

Safe Sanctuary Policy

VIDALIA
CORNERSTONE
CHURCH

Approved: April 17, 2023

April 17, 2023

Introduction:

Vidalia Cornerstone Church, first adopted policy on September 23, 2019, aimed at reducing the risk of child abuse in the church. The policy included the following statement:

Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes [a] child.... Welcomes me” (Matthew 12:5). Children are our present and our future, our hope, our teachers, our inspiration. They are full participants in the life of the church and 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. Vidalia Cornerstone Church believes that children must be protected from economic, physical, emotional and sexual exploitation and 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.

This policy has a threefold purpose: First, to protect the children that come to us; second, to protect our church staff and volunteers from potential allegations of abuse; third, to limit the extent of legal liability of our church.

This Safe Sanctuary Policy is a “living document” and as such, will need to be revised periodically. The Staff Parish Relations Committee is charged with the annual review of this policy and accompanying procedures. Revisions will be presented by the Church Staff to the Committee for approval. These policies may be modified or withdrawn by Vidalia Cornerstone Church at any time.

Therefore, 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 our children and youth as well as the workers with children and youth. We will follow reasonable safety measures in the selection and recruitment of workers; we will implement prudent operational procedures in all programs and events; we will educate all our workers with children and youth regarding the appropriate policies and methods (including first aid and methods of discipline); we will have a clearly defined procedure for reporting a suspected incident of abuse that conforms to the requirement of state law; and we will be prepared to respond to media inquiries if an incident occurs.

This policy applies to all programs that are considered a ministry of Vidalia Cornerstone Church. 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, confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to eternal life.

Selection and Screening of Staff and Volunteers:

1. Definitions – “Volunteer” means any person 18 years of age or older who assists in the conduct of children or youth activities under the supervision of a staff person and who will have regular and direct contact with or control over children and/or youth. A person is deemed to have regular and direct contact with children or youth if the individual is in any leadership or supervisory role such as a teacher, chaperone, driver, counselor, music leader or worship leader. A “helper” means anyone under the age of 18 years old who assists a volunteer or staff member in the conduct of any church activity. Helpers are exempt from the screening provisions of this policy but are required to be directly supervised by a qualified volunteer or church staff member. A “worker” means any church staff member or volunteer.
***(Amendment March 27, 2023)** One deviation from this rule is if a person 16-18 years old is chosen for employment for nursery staff, if this is the case, then all regular screening forms are required. This is allowed at the discretion of the Nursery Coordinator(s).
2. Volunteer Screening Procedures
 - a. Prior to consideration for a position, any volunteer candidate who may be assigned to work with children or youth shall complete and return a Volunteer Screening form (Appendix A & B), an Applicant Statement (Appendix C), a Church History & Prior Youth Work form (Appendix D), a signed Covenant Statement provided by department head, and complete a background screening.
 - b. The Screening Forms and Covenant Statement shall be carefully reviewed by the Youth Director, Children’s Director or other Church Staff Leader in the area where the applicant will be working.
 - c. If the applicant appears to be appropriate for the ministry work, and there is not an established relationship, we reserve the right to check at least two of the references to confirm the information provided on the application. The Reference Response Form (Appendix E) will be used to conduct and record the results of those interviews.
 - d. A background check will be conducted by a Vidalia Cornerstone Church selected contact agency and will include a check of the Georgia Statewide Criminal Records, and nationwide Sex Offender records.
 - e. Should Vidalia Cornerstone Church have sufficient reason to believe that an applicant poses a threat to children or youth and/or has a prior history of physical or sexual abuse directed at another person, then such applicant shall be immediately removed from consideration for assignment as a Vidalia Cornerstone Church volunteer.
 - f. Prior to beginning work as a volunteer, the applicant must complete appropriate Safe Sanctuary training as designated by the appropriate Church Staff leader.
 - g. All completed forms and background check materials are considered “Confidential Materials” and will be maintained in a locked file cabinet by the Church/Office Administrator. Access to these materials will be granted by the Senior Pastor. A copy of the results will be available to the applicant upon request.
3. Drivers who volunteer to drive for scheduled church youth/children’s activities will be designated by the Children’s or Youth Director. Drivers must be of age as Georgia Law requires, will be insured, have the appropriate number of seat belts, and have a valid drivers’ license.
4. Employee Screening Procedure
 - a. All persons applying for an employee position with children or youth will submit a Volunteer Screening form (Appendix A & B), an Applicant Statement (Appendix C), a

