

Safe Sanctuary Policy Surfside United Methodist Church

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, in April 1996, 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 and sexual exploitation and abuse." (§ 162C)

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. ¶ 384-386)

Purpose - Our purpose for establishing this policy and accompanying procedures is to demonstrate our total and unwavering commitment to the physical, emotional and spiritual safety of all our children, youth and vulnerable adults.

Covenant Statement - The Surfside 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 of our children and youth as well as all of our workers with children and youth. We will follow reasonable safety measures when selecting and recruiting workers; we will implement appropriate operational procedures in all areas of programming and care; we will train our workers 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 South Carolina state law.

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. Staff Recruitment and Selection Guidelines

A. Age - In recruiting and hiring volunteers and paid staff to work with children and youth in any position of authority, they must be at least 21 years of age and at least 5 years older than the age of the persons they are working to serve. 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.

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B. Six Month Rule - Surfside United Methodist Church will not use anyone as a worker for children or youth in the church unless they have been an active participant of Surfside UMC for at least six (6) months. In the case of paid staff workers, the applicant may have been a member of another Christian church for at least one year. This time of interaction between ministry leaders and the applicant allows leaders to better evaluate the suitability of an applicant for youth and/or children's ministry. In some situations this rule is not feasible and may be waived by the Senior Pastor on basis of probation. If the six-month rule is waived, program leaders may take additional steps to screen the applicant at their own discretion.

C. Application - Applicants must complete and sign a *Volunteer Application and Reference Form* giving permission to check references and background information, agreeing to abide by the provisions of this policy, agreeing to self-report anything in the future that would affect one's ability to work with children and/or youth, and attend necessary training.

D. Reference Checks - Church leaders will check three references for each ministry area leader. The references will be done by phone, mail, email, or in person. For applicants for compensated positions, additional former supervisors may be checked. *The Children's and Youth Worker's Reference 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 have supervisory responsibility for youth and/or children (e.g. youth group leaders, Sunday school teachers) 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. All volunteers and staff must sign an *Authorization for the Conduct of Criminal Records and Background Checks and Release Of Liability* form.

F. Prior Convictions - Individuals who have been convicted of physical or sexual abuse or neglect may not work in any church-sponsored activity or program for preschoolers, children, youth or vulnerable adults.

G. Interview - All volunteer applicants must be interviewed for suitability for the work they desire to do. Interviews will be conducted by one of the pastors or a person designated by the Senior Pastor using a *Volunteer Interview Form*. Church policy and guidelines should be discussed during the interview.

H. Child Abuse Survivor Applicants - Adult survivors of childhood physical or sexual abuse need the love and acceptance of this church family. A person's experience with abuse and their recovery process may be pertinent to their suitability as youth and children's ministry workers. Applicants who are survivors of abuse should discuss this in confidence with one of the pastors prior to the interview. When evaluating candidates, the following factors will be considered if an applicant is a survivor of child abuse:

1. Whether the applicant has previously committed an act of child abuse or molestation (anyone who has maltreated children may not serve in children's or youth ministry);
2. The extent of professional counseling the applicant has received;
3. The opinion of references, especially professional counselors who have served the applicant; and
4. The opinion of leaders in other churches or youth organizations in which the applicant has been involved; how closely the church is able to supervise and monitor the position for which the applicant is applying.

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 ministry staff is responsible for the implementation of these policies. The Church Secretary is responsible for the maintenance of confidential records.

II. Staff Supervision Guidelines - All meetings of children and/or youth affiliated with, sponsored by, or meeting in or on the property or facilities of Surfside United Methodist Church will be governed by the following guidelines:

A. Two adult rule - Two approved adults must be present at all times. This applies to classroom activities, outside activities, and activities away from the church facility involving children and/or youth. Whenever

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possible, teachers will be assigned in teams of two or more per Sunday school hour to every class of children or youth. Concerted effort will be made to recruit sufficient numbers of volunteer teachers/leaders to permit such team teaching. Other church sponsored (including Preschool) or community groups of children or youth who meet at the church should have two or more leaders present. When feasible, both male and female leaders will be present. 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. When transporting children and/or youth a minimum of one approved adult must be in each vehicle while two approved adults must always be present in the group as a whole (travelling together). Additionally, adult drivers should be paired with same gendered minors. At no time is it permissible for one adult and one minor to travel together alone unless they reside in the same household. See additional specifications for youth overnight outings in section II-H of this document.

