

The Union United Methodist Church In Fall River, Massachusetts
SAFE CHURCH POLICY

(Adopted from the Safe Church Policy of Union Church, Hinsdale, Illinois)

A Commitment to Our Children

June, 2009

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The Union United Methodist Church, as a Christian community of faith, upholds the resolution adopted by the General Conference of the United Methodist Church in April 1996 which states,

"Children are our present and our future, our hope, our teachers, our inspiration. They are full participants in the life of our church and in the realm of God."

In affirmation of this statement and the teachings of Jesus Christ, we adopt the following Safe Church Policy with unwavering commitment to the physical and spiritual safety of our children and youth.

I. MANDATED REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

All 50 states have passed some form of a mandatory child abuse and neglect reporting law in order to qualify for funding under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act. Massachusetts has required for many years that persons in certain enumerated occupations ("mandated reporters") file reports of child abuse or neglect with the Massachusetts Department of Children, Youth and Families ("DCYF"). A report is required when the mandated reporter has "reasonable cause to believe" that a child under 18 years of age is "suffering physical or emotional injury resulting from abuse inflicted upon him which causes harm or substantial risk of harm to the child's health or welfare including sexual abuse, or from neglect, including malnutrition. . . ."

Effective May 3, 2002, the statute was amended to add to the list of mandated reporters ordained or licensed ministers and anyone "employed by a church or religious body to supervise, educate, coach, train or counsel a child on a regular basis."

This means that in our Church any person who has direct contact with children, including volunteer Sunday School teachers, is mandated to report child abuse. We are not only our brother's keeper, we are also the guardians of children in the eyes of the law.

A copy of the full child protection statute is on file in the church office. A reporting hotline is available in Massachusetts:

508-235-9800 (office hours 8:45 am—5:00 p.m.) or **800-792-5200** (after hours)

II. SCREENING PROCEDURES

Union Church Employees

All individuals seeking employment at Union Church are subject to the interviewing and screening procedures outlined in the United Methodist Church Discipline, in the policies and procedures of the New England Annual Conference, and according to local custom and tradition. In the local United Methodist Church, responsibility for this is in the hands of the Staff Parish Relations Committee.

All employees who will have direct contact with youth or children must agree to have a background check (C.O.R.I.) conducted. These checks may be conducted without cost to Union Church and are managed by the Pastor and Chairperson of the Staff Parish Relations Committee. The Pastor undergoes a national background check, administered by the Annual Conference. This is to be renewed every seven years

Volunteers Serving Children and Youth

As a lay led church, we depend upon our members' good will and generous time commitments. This is particularly true in the staffing of the many and varied programs we offer young children and youth. While we want to maximize the opportunities for all members of the Congregation to contribute their time and talents in the service of young people, our responsibility is to ensure a safe environment for children and youth. This commitment requires us to take extra care in insuring that those working with our young members conduct themselves in an appropriate manner.

To accomplish this objective, all volunteers working with children and youth will be asked to submit to a C.O.R.I. background check with the state of Massachusetts. The Pastor, with the oversight of the Staff Parish Relations Committee, is responsible for the maintenance of all such records which pertain to these background checks.

Volunteers, and indeed the whole church, also will be asked to read and confirm their agreement with this Safe Church policy along with the attached "Memorandum of Understanding Regarding Conduct with Children and Youth" as this document outlines the Congregation's expectations about how we should conduct ourselves when interacting with young people.

III. GUIDELINES FOR INTERACTING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH

A child (also "youth") is defined as anyone under 18 years of age.

Volunteer Expectations

- All volunteers working with children or youth will be expected to provide information regarding their prior experiences in working with young people and disclose if they have been the subject of a prior report involving any form of child abuse or neglect.
- All volunteers working with children will be expected to attend a training regarding our Safe Church policies and expectations for interacting with children and youth. This training also will include an overview of child abuse and procedures for volunteers to follow if they suspect that a child has been or is a victim of any form of child abuse.

Conduct Guidelines

- All volunteers, professional and support staff will observe the “two adult rule. No adult is to be alone with one child or one youth on a church sponsored activity, on or off church premises. This “two adult rule” preferably refers to unrelated/unmarried adults. This includes driving alone with a single child. Staff or volunteers who need to have private conversations occur with youth will hold those conversations in a public place (restaurant, coffee shop, etc.) or in an office within Union Church during normal business hours if the office has a clear glass panel allowing viewing from the hallway when the door is closed; or any other room with the door open or with easy viewing from the outside.
- Appropriate physical touch is an important part of showing love and support to children. Nothing in the Safe Church policy should be construed as stopping an adult from hugging a child to show affection or approval for something well done or to comfort a child who has faced a disappointment or injury.
- Inappropriate touch will not be tolerated. Inappropriate touching between the child’s shoulders and knees, kissing, any type of hitting, or any touch uncomfortable to a child is strictly prohibited.
- Words have power to heal or to wound. Inappropriate language with children includes derogatory statements about any aspects of their identity, words spoken in anger, any sexually explicit statements and language deemed inappropriate among Christians is strictly prohibited.

IV. STAFF AND VOLUNTEER TRAINING

One of the best protections an organization can have against child abuse is to set clear conduct standards for all staff and volunteers. Then these standards can be reinforced through an introductory training program and ongoing supervision required for *current and new Union Church employees*, including the church secretary, sexton, and music director.