- Church History & Prior Youth Work form (Appendix D), a signed Covenant Statement provided by department head, and complete a background screening.
- b. Signed Covenant Statement provided by department head, and complete a background screening regardless of position being considered.
 - c. The Application and Covenant Statement shall be carefully reviewed by the Staff Parish Committee and appropriate Church Staff members to determine applicant's qualifications.
 - d. If the applicant appears to be qualified and appropriate for further consideration, at least two of the references will be checked to confirm the information provided on the application. The Reference Response Information form (Appendix E) will be used to conduct and record the results of the interviews.
 - e. A personal interview is not required for every applicant but should be conducted for those the Staff Parish Committee is seriously considering after reviewing their applications and references.
 - f. A background check will be conducted by a contact agency and will include a check of the Georgia Statewide Criminal Records, nationwide Sex Offender records, and a nationwide Criminal Database check.
 - g. Should the Staff Parish Relations Committee have sufficient reason to believe that an applicant poses a threat to children or youth, and/or has a prior history of physical or sexual abuse directed toward another person, then such applicant shall be immediately removed from consideration for employment.
 - h. Prior to beginning employment, the new employee must complete appropriate Safe Sanctuary training as directed by the Safe Sanctuary Committee.
 - i. All completed forms and background check materials are considered "Confidential Materials" and will be maintained in a locked file cabinet by the Church/Office Administrator. Access to these materials will be granted by the Senior Pastor. A copy of the results will be available to the applicant upon request.
5. Employee/Volunteer Update
- a. This policy and related procedures shall be reviewed annually by all church employees and volunteers.
 - b. Church employees and volunteers working in any capacity with children or youth at Vidalia Cornerstone Church are responsible for updating any personal information that changes.
 - c. Formal background record checks shall be conducted as deemed appropriate by the Staff Parrish Committee.
6. All department heads are in charge of screening their volunteers for their specific ministry. Department heads are in charge of initiating background checks for volunteers.

Sexual Abuse Prevention Policy

Each church family will be advised of this policy and will be asked to familiarize themselves with its contents. All church staff and volunteers will be required to complete a screening form prior to participating in children/youth programs or activities. These forms will include a personal history, church history, prior children/youth work, and references (if needed).

Persons selected for service will then be interviewed by the Staff Parrish Chair under the direction of Staff Parrish Relations Committee (SPRC) or church staff.

The instructional objective of this church is to ensure that all staff and volunteers have a functional knowledge of issues pertaining to sexual abuse and comprehension of this policy.

In the event of an allegation the enclosed Reporting and Response Procedure will be implemented by the Senior Pastor of Vidalia Cornerstone Church.

1. Individuals who have been convicted of either child sexual or physical abuse should not volunteer service in any church sponsored activity or program for children or youth.
2. Individual survivors of childhood sexual or physical abuse need the love and acceptance of this church family. Pastoral counseling is available.
3. All volunteers working with children and youth are required to be members of Vidalia Cornerstone Church for a minimum of 6 months or have been known to the staff for a minimum of 1 year.
4. Adult volunteers should observe the "two people" rule. Volunteers should never be alone or secluded with children or youth without at least one other adult present.
5. Volunteers should immediately report any behaviors which seem abusive or inappropriate to their supervisor.

Sexual Abuse includes any contact or interaction between a child and another person in which the child is being used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator and/or any additional person. This contact or interaction can include rape, molestation, forcing a child to look at or fondle the sexual parts of another person, and exploitation of a child through pornography and prostitution.

