

Child Protection Policy
Parkway Heights United Methodist Church
Hattiesburg, Mississippi

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, in April 1996, adopted a resolution aimed at eliminating any potential for sexual 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 millstone 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 and sexual exploitation and abuse." (para. 162C)

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, 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 in their 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. (From *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church*. P. 384-386)

Thus, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, Parkway Heights United Methodist Church adopts this policy for the prevention of child abuse in our church.

Purpose

Our purpose for establishing this Child Abuse Prevention Policy and accompanying procedures is to demonstrate our total and unwavering commitment to the physical, emotional and spiritual safety of all our children, youth and vulnerable adults.

Covenant Statement

Parkway Heights United Methodist Church hereby pledges to conduct the ministry of Jesus Christ in ways that assure the physical and emotional safety and spiritual growth of all of our children as well as all those who work with our children. We will follow reasonable safety measures when selecting and recruiting caregivers; we will implement appropriate operational procedures in all areas of programming and care; we will train our caregivers on our procedures and policies; and, we will have a clearly defined procedure for reporting a suspected incident of abuse that is consistent with Mississippi state law.

Hiring procedures/policies for paid staff and volunteers

A. Application

Applicants must complete and sign an application and related waivers giving permission to check references and background information.

B. Reference Checks

Applicants for both paid nursery staff and volunteers must provide three references. References will be checked by phone, mail, or in person. Additionally, former supervisors may be checked if the application is for a paid nursery staff position.

C. Background Checks

Criminal background checks will be conducted for all clergy, paid staff, and volunteers who have supervisory program responsibility for children and youth. The background check will be conducted prior to employment to determine current or historic child abuse or sexual misconduct, criminal record, or violent or pedophilic behavior. Background checks will be updated yearly.

D. Interview

All applicants will be interviewed to determine their suitability for the work they seek. Interviews for paid nursery staff/nursery volunteers will be conducted by Parkway Heights' Director of Children and Family Ministries and the Nursery Staff Supervisor. The Director of Children and Family Ministries will interview all volunteers who wish to work with children over the age of 5.

E. Confidentiality of Information

The church will keep confidential all information received in the applicant selection process. Selection information will be marked as such and stored in a secured location with access afforded only to church staff and others who need to know.

F. Six Month Rule

Volunteers who work with children in the church must be a member of Parkway Heights UMC or have regularly attended the church for at least 6 months prior to volunteer service.

G. Required Forms and Signatures

In addition to staff application and reference forms, all applicants will sign "Authorization and Request for Criminal Background Check" and "Covenant Statement" forms as part of the application process.

H. 90-Day Probationary Period

All paid nursery staff and volunteers are hired under a 90-day probationary period. During this time, the worker may terminate his/her employment with notice to the Nursery Supervisor. Also during this time, the church reserves the right to terminate the worker's/volunteer's employment without a two-week

notice or severance pay. At the end of the probationary period, an evaluation will be made by Parkway Heights' Director of Children and Family Ministries and the Nursery Supervisor. While under the 90 day probationary period the employee or volunteer must work with another worker or volunteer who is no longer in the probationary period.

I. Nursery Staff Administrative Team

The Nursery Staff Administrative Team, consisting of five church members, the Nursery Supervisor and the Director of Children and Family Ministries, will conduct yearly evaluations with employees who work regularly scheduled nursery events. A member of this team will be assigned to each paid staff member and will serve as his/her contact for any concerns that may arise during the year.

Staff Supervision Guidelines

All gatherings of children affiliated with Parkway Heights United Methodist Church will be governed by the following guidelines:

A. Two-Adult Rule

Two approved adults must be present at all times. This applies to classroom activities, activities away from the church facility, and when transporting children. Whenever possible teachers will be assigned in teams of two or more per Sunday School hour in every children's classroom. Every effort will be made to recruit a sufficient numbers of volunteer teachers/leaders. In the event that two Sunday school teachers cannot be present, paid nursery staff will be provided.

