

Spanish Fort United Methodist Church Policy Concerning Safe Sanctuaries

(adapted from Alabama-West Florida Conference Policies)

Introduction

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, beginning in April 1996, adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of child sexual abuse in the church.

*Jesus said, “..whoever welcomes a child...welcomes me” (Matthew 18:5)
Children are our present and our future, our hope, our teachers, our inspiration. They are full participants in the life of the church and in the realm of God.*

Jesus also said, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones..., it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matthew 18:6)

Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to the little ones, the children. The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church state that”...children must be protected from economic, physical and sexual exploitation, and abuse.” (Paragraph 162C)

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children. Child sexual abuse, exploitation and ritual abuse occur in churches, 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. 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.

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 – 2012)

Therefore, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, Spanish Fort United Methodist Church adopts this policy and its accompanying procedures to demonstrate our absolute and unwavering commitment to the physical safety and spiritual growth of all our children, youth, senior citizens, and at-risk adults. Volunteers and staff members are expected to uphold this policy as a minimum standard in establishing safe sanctuaries for all God’s children.

Background

The definition of abuse:

- Physical abuse – abuse in which a person deliberately and intentionally causes bodily harm
- Emotional abuse – abuse in which a person exposes a child to spoken and/or unspoken violence or emotional cruelty
- Neglect – abuse in which a person endangers a child's health, safety, or welfare through negligence
- Sexual abuse – abuse in which sexual contact between a child and an adult (or another older or more powerful youth) occurs.
- Ritual abuse – abuse in which physical, sexual, or psychological violations are inflicted regularly, intentionally, or in a stylized way by a person or persons responsible for the child's welfare
- Abuse of vulnerable adults – ritual, emotional, or sexual abuse of any person over 19 years of age with physical, mental, and/or developmental disabilities

The church at risk:

Any organization with young people is a place where abuse could occur. Several factors make local congregation, districts, and annual conferences more susceptible to risk:

- Churches behave as relatively trusting organizations, relying on their members and their leaders to conduct themselves appropriately. Sometimes this trusting attitude persists even in the face of questions or reports of misconduct.
- Churches are notoriously inactive when it comes to screening its volunteers and/or employees who work with children and youth. Often, no investigation is done at all before total strangers are welcomed aboard.
- Churches routinely provide opportunities for close contact and for close personal relationships with children. Indeed, these are nurtured and encouraged as we try to live out the gospel message.

Statement of Policy

No congregation or annual conference can afford, either financially, ethically, or morally to fail to implement strategies for the reduction and prevention of any and every kind of abuse. Therefore, it shall be the policy and covenant of the Spanish Fort United Methodist Church to do everything in our power to prevent physical, emotional or sexual abuse against children, youth, and adults with developmental disabilities involved in any ministry sponsored by our congregation.

Standards, Criteria, and Responsibilities

Minimum Age

The following standards for authority figures (whether volunteer or staff) are designed to separate authority figures for the group they are serving by age or enough years to reinforce recognition of the authority figure's role.

1. Authority figures – defined as the primary leaders of youth and children's activities
 - a. To work with youth (grades six and above), or children (infants – 5th grade) the authority figure must be a minimum of age 21 and it is recommended they are at least four years older than the youth involved.
 - b. To work with children (infants – fifth grade), the authority figure must be a minimum age of 21.
2. Assistants – defined as persons who lend aid to the authority figure and act at the direction of the authority figure, including volunteers, interns, and counselors. Whether working with youth or children, assistants must be:
 - a. a minimum of 12 years of age and four years older than the participants, and
 - b. In the judgment of a staff member, competent to assist in the activity,
 - c. An assistant less than 21 years of age may not be counted as an adult in adult/child ratios or in the "Two-Adult" rule.

Two-Adult Rule

A minimum of two non-related adults should be utilized in all programming with children, youth, and at-risk adults. When it is impossible to staff with two non-related adults, there should be an additional adult serving as a floater with visual and physical access to all areas.

No adult should ever be alone with a child in a room, especially one with a closed door. This includes a bathroom. In an instance where a small child needs assistance, another adult should be present, or, at a very minimum, the door should be left open.

Open Door Policy

Classrooms or child care rooms should be open to visitation at any time without prior notice by staff, parents, or other volunteers.

Sign-In Procedures

Sign-In Procedures should be in place for all ministries for and with children. When possible, sign-out procedures should also be utilized.

Three Month Rule

It is recommended that a three month rule be established in the selection of volunteer wishing to serve in the areas of children and youth ministry. This means that volunteers demonstrate an active relationship (membership, regular attendance, or known affiliation) with the church for a minimum of three months. Persons not meeting these criteria may be able to serve in an assistant capacity with other adults.

Overnight Programs

In the case of overnight events, the adults staying with the young people should be the same gender as the young people. The adults must never share a bed with a young person and should never be alone in the room with a young person at any time.

Transportation

- All persons transporting children or youth should have a background check that includes a review of their motor vehicle record.
- All drivers should be 21 years of age or older.
- Where possible, it is recommended that two adults be placed in each vehicle, or that vehicles with one adult be teamed in minimum groups of two and stay together at all times.
- On planned trips, a signed, permission slip with medical authorization should be on file. A manifest list should be used to call roll after travel stops and a copy of the manifest should be left at the church office.

Interpersonal Boundaries

Adult workers with youth and children must be attentive to:

- Appropriate attire
- Appropriate use of language
- Appropriate demonstrations of affection and encouragement (be cautious of hugging and lap sitting)

Cyber Issues/Photography

When utilizing pictures and/or videos from church events, no pictures that include distinguishable faces, are to be posted online for those under 18 years of age, unless written permission has been obtained from the parent.

Discipline

There are occasionally instances when working with youth or children that a discipline issue may arise. In these cases, it is important that boundaries are observed. Positive redirection is the best first choice in most cases. In some cases, this is not sufficient and removal from a situation is required. It is important to continue to observe the Two-Adult rule even in these cases. There are some cases where additional action is necessary, but it is important that we maintain that the church is a place where we demonstrate God's love at all times. Abusive language and physical discipline are NEVER to be used. Volunteers should always refer to the staff member in charge if there is a situation that they feel uncomfortable handling.

Recruiting, Screening, and Training

All persons employed or volunteering as an authority figure for children or youth should:

- Complete an Application Form
- Complete and sign a Safe Sanctuaries Covenant Statement
- Complete and sign a consent for background check which includes criminal and sexual offender check based on social security number and motor vehicle record for those who will be transporting children or youth (Background checks are valid for five years)
- Attend annual training by the church and/or annual conference in maintaining the Safe Sanctuaries Policies

Copies of applications and background check consents and results will be viewed only by necessary church staff and will be kept in a locked cabinet in a locked office in the church.

Reporting Abuse

If a volunteer witnesses any incident which they believe to be inappropriate or abusive, they should immediately notify the staff member in charge. In addition, if a volunteer believes that the child has been abused outside the church setting, they should notify a church staff member.