Expectations and Guidelines – On Site

1. Open Doors – All classroom doors without glass panes should remain open when used in conjunction with children's or youth classes and activities (unless there are two adults).
2. Floaters – Supervision will be maintained before, throughout, and after all events until the children and youth are in the custody of parents or off the premises.
3. Alone Policy – No one-on-one with child/youth. If an adult and child/youth are left alone, the adult should move to an area of public view, such as a doorway or hallway.
4. Bathroom Policy – Preschool bathroom doors should be partially open. Adults will assist with bathroom and diaper changing duties.
5. Preschool and Nursery Dismissal Policy – Children will only be released to properly identified and pre-authorized adults.
6. Youth Policy – Adequate supervision is considered to be a minimum of 1 adult per 6 children/10 youth.

7. Youth counselors must be 21 years of age to work with Senior High students. Youth counselors must be at least 18 years of age to work with Middle School students.

Expectation and Guidelines – Off Site

1. Written parental permission and medical forms in advance of event.
2. Transportation situations – Staff or other volunteers transporting youth for church sponsored events should not be alone with one child.
3. Adequate supervision will be a minimum of 1 adult to 6 children/10 youth. No one-on-one with a child or youth.

Church Reporting Procedure

Purpose: By reporting, you are helping to end the cycle of abuse and to ensure the safety of our children. Sexual perpetrators have been found to have numerous victims and a high recidivism rate.

Order to Report:

1. A report of inappropriate behavior (possible abuse) is made to a volunteer, teacher, or church staff person.
2. Volunteer, teacher, or staff reports to Senior Pastor.
3. Senior Pastor
 - a. Interviews victim
 - b. Contacts local Department of Social Services
 - c. Contacts victim's parents
 - d. Notifies church leaders, appropriate staff members, and church attorney.
4. Department of Social Services
 - a. Interviews victim
 - b. Contacts police in the county the abuse occurred
5. Police Department
 - a. Interviews victim
 - b. Interviews suspected perpetrator
 - c. Refers case to District Attorney or find abuse case is unsubstantiated.

Procedures Governing Misconduct with Minors

IF ACCUSED WORKER ADMITS TO THE ALLEGATIONS

1. If possible, we will obtain a signed statement from the accuser and accused regarding the incident.
2. We will immediately remove the accused from any volunteer or paid position with the church.
3. If the accused or the victim has not reported the incident to the police and the appropriate state agency, we will report the matter.
4. We will administer appropriate discipline which is consistent with our current church bylaws.
5. The church will attempt to assist the victim(s) in receiving counseling.
6. The church will contact the church's insurance company regarding the incident.
7. The church's attorney will be advised of the incident.
8. The church's congregation will be informed of the person's admissions of misconduct. All information will be limited to factual information.

IF ACCUSED WORKER DOES NOT ADMIT TO THE ALLEGATIONS

1. No assumption of the alleged offender's innocence or guilt can be made solely on his/her statement.
2. We will not deny that an incident occurred, nor minimize its severity, or blame the alleged victim.
3. The church will report the accusation immediately to the proper authorities through our church attorney.
4. If appropriate, the church will immediately suspend the alleged offender from any related volunteer or compensated duties at the church pending the outcome of the investigation.
5. The church will attempt to assist the victim(s) in receiving counseling.
6. The church's insurance company will be contacted.
7. The congregation will be kept informed of allegations. Comments will be kept to factual information.

UPON ARRIVAL OF POLICE

1. Advise the police that we will contact our church's lawyer.
2. Explain all relevant facts upon counsel with church's lawyer.
3. If the media contacts the church, only the Senior Pastor or other designated person(s) in his/her absence shall have the authority to speak on behalf of the church regarding any allegations.

RESPONDING TO ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE

1. All allegations need to be taken seriously.
2. Situations must be handled forthrightly with due respect for people's privacy and confidentiality.
3. Immediately contact your insurance carrier.
4. Give full cooperation to civil authorities under the guidance of your attorney.
5. Adequate care must be shown for the well-being of victims.
6. The victim should not be held responsible in any way.

