

# ***Safe Sanctuaries Policy***

## ***First United Methodist Church Bentonville***

### ***Bentonville, Arkansas***

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, in April 2004, 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 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, emotional, and sexual exploitation and abuse."

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places 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 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*. P. 201-203, resolution #65)

Thus, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, the First United Methodist Church of Bentonville adopts this policy for the prevention of child, youth and vulnerable adult abuse in our church.

#### **Purpose**

Our purpose for establishing this Safe Sanctuaries 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 First United Methodist Church Bentonville hereby pledges to conduct the ministry of Jesus Christ in ways that help to assure the physical and emotional safety and spiritual growth of all of our children and youth, as well as all of our volunteers and paid staff whom work with children and youth. We will follow reasonable safety measures when selecting and recruiting; we will implement appropriate operational procedures in all areas of programming and care; we will train and certify persons working with children and youth on our procedures and policies; and we will have a clearly defined procedure for reporting a suspected incident of abuse consistent with Arkansas state law (as referenced in Section IV).

#### **Theological Reflection**

We adopt this policy in accordance with the statement we as a congregation make at each Baptism; that we will "nurture children and youth in the Christian faith and life and include them in our care." With this policy, we renew our Baptismal pledge to "live according to the example of Christ" and surround children and youth with a

"community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God, and be thus confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal." (Baptismal Covenant II, *United Methodist Book of Worship*, p.96).

## **I. Volunteer Recruitment and Certification Guidelines**

### **A. Age**

In recruiting and hiring volunteers and paid staff to work with children and youth in any position, they must be at least 14 years of age and at least 4 years older than the age of the persons they are working to serve or a minimum age of 21 in order to work with Senior High youth.

This standard allows persons to be separated by enough years so as to better have perspective and recognition as an authority figure with the group they are serving. Persons not meeting these standards may not serve in a role of authority; however, they may be utilized as assistants to those in leadership positions.

### **B. Six-Month-Hospitality Rule and Check of References**

First United Methodist Church Bentonville will not use anyone as a worker for children and youth in the church unless they have been a regular attendee of the church for at least six (6) months. If the interested person has not regularly attended First United Methodist Church Bentonville for six (6) months, they shall have two (2) positive personal references from their previous church, and an interview must be conducted by a Pastor. Then the applicant may volunteer with pastoral approval.

The Six-Month-Hospitality Rule allows a time for those new to the life of our church to get to know people and explore the ministries our church offers. This interaction between ministry leaders and the applicant allows leaders to better evaluate the suitability of an applicant for work with children and youth.

### **C. Application**

All applicants must complete and sign an application and the related waivers giving permission to check references and background information. Failure to do so would exclude a person from volunteering with children and youth.

### **D. Reference Checks**

Church staff **will** check at least two (2) references for each applicant. The references will be done by phone, mail, or in person. See 6 month Hospitality Rule above.

The "Children and Youth Volunteer check" form will be filled out by the person conducting the reference check.

### **E. Background Checks**

Criminal background checks shall be made of all clergy, paid staff, and volunteers who work with children and youth, and all other church employees, to the extent permitted by law, prior to employment, to determine current or historic child abuse or sexual misconduct, criminal records, violent or pedophilic behavior. At the church's discretion, proof of current employment with a company/organization who conducts background checks may be accepted.

### **F. Prior Convictions**

Individuals who have been convicted of physical or sexual abuse or neglect or other violent offenses may not work in any church-sponsored activity or program for children and/or youth.

Individuals having a Criminal history of DUI or DWI conviction within the five years immediately prior to application shall not be allowed to act as a driver.

**G. Interview**

Applicants may be interviewed either by telephone or in person for suitability for the work they desire to do. Interviews will be conducted by the leader of the program in which the applicant will work, or by other persons designated by the program leader. A team of interviewers may be used. Church policy and guidelines should be discussed during the interview.

**H. Applicants with Substance Abuse Backgrounds:**

An applicant in substance abuse recovery or “clean” (i.e. not utilized any controlled substances) less than one year will not be permitted to work directly with children and/or youth.

**I. Confidentiality of Information**

The church will keep confidential all information received in the applicant selection process. Selection information will be marked as such and stored in a locked location with limited access afforded only to church staff and others with a need to know. The paid staff who directly supervise ministries involving children and youth, and the appointed Safe Sanctuaries Coordinator are responsible for the implementation of these policies, as well as the maintenance of confidential records.

