

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. Sexual abuse, exploitation, 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), and bullying occur in churches, both large and small, urban and rural. The problem cuts across all generational, economic, cultural, and racial lines. It is real, and it appears to be increasing. Most annual conferences can cite specific incidents of sexual abuse and exploitation in their churches. Virtually every congregation has among its members adult survivors of abuse.

Such incidents are devastating to all who are involved: the victim, 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, youth, and other vulnerable persons from 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 - Surfside United Methodist Church hereby pledges to do the following:

- We will conduct the ministry of Jesus Christ in ways that assure the physical and emotional safety and spiritual growth of all of our children, youth, and vulnerable adults as well as all of our workers with children, youth, and vulnerable adults;
- 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, youth, and vulnerable adults 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.

Definitions:

- Children – Birth to 12 years old
- Youth – 13 to 18 years old
- Vulnerable Adults – Someone who is aged 18 years or older who is or may be in need of community care services by reasons of mental health or other disability, age or illness and is or may be unable to take care of him or herself, or unable to protect him or herself against significant harm or exploitation.
- Abuse – The act of a person using his/her position or power to take advantage of another who feels that he/she is in lesser position.

I. Staff Selection and Screening

- A. Age** - In recruiting and hiring volunteers and paid staff to work with children and youth as a supervisory adult, 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. Persons not meeting these standards but not younger than 15 years of age may not serve in a role of authority; however, they may be utilized as assistants to those in leadership positions after appropriate screening and with written permission from the Senior Pastor.
- B. Six-Month Rule** - Surfside United Methodist Church will not use anyone as a worker for children, youth, and vulnerable adults in the church unless they have been an active participant of Surfside UMC for at least six (6) months. In extenuating circumstances, the cumulative participation of seasonal attendees may be considered as satisfying the six-month rule. In the case of paid staff workers, the applicant may have been a member of another Christian church for at least one year.
- C. Application** - Applicants must complete and sign a *Volunteer Application and Reference Form* giving permission to check references and conduct a background check, and information, agreeing to abide by the provisions of this policy.
- D. Reference Checks** - Church leaders will check three. The references will be done by phone, mail, email, or in person.
- E. Background Checks** –
1. Criminal background checks shall be made of all clergy, paid staff, and volunteers who work with children and/or youth.
 2. Criminal background checks shall be made of all clergy, paid staff, and volunteers who work in a supervisory role with vulnerable adults.
 3. Youth serving as assistants cannot have background checks. However, they will undergo all the other screening.
 4. Background checks will be repeated every three years.

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. Background checks will look for:

- Felony convictions
- Child abuse or sexual misconduct
- DUIs for 5 years (for drivers).

G. 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 the senior pastors prior to the interview.

H. Confidentiality of Information The church will keep confidential **all** information received in the applicant selection process. These records will be stored under lock and key.

II. **Operation 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. If outside groups seek to use our space, they must also abide by the following guidelines. Exceptions to these guidelines will be considered on a case-by-case basis, and if granted written documentation will be kept on file in the office.

A. Two adult rule – Whenever possible we will have two, non-related adults in each youth or children's classroom.

B. Check-in/Check-out Procedure - When children or youth are left in the supervision of church leadership, the attendance of the children, youth, and adult leaders will be recorded.

1. Nursery and Children's Sunday School - All parents utilizing the church nursery and children's Sunday School will observe the check- in/checkout procedure as outlined by the children's policy.
2. Children's Church, other Children and Youth Classes – Other classes with children and youth will keep an attendance roll that includes the names of children, youth, and adult leaders present.
3. Maintenance of Records – Hard copies of these records will be kept for 7 years. Scanned copies of these records will be maintained on the church network. The Children's Ministry Director and Youth Ministry Director will be responsible for the maintenance of these records.

C. Open Door Policy – Classrooms will be accessible to the parents of the children served, the clergy, administrative and professional staff of the church.

- 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 remain open while occupied. Windows will be kept free from adornment at all times.
- F. Individual Counseling** – No one-on-one isolated interactions.
- G. Touch** - Physical affection should be appropriate to the occasion and age of the child, youth, or vulnerable adults.
- H. Over-Night Outings Away From Church Property** –
1. All children and youth participating in out-of-town and over-night 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).
 2. There must be access to a phone (cell or landline) when groups are away from the church property.
 3. In no circumstance is one adult (other than the parent) to take a child or children on an overnight outing alone.
 4. 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.
 5. Dating 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 in writing, as well.
- J. Gifts** – No staff, either paid or volunteer, are to give gifts to individual children or young people. Because gift giving can be a form of buying loyalty or silence, gift giving should be done on a group basis.
- K. Training** – Prior to working in the youth or children's departments, new workers must undergo Safe Sanctuary training. Training will be offered at least twice per year. Persons beginning to serve between training sessions will receive a copy of the policy and a detailed explanation of the policy. Persons who have been trained will be retrained every three years.

III. RESPONSE BY CHURCH WORKERS TO ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE

If abuse is suspected by, observed by or disclosed to a volunteer and/or paid staff member of the church, that person shall care for the immediate need of the child, youth, or vulnerable adult and shall report the incident immediately to the pastor. (If the accused is the pastor, see information below.) Be prepared to do the following:

A. Care for Child, Youth, or Vulnerable Adult – Ensure the protection of and tend to the immediate needs of the child, youth, or vulnerable adult, as the situation requires.

B. Notifications:

1. IMMEDIATELY contact the senior pastor or pastor on call.
2. IMMEDIATELY notify the proper authorities (immediate supervisor, or the adult in charge of the event). This person will:
 - a. Provide written documentation concerning the incident on the designated form.
 - b. Notify the County Office of DSS or appropriate authorities as defined by law. (Note: **Do not attempt an investigation. This should be left to professionals who are familiar with these cases.**)
 - c. If the pastor is the accused party, notify the Chair of the Staff Parish Relations Committee and the District Superintendent.
 - d. Give written documentation to the pastor. If the pastor is the accused party, give written documentation to the Chair of the Staff Parish Relations Committee.
3. The pastor or Chair of Staff Parish Relations Committee will notify the parents of the victim and take whatever steps are necessary to assure the safety of the child, youth, or vulnerable adult until the parent(s) or guardian arrive. **It is important to emphasize that the proper authorities must be notified even if the parent(s) or guardian 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.)
4. 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 359 and Paragraph 2702 of *The 2012 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* must be followed.
5. A list of emergency numbers will be available to the staff at all times.

C. The Accused Worker

1. If the accused is working in a volunteer or paid position with children, youth, and vulnerable adults in the church, immediately, yet with dignity and respect for the sacred worth of the person, remove the accused from further involvement with children, youth, or vulnerable adults.

2. Once the proper authorities have been contacted and the safety of the child, youth, or vulnerable adult is secured, the pastor 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 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.

D. Media – 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.

E. Reporting – 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.

F. If the pastor is accused:

1. Contact SPRC chair.
2. SPRC will contact the District Superintendent.
3. District Superintendent will contact Bishop.
4. Same steps apply with media and documentation.

IV. Conclusion

Living Document – This is a living document. It is expected that the Surfside UMC Safe Sanctuary Policy will be reviewed at least annually.