

Plainfield United Methodist Church

“Safe Sanctuaries” Policy

2022

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. The following is a reflection on the adopted resolution. (Book of Resolutions, 2016 #3084)

A central tenet of the Christian faith is the inherent value and worth of all children, youth, and adults. Children, youth, and other vulnerable people are least able to protect themselves in our society and are particularly vulnerable to abuse and neglect. The United Methodist Church is eager to do all it can to protect the youth, children, and other vulnerable people who participate in the life of this congregation.

We believe implementing a policy and adopting procedures to protect our children, youth, and other vulnerable people recognizes that:

Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to our children, youth, and other vulnerable people. The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church state, “...children must be protected from economic, physical and sexual exploitation and abuse.” The Social Principles also state, “...all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God.”

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children, youth, and other vulnerable people. Neglect, sexual abuse, and exploitation occur in churches, both large and small, urban and rural. The problem cuts across economic, cultural, racial, and ethnic lines. God calls us to make our churches safe places and to protect children, youth, and other vulnerable people from abuse.

Abuse prevention and ministry protection policies and procedures are essential for congregations, not only for the protection and safety of our children, youth, and other vulnerable persons, but also for our volunteers and staff working with them.

The Gospel calls us to be engaged in ministry with children, youth, and other vulnerable persons (*Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church for Children and Youth*, page 10).

Jesus taught that “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).

We should not allow possible risks to undermine or stop our ministry. Rather, we must:

- Acknowledge the risks and develop a practical plan to address these issues;
- Take steps to prevent harm to our children, youth, and other vulnerable persons; and
- Continue to answer the Gospel’s imperative to be in ministry with children, youth, and other vulnerable persons, thus making a difference in their lives (adapted from *Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church for Children and Youth*, page 10).

Safe Sanctuaries policies and implementation of practices that reflect those policies seek to fulfil this call for Plainfield United Methodist Church.

Definitions (for the purposes of this document):

- 1. child – infant through fifth grader.**
- 2. junior high youth – sixth grader through eighth grader.**
- 3. senior high youth – high schooler.**
- 4. vulnerable person – a person whose ability to protect themselves from violence, abuse, or neglect is significantly impaired through social, physical, or mental disability or illness.**
- 5. teacher – individual in charge of teaching or facilitating a class or group.**
- 6. helper – individual assisting the teacher.**
- 7. volunteer – unpaid person who has contact with children, youth, or vulnerable people.**
- 8. chaperone – person who escorts children, youth, or vulnerable people off-site.**
- 9. paid staff – persons who are hired by the church to work with children, youth, or vulnerable people. This includes staff members who request not to be compensated for their work.**

Procedures:

- ◆ **Volunteer Screening:** All individuals beginning to work with children, youth, and vulnerable people will fill out a Volunteer Information form.¹
- ◆ **Background Checks:** All paid and volunteer staff 18 years and older must consent to a background screening.² Background screenings will be repeated every three years. Only the Minister of Faith Formation, Director of Youth Ministries, and the Senior Pastor will have access to these files. If a background check is flagged, the situation may be reviewed by the Senior Pastor, Minister of Faith Formation, and the chair of the Staff/Parish Relations Committee.
- ◆ **Eligibility:** Individuals who have been convicted of physical or sexual abuse or neglect may not work in any church-sponsored activity or program for children, youth, or other vulnerable people.
- ◆ **6 Month Rule:** All volunteers will have been active participants at PUMC for 6 months. Exceptions will be made at the discretion of the Minister of Faith Formation and/or pastoral staff. Exceptions require an application with references and background check.
- ◆ **Five Years Older Rule:** All teachers and chaperones must be at least five years older than the children or youth they lead. Helpers should be at least three years older.
- ◆ **Volunteers Under 18:** Volunteers or staff under the age of 18 will work alongside an adult.
- ◆ **Two-Deep Rule:** Two teachers or a teacher and a helper should be in the room with children, youth, or vulnerable people. In instances where an immediate situation makes it impossible for two people to be present, there should be an adult “floater” with visible and physical access to all areas to move from group to group. If a class or group does not have two volunteers and a floater is not available, the meeting should be combined with another group or cancelled.

¹ See attached Volunteer Information form (A).

² See attached Background Screening form (B).

- ◆ **Open Door Rule:** All counseling and teaching sessions with children, youth, or vulnerable persons will take place in rooms with windows or the door shall remain open.
- ◆ **Public Spaces:** Mentoring or small group meetings between adults and youth should occur in a public place. Groups of youth (two or more) may meet with only one adult or a pair of related adults if the meeting takes place in a public arena such as a restaurant, store, movie theater, etc. In such cases, the group will gather at the designated public spot and leave from a designated public spot.
- ◆ **Online Gatherings:** Online gatherings should generally abide by the same guidelines as in person gatherings, such as the two-person rule, ages of volunteers, etc. Links to online gatherings should not be shared publicly, but should be accessible to registered participants via a protected portal or private link. Communication about online meetings should be shared with parents/guardians as well as with children, youth, and vulnerable people.
- ◆ **Social Media Use Policy:** Volunteers and staff shall follow social media and online best practices.³ Adult leaders should only share photos/posts from the official church accounts. All electronic communications should be documented and maintained.
- ◆ **Bathroom Use:** Children in 2nd grade and younger will be escorted to the bathroom (typically in the classroom) by a teacher or helper. The assistant will remain outside of the bathroom door. Children in 3rd grade through 5th grade will use the buddy system (two or more children together).
- ◆ **Disciplining Children:** A written policy for disciplining children should be available to all teachers, helpers, chaperones, and parents.⁴
- ◆ **Sign-in Procedures:** All infants through pre-kindergartners must be signed in and out from the nursery by a parent or other authorized adult (as indicated on registration form).

