hymnal, p. 44). We take our policies to reduce the risk of abuse seriously and we are committed to their enforcement for the safety and security of all our children, youth, vulnerable adults, and those who work with them.

All Conference and District ministry events are required to comply with these policies.

Each Conference ministry event shall be subject to review by the Director of Connectional Ministries and other appropriate staff persons.

Non-compliance with these policies shall result in potential loss of sponsorship by the Conference Office of Connectional Ministries, the District, or the sponsoring Team, Board, or Committee.

The Director of Connectional Ministries shall initiate a review of these policies and procedures at least every two years or when procedural changes are made.

These policies and procedures were affirmed by the Connectional Ministries Council on March 2008. This policy was developed by a Safe Sanctuary Task Force in compliance with *The Resolution to Require the Establishment of a Safe Sanctuary Policy in Every United Methodist Church and in every United Methodist Conference Event in the South Carolina Annual Conference* adopted at the 2007 session of The South Carolina Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church.