

SAFE SANCTUARIES
Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church Policy
Updated 2024

PREAMBLE

God has called us to make our ministries safe, protecting our children from abuse and exploitation. God has also called us to create communities of faith where children can be safe and grow strong.

Jesus taught “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,” (Mark 9:37 NRSV) and “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 NRSV)

The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church state “...children must be protected from economic, physical, and sexual exploitation and abuse.” (Par. 162(D) *2012 Book of Discipline*)

At each child’s baptism, we affirm our responsibility to their safety by our congregational response, pledging:

“With God’s help, we will so order our lives after the example of Christ that this child, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.” (The Book of Worship, Baptismal Covenant, Congregational Pledge II)

Building on these foundations, we recognize that our faith calls us to offer hospitality and protection to all children, as well as those who are committed to ministering to them as volunteers and employees. Every 15 seconds, a child is abused or neglected. Often, abuse occurs in places where children feel safe – homes, schools, camps, and even churches. In over three quarters of reported cases, the victim was related to or acquainted with the abuser. In light of this, the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of The United Methodist Church has seen fit to establish this policy that can help to 1) prevent such abuse from happening in our churches; 2) make our churches places where children can feel safer in disclosing abuse; and 3) protect the volunteers and employees that minister to our children.

It is the policy of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference that every church in the conference adopt a Safe Sanctuaries policy that conforms to the standards set forth in this conference policy. It is the policy of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference that all conference and district ministries with children comply with the standards set forth in this policy.

Notwithstanding anything contained in this policy, it is the responsibility of every church in the conference to ensure that it is in compliance with all aspects of the Pennsylvania Child Protective Services Law (63 PA. C.S.A. 6301). In the event that the law conflicts with this policy, the law shall control.

SCREENING AND SELECTION OF STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS:

Screening Standards:

All new applications for employment and/or volunteer service in which that applicant shall have contact with children in a manner which, under Pennsylvania law currently in force and as enacted and amended in the future from time to time, requires the person to obtain background clearances shall complete the following prior to start of service:

- 1) **Written Application completed** – provided by church and including:
 - Personal contact information
 - Acceptance of Notice Requirement signature – complete the acceptance of notice requirement acknowledgment that they have been informed of and will comply with Pennsylvania law that requires them to inform the church in writing of any arrest, conviction or child abuse report that would prohibit them from working with children.
 - References – at least two references from persons not related to the applicant shall be obtained and contacted for all new applicants for employment or volunteer service.
- 2) **Background Checks** – All background checks required by the laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania currently in force and as enacted and amended from time to time.
- 3) **Relationship with Church** – All prospective volunteer workers with children shall have an active relationship with the local church for at least six months before being allowed to be in a supervisory role in activities for children; or twenty-four months of good standing at their previous church.
- 4) **Records** – All written records shall be confidential and shall be kept in a secure location with access restricted on a need to know basis. All files shall be maintained for thirty (30) years after service ends.
- 5) **Mandated Reporter** – read and be familiar with the Mandated Reporter information sheet.

Training:

All persons who have direct contact with children shall participate in training as required under the laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania currently in force and as enacted and amended in the future from time to time.

Supervision:

Supervision procedures are designed to reduce the possibility of abuse or exploitation of children, and to protect staff persons and volunteers from unfounded accusations.

Supervision Standards:

Programs and ministries in the church that are licensed or accredited by a licensing or accreditation body or that have formally adopted supervision procedures, and that receive pre-approval from the conference Board of Trustees shall follow their established requirements for the supervision children. EPA conference camps shall follow the supervision standards required for accreditation by the American Camp Association. All other programs and ministries of the church shall use the following standards for the supervision of children.

1. The two-adult rule – Regardless of the size group, there will always be at least two adults present. These adults are to be unrelated. This may include the presence of an adult ‘roamer’ who moves in and out of rooms/ministry activities.
2. No child will be left unsupervised while participating in a ministry activity/event.
3. All ministry activities should occur in open view. Each room or space where ministry activities/events occur must be open to public view. For example: enclosed spaces such as classrooms shall have a viewing window, a glass panel in the door, a ½ door configuration or an open door.
4. No person shall supervise an age group unless he/she is at least 18 years of age or older and is at least 5 years older than the children being supervised.
5. Ministry events involving transportation shall require a written consent form signed by the parent or guardian of the child.

