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Guidelines for Creating Safe Space For Children, Youth and Vulnerable Adults

BACKGROUND:

The following document contains guidelines for making Covenant a safe place for children, youth and vulnerable adults. Minimum standards of accountability have been established by the Upper New York Annual Conference for full implementation by December 31, 2012 by all United Methodist Churches in the UNY area.

It is a reality that accidental injury, child abuse, sexual misconduct and false accusations occur wherever humans exist. While it is impossible to completely insulate anyone from the above occurrences, steps can be taken to greatly reduce the risk of harm to children, youth and vulnerable adults and those who work with them.

Often churches are reluctant to adopt safety policies as volunteer ministers and employees are seemingly well known. Also many are under the illusion that child abuse only occurs in “other places” and it would seem “unchristian” not to trust volunteer ministers. However, more than 80% of abuse is perpetrated by persons known to the victim, and abuse happens everywhere. There are no financial, racial, educational or other barriers to abuse. Abuse is far too prevalent to be ignored by our church.

While creating a safety policy may be difficult to establish and enforce, the end results produce an atmosphere where adults can be free to teach and love children and special needs adults, in a Christ-like manner, and children and special needs adults can pursue their journey to know, love and serve God freely without fear.

A Safe Sanctuaries Policy, established and followed, provides parents and guardians assurance that the Church cares about and actively seeks to prevent conditions conducive to predatory behavior by would be abusers. In establishing this policy we must be diligent in implementing it fully and earnestly.

DEFINITIONS:

1. **A child** is anyone under the age of 18.
2. **A Special Needs Adult** is, “An adult (a person aged 18 or over) who is or may be in need of community care services by reason of mental or other disability, age or illness and who is or may be unable to take care of himself or herself, or unable to protect him or herself against significant harm or exploitation.”
3. **A Volunteer Minister** is a person called by Jesus Christ to serve and work with children or special needs adults in any unpaid capacity.
4. **Children, youth and vulnerable adult abuse** refers to any non-accidental injury; any sexual activity or sexual exploitation; or any neglectful treatment or maltreatment that harms the health, welfare, or safety of a child or special needs adult. This includes the following types of abuse:
 - a. **Physical Abuse:** Causing deliberate and intentional bodily harm to a child or special needs adult.

- b. **Emotional Abuse:** Verbal and/or nonverbal emotional cruelty to a child or special needs adult. Emotional abuse sends a message to the victim that he/she is worthless, bad, unloved, and undeserving of love and care.
- c. **Neglect:** Endangering a child's or special needs adult's health, welfare, and safety through negligence. This includes but is not limited to withholding food, medical care, affection, affirmation, clothing, shelter, hygiene, or education.
- d. **Sexual Abuse:** Sexual contact between an adult and a child, an older and/or more powerful child and a child, or an adult and a special needs adult. Sexual abuse may include but is not limited to: fondling, inappropriate touching, intercourse, incest and the exploitation or exposure to pornography and/or prostitution.
- e. **Ritual Abuse:** Intentional abuse of a physical, sexual, or psychological nature inflicted on a child or special needs adult in a stylized way by a person (or multiple persons) with responsibility for the victim's welfare. Ritual abuse may include cruelty or threats of cruelty of animals, and repetitious threats of sexual or physical violence to the victim, or other persons related to the victim.

UPPER NEW YORK CONFERENCE MINIMUM STANDARDS as approved by the 2010 annual conference session in Syracuse, New York.

The Minimum Standards set forth below have been established by the UNYAC for all ministries. They are mandatory. They are not inspirational, but set minimum standards to protect children, youth, and vulnerable adults from abuse and exploitation. Without exception, these standards apply to all local churches/charges, district and annual conference ministries, and those who serve within.

Minimum Reasonable Safety Standards in Recruiting, Screening and Selecting Volunteer Ministers

1. Recruiting Volunteer Ministers
 - a. A written position description that includes the essential functions of the job shall be provided for positions in ministries with children, youth and vulnerable adults.
 - b. Interested workers shall complete an application that includes identification, address, employment history for the past five years, volunteer work during the past five years, experiences and skills specifically related to the position, prior church membership (if any), personal references (not related to the applicant) with complete address and contact information, waiver of any right to confidentiality and of any right to pursue damages against Covenant caused by the references' responses, certification that the information provided is true and correct, voluntary disclosure of past criminal convictions, and authorization to conduct a criminal background check.
2. Screening Workers
 - a. References provided by the applicant shall be checked by the pastor or a designated Safe Sanctuaries committee member. The reference check shall include questions about the applicant's ability to work with children, youth or vulnerable adults (depending on ministry) and leadership ability.
 - b. A personal interview shall be conducted.
 - c. A criminal background check shall be authorized by and completed for all clergy, paid workers, and volunteer ministers who have regular and direct contact with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. The criminal background check shall be

performed after every seven (7) years of service and at the beginning of service and after a break in service of one or more years. Background check results shall be kept in a secure manner.