³ See attached Social Media Use Policy (C).

⁴ See Discipline Policy addendum.

- ◆ **Child Pick-Up:** Children up to third grade must be picked up from the classroom by their parents or authorized adult, or written permission must be given.
- ◆ **Child Supervision:** Children through 5th grade should be supervised by an adult at all times during church programming. It is the responsibility of the parents/guardians to make sure children are supervised before, after, and in between church programming.
- ◆ **Diaper Policy:** Nursery workers or teachers may change diapers unless otherwise instructed by parents or guardians on sign-in/registration sheet. Gloves will be available and should be worn by volunteers when changing diapers.
- ◆ **Building Evacuation:** Evacuation procedures should be clearly posted.
- ◆ **Photo Policy:** Photos of children on church media will not include identification of individual children unless written consent is given.
- ◆ **Allergies and Medical Conditions:** A list of allergies or medical conditions of students will be given to the teachers.
- ◆ **First Aid/CPR Training:** First Aid educational opportunities will be offered and recommended for all volunteers. We recommend that the Minister of Faith Formation, Sunday School Superintendent, Youth Director, Nursery Staff, and Pastors have current CPR/AED certification. A First Aid kit will be available on each level of the building. Each classroom and the nursery will have a supply of band-aids and gloves. Accident report forms should be filled out for any incident or treatment given.⁵
- ◆ **Lodging:** Always have more than two people in a room. Exceptions are allowed only for family relations.
- ◆ **Transportation for Church Related Events:** An adult should never transport a child/youth/other vulnerable person alone. At minimum, there must be at least two unrelated youth present. Exceptions are only allowed in emergency situations or if written permission is given by a parent or guardian.

⁵ See attached Accident Report form (D).

Drivers of church vehicles should be approved and covered by the church's insurance company. Drivers will be at least 23 years old. All drivers must present a copy of their driver's license and current insurance card to the staff member in charge.

- ◆ **Outside Organizations:** Groups using the church facility will follow PUMC's Safe Sanctuary guidelines.
- ◆ **Policy Education:** Paid and volunteer staff will be educated about this policy and will sign that they have received a copy in writing. Paid and volunteer staff will also sign a Covenant Statement for working with children, youth, and vulnerable persons.⁶
- ◆ **Policy Publication:** This Safe Sanctuaries Policy will be posted in visible areas of the church and available to all congregants.
- ◆ **Policy Review and Changes:** This policy is subject to review. Changes can be made by vote of the Administrative Council.

Response of leader who witnesses/has suspicions of an incident of abuse:

1. Ensure the safety of the child, youth, or vulnerable person.
2. Immediately report your information to the Minister of Faith Formation or Senior Pastor. If a paid staff member is involved in the incident, report it immediately to the chair of the Staff/Parish Committee. In the absence of the chair of the Staff/Parish Committee, the chair of the Administrative Council should respond. Mandated reporters can directly alert the proper authorities.

The Minister of Faith Formation, Pastor, or Staff/Parish Chair will:

1. Notify the parent(s) or guardian(s) of the victim and ensure the child's safety until the parent(s) arrive. The safety of the victim is the church's primary concern.
2. Treat the accused abuser with dignity, but immediately remove him/her from further contact with the child. Do not confront the accused abuser.

⁶ See attached Covenant Statement (D).

3. Notify the senior pastor and the proper law enforcement or child protective service agency (Illinois Child Protective Service 1-800-252-2873, Plainfield Police Department 815-436-2341, IL DCFS online reporting system)
4. Notify the District Superintendent and Bishop, the church's insurance agent, and the church's attorney.
5. Keep a written record of all actions taken by the church in response.
6. Call upon the chair of Staff/Parish or the Senior Pastor to make any necessary statements or response to the media.
7. Prepare a brief, honest statement that can be made to the congregation without giving unnecessary details, placing blame, interfering with the victim's privacy, or violating confidentiality.
8. Be prepared to interface with law enforcement officials, child protective services, and authorities of the church.⁷

Confidentiality:

We must assume that an allegation against a person may or may not be true. Therefore, the details to the allegations must and will be kept confidential until such time as they are proven and released to media or church officials. A public statement that an alleged incident has occurred, naming the alleged offense but not names of the victim or accused should be immediately formulated after victims have been cared for and the details of the incident are recorded. Children's names should never be released.

⁷ Adapted from *Safe Sanctuaries*.

Discipline of Children and Youth

There will be times in your ministry when it will be necessary to discipline those you are responsible for watching. While the appropriate response will often depend upon the actions of the child or youth, there are certain general procedures to follow.

1. Never physically punish a child by grabbing, slapping, spanking, pushing, etc.
2. Give ample directions to children and youth as to appropriate behavior. Immediately point out inappropriate behavior.
3. If the child or youth does not respond to you, remove the individual from the situation and consult with the Minister of Faith Formation, Director of Youth Ministries, or Pastor.
4. The responsibility for discipline ultimately lies with the parents or guardians. Notify the parents of problematic behavior.
5. While everyone is welcome at church organized events, there are expectations for appropriate behavior. If the child or youth continues to disrupt an event, group meeting, or class, the Minister of Faith Formation, Director of Youth Ministries, or Senior Pastor will ask that the individual be removed from the event until they are able to join in appropriately.