**J. Required Forms and Signatures**

As part of the application process, the following forms will be completed and signed:

- Application (form I), Participation Covenant Statement (form II),
- Authorization and Request for Criminal Background Check (form III),
- Volunteer Confidentiality Agreement (form IV), Children & Youth Volunteer Reference Check (form V).

**II. Staff Supervision Guidelines**

All meetings, outings, and trips of children and/or youth affiliated with First United Methodist Church Bentonville will be governed by the following guidelines:

**A. Two adult rule**

Two (2) certified adults or one (1) certified adult with the door open and a “floater” (adult) monitoring. Other church sponsored or community groups of children and/or youth who meet at the church should have two or more leaders present whenever possible. If the group stays overnight at the church, or if a church sponsored group leaves the premises, two or more leaders must be present and must include at least one male and female if the group is mixed gender.

**Goals for Worker to Child Ratios** – First United Methodist Church Bentonville has a goal of maintaining the following ratios of ministry workers to children whenever feasible. These ratios are goals. The church recognizes that in some circumstances achieving these ratios may not be feasible, such as an unexpected number of children at an event.

\*See below the Best Practices from the Nursery and Child Care Staff/Volunteer Handbook for adult:child ratio guidelines for children under the age of 5 years.

**Best Practice Ratio from Nursery and Preschool Staff/Volunteer Handbook**

<u>Ages of Children</u>	<u>Number of Staff</u>	<u>Number of Children</u>
Birth – 12 months (Infants)	2	6
12 months – 24 months (Waddlers & Toddlers)	2	9

2 years - 5 years (preschool)	2	12
Kindergarten and above	2	20

- a. Children ages 30 to 36 months may be placed in the group most suited to their social, emotional and developmental maturity.
- b. Infants through toddlers shall not be mixed with older children, except as listed in the following requirement.
- c. When a total of eight (8) or fewer children are in care in one room, age groups may be mixed according to the following ratios:

<u>Number of Staff</u>	<u>Number of Children</u>	<u>Ages of Children</u>
a. 2 adults	6	No more than 3 under the age of 2 years
b. 2 adults	7	No more than 2 under the age of 2 years
c. 2 adults	8	No more than 1 under the age of 2 years

Program	Adult Workers	Children
Elementary	2	20
Youth	2	25

**B. Nursery Checkout Procedure**

All families utilizing the church nursery, childcare, Sunday school and all other children and youth ministries shall observe the check-in/checkout procedure as outlined in the Children and Youth manuals.

**C. Classroom Visitation Policy**

Further protection for the children requires that an open door policy be followed. This policy states that the parents of the children served, the clergy, administrative and professional staff of the church have the right to observe any children's' and youth activity, classroom, or church-sponsored program at any time, unannounced. All others must obtain permission or be accompanied by a staff member who supervises that program.

**D. Outside Access**

There must be access to a cell or landline phone when groups are at or away from the church facility. The church office or authorized church representative shall be given this number prior to the group's departure from church property.

**E. Doors and Windows**

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 and kept locked at all times.

**F. Individual Conferences**

One-on-one interactions are sometimes necessary and appropriate, but care must be taken that they be conducted in an environment that provides visibility by other adults. If at all possible, another adult is to have knowledge of staff members' whereabouts and with whom they are meeting. Children and youth receiving individual counseling or mentoring with a volunteer or paid staff member should be told they are free to discuss any aspects of the counseling process with a parent or other adult, especially if they

are uncomfortable about anything that occurs in counseling. All incidents of suspected abuse and neglect revealed during the session will be reported in accordance with section IV of this policy.

## **G. Touch**

Physical affection should be appropriate to the age of the child or youth. (For example, it is generally appropriate for a four-year-old to sit in a nursery worker's lap and give a kiss on the hand, but it is not appropriate for a teenager and youth leader to behave this way.)

Touching should be a response to the child's need for comforting, encouragement, or affection and should be initiated by the child or youth.

Ideally, touching and affection should only be given when in the presence of other children's ministry or youth workers. It is much less likely that touches will be inappropriate or misconstrued as such when two adult workers are present and the touching is open to observation. This is especially important when diapering a baby or helping a young child change clothes or use the restroom.

