

Safe Sanctuary Policy
Zion United Methodist Church Anderson, South Carolina
Approved 10/25/2025

The General Conference of the United Methodist Church, in April 1996, adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of child sexual abuse in the church.

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, emotional and sexual exploitation and abuse” (para.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 within 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—2000, pp.180-181. Copyright 2000 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.)

Thus, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, Zion United Methodist Church adopts this policy for the prevention of abuse of children and vulnerable adults 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 our children, youth and vulnerable adults.

I. Covenant Statement

Zion 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, 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 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.

II. 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 or be approved for service by the Staff/Pastor Parrish Relationship Committee in cooperation with the pastor.

B. Workers with children:

Zion United Methodist Church will not use anyone as a worker for children/youth or vulnerable adults in the church unless they have completed a satisfactory background check.

C. Application:

Applicants must complete and sign an application and the related waivers giving permission to check references and background information.

D. Reference Checks

Church leaders will check three references for each primary worker. The references will be done by phone, mail, or in person. 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 program responsibility for youth (e.g. youth group leaders) 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.

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 applicants must be interviewed 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. 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 person who conducts the confidential interview. If an applicant is uncomfortable doing so, he/she may have the interview conducted by a pastor.

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 Safe Sanctuary Team is responsible for the implementation of these policies as well as the maintenance of confidential records.

J. Required Forms and Signatures:

In addition to staff application and reference forms, all applicants will sign "Disclosure Regarding Consumer Reports, Authorization to Obtain Consumer Report" and "Participation Covenant Statement" forms as part of the application process.

III. Staff Supervision Guidelines

All meetings of children and/or youth affiliated with Zion United Methodist Church will be governed by the following guidelines:

A. Two adult rule:

Two approved adults present when possible with one who roams the hall. This applies to classroom activities (and) activities away from the church facility. When transporting youth and children, whenever possible, we will have at least two children/youth per licensed and insured adult driver. Whenever 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 or community groups of children or youth who meet at the church should have two or more leaders present whenever possible. When feasible, both male and female leaders would 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. See additional specifications for youth overnight outings in section III-I of this document.

B. 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.

C. Outside Access:

There must be access to a phone, cell phone or pager when groups are at or 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.

D. 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. Doors that do not have visibility from the outside will be replaced with doors with window when replacement is needed.

E. 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 IV of this policy.

F. 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 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. Do not force affection 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.

G. Outings Away From Church Property:

All children and youth participating in out-of-town and over-night outings must have written consent and a notarized medical release form executed by custodial parent or guardian. (Medical release forms may be completed for a one-year period and must be renewed annually). Consent forms executed by custodial parent or guardian must be furnished for each outing. There must be access to a phone, cell phone or pager when groups are away from the church property. 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.

H. Classroom Discipline:

All teachers and workers (with children) will use the following procedure: If a child is behaving inappropriately, and if the child's disruptive behavior continues, a teacher will notify the Pastor who will talk with the child and work with the child's parents or guardian.

I. 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 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.

J. Training:

Prior to working in the youth or children department, workers must undergo child protection safety training. Initial training on issues of child sexual abuse in church settings shall be required for all clergy, paid staff and volunteers who regularly supervise youth activities (e.g. youth group leaders) and all other church employees. Safe Sanctuaries training for new and existing volunteers will be provided by the church. Existing workers will renew their Safe Sanctuaries Covenant at least every three years or when Church Council advises. It is the worker's responsibility to renew/attend training when it is offered. In addition, 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 activities, Church Council members and all other church employees.

K. 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 Zion United Methodist Church's Child Abuse Protection Policy.

IV. RESPONSE BY CHURCH WORKERS TO ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE:

As caring Christians, we are committed to protect and advocate for children/youth participating in the life of the church. The church is entrusted to provide an emotionally safe, spiritually grounded, healthy environment for children, youth, and adults in 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 to the pastor or designee. (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 child protection 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 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.)
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 359 and Paragraph 2702 of The 2000 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 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.

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 South Carolina Conference where it shall remain confidential.

If the pastor is the accused party:

1. The worker will ensure the protection of and tend to the immediate needs of the child, youth or vulnerable adult as the situation requires.
2. The worker will immediately notify the chair of the Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC).
3. The SPRC chair will immediately call 911.
4. The SPRC chair will follow the same procedures as listed in the prior section with the addition of contacting the District Superintendent. The District Superintendent will guide the SPRC chair in how to further carry out responses to the allegations.