- d. Adult volunteer ministers shall demonstrate an active relationship with Covenant for at least six (6) months before being allowed to be in a supervisory role in activities for children, youth, or vulnerable adults.

3. Selecting Volunteer Ministers

- a. Only Volunteer Ministers that have successfully completed the application and screening process shall be eligible to be considered for selection to a ministry position with children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults.
- b. In the event that the criminal background check reveals a conviction or other cause for concern, the pastor and/or another ministry leader shall consult with the applicant.
- c. Adults convicted of child abuse or named as the perpetrator in a founded or indicated child abuse report through a designated state or county agency, or who are under investigation for, or who have charges pending for child abuse, shall not be accepted as paid employees or volunteer ministers that would have direct access to children, youth, or vulnerable adults in any church-sponsored activity or setting.

GUIDELINES FOR ADULT VOLUNTEER MINISTERS AND EMPLOYEES WHO WORK WITH CHILDREN, YOUTH AND VULNERABLE ADULTS

1. Adult staff and volunteer ministers are those who are at least 18 years old and who are at least five years older than the oldest minor present, whom they are leading, ministering to or supervising. Youth (those ages 13-17) are invited to assist adult volunteer ministers but are not to be considered an adult for the “two-adult rule.” The two-adult rule requires that regardless of the size of the group, there shall always be two unrelated adults present. This may include the presence of an adult ‘roamer’ who moves in and out of rooms or ministry activities. No child, youth, or vulnerable adult shall be left unsupervised while attending a ministry program or event.
2. All adult staff and volunteer ministers and clergy shall be observant for unusual behaviors and signs of child, youth, and vulnerable adult abuse and shall report them immediately to the appropriate supervisor.
3. Volunteer ministers and employees must complete and sign an application form. (attached) Assistants under 18 years of age must have co-signature of a parent or guardian. All adult staff and volunteer ministers and clergy working with children, youth, and vulnerable adults shall receive a copy of the applicable Covenant Safe Sanctuaries Policy before starting their service and shall agree to covenant with Covenant UMC to fully cooperate with these abuse prevention strategies and screening process.
4. Volunteer ministers and employees must give written consent for a criminal background check, which includes a County and National criminal check, Department of Motor Vehicles Report and a Social Security Number Validation. The criminal background check shall be performed after every seven (7) years of service and at the beginning of service and after a break in service of one or more years. Background check results shall be kept in a secure manner.

5. All ministry activities shall occur in open view. Each room or space where ministry events occur must be open to public view. This may require enclosed spaces such as classrooms, having a viewing window, a glass panel in the door, a half door configuration or an open door.
6. Written attendance records shall be kept for all ministry events/activities involving children and youth. These records shall include at a minimum, the date and names of all participants and shall be kept until Jesus returns (perpetuity).
7. Covenant's facility shall be free from conditions that pose a safety or health hazard to the participants.
8. Appointed clergy shall regularly review and be familiar with public sex offenders registries maintained by New York State law enforcement agencies. This is done by accessing: http://criminaljustice.state.ny.us/SomsSUBDirectory/search_index.jsp

COVENANT'S SPECIFIC GUIDELINES SHOULD INCLUDE:

PHYSICAL SURROUNDINGS:

1. Classrooms, offices, and other rooms should have windows which make the rooms clearly visible to outside observers. These windows should usually be in the interior doors. Rooms without clear visibility should leave a door open whenever children are present.
2. Spaces used for children and special needs adults should be clean and free from safety hazards, such as chipping paint, toxic chemicals, fire hazards, etc. Fire exits should also be readily available.
3. Scheduled activities should be within safety guidelines for facilities and activities. Adult supervision is also necessary.

TRANSPORTATION:

1. Adults transporting children, youth, or vulnerable adults must have a valid driver's license, be at least 21 years of age and at least 5 years older than the oldest child.
2. Private vehicles used for transportation must have a current inspection and registration and be properly insured.
3. There must be a seat belt (and car seats for those required by NYS law) for every child/special needs adult that is transported in any vehicle other than a bus. Adults are responsible to see that they are used.
4. In very specific circumstances of transportation, the 'two adult rule' may be suspended, but it is recommended that no adult should ever be alone in a vehicle with a child or special needs adult without permission from the parent or guardian.