Parental Supervision Responsibilities

It is the responsibility of a parent to supervise when a child/children are not in an organized activity. Children grades 5 and younger should be escorted to and from an activity. If a different person is to pick up the child/children from an activity, notify the program or activity director. Program and activity Directors do not release a child to anyone not designated to pick up that child.

Reporting:

Reporting of any allegation of child abuse shall be done in accordance with the laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania currently in force and as enacted and amended in the future from time to time.

It is essential that all employees and volunteers who have contact with children in a manner which, under Pennsylvania law currently in force and as enacted and amended in the future define them as a mandated reporter have a legal responsibility under the law to make a report directly to public child welfare officials any time they have reasonable cause to suspect abuse has occurred. Failure to comply with this requirement can lead to civil and/or criminal penalties for the employee or volunteer.

“Mandated Reporters” - The following adults are required to make a report of suspected child abuse, if the person has reasonable cause to suspect that a child is a victim of child abuse:

- (1) A clergyman, priest, rabbi, minister, Christian Science practitioner, religious healer or spiritual leader of any regularly established church or other religious organization.*
- (2) An individual paid or unpaid, who, on the basis of the individual's role as an integral part of a regularly scheduled program, activity or service, accepts responsibility for a child.*
- (3) An individual supervised or managed by a person listed above.*

The District Superintendent shall be notified if the alleged perpetrator is a staff person or volunteer of the church.

In the event that a member of the clergy becomes aware of suspected child abuse as a result of confidential communication which is protected under 42 PA C.S. 5943 (relating to confidential communications to clergymen), the conference legal counsel should immediately be consulted.

Pastor responses for reports of allegations of abuse:

Any allegation of abuse requires a process to address responding to the victim, the alleged perpetrator, and the press. The response must be quick, compassionate and unified. All allegations will be taken seriously.

Pastoral response is NOT an investigation of the alleged abuse. The investigation is the responsibility of public officials (child welfare and/or law enforcement). In all cases of reported abuse, there shall be cooperation with all official investigating agencies.

Response to victims of abuse:

In the instance of any allegation of abuse, there shall be a reaching out to the victim and the victim's family. Pastoral resources shall be extended, and the conference I-Care Team can be contacted to assist in providing this service. The care and safety of the victim shall be considered the first priority. Response to the victim and the victim's family shall be done in a positive and supportive manner.

The parents of the victim shall be notified and steps shall be taken to address the safety and well-being of the child until the parent(s) arrive. **NOTE:** If one or both parents is the alleged abuser, the direction of the child welfare authorities shall be followed concerning notification of others.

Response to all alleged perpetrators of abuse:

In the instance of an allegation of abuse there shall be a reaching out to the alleged perpetrator and the perpetrator's family. Pastoral resources shall be extended and the conference I-Care Team can be contacted to assist in providing this service. Response to the alleged perpetrator and the perpetrator's family shall be done in a supportive way.

The alleged perpetrator shall immediately, yet with dignity and respect for their sacred worth, be removed from further involvement with children and advised that there has been an allegation of abuse. Details of the allegations of the abuse shall not be discussed with the alleged perpetrator at the time of removal. In any removal of a staff member or volunteer from any activity/ministry, care shall be taken to handle the removal in a discreet manner.

When it has been alleged that a member of the church staff or a volunteer has committed an act of abuse, the staff member or volunteer shall be required to refrain from all ministry activities/events with children until the incident has been fully resolved by the appropriate state authorities and/or in accordance with the Book of Discipline.

At that time, a meeting shall be held with the employee or volunteer to discuss the incident(s) that led to the report being made. Even if the public agency determines the report to be unfounded, the church has the right to prohibit the volunteer or employee from resuming working in ministries with children based on the facts and circumstances available at that time.

Response to the Media:

In consultation with the presiding bishop, the District Superintendent, the Conference Director of Communications and pastor shall decide on a single spokesperson for contact with the public/media. All media requests for statements shall be directed to that spokesperson.

Building Use Agreements:

For any group that is a non-ministry group of the church that enters into a building use agreement with the church and/or trustees of the church and works with anyone under 18, that group needs to:

1. Follow this safe sanctuary policy and complete all application, training and background checks before the building can be used and comply with the policy as the building is being used.
2. OR provide a safe sanctuary policy of the group that meets the minimum of this policy and is approved by the church's trustees and Pastor Staff.

Compliance: Compliance with this policy shall be a matter of record at each annual Charge Conference.