The Nursery Supervisor will act as a "floater" for each classroom to ensure the two-adult rule is in place, to act as the second adult in the event that a nursery worker or Sunday School teacher must step out briefly, or to meet any unexpected needs encountered by staff or Sunday School teachers. In the absence of the Nursery Supervisor, a background-checked nursery volunteer or, if staffing is adequate, a paid nursery staff member will act as a floater.

B. Goals for Worker to Child Ratios

Parkway Heights United Methodist Church has a goal of maintaining the following ratios of workers to children whenever feasible:

Nursery workers to children — 2:10

Sunday school workers to children — 2:14

The ratios are goals. The church recognizes that in some circumstances achieving these ratios may not be feasible, such as when an unexpected number of children show up for an event.

C. Open Door Policy

All classroom doors must be left open. In the case of a room with a Dutch (divided) door the top half must remain open. All bathroom doors must remain completely open.

D. Classroom Visitation

Parents of children served, and all Parkway Heights' administrative and professional staff, have the right to visit and observe children's activities at any time, unannounced. Older children or siblings of Sunday School teachers, nursery staff, or volunteers are not allowed in the nursery or any Sunday School room when children are present.

E. Touch

Physical affection should be appropriate to the age of the child or youth. (For example, it is generally appropriate for a four-year-old to sit in a nursery worker's lap and receive a kiss on the cheek; it is not appropriate for a teenager and youth leader to behave this way.)

Touching should be initiated by the child. It should be a response to the child's need for comforting, encouragement, or affection. It should not be based upon the adult's emotional need.

Ideally, touching and affection should only be given when in the presence of other children's ministry workers. It is much less likely that touches will be inappropriate or misconstrued as such when two adult workers are present and the touching is open to observation. This is especially important when diapering a baby or helping a young child change clothes or use the restroom. Two adults should always be present when changing diapers or taking children to the restroom.

Touching behavior should not give the appearance of wrongdoing in any way. Ministry workers behavior must foster trust at all times; it should be above reproach.

A child's preference NOT to be touched should be respected. Do not force affection upon a reluctant child. Church workers are responsible for protecting children under their supervision from inappropriate touching by others.

F. Gifts

No staff person, either paid or volunteer, is to give gifts to individual children or young people without the prior knowledge of the parents or responsible clergy. Because gift giving can be a form of buying loyalty or silence, gift giving should

be done on a group basis, or for special occasions only. Gifts may not be elaborate; they should be modest and appropriate to the occasion.

G. Social Media

Staff, paid or volunteer, may not post photos of children to their personal social media pages. If the church would like to use photos of the children for its social media outlets, a photo release form will be provided to the parents to acknowledge consent. Violation of this policy will result a meeting with the Nursery Supervisor, the Director of Children and Family ministries and the Nursery Administrative Team.

H. Training

A mandatory training orientation for all paid staff and volunteers will be conducted yearly. The purpose of the training is to ensure that the staff fully understands Parkway Heights' policies and procedures, to renew their covenant agreements, and to receive or renew first aid or CPR training.

CPR/First Aid Training

Church employees who supervise young people must maintain current certification in basic first aid and basic CPR. New employees must obtain certification within 90 days of the start of their employment. Nursery workers and others serving young children may also desire training in infant and toddler CPR. Training costs for all will be paid by Parkway Heights.

I. Parent Responsibilities

Parents can be helpful in reducing the risk for abuse in our church by working with the paid nursery staff/volunteers to keep them informed of potential safety hazards or staffing issues as they arise.

Dropping off Children

Parents should only drop off children when two or more nursery workers or volunteers are present, and only drop them off after all proper check-in procedures have been preformed. If two or more nursery workers are not present, parents should notify the Nursery Supervisor immediately or stay with their child until two nursery workers arrive.

Children should be dropped off only in the designated areas specified by either the Nursery Supervisor or the Sunday School teacher.