PERMISSION FORMS:

1. A detailed medical form must be filled out by a parent or guardian for each child participating in overnight activities at the beginning of each year and kept on file.
2. An event specific permission form should be completed and signed by a parent or guardian for each event outside of the church.

REPORTING AND RESPONSE

A quick, compassionate and unified response to an alleged incident of abuse is expected. ALL allegations shall be taken seriously. In all cases of reported or observed abuse there shall be cooperation with all official investigating agencies.

Reporting shall be required for any staff or volunteer minister that personally witnesses an incident of abuse or exploitation, when an allegation of an event of abuse or exploitation is made to staff or a volunteer minister by a third party and/or when a child, youth, or vulnerable adult discloses abuse or exploitation to a staff member or volunteer minister. **It is crucial that reporting be immediate and the allegations dealt with as soon in time as possible** to the incident or disclosure.

Reporting

1. The staff person or volunteer minister who observes alleged abuse or to whom such abuse is reported or disclosed, or who suspects abuse shall be required to report the incident/suspected abuse **immediately** to the person in charge of the ministry/activity. Upon receiving the information, the person in charge of the ministry/activity shall **immediately** call the New York State Child Protective Services Hotline at (800) 342-3720. Identification information for the alleged victim and the adult responsible for their care is required for the report. The pastor in charge and immediate staff supervisor are to be informed immediately before or subsequent to the making of a report. The person in charge of the ministry/activity in which the alleged abuse was observed or disclosed shall immediately attempt to obtain necessary information such as the name of the alleged victim and his/her address and family information.
2. If the accused is the appointed clergy, supply pastor or a member of his/her family, the allegations shall be immediately reported to the District Superintendent. The District Superintendent shall immediately report to the proper authorities as set forth in paragraph 1 above. The District Superintendent shall take responsibility and act according to the established rules in The Book of Discipline with respect to claims against the pastor. If the District Superintendent is not available, the incident shall be reported to the Bishop's office.
3. All clergy are included in mandatory reporting as required by The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church ¶341.5. All clergy of The United Methodist Church are charged to maintain all confidences inviolate, including confessional confidences, except in cases of suspected child abuse or neglect or in cases where mandatory reporting is required by civil law.
4. After the person in charge of the ministry/activity has reported the suspected abuse to the proper authorities, the appointed clergy/supply pastors shall report the incident immediately to the District Superintendent. If the District Superintendent is not available, the incident shall be reported to the Bishop's office.

5. The person in charge of the ministry/event must keep a written report of the steps taken by the church/charge in response to the reported abuse. The report should be kept brief and contain only factual information relevant to the situation. This report should be kept in a secure place. It should be written in ink or typed to prevent it from being changed.
6. **NEVER** discuss allegations with any other people except law enforcement or designated county investigators. To do so can cause irreparable harm to the victim, their family, the church/conference and community.

Response Plan

A quick, compassionate and unified response to an alleged incident of abuse is expected. All allegations shall be taken seriously. In all cases of reported or observed abuse there shall be cooperation with all official investigating agencies.

1. All media requests for statements shall be directed to the Annual Conference Director of Communications. If the media calls, please tell them, "All questions may be directed to the Upper New York Conference Communications Director: Steve Hustedt. (855) 424-7878 ext. 307 or (315) 424-7878.
2. Take all allegations seriously and reach out to the victim and the victim's family. Show care and support to help prevent further hurt. Extend whatever pastoral resources are needed. Remember that the care and safety of the victim is the **first** priority. Respond in a positive and supportive manner to the victim and the victim's family.
3. Immediately, and with dignity and respect for the sacred worth of the accused, remove the accused from further involvement with children, youth, or vulnerable adults and advise the accused that there has been an allegation of abuse. Details of the allegations of the abuse should not be discussed with the accused at the time of the removal. In any removal of a staff member or volunteer minister from any activity/ministry, care shall be taken to handle the removal in a discreet manner, recognizing that there will be an investigation by either state or church authorities, or both.
4. When it has been alleged that a member of the church staff or volunteer minister, has committed an act of abuse or exploitation, the staff member or volunteer minister shall be required to refrain from all ministry/activities with children, youth, and vulnerable adults until the incident has been fully resolved by the appropriate state authorities and/or in accordance with The Book of Discipline.
5. Notify the parents/guardians or the victim and take whatever steps are necessary to assure the safety and well being of the child, youth, or vulnerable adult until the parent(s)/guardian(s) arrive. **NOTE:** If one or both of the parents is the alleged abuser, follow the advice of the authorities concerning notifications of others.
6. Covenant shall provide a supportive atmosphere to all those who are affected, offering both objectivity and empathy as it seeks to create a climate in which healing may take place.