

Safe Sanctuaries Policy and Minimum Standards

INTRODUCTION

Spanish Fort United Methodist Church (SFUMC) seeks to create a safe environment for all children, youth, and vulnerable adults involved in our programs. Jesus made the importance of children clear in his ministry. In Matthew 19:13-14, Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” In order to promote safety, we have developed the Safe Sanctuary Policies to help prevent risk of injury through accident or abuse. The policies were proposed and voted on by the Board of Trustees on Tuesday, January 10. The committee considered policy from the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference, previous SFUMC policy, and policy from two churches that were used as benchmarks.

I. THEOLOGICAL BASIS. The theological basis of the Safe Sanctuaries Policy and Minimum Standards (SSPMS) is grounded in the following:

A. Children are important! Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me . . .” (Mark 9.37, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version). We ought to offer hospitality and protect children. Jesus said, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, 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; Mark 9.42).

B. *The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church* state that “. . . children must be protected from economic, physical and sexual exploitation, and abuse.” Id, ¶162C.

C. Members of the United Methodist Church regularly pledge commitment to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each person will be “. . . surrounded by steadfast love, . . . established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal” (*Baptismal Covenant II, United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 44).

D. ¶2702 of *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012* names child abuse, sexual abuse, sexual misconduct, and sexual harassment as chargeable offenses for both clergy and lay members.

II. **DEFINITIONS.** The following definitions shall be used in establishing, applying, and interpreting the SSPMS:

A. Abuse

1. **Physical abuse** occurs where a person intentionally causes bodily harm to a child, youth, or at-risk or vulnerable adult.
2. **Emotional abuse** occurs where a person speaks violently or cruelly to a child, youth, or at-risk or vulnerable adult, or otherwise exposes a child, youth, or at-risk or vulnerable adult to violence or emotional cruelty.
3. **Neglect** is abuse which occurs where a person endangers the health, safety, or welfare of a child, youth, or at-risk or vulnerable adult by failing to act in a reasonable manner.
4. **Sexual abuse** occurs where an adult or another older or more powerful youth has sexual contact with a child, youth, or at-risk or vulnerable adult.

B. Personnel

1. **Governing body** refers to the local church leadership approved and elected by the annual Charge Conference of the local church and in compliance with *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012* (§ 243, 244, and 247). Examples may include Church Council, Administrative Board, Board of Stewards, etc.
2. **Authority figure** is a person who is the primary leader of any youth, children, or at-risk or vulnerable adult activity and such person is required to be twenty-one (21) years of age or older.
3. **Assistant** is a person who gives help to and is directed by an **authority figure** in the course of any **youth, children, or at-risk or vulnerable adult** activity including, but not limited to, volunteers, interns, camp counselors, and Vacation Bible School workers. Such an assistant must be at least twelve (12) years of age. However, in order to count for satisfying requirements of the **two adult rule** (§ II.C.1, below,) such assistant must be an **adult** as herein defined.
4. **Adults** are all persons who have attained the age of majority (19 years in Alabama and 18 years in Florida).
5. **Floater** is an **adult** who acts as an **assistant** to an **authority figure** to monitor **covered activities or events** (§ II.C.2, below,) in order to comply with the **two adult rule** (§ II.C.1, below,) when achieving such compliance by use of two non-related adults is unfeasible.
6. **Children** are all persons from infants through the fifth grade or sixth grade, as determined by each local church in order to conform with grade-level practices of its local area schools regarding classifications of elementary schools and middle or junior high schools.
7. **Youth** are all persons in the sixth-grade or seventh-grade through the twelfth-grade, as determined by each local church in order to conform with grade-level

practices of its local area schools regarding classifications of middle or junior high schools and high schools.

8. **At-risk** or **vulnerable adults** are adults with physical, mental, and/or developmental impairment or disability.

C. Activities

1. **Two adult rule** is a core principle regarding the supervision required for **covered activities** and **overnight events**. This rule means that a minimum of **two adults** who are not related to each other should be utilized in all programming with **children, youth, and at-risk or vulnerable adults**. However, when unfeasible to staff at buildings and outdoor areas with two non-related adults, there should be at least an additional adult serving as a **floater** with visual and physical access to all areas where such programming occurs. Visual and physical access means either an open door or door with a window that provides a line of sight enabling the **floater** to see into a room or other building space and to see fully outdoor sites where **covered activities or events** take place.

2. **Covered activities or events** for purposes of this document include all church programming for **children, youth, and at-risk or vulnerable adults**.

