

Mount Pleasant United Methodist Church
Safe Sanctuaries Policy
[Approved at the November 6, 2014 Charge Conference]

I. INTRODUCTION

In April 1996, the General Conference of The United Methodist Church adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of child abuse in the church. The adopted resolution includes the following statement:

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 in 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 milestone 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" (P162C).

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.

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In keeping with the resolution adopted by the General Conference of the United Methodist Church in April 1996, and the Biblical teachings and the traditions and beliefs of the United Methodist Church, we the congregation of Mount Pleasant United Methodist Church, adopt the following policy and procedures so as to provide a safe sanctuary for children and youth.

II. PURPOSE

The Mount Pleasant United Methodist Church, Greensboro, NC, adopts the following policy and procedures to provide a safe and secure environment within the church and for any event that is connected with the ministries and operations of this church. While the primary reason for this policy is to prevent abuse and neglect of children and youth, it has been adopted to protect all who enter our doors. "Youth" or "Child" shall be deemed synonymous and shall be defined as any person less than eighteen (18) years of age for purposes of these procedures. "Adult" shall be defined as any person at least eighteen (18) years of age for purposes of these procedures.

III. STATEMENT OF COVENANT AND POLICY

As a Christian community of faith, we pledge to conduct the ministry of the gospel in ways that assure the safety and spiritual growth of all children and youth, as well as those who work with them. We will follow reasonable safety measures in the selection and recruitment of staff. We will implement prudent operational procedures in all programs, events, and camps. We will educate all our workers with children and youth regarding the use of all appropriate policies and methods. We will have a clearly defined procedure for reporting a suspected incident of abuse that conforms to the requirements of state law, and we will be prepared to respond to media inquiries if an incident occurs.

IV. POLICY / PROCEDURE REVISION

This policy, and all procedures, shall be reviewed every two years by the Senior Pastor, the Director of Youth Ministries, and the Director of Children's Ministries or their designees. It can be modified subject to review and approval of the Church Council. Any such modifications shall be promptly conveyed to all Mount Pleasant UMC persons affected by the modification. Regardless of the guidelines above, this policy can be reviewed at anytime as needed.

V. PROCEDURES:

While the following are the basic procedures to insure a safe physical and emotional environment, there is a need for common sense procedures in dealing with hazardous conditions.

A. SUPERVISION AND CONDUCT:

1. All teachers and those who supervise directly or indirectly children/youth must be a participant in good standing for at least six months. The exception to this rule could be positions, such as Child Development Center Staff, Director of Youth Ministries, Director of Children's Ministries, or paid child care workers, as well as the scouting programs, which have their own sets of requirements.
2. **Volunteers / Paid Child Care Workers:** All adults supervising children/youth must have completed a application including references, and be willing to submit to a criminal background check from local and when appropriate, state and national law enforcement agencies. (These background checks may be provided by law enforcement agencies or by the use of an approved investigative agency). A completed renewal application will be required every three (3) years.

The Staff-Parish Relations Committee, in consultation with the Senior Pastor, shall designate a staff member to be responsible for obtaining and maintaining the required documents and performing background investigations. Should this designated staff person, in consultation with the pastor, have sufficient reason to believe that an applicant poses a threat to the children or youth and has any prior history of physical, emotional or sexual abuse directed against another person, this shall result in the immediate removal of an applicant from consideration. The collection of the information required by this policy shall be maintained in confidence by the designated staff person and accessible by the Senior Pastor.

3. **Employees:** Effective November 2014, all paid employees of the church, including pastors, will be required to have a criminal background check. The Staff-Parish Relations Committee must check out all references for paid staff.

In the event, the Staff-Parish Relations Committee has sufficient reason to believe that an applicant for paid employment poses a threat to the children or youth and has any prior history of physical, emotional or sexual abuse directed against another person, the applicant will immediately be removed from consideration.

