



Policy for the Prevention of Abuse of Children, Youth & Vulnerable Adults

South Carolina Annual Conference
The United Methodist Church

Introduction

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church adopted in April 1996 a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of child sexual abuse in the church. The resolution, which the General Conference readopted in 2004 and 2008, includes this 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 states, “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.

“Ritual abuse” refers to abusive acts committed as part of ceremonies or rites; ritual abusers are often related to cults, or pretend to be.

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 2016 Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, [pp. 182-183](#)
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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 those 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 it is 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:

- All persons who 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 youth 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. (18- to 20-year-olds will not function in a supervisory capacity.)
 - 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.
 - Complete the background check release form.
 - Complete the background check order form.
 - Complete the background check report form.

- All persons who are employed or volunteer to serve in a supervisory capacity in conference programs involving vulnerable adults shall be at least 21 years 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. (18- to 20-year-olds will not function in a supervisory capacity.)
 - 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.
- Camps and Retreats may utilize 18-year-olds as employed or volunteer leaders of younger children when combined with adequate training on conference policies and procedures and in keeping with American Camp Association guidelines for training and supervision.
- 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 three years.
- All forms and reference reports shall be kept as a part of an applicant's personnel file.
- All applications and related forms must be completed prior to service.
- 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.
- For all conference activities, the care of records will be maintained by the Office of Connectional Ministries of the Annual Conference. Records for staff – volunteer and paid – of Camps and Retreat Ministries also will be maintained by the S.C. Board of Camps and Retreats.
- When the conference is hosting an event for which the local church is responsible for chaperones, all communication 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 be 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 – from either the conference or the district – is in place. The design team also must have a person available at the event who is trained and certified to receive any report of allegations of abuse and to follow through according to conference guidelines and the requirements of South Carolina 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 the American Red Cross.

Training shall include information, explanation and discussion of:

- The Annual Conference policy.
- Behaviors or other indicators that might signal problems.
- Requirements of South Carolina law for reporting incidents of abuse.
- Procedures for response to incidents or allegations of abuse and for reporting such incidents.

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

- Minimum supervisory standards will include the “two-adult rule.” This 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, at least two leaders must be present in order to make it most likely that proper assistance for first aid or care can be given.
- South Carolina law defines children as persons under the age of 18. These persons do not count as adults.
- If both boys and girls are participants, then the adult leaders shall include both men and women.
- No person shall supervise an age group unless he/she is at least five years older than the persons with whom he/she is working. The only exception for this rule is for camp counselors who work with senior high youth and who have been properly screened and trained according to the guidelines of the American Camp Association in a setting accredited by the ACA.
- 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.
- 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.
- Children and youth participants will not be allowed to leave the designated meeting area without permission/supervision.
- 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.
- All ministry events will be carried out in locations where this policy can be implemented and with safe and age-appropriate equipment.
- 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.
- Registration materials for activities in which children and youth are outside the direct supervision of their parents/guardians shall require signed written permission forms that include pertinent health information in order to participate. All adults attending conference events will fill out pertinent health information, including how to contact a caregiver.

Internet, Social Media & Communications Policy

Incredible ministry can take place using modern technology but, as with all forms of ministry, there are inherent risks involved with the use of electronic communications. Following these procedures can minimize risks for adults working with children, youth and vulnerable adults.

- Obtain Permission from a Parent or Guardian – In addition to general permission to participate in a church ministry, adults working with children and youth will obtain written parental/guardian permission in advance before:
 - Posting photos and videos of participants on any church website and social media, or sharing photos and videos in any way, including but not limited to email, text message and messaging apps.

- Communicating directly with an individual child, youth or vulnerable adult (beyond overall group messaging) in any way, including but not limited to phone, email, text message and messaging apps.
- Sharing any participant’s full name, contact information or personal information on any platform.
- Rules for Digital Communication
 - If communicating by email, place email addresses in the BCC (blind carbon copy) field so recipients see only their own address when a message is received.
 - All digital information will be delivered as a group or with a Safe Sanctuaries-trained leader added. There will be no one-on-one conversation between an adult and an individual child, youth or vulnerable adult.
 - Conduct all communication in a professional manner.
 - All individual communication should be preserved so it can be reviewed later, should the need arise. Refer to the “Preservation of Digital Communications” section below to review options for documenting.
- Safety Rules for Using Digital Platforms
 - Do not submit a “friend request” to an individual child, youth or vulnerable adult; use discretion when accepting a “friend request” from an individual child, youth or vulnerable adult.
 - Do not post anything on social media that you would not publish in a church bulletin or newsletter.
 - Educate the church and its leadership about these rules and make sure they know they are not optional.
- Administration of Official Church Social Media
 - Each social media account or group will have a minimum of two unrelated administrators who are either church leaders or adult volunteers engaged in the ministry.
 - Social media will be monitored frequently by these administrators to allow for quick responses in the event urgent or crisis concerns are posted.
 - Any inappropriate material posted to church social media or groups will be deleted and addressed.
 - Church email addresses and church digital platforms are to be used only for church-related matters – never for private conversations.
- Preservation of Digital Communications
 - Do not delete any communications with an individual child, youth or vulnerable adult.
 - It is recommended that texting occur via a text messaging platform/app in order to store, observe and access communications by all adults in ministry with children, youth and vulnerable adults.
 - All communications via direct messaging on social media platforms and websites via chat options should be archived via those platforms for accountability purposes.
 - If you find yourself communicating via direct text messages on your phones, store those messages on your computer using the backup feature on your iPhone or Android device. This process will be explained in more detail during your Safe Sanctuaries training session.