Touching behavior should not give even the appearance of wrongdoing. As ministry workers our behavior must foster trust at all times; it should be above reproach.

A child or youth's preference not to be touched should be respected. Do not force affection upon a reluctant person. Church workers are responsible to protect those under their supervision from inappropriate touching by others.

Church staff and volunteers must promptly report inappropriate touching or other questionable behavior by other workers with their ministry leader, staff member, or a pastor. See attached form VI.

## **H. Outings Away From Church Property**

All children and youth participating in out-of-town and over-night outings must have written consent and a medical release form. There must be a medical release form present at each outing, for each child and youth participant. Medical release and consent forms may be completed for a one-year period and must be renewed annually. See attached form VII.

There must be access to a cell or landline phone when groups are away from the church property.

Under no circumstance is one adult (other than the parent) to stay with a child or children on an overnight outing alone. On children/youth overnight outings, there will be a 1:10 ratio. "Two Adult Rule" also applies. With the exception of a parent/child combination, an adult and child will not occupy the same bed or sleeping bag.

## **I. Classroom Discipline**

All teachers and workers will use the following discipline measures:

1. If a child is behaving inappropriately, the teacher or worker will tell the child specifically what he/she is doing that is not acceptable and state what the expected behavior is, e.g., "We do not throw the blocks. We use blocks for building."
2. If this measure is not effective, the child will be guided to another activity. If inappropriate behavior continues, the child may be placed at a table to work alone away from the other students.
3. If the child's disruptive behavior continues after these steps have been taken, a teacher shall notify an appropriate staff person who will talk with the child and work with the child's parents.
4. **No physical punishment or verbal abuse, e.g., ridicule, are to be used at any time.** If isolating the child within the classroom or removal of the child from the room becomes

necessary, the situation will be discussed with the child's parents or guardian as soon as possible.

## **J. Gifts**

No staff, either paid or volunteer, is to give gifts to individual children or youth without the prior knowledge of the parent(s) or responsible clergy. Because gift giving can be a form of buying loyalty or silence, gift giving should be done on a group basis or for special occasions only. Gifts may not be elaborate but should be modest and appropriate to the occasion.

## **K. Certification and Training**

Prior to working with children and/or youth, workers must sign a "Participation Covenant Statement" form and an "Authorization and Request for Criminal Background Check" as part of the application process. See attached forms II and III. Training sessions will be conducted as needed to keep volunteers up-to-date on procedures and policies regarding ministries to children and youth. If proper training is not attended, the volunteer may lose or be denied their Safe Sanctuaries certifications.

A summary of current child abuse statutes and reporting requirements for your legal jurisdiction are to be made available to all clergy, paid staff and volunteers who regularly supervise youth, children and vulnerable adult's activities, Church Council members and all other church employees.

Church employees who supervise children and youth must maintain current certification in basic first aid and basic CPR. New employees must get this certification as soon as possible from the start of their employment. Nursery workers and others serving young children may also want training in infant and toddler CPR. Other workers are encouraged, but not required, to get training if they frequently accompany children or youth on such activities as: water sports, camping, home-building mission trips, etc. Outings away from church property will require at least one staff certified in CPR and First Aid.

## **L. Verification of Reading of Policy Statement**

Upon receipt of the this policy statement, the volunteer or paid staff person will read and sign a statement that he/she has read First United Methodist Church Bentonville's Safe Sanctuaries Policy. See attached form II.

## **III. Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect (Arkansas Code 9-30-103)**

- A. Arkansas Code defines a child as being any person under eighteen (18) years of age.
- B. Child abuse is any non-accidental physical injury, mental injury, sexual abuse, or sexual exploitation inflicted by those legally responsible for the care and maintenance of the child, or an injury which is at variance with the history given. The term encompasses both acts and omissions.
- C. Neglect refers to
  - 1. Failure to provide, by those legally responsible for:
    - a. The care and maintenance of the child and the proper or necessary support;
    - b. Education, as required by law; or
    - c. Medical, surgical, or any other care necessary for his well-being; or
  - 2. Any maltreatment of the child. The term includes both acts and omissions. Nothing in the code shall be construed to mean a child is neglected or abused for the sole reason he is being provided treatment by spiritual means through prayer alone in accordance with the tenets or practices of a recognized church or religious denomination by a duly accredited practitioner thereof in lieu of medical or surgical treatment.