CREATE A RESPONSE PLAN

1. Maintain adequate records of workers' applications, references, and screening forms.
2. Select a spokesperson.
3. Know the State's reporting obligations regarding which behaviors should be reported and which persons are mandated to report suspected abuse.
4. Use a reporting procedure.
5. Prepare a position statement for public use regarding child sexual abuse. This statement should include your policies and established safeguards. This can be released if an allegation of abuse occurs.
6. Don't engage in denial, minimization, or blame.
7. Use an attorney.
8. Don't be accusatory in a public interview.
9. Work closely with your insurance company.

IF AN ALLEGATION OCCURS

1. Document all your efforts at handling the incident.
2. Report the incident immediately to your insurance company. Do not try to handle this without professional outside assistance.
3. Contact proper civil authorities following the guidance of your insurance company and attorney.
4. Notify the parents.
5. Do not confront the accused until the safety of the child or your member is secured.
6. Do not prejudge the situation but take the allegations seriously and reach out to the victim or victim's family.
7. Treat the accused with dignity and support. If that person is an employee, that person should be relieved temporarily of his/her duties until the investigation is finished.
8. Use the text of the prepared public statement to answer the press and to convey news to the congregation. Be careful to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of all involved.

Mandated Reporter

By definition, a mandated reporter is any staff member or volunteer who has reasonable cause to believe that a child has been abused or neglected. The following are procedures for allegations that have occurred outside of the Church and church functions. Once a report has been made, the duties of the mandated reporter have been fulfilled.

1. Report allegations to Pastor.
2. Document Incident.
3. Pastor will decide on next steps to be taken.

Policy

WHEREAS the Trustees of the Vidalia Cornerstone Church are aware that youths of all ages use the church facilities and it is the desire of the Trustees to protect these youths.

NOW THEREFORE, it is the policy of the Trustees that whenever feasible, prior to the signing of any contract for construction or repair work on the church premises, the contractors responsible for performing work at the church shall be required to sign an affidavit certifying that no employees with criminal histories involving sexual offenses will be allowed on the site without other adults also present the entire time. There shall be exempted from the requirements of the policy any minor repair or emergency repair where it would not be practical to meet the requirements to comply with this policy.

Screening Form For Church Staff & Volunteers

The disturbing and traumatic rise of physical and sexual abuse of children has claimed the attention of our nation and society. The following policies reflect our commitment to provide protective care of all children, youth, and volunteers who participate in church sponsored activities.

1. Individuals who have been convicted of either child sexual or physical abuse should not volunteer service in any church sponsored activity or program for children or youth.
2. Individual survivors of childhood sexual or physical abuse need the love and acceptance of this church family. Pastoral counseling is available.
3. Any adult volunteers working with youth or children are required to be members of Vidalia Cornerstone Church for a minimum of six months or have been known to the staff for a minimum of one year.
4. Adult volunteers should observe the "two people" rule. Volunteers should never be alone or secluded with children or youth without at least one other adult present.
5. Volunteers should immediately report any behaviors which seem abusive or inappropriate to their supervisor.

1. As a church volunteer, do you agree to observe all church policies regarding working with youth or children?

_____ Yes _____ No

2. Were you a victim of abuse or molestation while a minor?

_____ Yes _____ No

* If you prefer, you may refuse to answer this question, or you may discuss your answer in confidence with the Senior Pastor rather than answering it on the form. Answering yes, or leaving the question unanswered, will not automatically disqualify an applicant for children or youth work. As your church, we are sensitive to this issue and can offer pastoral counseling.

3. Have you ever been convicted of or pleaded guilty to a crime?

_____ Yes _____ No

* If yes, please describe on a separate sheet of paper.

I have read the above policy and agree to observe the safeguards listed.

Signature

Date

Print Name

Church Staff and Volunteer Screening

This application is to be completed by all applicants for any position (volunteer or compensated) involving the supervision or custody of minors. This is not an employment application form. Persons seeking a position in the church as a paid employee will be required to complete an employment application in addition to this screening form. It is being used to help the church provide a safe and secure environment for those children and youth who participate in our programs and use our facilities.