3. **Overnight events** are a type of **covered activity or event** which extends through the evening and which may include summer camps, retreats, mission trips, and lock-ins.

a. **Room sharing limits** means that adults staying with young people during **overnight events** must be the same gender as the young people and that such adults must not be alone in a lodging room with a young person at any time and must not share a bed with a young person unless he/she is an immediate family member or guardian of such young person and of the same gender.

b. **Immediate family member or guardian room sharing exception** means that an immediate family member or guardian of a young person who is chaperoning an **overnight event** is permitted to share a room and bed with his/her child no matter the gender as long as no other young people are sharing the room.

4. Transportation

a. **Transportation** is a **covered activity** whenever such transportation is provided in a church-owned or leased vehicle (car, SUV, van, bus, etc.) or when a church staff member is the driver of or present in any vehicle used for such transportation. This provision shall not apply to multi-vehicle caravanning transportation. Two adults are not required to occupy each of the private vehicles in a caravan.

b. Any such transportation provided for a church-sponsored or church-hosted program of day-care, pre-school, or after-school care that is licensed under the laws

of Alabama or Florida shall abide by and conform with the respective state laws and regulations, if any, applicable to such a transportation function.

c. Youth shall not drive to any out-of-town events without written parental permission.

d. Drivers to youth and children's events must be background and motor vehicle checked, but if they are not participating as a chaperone for the event, they are not required to have Safe Sanctuary training as long as they are driving in a caravan or with another adult in the car.

5. Social Media: The use of electronics or media communications may be useful tools in supporting ministries with children, youth, and other vulnerable people. However, in such circumstances, the following requirements shall be met:

- a. The volunteer or staff person shall never initiate a connection (friending, following, etc.) on social media.
- b. If a student initiates a connection, Youth Director shall be notified.
- c. If an adult leader receives a private text from a child, youth, or vulnerable person that seems to be questionable, the adult should immediately end the conversation in the virtual space and offer opportunities to have the conversation in person and in compliance with the earlier guidelines for one-on-one conversations. The ministry supervisor and/or parent/guardian should be made aware of the incident immediately.
 - a. Note: If an in-person meeting is not possible, those involved will determine the most reasonable alternative in compliance with the earlier guidelines for one-on-one conversations.
- d. Adult leaders should post photos on social network sites only with prior written permission granted by a parent/guardian.
 - a. All photos must be appropriate and in keeping with the spirit of the ministry event.
- e. All in-person protection policies apply to online platform meetings like Zoom, Skype, Messenger, and so on. (For example, two unrelated adults should be present in the virtual room just as in a physical room).
- f. All online programming should use the official church account, not a personal account.
- g. Communication about online meetings should be shared with parents/guardians as well as with children, youth, and other vulnerable people.
- h. Adult leaders and participants should use their real names as usernames.
- i. Do not interact with students on apps that erase messages or interactions.

III. POLICY STATEMENT. In covenant with all United Methodist congregations and the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, we endeavor as follows:

A. We shall strive to provide for physical safety and spiritual growth of all our children, youth, and at-risk or vulnerable adults.

B. We shall strive to demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ so that each person will be “. . . surrounded by steadfast love, . . . established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal” (*Baptismal Covenant II, The United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 44).

C. We shall strive to prevent physical, emotional, or sexual abuse of children, youth, and at-risk or vulnerable adults involved in any ministry sponsored by our Annual Conference or our local congregation.

D. We shall strive to provide and facilitate the use of reasonable care and effort in caring for the children, youth, and at-risk or vulnerable adults involved in any ministry sponsored by our Annual Conference or our local congregation.

E. We shall strive to minister to and act in the best interests of persons who are experiencing abuse or who have been victims of abuse in the past.

F. We shall strive to be aware of and comply with our legal responsibilities regarding the types of abuse addressed in this document.

G. We shall strive to screen all current and future staff, and all volunteers for every program that involves children, youth, and at-risk or vulnerable adults.

H. We shall strive to acknowledge, respond to, and investigate all questions or reports regarding alleged abuse.

I. We shall strive to adhere to biblical church discipline, particularly as recognized in ¶ 2702 of *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012*, which names child abuse, sexual abuse, sexual misconduct, and sexual harassment as chargeable offenses for clergy and lay members.

J. We shall commit to observe the Safe Sanctuaries Policy and Minimum Standards.

IV. STANDARDS: THEIR ADOPTION.

A. RESPONSIBILITY FOR IMPLEMENTATION.

A. The Trustees Committee shall have the responsibility for developing local church safe sanctuaries policies and minimum standards and procedures.

