

Safe Sanctuary Policy
Searcy First United Methodist Church
304 N. Main Street
Searcy, AR 72143

The General Conference of the United Methodist Church, in April 2000, adopted a resolution aimed at eliminating any potential for child sexual abuse in the church. The adopted resolution includes the following statement:

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 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."

Tragically, churches have not always been a safe place for children. Child sexual abuse, exploitation and ritual 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) 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 sexual abuse and exploitation in their churches. Virtually every congregation has among its members adult survivors of early sexual trauma.

Such incidents are devastation 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 allegation 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. P. 384-386)

Thus, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, the Searcy First United Methodist Church adopts this policy for the prevention of child abuse in our church.

Purpose

Our purpose for establishing this Child Abuse Prevention Policy and accompanying procedures is to demonstrate our total and unwavering commitment to the physical, emotional and spiritual safety of all the children and youth God has entrusted to our care.

Covenant Statement

The Searcy United Methodist Church hereby pledges to conduct the ministry of Jesus Christ in ways that assure the physical and emotional safety and spiritual growth of all the children and youth as well as all the workers with children and youth. We will follow reasonable safety measures when selecting and recruiting workers; we will implement prudent operational procedures in all areas of programming and care; we will train our workers with children /youth on our procedures and policies; and we will have a clearly defined procedure for reporting a suspected incident of abuse that conforms to the requirements of Arkansas law.

Definitions

A. “Child” and “Youth” and “Adult”

A child is anyone 6th grade or younger. A youth is anyone not a child under the age of 18. An adult is anyone 18 years of age or older and has finished high school.

B. “Paid Staff Person,” “Adult Volunteer,” and “Screened Adult”

A paid staff person is someone paid by the church, overseen by Staff Parish and screened. An adult volunteer is someone who has not been screened. They can work in a room with a Screened Adult or paid staff person. A screened adult is a volunteer who has gone through the screening process. These persons may or may not be members, but they must be participating in the life of the church and / or approved by ministry staff of that department.

C. “Child/Youth Abuse”

For purpose of this Policy, child/youth abuse is defined as any of the following:

1. Physical Abuse:

Violent non-accidental contact which results in injury. This includes, but is not limited to, striking, biting, or shaking. Injuries include bruises, fractures, cuts, and burns.

2. Sexual Abuse:

Any form of sexual activity with a child/youth, whether at the Church, at home, or any other setting. The abuser may be an adult, an adolescent, or another minor.

3. Emotional Abuse:

A pattern of intentional conduct which crushes a child’s/youth’s spirit attacks his/her self-worth through rejection, threats terrorizing, isolating, or belittling.

Screening and Selection of Church Staff and Adult Volunteers

- A. Adult volunteers who regularly work with the Church’s children and youth and each church paid staff person will be screened. Those who work regularly with children/youth will be trained on Safe Sanctuary issues prior to beginning their regular involvement with children and youth. The procedures for screening are as follows: Each person being considered to work regularly with children and/or youth, whether as a volunteer or paid staff person, shall fill out an application form (See Appendix I).
- B. Before placing the applicant in a position of responsibility with children or youth, the designated paid ministry staff member or other person charged with specific responsibility will interview the applicant reviewing with them the written application.
- C. The person conducting this interview will contact the references provided on the application form and any additional persons as the circumstances dictate. A written record of such contacts will be retained with the application form. (See Appendix II)
- D. Each person applying to work with children and/or youth shall “authorize” the church to conduct a criminal background check. (See Appendix III) **You must get written authorization to run a background screening. For persons who have not lived in Arkansas for the past five years, a national background check needs to be conducted.**
- E. Before beginning work with either children or youth, each paid staff member and volunteer will sign a statement that they have read, understood, and agree to abide by this Safe Sanctuary Policy. (See Appendix IV)

Staff Selection Policies

All volunteer and paid staff who works with children and youth at Searcy FUMC will be:

- At least 18 years old or 4-5 years older than the oldest child/youth they will be supervising. If the age difference is less than 4-5 years older than the oldest child/youth, an Adult will be supervising.
- A member or person participating in the life of Searcy FUMC for at least 6 months or by approval by ministry department.

All volunteer and paid staff who works with children will:

- Complete and sign an application and the related waivers giving permission to check references, background information and policy covenant.
- Persons applying for a paid position should provide the names and contact information of 3 personal references.
- Undergo a criminal background check at no expense. Individuals who have been convicted of physical or sexual abuse or neglect may not work in any church-sponsored activity or program for children or youth.

Staff Supervision Guidelines

Whenever supervising activities involving children at Searcy FUMC,

- One screened adult, preferably two with the door open or window in door and a “floater” monitoring frequently.
- Children ages 0 – 6th grades will be signed in to and out of church sponsored activity by their parent or legal guardian or people authorized by parent/legal guardian.
- They will have access to a telephone, cell phone or pager when groups are at or away from the church facility.
- One-on-one interactions with children will be with an open door and /or visibility to all.

Whenever supervising activities involving youth at Searcy FUMC,

- One screened adult, preferably two with the door open or window in door and a “floater” monitoring frequently
- Youth ages 7th – 12th grade will sign themselves in. If remaining on campus after program ends, they must write their location when signing out.
- They will have access to a telephone, cell phone or pager when groups are at or away from the church facility.
- One-on-one interactions with youth will be with an open door and /or visibility to all.

Whenever Searcy FUMC sponsors an activity involving children and youth,

- Parents, volunteers or staff of the church will be permitted, as reasonableness dictates, to visit and observe all programs and classrooms at any time.
- All classroom and office doors will have a window or visibility from hallway or remain open while occupied.
- Windows will be kept free from adornment.