Children should never be left alone to wait for a nursery worker or Sunday School teacher.

Only parents and authorized persons will pick up children. Siblings are not allowed to pick up children under any circumstances.

If there is a parent whose child requires one-on-one supervision, or any other type of assistance to meet special needs, Parkway Heights UMC will provide either a paid nursery staff member or volunteer to accompany that child during his or her stay in our nursery or Sunday School class.

Response by Church Workers to Allegations of Abuse

As caring Christians, we are committed to protect and advocate for children/youth participating in the life of the church. The church is entrusted to provide children, youth and adults an emotionally safe, spiritually grounded, healthy environment absent from all abuse.

It is our legal and moral responsibility to report suspected abuse whenever it comes to our attention, regardless of where that abuse takes place. Reporting abuse gives witness to God's love and justice and is a form of ministering to the needs of those needing help. If it is found that abuse has occurred, it is our intention to act as an advocate for all affected persons, providing support, information, assistance, and intervention. Offering both objectivity and empathy, we seek to provide a supportive atmosphere that facilitates healing.

If abuse is suspected by, observed by or disclosed to a volunteer or paid staff member of the church, that person will report the incident immediately to the pastor or his/her designee. (If the accused is the pastor, see information below.) Be prepared to do the following:

- A. Ensure the protection of and tend to the immediate needs of the child, as the situation requires.
- B. IMMEDIATELY contact the pastor in charge.
 1. If the pastor is the accused party, the designee will notify the chair of the Staff Parish Relations Committee and the District Superintendent.
- C. IMMEDIATELY notify the proper authorities (immediate supervisor, designated church child protection representative or the adult in charge of the event.) This person will:
 1. Provide written documentation concerning the incident on a designated form.
 2. Notify proper county authorities. THIS IS A REQUIREMENT OF THE LAW. (Do not attempt an investigation; this should be left to professionals.)
 3. Give written documentation to the pastor and/or the chair of the Staff Parish Committee.
- D. The pastor or designee will notify the parents of the victim and take necessary steps to assure the safety of the child/youth until the parent(s) arrive. It is

- important to emphasize that the proper authorities must be notified even if the parent(s) does not wish the incident to be reported (Note: if one or both of the parents is the alleged abuser, contact the proper authorities listed above. Follow their advice about notification of the parents.)
- E. After having reported the suspected abuse to the proper authorities, the incident is to be reported immediately by the senior pastor to the church attorney and insurance company, and to the district superintendent. The district superintendent will report the allegation to the bishop's office. If the accused is clergy, member of an annual conference, local pastor, or diaconal minister, provisions of paragraph 2702 of The 2008 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church must be followed.
 - F. Parkway Heights' staff contact information will be available to nursery workers at all times.
 - G. If the accused is working in a volunteer or paid position with children in the church, immediately, yet with dignity and respect for the sacred worth of the person, remove the accused from further involvement with children.
 - H. Once the proper authorities have been contacted and the safety of the child or youth is secured, the pastor or other designated person may tell the accused that a report has been made. If the accused is a volunteer or paid staff of the church, that person will be temporarily relieved of his or her duties until the investigation is complete. If the accused is a paid staff member of the church, arrangements should be made to either maintain or suspend his or her income until the allegations are cleared or substantiated.
 - I. Any contact with the media will be handled by a designated spokesperson. Care will be taken to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of all involved. The spokesperson should generally convey that the matter is under investigation and any comments made prior to the conclusion of the investigation would be premature.
 - J. A written report of the basic information pertaining to an incident will be kept confidential to ensure ongoing ministry to and advocacy for, victims and others involved. A form for this purpose is available in the church office. The report will be brief and contain only factual information relevant to the situation; written in ink or typed; and kept in a secure place to ensure confidentiality. The church must also file a copy of the report with the bishop's office of the Mississippi Conference where it will remain confidential.