4. **Training:** All paid or volunteer teaching/supervising staff working with children/youth must be trained in the Safe Sanctuary Policy and procedures before teaching or supervising. Thereafter, all teachers/supervisors should be re-trained biannually. This training may be provided by the individual church, district or conference training programs. It will be the responsibility of the Senior Pastor or their designee, such as the Director of Youth Ministries, or the Director of Children's Ministries, to insure that annual training takes place. All adult volunteers and staff shall sign a covenant to follow this policy and these procedures prior to being permitted to participate in activities with children/youth.
5. **Classrooms:** All classrooms or areas being used by children/youth should have either a split door or a glass panel in the door to allow for outside monitoring. This glass panel must not be covered, nor should the upper half of a split door be closed, in order to allow monitoring of all spaces within the classroom or area. If a children/youth activity is held in any room not having a window in the door, then the door to the room must remain fully open during all aspects of the activity.
6. **Rooms for Pastoral Consultation:** Any room where pastoral consultation of a child, youth or adult is common should have a small glass window in it. An open door policy may also be used when necessary. Counseling is expected to be confidential in nature, but it is preferred that such sessions take place where other people are nearby, though not within hearing distance.
7. **"Two Adult Rule":** A minimum of two adults should be present for any church sponsored program or event involving children/youth. When possible, the two adults should be unrelated. If the "Two Adult Rule" is not possible, the door to the classroom must remain open or have a glass panel. The Floater rule should also be followed.
8. **"Floater Rule":** During any church activity where the "Two-Adult Rule" is not met, an additional person must be designated as a "Floater" and should make unscheduled visits to check on all classrooms or areas.
9. **"The Buddy System":** We encourage parents, teachers, and leaders of anyone under the age of 18 to make sure the children or youth always have a "buddy" who is close to their age so that no child is ever alone while in the church buildings, or while on any activity, trip, or overnight.
10. **Communication And Advanced Notice To Parents:** Parents should always be kept informed of the programs in which their children and youth are involved, and be given advance notice and information regarding any activity which deviates from the routine program offered by the church.
11. **Permission Forms:** Medical information forms must be completed annually for children/youth participating in any programs offered by the church. Activity specific forms must be completed and signed by the parent/guardian for all off-site activities. Both of these forms must accompany children/youth for any off-site activities.

12. **Restroom Use:** It is encouraged that a parent or guardian accompanies any child/youth needing assistance in the restroom. When this is not possible, the door to the restroom should be kept open or ajar with as much privacy as possible for the child/youth.
13. **"Five year Older Rule":** Children/youth at all times must be supervised by a responsible adult person (at least eighteen (18) years of age and five years older than those being supervised) to lessen the likelihood of any situation that could result in injury, abuse or neglect. This procedure DOES require that the "two adult rule" be met by persons at least five years older than the children/youth in any activity. This procedure does NOT prohibit adults/youth who are less than five years older than the youth or children in an activity from participating as a "helper" for the activity.
14. **Overnight Youth Retreats Or Mission Trips:** All counselors must be at least twenty-one (21) years of age. On an overnight retreat where there are both male and female youth, there must be both male and female counselors. Youth will not share a bed with an adult. Where possible, a minimum of three persons shall be assigned to a room, males and females housed in separate rooms, with the exception of married couples. Visitation between male and females in bedrooms is prohibited unless directly supervised in a group setting with the counselors for devotional or group discussion times.
15. **Appropriate Touch:** Some good rules of thumb for appropriate demonstrations of affection or physical contact would be: never initiate a hug (unless there are other adults in the room); keep hugs brief; always be the one to end a hug; hug from the side rather than the front; never impose touches on the children/youth in the group; no wrestling; no tickling. Never separate yourself from others in the group so that you are alone with a child/youth.
16. **Insurance:** The church will provide adequate liability insurance for their facilities and the church van in case of accident or injury to anyone participating in a church-sponsored activity, as well as coverage for sexual and other forms of abuse.
17. **Web Site Safety:**
 - The church will offer its web content by way of the www.mountpleasantumc.org url or other singular url as approved by Church Council. As a starting point, our website will adhere to the rules established by the Federal Trade Commission's 1998 Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (or COPPA). Given that such rules presently only govern children to age 13, the church will expand their application to all persons under age 18 years of age.
 - Only approved staff or adult volunteers may have church website responsibilities including updating web content and email correspondence. As such, they will adhere to communications policies established to protect our children and youth. Youth/children are not permitted to have any church website responsibilities.
 - The church website will not disclose contact information for any youth/child including phone number, home address, email information, etc. The only publicly available contact information at the website will be the church address, phone, fax and email addresses. At no time should the last names of children/youth be disclosed.
18. **Photographs:** Although photos can often best depict the excitement and energy of church activities, the church must be sensitive to publishing/displaying photos of youth/children. Therefore, photos of groups that minimize unique identifying participant characteristics versus close-up photos of youth/children are preferred. For published/displayed photos, descriptions will be limited to the activity depicted. At no time will individuals be identified by first and last name. All photos for publication require written parental permission.
19. **Outside Groups:** All outside groups using the church facilities must sign the covenant stating that they have read and will abide by the provisions stated in this policy. These signed covenants will be renewed annually and maintained by the church's designee under the direction of the Board of Trustees.