Transportation by Ministry Staff or Ministry Adult Volunteers

- No youth should drive to/ from events.
- Adults should never transport child/youth by self unless circumstances require a paid staff to do so. Ex. Child or youth not picked up and parents cannot be reached.

- When transporting children or youth, one screened adult, preferably two supervising or with parent approval.

Transportation by Church Vehicles

A. General Rules

Transporting youth and children is an important concern. Their safety can be at risk in a variety of ways. Therefore, certain discretion must be used depending upon the event attended, the locale of the event, and the age group participating. This Policy includes both Requirements and Guidelines. When feasible, there should be adherence to the recommendations in the Guidelines. It is expected that the Requirements will always be followed.

B. Requirements

- Drivers must be known to the designated adult leader of the event.
- When a child/youth is transported in any vehicle, the driver must be either the child's/youth's parent/guardian, or a screened adult or a paid staff person who is at least 18 years old.
- When a child/youth is transported in a church-owned vehicle, the driver must be at least 21 years of age; provided, however, exception is made when the driver is a paid staff member who is at least 18 years of age and for whom a motor vehicle record search has been made and the record has been found satisfactory.
- Drivers must have a valid driver's license for the vehicle being operated. For example, if driving a church bus, a commercial license is required. A copy of the driver's license should be on file at the church.
- Drivers must require that seat belts be used at all times and the number of passengers must not exceed the number of seat belts.
- When a trip is planned and the destination is expected to be 100 miles or more from the point of departure, drivers are to be listed on an "approved driver list" maintained in the church office.
- Persons who regularly drive church owned vehicles are to be listed on an "approved driver list" maintained in the church office.
- In order to be listed on the "approved driver list" of drivers, approval must be done by church administrator.
- Drivers will read and sign an acknowledgement form indicating the Safe Sanctuary Policy has been read and will be followed. (See Appendix IV)

C. Guidelines

- Drivers should be accompanied by at least one other adult
- Drivers should receive training of the church vehicle being operated.

Trip and Retreat Supervision

Trip and Retreat settings can call for different child/youth protection requirements depending on the circumstances. What follows are Requirements of this Policy. The Requirements should always be implemented. Those in charge of the trip or retreat should be mindful of Requirements, in addition to applying their own wisdom to the needs of a given occasion.

A. Requirements

- There will be at least two screened adults present for all trips, retreats and other events where the children and/or youth gather overnight at, or away from the church campus.

- There will be at least one screened adult for each gender present at co-ed overnight events. At single gender overnight events, at least one of the two screened adults present shall be of the same gender as the child/youth.
- The person in charge of youth/children for each overnight trip and/or retreat shall carry parental permission slips including permission for emergency medical care. (See Appendix V)

Responding to Allegations of Child Abuse

- A. Everyone in the church has a moral responsibility and legal duty to report suspected abuse whenever it comes to their attention, regardless of where that abuse takes place. Reporting abuse is a form of ministering to the needs of those crying out for help. Therefore, immediately notify the proper authorities (i.e., the local law enforcement agency in the jurisdiction in which the child/youth resides or in which the suspected abuse occurred and/or the appropriate department of children's services).
- B. Immediately, yet with dignity and respect for the sacred worth of the accused, remove the accused from further involvement with children and /or youth. Once the proper authorities have been contacted and the safety of the child or youth is secured, the appointed clergy or ministry staff persons should inform the accused that abuse has been reported.
- C. If abuse is observed by, disclosed to, or suspected by a volunteer and/or paid staff member of the church, the observer shall report the incident immediately to the appointed clergy and ministry staff. If the appointed clergy and ministry staff are not available, the matter should be reported to the District Superintendent.
If the accused is the appointed clergy and ministry staff or a member of his/her family, the allegations shall be immediately reported to the District Superintendent and immediately reported to the proper authorities as required by state or local law. The District Superintendent will take responsibility and act according to established rules of *The Book of Discipline* with respect to claims against a pastor. If the District Superintendent is not available, the incident should be reported to the Bishop's office.
- D. Notify the parents of the victim and take whatever steps are necessary to assure the safety and well being of the child/youth until the parent(s) arrive.
- E. Take all allegations seriously and reach out to the victim and the victim's family. Show care and support to help prevent further hurt. Remember that the care and safety of the victim is first priority. Respond in a positive and supportive manner to the victim and the victim's family.
- F. The church should provide a supportive atmosphere to all those who are affected, offering both objectivity and empathy as it seeks to create a climate in which healing can take place.
- G. After having reported the suspected abuse to the proper authorities, the appointed clergy and ministry staff are to report the incident immediately to the District Superintendent.
- H. Keep a written report of the steps taken by the church in response to the reported abuse (See Appendix VI). The report should be brief and contain only factual information relevant to the situation. It should be kept in a secure place. It should be written in ink or typed to prevent it from being changed.
- I. Any contact with the media should be handled by a pre-determined spokesperson selected by the appointed clergy and ministry staff. The church spokesperson should generally convey a spirit of concern for the spiritual, physical, and emotional wellbeing of all who are affected, and that the matter is being diligently and appropriately handled.

Implementation

Unless otherwise specifically stated, it shall be the responsibility of the Staff Parish to implement this Policy, to design and conduct future training, and to ensure the ongoing effectiveness of this Policy.

Application

All of those who participate in the life of this congregation and use its facilities – individuals, organizations, and groups within and outside this congregation—are expected to respect, implement, and adhere to these provisions as a minimum.

Conclusion

In all of our ministries with children and youth, this congregation is committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each child and youth will be “surrounded by steadfast love...established in the faith and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.”