With respect to volunteers working with children and youth, the Pastor and the Christian Education Committee, using the full resources available in our District and Conference, will be responsible for developing and implementing this training. All volunteers are *strongly encouraged to attend this ongoing training*.

V. ADDRESSING ALLEGATIONS OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Any staff, volunteer, parent or youth who suspects that a Union Church staff member or volunteer is involved in the abuse or mistreatment of a child should discuss their concerns with the Pastor. If the Pastor is alleged to be involved in the report, the reporter should immediately inform the Chairperson of the Staff Parish Relations Committee who will then inform the District Superintendent.

- (a) All Union Church paid and lay leadership will cooperate fully in any investigation of such a complaint as required by state law and the denomination of the United Methodist Church.

(b) The Union Church Response Team will be composed of the chair of the Staff Parish Relations Committee, two additional members of the congregation familiar with the policies relating to child maltreatment, the Pastor, and the District Superintendent.

© If the allegation is determined to reflect questionable but not abusive behavior, the Pastor, in consultation with church leadership, will establish a performance plan designed to eliminate these behaviors and promote more positive and appropriate interactions between the employee or volunteer and the Congregation's children and youth. The Leadership Council of the Church will review this plan regularly.

VI. EDUCATING THE CONGREGATION

Clarifying our policies with respect to the hiring, electing, and training of program personnel and responding to charges of abuse are important components of insuring that Union Church provides a safe and secure environment for all children. Equally important, however, is educating ourselves on how to be better caretakers and role models for children and youth. To that end, it is important to provide learning opportunities for both our adult and youth members. Specifically, relevant committees, including and especially the Leadership Council and Education Committee, can promote a safe church by:

- providing opportunities to talk about the issue of child abuse with our youngest members within the context of their educational and fellowship programs;
- providing opportunities to educate parents on the topic through our Sunday School programs; and
- educating all existing and new members of the Congregation about how they can play a role in preventing child abuse and supporting the healthy development of our children and youth.

Memorandum of Understanding Regarding Conduct with Children and Youth

Meet with youth often. Be a part of their life.

Earn their trust by authentic interaction with them. Be a loving, caring, positively influencing, God centered example in their life. Relationship building is vital to our ministry with them. Meet them in their "life arena" i.e. at school, sporting events, performances, restaurants, concerts, at church and at outings. As a member of Union Church, any interactions you have with kids within our program, socially or through scheduled programming, off-site or on-site, is considered a ministry of this church, and your actions and interactions need to be appropriate and consistent with these guidelines.

For the safety of our kids, and for each of us as leaders, the following behaviors must be avoided:

- Being alone (one on one) with kids in non-public places, regardless of whether it is social or for "counseling". This would include places such as your home, their home, your/their car, secluded settings and offices or rooms with closed doors and no clear panel openings.
- Picking kids up or dropping them off at places if it means you will be in a one on one situation with them.
- Being alone (one on one) with kids in hotel rooms or other lodging facilities, when traveling with youth and student groups.
- Putting yourself in situations that might be construed by others as inappropriate, compromising or reckless, when interacting with kids.
- Trying to solve any one youth's problem(s) by yourself. We are a team. Regularly bring other team members up-to-date with issues you are dealing with for objective input and accountability.
- Being the "sole contact" for any particular youth.
- Situations where a youth may try to manipulate you into inappropriate, compromising or reckless behavior. (If this is the case, or if you are even suspect of it, confer immediately with a member of the Education Committee and/or the Pastor).

Practice these positive behaviors:

- When arranging time with kids, set time limits or boundaries on how long you can meet. This will give either of you an "out" if necessary (if for any reason you or the youth is feeling uncomfortable). It will also help kids respect your own time boundaries.
- In one on one situations, be accountable to another adult (spouse, youth team

member, church staff) about your meetings with kids. Let someone know what you are doing, where you are going, and your time frame.

- Do develop strong, lasting, positive relationships with kids and let them know they are loved. Sometimes the love they get from us is the only love they will know.

- Love kids and hug kids if this is your style, if it is appropriate, and if you feel comfortable with it (also, only if the youth feels okay with it). Be appropriate and public in your touch and be an “equal opportunity” hugger, not a selective hugger. Inappropriate touch would include touching between the waist and the knees, hitting, kissing, and any sexual touching.

- Be sensitive to kids’ personal space, and learn to “read” them. **Do not force hugs or affections.**

- Be a positive example to our kids in all you do. They watch and see everything you do (as trip leader, in prayer, in worship, in fun, in singing, in settings outside of church) and they look to you [us] as role models. If you act as though the rules don’t apply to you, then the youth will wonder why they should apply to them.

- Choose your words wisely. Words have the power to heal or wound. Inappropriate language with youth includes derogatory statements about any aspect of their identity, and words spoken in harsh anger. Any sexually explicit statements and language deemed inappropriate among Christians is strictly prohibited.

The objective of these guidelines is not to hinder our experience and interaction with kids, but to enhance it and to make it safer both for them and for us. This is also an evolving set of guidelines and not necessarily an exhaustive list. There will always be situations where it may seem like it is not possible to operate within these guidelines. This is when we need to look to creative solutions, without embarrassment or prejudice, and support each other to be safe, loving, caring leaders for our kids. Your behaviors as a leader can directly and positively impact the life of these kids, or they can undermine the goals and objectives of this ministry. Your good judgment is vital in our ministry.