B. SAFETY AND FIRST AID:

20. **First Aid Kits:** The church will maintain multiple first aid kits in key areas where they may be needed such as Sanctuary Narthex, Christian Enrichment Center, Nursery, Church Vehicles, etc. The Chairperson of the Church Trustees will appoint a staff designee who will be responsible for maintaining these first aid kits.
21. **CPR/First Aid Training:** It is recommended that all full-time employees, staff and volunteers, especially those working with children/youth and older adults, obtain and maintain CPR/First Aid certification. This certification shall be from the American Red Cross or similar organization.
22. **Age And Activity Appropriate Equipment:** All equipment used in the nursery, classrooms, youth room, and play ground shall be routinely examined to ensure safety and age appropriateness as determined by the Director of Children's Ministries.
23. **Evacuation Routes:** Fire evacuation routes will be posted and the Trustees will maintain fire extinguishers and smoke alarms annually.

C. TRAVEL:

24. Any teaching or educational experience that requires travel from the church or overnight travel must have the written permission from the parent or guardian of each child/youth. The permission/medical information file must stay with the coordinator for the entire trip.
25. The "Two Adult Rule" must be followed with no exceptions when traveling for any off-site activities.
26. No youth may drive to any youth group activity that is located outside of the Greensboro area.
27. No youth may leave the church activity with any person other than their parent without parental permission. On-going transportation arrangements can be made with written parental permission on file.
28. Church Vehicle use: Rules and Regulations as stated in the Mount Pleasant UMC transportation policy and general operating procedures should be followed at all times.

VI. REPORTING ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE:

Any suspected or reported case of neglect or abuse (physical, sexual or other abuse) that occurs in connection with the ministries and operations of the church should be reported immediately to the Senior Pastor, or the Church Council chairperson and proper authorities. In the event the Senior Pastor is implicated, the chairperson of the Church Council must notify the chairperson of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee and the District Superintendent within 24 hours.

The Senior Pastor or Church Council chairperson to whom the incident has been reported must immediately complete an incident report with all available details. Report forms will be kept in the church office. The District Superintendent must be notified by the next business day. It will then be the decision of the District Superintendent, Senior Pastor and Church Council chairperson as to the appropriate action to be taken. The District Superintendent shall have final local authority in the matter. The WNCC Director of Communications will also be notified.

In no event shall any of the above fail to report substantiated abuse or neglect to the proper law enforcement or social service agency as required by North Carolina law. Contact should be made with the Greensboro/Mecklenburg Police Department and/or the Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services to communicate the complaint.

The Senior Pastor or Church Council chairperson will be the spokesperson following reported cases of neglect or abuse. This person will be the only person authorized to convey information concerning the situation so as to avoid compromising any ongoing investigation and will convey only such information as deemed necessary under the circumstances.

Any person named as an alleged offender in a complaint shall immediately be required to cease any contact with children or youth through Mount Pleasant United Methodist Church activities. The alleged offender may resume activities with children or youth at such time as the District Superintendent, Senior Pastor, or Staff-Parish Relations Committee shall deem it appropriate.

VII. CONGREGATIONAL CARE AND SUPPORT:

The Senior Pastor (and/or Church Council chairperson) will offer support to the victim and their family, including offers to provide for counseling and other care. The Senior Pastor (or Church Council chairperson) will send a letter to the congregation briefly explaining the incident and action taken by the church, taking every precaution to protect the identity of the victim and the accused abuser. The letter should include a statement of actions taken to assure the safety of all the children and youth and to assure the congregation's continuing ability to provide ministry to children and youth. It is strongly recommended that the Senior Pastor and/or Church Council chairperson call a congregational meeting at which time the Senior Pastor and/or Church Council chairperson will inform those present of the action(s) taken. It is also recommended that Safe Sanctuary Task Force be utilized in the planning of the congregational meeting and that those present would include the Senior Pastor, the Lay Leader, the Church Council chairperson, the District Superintendent and a qualified counselor who is not a member of the church. *Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church*, by Joy Thornburg Melton provides resources for such a congregational gathering.

VIII. CONCLUSION:

In all our ministries with children and youth, this congregation is committed 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." (From Congregational Pledge 2 of the UMC Baptismal Covenant II).

[Revised October 23, 2014]