- Glossary
 - Digital Platforms – Any social media or online spaces that can be created for interaction. Examples: Facebook, Instagram, GroupMe, Remind, Church Website, WhatsApp, TikTok and Twitter.
 - Digital Communications – Any information shared electronically. Examples: Email and text services (direct messaging), phone calls and digital publications such as newsletters and bulletins.
 - Safe Sanctuaries-Trained Leader – Anyone trained in our official child, youth and vulnerable adult protection policies. Examples: clergy, staff, laity, interns, chaperones and co-leaders.

Bullying Prevention Policy

The South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church is committed to providing a safe, caring, nurturing environment for all persons. We have zero tolerance for bullying and will handle any incidences that occur according to the policy detailed herein.

- Actions considered bullying will be identified by, but not limited to, the following definition:
 - Aggressive behavior that involves unwanted, negative actions.
 - A pattern of behavior repeated over time.
 - An imbalance of power or strength.
 - A person is bullied when they are exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more persons, and they have difficulty defending themselves.
- Bullying can take on many forms, including, but not limited to:
 - Verbal bullying, including derogatory comments and bad names.
 - Bullying through social exclusion or isolation.
 - Physical bullying, such as hitting, kicking, shoving and spitting.
 - Bullying through lies and false rumors.
 - Having money or other things taken or damaged or hidden by individuals who bully.
 - Being threatened or being forced to do things by individuals who bully.
 - Racial bullying.
 - Sexual bullying.
 - Cyber bullying (via cell phone or internet).
- When there is a suspected occurrence of bullying:
 - It should be brought to the attention of the supervising adult present at the time of the incident by either the child, youth or adult targeted, or any witnesses, parents or volunteers.
 - Appropriate staff – children’s ministry for children, youth ministry for youth, a pastor for adults – should immediately be made aware of any reports.
 - The staff member will notify the senior pastor and keep a record of any reported claims of bullying in order to document patterns or trends in behavior.
- When an incident occurs that is identified as falling under the definition of bullying, the age-level leader or staff member, in consultation with the senior pastor, will talk with the child, youth or adult accused of bullying another person, and parents/guardians will be contacted. If bullying remains a problem, the following actions may be employed:

- Parents/guardians of the child, youth or adult accused of bullying will be asked to attend the program/class with their child, youth or adult.
- A child, youth or adult accused of bullying will be separated for the ministry activity.
- A mentor will be assigned to assist the child, youth or adult accused of bullying.
- A behavioral covenant will be developed for the child, youth or adult accused of bullying.

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 the abuse of a child, youth or vulnerable adult 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, youth or vulnerable adults to investigate allegations of abuse. The director/supervisor will then follow all appropriate procedures for reporting to the child's parents/guardians or vulnerable adult's caregiver, 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, youth and vulnerable adults until the incident report is resolved. Care should be taken to handle any removal of a person from activities 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 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 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 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 in the incident, as indicated.

Local Church Policy

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

- Procedures for recruiting, screening (including national criminal background checks) and training of all workers with children, youth and vulnerable adults, that include the same components as the conference policy (pp. 2-3 of this document).
- Operating procedures that include the same components as the conference policy (pp. 3-5 of this document).
- A statement regarding sleeping arrangements of adults and youth during overnight trips.
- Annual training of paid and volunteer workers that includes review of the policy and first aid/CPR training.
- Severe weather and other disaster response plan.
- Regular monitoring of equipment to ensure adequacy, safety and good repair.
- Adequate insurance coverage.
- Procedures for ensuring that non-church programs involving children, youth and vulnerable adults that occur on church property comply with church policies.
- An incident reporting procedure that is in compliance with South Carolina law and that includes the components of this policy (p. 5 of this document).
- 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.

This policy was developed by a Safe Sanctuaries Task Force in compliance with “The Resolution to Require the Establishment of a Safe Sanctuaries Policy in Every United Methodist Church and in Every United Methodist Conference Event in the South Carolina Annual Conference,” which was adopted by the 2007 session of The South Carolina Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. This policy was affirmed by the Connectional Ministries Council in 2008. Since that date, the director of Connectional Ministries, in consultation with the conference chancellor, has reviewed and revised this policy to reflect key learnings from growing ministries and the continued development of electronic communication. The latest revision was completed March 13, 2023.