B. Implementing the Safe Sanctuaries Policy and Minimum Standards (SSPMS) and responding to any Safe Sanctuaries related concern, shall be the responsibility of the Spanish Fort Executive Team (SFET) - comprised of Senior Pastor, Lay Leader, Chair of Church Council, Chair of Trustees, Chair of Finance, and Chair of SPRC.

D. ACCOUNTABILITY AND REPORTING. The following accountability and reporting measures shall be developed and employed:

1. **Congregational Accountability.** The SFWT shall report to the Governing Body of the local church congregation at least annually and at such other interim times as circumstances relating to its responsibilities may require, on matters related to Safe Sanctuaries. Also the Governing Body and congregation shall regularly be informed and reminded by the Trustees of the Safe Sanctuaries Policy and Minimum Standards content, and the Standards, Qualifications, and Screening requirements under the SSPMS that are applicable to employment of paid staff and to granting permission for service by volunteer workers. The SFWT shall periodically announce and publicize that a church member may at any time upon request to the Pastor in Charge or his/her designee review and/or obtain a personal written copy of the complete policy document.

2. **Infractions/Incidents Accountability.** Actions or conduct concerning any personnel and covered activities as defined in this SSPMS document that are observed by or otherwise brought to the attention of a person (paid staff member; volunteer worker; parent or other relative of a child, youth, or at-risk or vulnerable adult; church member, church visitor, or guest; etc.) which is reasonably believed to be an infraction or incident in violation of this SSPMS should be promptly reported to the SFWT. Resources and instructions for reporting suspected infractions or incidents constituting abuse (whether of child, youth, at-risk or vulnerable adult) proscribed by this policy document should be conspicuously posted in and about the local church buildings and campus.

E. QUALIFICATIONS REQUIRED FOR SERVING CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND AT-RISK OR VULNERABLE ADULTS FOR VOLUNTEER PERSONNEL. The qualifications for volunteer service in a local church with duties and responsibilities that include serving children, youth, and at-risk or vulnerable adults shall be as follows:

1. Must have demonstrated an active relationship in the local church where service will occur for a minimum of three months prior to being permitted to serve as an authority figure.
2. Must be competent to work effectively in the served activity as an assistant in the judgment of the supervising staff member or supervising authority figure.
3. **Five-Year Rule:** Persons should be at least five (5) years older than the oldest member of the age group with whom they are to work.

- a. Unless otherwise approved my person supervising ministry.
- 4. Minimum Age of Leaders: Persons leading a group of children or youth should be nineteen (19) years of age or older. Persons under the age of nineteen (19) may serve in a helping capacity, provided they are at least twelve (12) years of age and five (5) years older than the oldest member of the group they are helping to lead.

F. SCREENING AND BACKGROUND. The local church shall obtain background checks on all persons serving with children, youth, or at-risk or vulnerable adults. Such persons shall be subject to the following requirements and actions:

1. Complete an Application/Commitment form.
2. Be interviewed by the director of the ministry or program to be served.
3. Have experience and qualifications necessary for the staff position or volunteer service sought.
4. Attend training by the church or annual conference in maintaining the SSPMS; or in the event of an unforeseen circumstance requiring use of a substitute worker who has not had such training, that substitute worker must be briefed on the SSPMS by the director or other supervisor before beginning work.
5. Consent to initiation by the local church of the following background check(s):
 - a. Multi-state criminal and sexual offender check based on social security number.
 - b. Motor vehicle records check (for those who will be transporting children, youth, or at-risk or vulnerable adults). The Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference recommends background checks be run through the Trak-1 Company or other reputable screening company. A background check will be valid two years unless the individual has been absent for twelve (12) months or longer.
6. The process for conducting the above described background checks and for handling the results received shall include the following:
 - a. Authority to initiate requests for criminal/sexual offender and motor vehicle background checks (see ¶ IV.F.6, above,) shall be limited to the Pastor in Charge or to his/her designated senior non-cleric staff employee.
 - b. Upon receipt of background checks documents/data, whether favorable or unfavorable, its confidentiality shall be maintained. For such background check reports concerning a staff member, secure distribution will be made only to the Pastor in Charge and the Staff-Parrish Relations (Pastor-Parish Relations) Committee chairperson. For such background check reports concerning a volunteer, secure distribution will be made only to the Pastor in Charge and Lay Leader. For both categories of persons further actions shall be taken in accordance with provisions in Section G below.