Goals For Worker to Child Ratios – Surfside United Methodist Church has a goal of maintaining the following ratios of ministry workers to children:

Program	Work ers	Child ren
Nursery	2	10
Sunday School	2	14
Youth Programs	2	16
Mid-week Classes	2	14
VBS	2	14

The church recognizes that in some circumstances achieving these ratios may not be feasible, such as an unexpected number of children showing up for an event. Additionally, the Preschool shall abide by all the laws of the State of South Carolina and all of the regulations set by applicable state and local agencies pertaining to our Preschool.

B. Nursery Checkout Procedure - All parents utilizing the church nursery will observe the check-in/checkout procedure as outlined in the nursery policy manual.

C. Open Door Policy - Further protection for the children requires that an open door policy be followed. This policy shall state that the parents of the children served, the clergy, administrative and professional staff of the church have the right to visit and observe the children's/youth activity, classroom, or church-sponsored program at any time, unannounced.

D. Outside Access - There must be access to a phone (landline or cell) when groups are away from the church facility. The church office or authorized church representative will be given this number prior to the groups' 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 at all times.

F. Individual Counseling - 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 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 III 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 cheek, but it

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is not appropriate for a teenager and youth leader to behave this way.) Touching should be initiated by the child or youth. It should be a response to the child's need for comforting, encouragement, or affection. It should not be based upon the adult's emotional need. 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's preference not to be touched should be respected. Affection should not be forced upon a reluctant child. Church workers are responsible to protect children under their supervision from inappropriate touching by others. Church workers must promptly discuss inappropriate touching or other questionable behavior by other workers with their ministry leader, staff member, or a pastor.

H. Outings Away From Church Property - All children and youth participating in out-of-town and overnight outings must have written consent and a notarized medical release form. (Medical release and consent forms may be completed for a one-year period and must be renewed annually). There must be access to a phone (cell or landline) when groups are away from the church property. If the outing involves water activities such as swimming, a certified lifeguard will accompany the group. In no circumstance is one adult (other than the parent) to take a child or children on an overnight outing alone. On youth overnight outings, there will be a 1:7 staff:youth supervision ratio observed. Female staff will supervise female youth in their sleeping quarters and male staff will supervise male youth. Married couples will not stay together but observe the female/female and male/male sleeping arrangements. With the exception of a parent/child combination, a staff and youth will not occupy the same bed or sleeping bag.

I. Classroom Discipline - 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. The ministry leader, staff person, and a pastor should be notified, as well.

J. Gifts - No staff, either paid or volunteer, are to give gifts to individual children or young people without the prior knowledge of the parent(s) or pastor. 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. Training - Prior to working in the youth or children department, workers must undergo child protection safety training. A minimum of four hours of initial training on issues of child sexual abuse in church settings shall be required for all clergy, paid staff and volunteers who regularly supervise children's and/or youth activities (e.g. youth group leaders) and all other church employees. In addition, a summary of current child abuse statutes and reporting requirements for South Carolina are to be made available to all clergy, paid staff and volunteers who regularly supervise youth activities, Church Council members and all other church employees. Church employees who supervise young people must maintain current certification in basic first aid and basic CPR. The church will pay expenses for this training. New employees must get this certification within 90 days of 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.

III. RESPONSE BY CHURCH WORKERS TO ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE - As caring Christians, we are committed to protect and advocate for children/youth/vulnerable adults participating in the life of the church. The church is entrusted to provide an emotionally safe, spiritually grounded, healthy environment for children, youth, and vulnerable adults. 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. Reporting abuse is a form of ministering to the

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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 to the pastor or designee. (If the accused is the pastor, see B. 1. 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** notify the supervisor or the adult in charge of the event. This person will:
 1. **IMMEDIATELY** contact the senior pastor or pastor on call. If the pastor is the accused party, the designee will notify the chair of the Staff Parish Relations Committee and the District Superintendent.
 2. Provide written documentation concerning the incident on the designated form.
 3. Notify the County Office of DSS. 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.) And,
 4. Give written documentation to the pastor and/or Chair of the Staff Parish Relations Committee.
- C. 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.)
- D. 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 ¶362 and ¶ 2702 of *The 2004 Book of Discipline* of The United Methodist Church must be followed.
- E. 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. Don't wait for proof.
- F. Once the proper authorities have been contacted and the safety of the child or youth is secured, the pastor or other designated person may 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.
- G. All contact with the media should be handled by the Senior Pastor. 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.
- H. 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 South Carolina Conference where it shall remain confidential.
- I. Additional information can be found in *Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect: Mandatory Reporting by Clergypersons and Others* which is available in the Church Office and at www.umscs.org.