

# SAFE SANCTUARIES

## Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church

### June 2006

FAITH ALIVE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
678 PINE STREET, PALMERTON, PA 18071

WORKING DOCUMENT  
FOR THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN, YOUTH AND VULNERABLE ADULTS

### SCOPE OF WORK

In our world today, the church may be the only place where some children find the unconditional love and care they so desperately need to grow and thrive. As Christians, we must take our responsibilities to our children very seriously, always attending to their spiritual growth and nurturing. We fail in our responsibilities if we neglect to take adequate precautions against physical abuse in our church. It is unlikely that we can completely prevent child abuse in every circumstance. Yet, it is possible for us to greatly reduce the risk by following a thorough and practical plan of prevention.

Child sexual abuse is a tragic reality in our communities. Although we would much prefer to deny the reality, child sexual abuse in our churches is an inescapable fact. All too often we hear about abuse perpetrated in a church or a church-sponsored program. When allegations of child abuse are made, whether they eventually are proven true or false, everyone in the church suffers—the child victim & their family, the congregation, and the other family involved. In addition to personal suffering, criminal charges may be brought or a civil lawsuit may be filed to recover monetary damages from the accused and from the church. The costs of litigation, regardless of the outcome, are astronomical— financially, emotionally and spiritually. In many cases it takes years for the church to become whole again, even if the allegations are proven false.

That said, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church has adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of child sexual abuse in the church. The social principles of the United Methodist Church state that, “Children must be protected from economic, physical, emotional and sexual exploitation and abuse.” (§ 162C from the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church). In an effort to assist congregations, the Conference has stated that at each Charge Conference after December 31, 2005, the Pastor must verify for each regular worker, (a person who regularly works with children) that documented clearances and screening are on file.

Presented herein is a working plan that will include all the areas of the issue: **Screening, Supervision, Reporting Procedures and a Response Plan.**

These delineated policies are the MINIMUM necessary precautions for protecting children. The Local church will endeavor to monitor updates and recommendations by The United Methodist Church and may modify the plan accordingly.

*This policy was approved by the Faith Alive United Methodist Church Council on July 10, 2006.*

**DEFINITIONS:**

**“Adult”** means a person 18 years of age or older.

**“Child abuse”** as defined under Pennsylvania Child Protective Services Law means any of the following:

- Any recent act or failure to act by a perpetrator which causes non-accidental serious physical injury to a child under 18 years of age.
- An act or failure to act by a perpetrator, which causes non-accidental serious mental injury to or sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a child under 18 years of age.
- Any recent act, failure to act or series of acts or failures to act by a perpetrator, which creates an imminent risk of serious physical injury to or sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a child under 18 years of age.
- Serious physical neglect by a perpetrator constituting prolonged or repeated lack of supervision or the failure to provide essentials of life, including adequate medical care, which endangers a child’s life or development or impairs the child’s functioning.

**“Child”** means any person under the age of 18.

**“Vulnerable adults”** for the purposes of this policy will be adults whose mental or physical condition makes them susceptible to abuse.

**“Children’s Activities”** means any activity or program in which children are under supervision of staff persons or volunteers.

**“Ministry Team Leader”** means any person who supervises a children’s activity. This person has regular and direct contact with children, must be 21 years or older and is counted in the 2-adult rule.

**“Volunteer”** means any adult, who assists in conducting children’s activities under the supervision of a staff person and/or Ministry Team Leader, has regular and direct contact with children and is counted in the 2-adult rule.

**“Helper”** means anyone who aids in ministry & is not counted in the 2-adult rule including a youth ages 11-17.

**“Persons Required to Report Child Abuse”** means persons, who, in the course of their employment, occupation, or practice of their profession, come into contact with children. Such persons include, but are not limited to, medical professionals, school administrators, teachers and nurses, social services workers, day-care center workers, mental health professionals, peace and law enforcement officers.

**“We”** means local church.

## SCREENING PROCEDURES:

Careful **screening** is one way to prevent the abuse of children and vulnerable adults. It can be time consuming and expensive, but well worth the effort in peace of mind that the most reliable, committed and experienced staff and volunteers are in place for every program that involves children.

1. All Staff, Ministry Team Leaders and volunteers who have regular and direct contact with children shall be required to fill out a Volunteer Screening Form that shall include but is not limited to:
  - a. Standard contact information
  - b. Experience and qualifications for the position
  - c. Voluntary disclosure of past criminal history and allegations of criminal history
  - d. Waiver of confidentiality allowing the church or non-church organization to secure the background checks necessary for the position being applied for
  - e. Listing of three (3) non-related references. This list shall have complete contact information for all references. This portion of the application process is considered incomplete if full contact information for the references is not provided.
  - f. A completed PA Child Abuse History Clearance form (CY113 12/99) dated less than one year prior to the application.
  - g. A completed PA Request for Criminal Record Check (SP 4-641/97) dated less than one year prior to the application
  - h. For local church children’s ministries, persons shall demonstrate an active relationship with local church for at least six months before being allowed to be in any role in children’s activities.

