

**Bethesda United Methodist Church**  
***Safe Sanctuaries Policy***  
***For the Protection of Children and Youth***

**INTRODUCTION**

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church has adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the potential for child abuse in the church. The resolution calls all churches to welcome children and to make our churches safe places for children to grow and learn. It is our responsibility to be proactive in our recruiting and training, to find people with a gift for caring for children and to protect those volunteers from false accusations. It is also our responsibility to oversee all programs involving children and youth to promote a safe environment and to have a plan of response in place. The General Conference resolution affirmed that every local church should have in place a policy for protecting children. The Baltimore-Washington Conference also requires all local churches to have a policy in place.

Thus, in unity with other United Methodist churches, Bethesda United Methodist Church (BUMC) adopts this policy for the prevention of abuse in our church. This policy applies to all volunteers, paid staff and clergy.

**PURPOSE**

BUMC's purpose for establishing this Safe Sanctuaries policy is to demonstrate our commitment to the physical and emotional safety and spiritual growth of all children and youth participating in the church's programs and ministries.

**STATEMENT OF COVENANT**

As a Christian community of faith committed to ministry to and with children and youth, we pledge to conduct all our activities and ministries in a way that promotes the safety and spiritual growth of all children and youth entrusted to us. We will follow reasonable safety measures when selecting and recruiting workers, implement appropriate operational procedures in all areas of programming and care, and be responsible in overseeing our programs and events and in training our staff and volunteers so they are equipped to minister to children and youth in Jesus' name. We will report and respond to all suspected incidents of abuse as required by state law and our moral conscience, and we will be prepared to minister to all involved.

**PROCEDURES**

**1. Screening and recruiting.**

- A. All leaders must be adults (age 18 or older), except that teenagers of exceptional maturity who are age 16 or 17 may serve as leaders with the unanimous approval of the teenager's parent(s), the Director of Christian Education and at least one of the pastors. Other persons under age 18 may serve as assistants to those in leadership positions but should not be left alone with children or youth. All leaders and assistants must be a member of this church for at least six months or demonstrate an active relationship with this church of at least six months, before being allowed to work with children or youth. An exception may be made during Vacation Bible School to permit volunteer assistants who do not meet the six-month rule, but whenever those assistants are with children, they must be accompanied by a Safe-Sanctuaries trained adult, an approved 16 or 17-year leader (as described above), or an assistant who does meet the six-month rule.

- B. All workers with children and youth will complete the *Safe Sanctuaries Participation Covenant Statement* and the *Sexual Misconduct Questionnaire*, and provide all requested information, including at least three references not related to the applicant, including the references' email addresses. These forms must be submitted every year at the start of the program year (generally September) and throughout the year by individuals who join the program later. References will be contacted by telephone, email or in person.
- C. All adult workers (age 18 or older) will be asked to complete a form granting permission for the church to obtain a criminal background check. Background checks will be repeated every three years.
- D. All volunteer workers will submit a volunteer application, along with all the forms required by paragraphs 1B & 1C above, and be approved by the Director of Christian Education or the pastor(s), before they begin work.
- E. All paid workers will submit an employment application, along with all the forms required by paragraphs 1B & 1C above, and be interviewed by the pastor(s), the Director of Christian Education or the Children's Ministry Chair before they begin work.
- F. Individuals who have been convicted of physical or sexual abuse or child neglect may not work in any church-sponsored activity or program for children or youth.
- G. All paperwork will be kept on file in a secure area at the church for at least six years, with access limited to church staff and others with a need to know. Papers that contain Social Security numbers and/or driver's license numbers will be shredded.