Definitions of specific types of child abuse and neglect are further delineated in the Arkansas Code.

#### IV. RESPONSE BY CHURCH STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS TO ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE

As caring Christians, we are committed to protect and advocate for children, youth and vulnerable adults participating in the life of the church. The church is entrusted to provide an emotionally safe, spiritually grounded, healthy environment for children and youth which they are protected from abuse. It is our legal and moral responsibility to report suspected abuse whenever it comes to our attention regardless of where that abuse takes place. We shall report suspected abuse to stop potentially existing abuse and to prevent further abuse. To report abuse is to witness to the world of the love and justice of God. Reporting abuse is a form of ministering to the needs of those crying out for help. If abuse occurs, it is our intention to act as an advocate for all affected persons, providing support, information, assistance and intervention. We seek to provide a supportive atmosphere, offering both objectivity and empathy as we seek to create a climate in which healing can take place.

If abuse is suspected by, observed by or disclosed to a volunteer and/or paid staff member of the church, that person shall report the incident immediately. Staff and volunteers must promptly report inappropriate touching or other questionable behavior by other workers with their ministry leader, staff member, or a pastor. See attached form VI. (If the accused is the pastor, see information below.) Be prepared to do the following:

- A. Ensure the protection of and tend to the immediate needs of the child, as the situation requires.
- B. IMMEDIATELY contact the senior pastor or pastor on call.
- C. IMMEDIATELY notify the proper authorities (immediate supervisor, designated church Safe Sanctuaries representative or the adult in charge of the event.) This person will:
  - 1. provide written documentation concerning the incident on the designated form
  - 2. notify the Arkansas Child Abuse Hotline 1-800-482-5964. **This is a requirement of the law.**

*(Note: Do not attempt an investigation. This should be left to professionals who are familiar with these cases.)*

- 3. notify the pastor in charge. If the pastor is the accused party, the designee will notify the chair of the Staff Parish Relations Committee and the District Superintendent.
- 4. give written documentation to the pastor and/or Chair of the Staff Parish Committee.
- D. The pastor or designee will notify the parents of the victim and take whatever steps are necessary to assure the safety of the child/youth until the parent(s) arrive. It is important to emphasize that the proper authorities must be notified even if the parent(s) does not wish the incident to be reported. (Note: If one or both of the parents is the alleged abuser, contact the proper authorities listed above. Follow their advice about notification of the parents.)
- E. After having reported the suspected abuse to the proper authorities, the incident is to be reported immediately to the church's attorney, the church's insurance company, and the district superintendent. The district superintendent will report the allegation to the bishop's office. Do not try to handle this without professional assistance. If the accused is a clergy (deacon or elder) member of an annual conference, local pastor, or diaconal minister, provisions of Paragraph 362 and Paragraph 2702 of The 2012 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church must be followed.
- F. A list of emergency numbers will be available to the staff at all times.
- G. If the accused is working in a volunteer or paid position with children or youth in the church, immediately, yet with dignity and respect for the sacred worth of the person, remove the accused from further involvement with children and/or youth.
- H. Once the proper authorities have been contacted and the safety of the child or youth is secured, the pastor and other designated person shall tell the accused that a report has been made. If the accused is a volunteer or paid staff of the church, that person shall be relieved temporarily of his or her duties until the investigation is finished. If the accused is a paid staff person of the church, arrangements should be made to either maintain or suspend his or her income until the allegations are cleared or substantiated.

I. Any contact with the media should be handled by a pre-determined spokesperson. Care will be taken to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of all involved. The spokesperson should generally convey that the matter is under investigation and any comments made prior to the conclusion of the investigation would be premature.

J. A written report of the basic information shall be kept to ensure on-going ministry to, and advocacy for, victims and others involved. A form for this purpose shall be available in the church office. The report shall be brief and contain only factual information relevant to the situation. It shall be filed in a secure place in order to ensure confidentiality. It shall be written in ink or typed to prevent it from being changed. The church must also file a copy of the report with the bishop's office of the Arkansas Conference where it shall remain confidential.

- *Arkansas Code and the United Methodist Church define child and youth as being any person under eighteen (18) years of age.*

*In the church we usually define children as 0 to 11 years of age or through 6<sup>th</sup> grade and youth as 12 to 18 years of age or through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.*