- i. In the case of new staff hires, background checks & references deemed adequate by the hiring supervisor will replace the six-month waiting period for all paid employees
2. Persons who have a break in service of one or more years shall submit to screening procedures. The local church reserves the option to repeat background checks of persons who have had three (3) or more years of service.
3. All forms and reference reports shall be kept as a part of an applicant's confidential personnel file which the Pastor will maintain. Detailed notes on a designated form shall be for all reference checks, which shall also be included in the personnel file. All applications and related forms must be completed.
4. Outside Groups using the facility shall maintain their own personnel files. The local church reserves the right to obtain an explanation of the non-local church's record-keeping process and, upon written request of the Pastor, to be given copies of documents applicable to programs conducted at the local church.
5. The **"Safe Sanctuaries" Committee** is responsible for reviewing the plan with each applicant during an interview prior to service with children's activity(ies) and approval or disapproval of said applicant.

## **SUPERVISION:**

**Supervision** procedures are designed to reduce the possibility of abuse to the children or vulnerable adults and to protect staff persons and volunteers from unwarranted accusations. Again, these are MINIMUM standards and each children's activity may adopt more stringent requirements as necessary

- Training is a requirement for all staff persons, Ministry Team Leader and volunteers working with children in church children's activities. An educational component of the "Safe Sanctuaries Program" will be part of the Application Packet and Interview. Thereafter, the minimum training would be an orientation that includes information regarding this plan, procedures for supervision, as well as information on how to identify and report child abuse.
- Minimum supervisory standards will include the "two-adult rule". The two-adult rule requires that no matter the size of the group, there will ideally be two adults present. This may include the presence of an adult **"Roamer"** who moves in and out of rooms.
- Should the children's activity be an outdoor program or offsite event, the person(s) in charge of the activity shall take appropriate measures to make sure that the setting suits the activity, and that the children are properly supervised, keeping with the church plan. If the 2 adults are related, a third, fully screened adult must accompany the group.
- No person shall oversee an age group unless he/she is AT LEAST 18 years of age or older and is five (5) years older than the children being supervised.
- No child will be left unsupervised within reason, while attending a local church children's activity.
- Each room or space where children are being cared for shall have a window in the door or the door shall be left open such as a restroom. All activities should occur in open view, except in restrooms where privacy is to be maintained.
- Registration materials for activities in which children are outside of the direct supervision of their parents/guardians shall require signed written "Parental/Guardian Consent Forms".
- All ministry team leaders and volunteers shall sign a "Participation Covenant".
- Accurate participation records shall be maintained for all children's activities. Ministry Team Leader will complete and submit an "Event Planning Form" to the church office prior to the event.

## **REPORTING:**

Once an incident of child abuse occurs or allegation of an incident is made, it is crucial that it be dealt with speedily and in a clearly outlined manner.

1. **The Ministry Team Leader, Volunteer or Helper** who observes alleged abuse or to whom such alleged abuse is reported is required to report the incident immediately to the person in charge of the children's activity.
2. **The Pastor and/or Safe Sanctuaries Contact Person** must be informed immediately before or subsequent to the making of a report.
3. **The person in charge** of the children's 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 or her address and family information.
4. Upon receiving such information, the person in charge of the children's activity will **call the Pennsylvania Childline & Abuse Registry (1-800-932-0313)** to make a report. The person in charge of the children's activity shall then send the completed PA CY47 form to the local Children and Youth Services agency. This line of reporting shall be followed in all such incidents.
5. If the allegation is against a Local church staff person, Ministry Team Leader, Volunteer or Helper or if it occurred in the course of a children's activity, the person in charge of the children's activity and the Staff-Parish Relations Committee shall be contacted immediately.
6. Any **person who is the object** of the report will be required to refrain from all children's activities until the incident report is resolved.
7. In any **removal of a person** from any children's activities, care should be taken to handle this in a discreet manner, recognizing that an investigation is still being conducted.

## RESPONSE PLAN:

A quick, compassionate and unified response to an alleged incident of child abuse is expected. All allegations will be taken seriously. In all cases of reported or observed abuse in a children's activity, the entire staff of that activity shall be at the service of all official investigating agencies.

- The Pastor of the local church, or his/her designee, is the only person/s authorized to make statements to representatives of the media. All requests for statements should be directed to the Pastor. A spirit of cooperation in helping the media find the "official spokesperson" is often helpful.
- Even in the event that the allegation concerns activities or persons outside any relationship to a local church related event or activity, procedures in number (4) shall be implemented. An example of this would be a child telling a teacher about abuse by a relative during the prior year. If this report were made to the teacher in the course of his or her duties as a teacher, then the incident report should be filed with the person in charge of the children's activity within 24 hours.
- If the allegation is against a staff person, Ministry Team Leader, Volunteer or Helper, the custodial parent will be notified immediately and a face-to-face meeting with the parent will be scheduled.
- In either case, pastoral support will be available to all persons involved with the incident as indicated.

## REFERENCES:

Joy Thornburg Melton, Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1998) Rev Melton is an ordained deacon the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church who is both a Christian educator and a lawyer.