## **2. Supervision.**

- A. Two-adult rule: Two non-related adult leaders will be present in each room/space during all programs involving children or youth. This applies to classroom activities, activities away from the church premises and when transporting children or youth. If this is not feasible, there will be a roving adult who moves among the rooms during the program period.
- B. Adults: Except for an approved 16 or 17-year leader (as described in Paragraph 1-A above) no person under 18 years of age will be considered as one of the two adult leaders, but persons younger than 18 may serve as assistants to those in leadership positions.
- C. Five-years-older rule: All workers in a leadership role must be at least five years older than the oldest child or youth they will be supervising.
- D. Classroom and office doors will have an unobstructed window or be left open whenever children or youth are in the room.
- E. Open-door policy: The parents of the children or youth served, the pastors, and church staff may visit and observe the children's/youth activity, classroom, or church-sponsored program at any time, unannounced.
- F. Children in the nursery will be checked in and out by their parent, legal guardian, or other person authorized by the parent/legal guardian.
- G. Touch: Physical affection should be limited and must be appropriate to the age of the child or youth. Touching should ordinarily be initiated by the child and be done in the presence of other workers. A child's preference not to be touched should be respected.
- H. Restroom policy: When taking preschoolers or young children to the restroom, the adult should remain outside the stall. If the child needs help, the help should be given outside the stall when feasible. Ideally, another adult should be present at the door of the restroom.
- I. If an adult who is scheduled to be working with children becomes unavailable or needs to leave early, that adult should try to find a substitute who has been through the Safe Sanctuaries training and must notify the Director of Christian Education as soon as possible.

- J. While working with children or youth, paid and volunteer workers should not use their cell phones to make or receive personal calls, texts, etc., and should keep their full attention focused on the children or youth.
- K. Volunteers who are helping on a one-time basis must read and sign the Participation Covenant but need not complete a volunteer application or the sexual misconduct questionnaire, and need not have a background check. However, such volunteers will be permitted to work only if they are always with at least one approved, regular leader who has fulfilled all the Safe Sanctuaries requirements (not a roving teacher).
- L. Social media and photography: church workers must have written permission from a child's or youth's parent or guardian to post pictures of the child or youth online. Children's and youth's names should not be posted online.
- M. Outings overnight or away from church property:
  - a. All children and youth participating in out-of-town or overnight outings where they are not under the direct supervision of their parents/guardians must have written consent and a medical release form. Medical release forms may be completed for a one-year period and must be renewed annually.
  - b. No one under the age of 18 will be permitted to drive others (whether adults, children, or youth) on any church-sponsored outing.
  - c. Transportation arranged by the church for children or youth should have at least two adults (at least one of whom has fulfilled all the Safe Sanctuaries requirements) in each vehicle.
  - d. For overnight events, two or more adult leaders must be present and must include at least one male and female if the group is of mixed gender. Female staff will supervise female youth in their sleeping quarters and male staff will supervise male youth in separate sleeping quarters. Exceptions for an individual child or youth may be made after discussion with the child's or youth's parents. Married couples will not stay together but observe the female/female and male/male sleeping arrangements. Adults will not share a hotel room, bunkhouse, or tent with youth or children, unless there are at least two non-related adults and at least two children or youth present in that space. Except for a parent/child combination, an adult and a child or youth will not occupy the same bed or sleeping bag.
  - e. There must be access to a phone or cell phone when groups are away from the church property.
  - f. Attendance records of children, youth and leaders must be taken at all overnight or out-of-town events.
  - g. Upon return to the church, at least two adults must remain until all the children or youth have been picked up.

**3. Training.** Training on safe sanctuaries policies and procedures will occur at least once a year and workers will be trained to recognize the warning signs of abuse and neglect.

#### **4. Reporting and Responding.**

- A. If abuse of a child or youth is suspected by, observed by or disclosed to a volunteer and/or paid staff member of the church, that person will, after ensuring the child's or youth's safety, report the matter immediately to a church official: either the Director of Christian Education, the pastor(s), or the SPRC Chair. Whichever of these officials receives the initial report will immediately notify the other officials.

- B. If the church becomes aware of alleged abuse done by a church staff member or volunteer, that person will immediately be removed from contact with children and youth until the reported incident has been resolved. This should be handled in a discreet manner and the suspected person should not be banned from other church ministries.
- C. All allegations will be taken seriously.
- D. Upon learning of an alleged incident of abuse, the pastor(s), in consultation with the District Superintendent and/or the bishop and the Chair of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, will consult legal counsel as to whether the allegations are subject to state law reporting requirements and, where appropriate, will make a report to the local department of social services and/or the police.
- E. If the allegation concerns a staff member or pastor, the Chair of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee and the District Superintendent will be contacted immediately.
- F. The pastor(s) or a designee will keep a written record of all steps taken to report the alleged abuse.
- G. Requests for public statements about the incident will be referred to the pastor(s) and/or the District Superintendent.
- H. Pastoral support will be available to all persons involved in the incident.

## **CONCLUSION**

In all our ministries with children and youth, this congregation is committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each child, youth and vulnerable adult 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 Book of Worship)