G. UNFAVORABLE REPORTS

1. The individual who has been the subject of a background check, the results of which are unfavorable, shall be so informed in writing with a Notice of Unfavorable Background Check form (see Conference website for forms).
2. If an unfavorable report concerns a volunteer applicant, the Pastor in Charge and another church leader (laity or staff) chosen by the Pastor in Charge shall meet with the volunteer applicant to review and discuss the report.
3. If the unfavorable report concerns a staff applicant, the Pastor in Charge and Staff-Parish Committee chairperson shall meet with the staff applicant to review and discuss the report and shall thereafter take such personnel action as shall be deemed appropriate.
4. Review of unfavorable reports containing any history of criminal charges or convictions or of any reported non-criminal conduct nevertheless suggesting potential unfitness for employment or volunteer status may take into consideration the following factors:
 - a. The nature and seriousness of the crime or conduct
 - b. The relationship of the crime or conduct to the purpose and nature of the church job or program for which employment or volunteer status is sought
 - c. The age of the person at the time of the commission of the crime or conduct
 - d. The time elapsed since the person's crime or conduct
5. Any background check reported charge, conviction, or conduct that deals with sexual abuse or child abuse shall bar the person from working as an employee or volunteer with children, youth, and/or at-risk or vulnerable adults.
6. Documentation of the employment or volunteer decision made shall be placed in the person's application or employee personnel file.

H. RECORD RETENTION.

1. Records from the screening process including Application/Commitment interview forms and information from prior employment, references, and background checks shall be maintained in personnel and application files by individual name for each staff member/volunteer.
2. Both paper and electronic media records shall be kept safe and secure.

I. TRAINING STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS. The local church, within fourteen (14) days of employment or the beginning of volunteer service, shall provide training regarding safe sanctuaries policy, minimum standards, and procedures to such new workers who will work with children, youth and/or at-risk or vulnerable adults. Additionally, regularly occurring (at least annual) continuing education for safe sanctuaries training is required of all such workers (new and old). Attendance at all training programs shall be documented and retained in personnel files of the

attendees. Upon completion of the training, attendees will sign an acknowledgement they have received the training and understand the SSPMS. The training should include, but is not limited to, the following:

1. The definitions and signs of child abuse and reporting of child abuse
2. The church's policy and procedures on child abuse and the reasons for having them (i.e. two adult rule, sign-in and sign-out sheets, procedures to follow if an accident occurs, procedures to follow for reporting an alleged incident of child abuse, information on state child abuse laws)
3. The need to maintain a positive classroom environment, including appropriate discipline and age-level characteristics
4. Appropriate behavior for teachers and leaders of child, youth, and at-risk or vulnerable adult events
5. Definitions of appropriate interpersonal boundaries (ways of touching students, appropriate language, etc.)
6. All forms used by the church for application, background checks, reporting, and teacher files

V. REPORTING AND CHILD ABUSE INTERVENTION RESOURCES.

Child abuse reporting requirements and procedures for the states of Alabama and Florida and a list of child abuse intervention resources are provided in this section.

A. Reporting abuse or alleged abuse in Alabama. Alabama's mandatory child abuse and neglect reporting law states that all school teachers and officials, social workers, day care workers or employees, mental health professionals, members of the clergy as defined in Rule 505 of the Alabama Rules of Evidence, or any other person called upon to render aid or medical assistance to any child, when the child is known or suspected to be a victim of child abuse or neglect, shall be required to report, or cause a report to be made of the same, orally, either by telephone or direct communication immediately, followed by a written report, to a duly constituted authority. When an initial report is made to a law enforcement official, the official subsequently shall inform the Department of Human Resources of the report so that the department can carry out its responsibility to provide protective services when deemed appropriate to the respective child or children.

C. Child Abuse Intervention Resources. Below are child abuse intervention reporting resources and contacts for use by the local church.

1. National Child Abuse Hotline 1(800) 4-A-CHILD
2. Florida Child Abuse Hotline 1(800) 96-ABUSE
3. County Department of Human/Children Services
4. Area Child Protective Services; for Alabama, the appropriate county Department of Human Resources (DHR)

5. National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse 1(312) 663-3520
6. Parents Anonymous 1(800) 421-0353
7. Alabama Sex Offender Registry <http://community.dps.state.al.us>
8. Florida Sex Offender Registry www.flsexoffender.net