Personal

| | | |
|-----------|------------|-------------|
| Last Name | First Name | Middle Name |
|-----------|------------|-------------|

Date

Identity must be confirmed with a state drivers' license or other photographic identification.

Present Address

City, State, Zip

Home Phone

Please indicate the type of youth or children's work you prefer and why.

Do you have a current driver's license?

☐ Yes ☐ No

License Number

Applicant's Statements

The information contained in this application is correct to the best of my knowledge. I authorize any references or churches listed in this application to give you any information including opinions that they may have regarding my character and fitness for children's or youth work. In consideration of the receipt and evaluation of the application by Vidalia Cornerstone Church, I also certify that any person(s) who may furnish such information concerning me should not be held accountable for giving this information and I do hereby release said person(s) from any and all liability which may be incurred as a result of collecting such information. I waive any right that I may have to inspect any information provided about me by any persons or organization identified by me in this application.

I further state that I HAVE CAREFULLY READ THE APPLICANT'S STATEMENT AND KNOW THE CONTENTS THEROF AND SIGN THIS STATEMENT OF MY OWN FREE ACT. This is a legally binding agreement which I have read and understood.

Applicant's signature _____

Date _____

Witness _____

Date _____

Church History and Prior Youth Work

Name of church of which you are a member: _____

List (name and address) other churches you have attended previously during the past year?

List previous church work involving children/youth (list each organization's name and address, type or work performed, and dates)

List previous non-church work involving children/youth (list each organization's name and address, type or work performed, and dates)

List any gifts, calling, training, education or other factors that have prepared you for children's or youth work.

Personal References (Not former employers or relatives)

Name _____

Name _____

Address _____

Address _____

Phone _____

Phone _____

Reference Contact Form – Confidential

Record of Contact with a Reference or Church Identified by an Applicant for Youth or Children's Work

Name of Applicant _____

Reference or church contacted (if a church, identify both the church and person or minister contacted) _____

Date and time of contact _____

Person contacting the reference or church _____

Method of contact (e.g., phone, email, letter, personal conversation) _____

Questions:

1. Would you recommend this person for work with children or youth?

2. Would you say this person is responsible in reinforcing appropriate behavior for children/youth activities?

3. Is there any additional information we should know or that you would like to offer regarding this person?

Legible Signature

Position

Date

Investigation Release Form
Consent for Release of Confidential Information

I, (name) _____ date of birth _____
(Victim of family) (Victim)

authorize _____ to disclose to/receive from _____

the following information: _____

for the following purpose(s): _____

I understand that my records are protected under the federal and specific state confidentiality laws and regulations and cannot be disclosed without my written consent unless otherwise provided for in the regulations. I also understand that I may revoke this consent at any time except to the extent that action has been taken in reliance on it and that in any event, this consent expires automatically as described below.

This release expires upon the fulfillment of the purpose for which this release was enacted and, in any event, specifically expires on:

One Year from Date of Signature
Date of Expiration

I understand that I have a right to inspect and receive a copy of the material to be disclosed.

I further acknowledge that the information to be released was fully explained to me and this consent is given on my own free will.

Dated _____

Signature of person named above

Signature of parent/legal guardian/authorized representative

Appendix F

Report of Suspected Incident of Child Abuse

1. Name of worker (paid or volunteer) observing or receiving disclosure of child abuse: _____

2. Victim's name: _____
3. Date/place of initial conversation with/report from victim: _____

4. Victim's statement (give your detailed summary here): _____

5. Name of person accused of abuse: _____
Relationship of accused to victim (paid staff, volunteer, family member, other): _____

6. Reported to pastor: _____
Date/time: _____
Summary: _____

7. Call to victim's parent/guardian: _____
Date/time: _____
Spoke with: _____
Summary: _____

8. Call to local children and family service agency: _____
Date/time: _____
Spoke with: _____
Summary: _____

9. Call to local law enforcement agency: _____

Date/time: _____

Spoke with: _____

Summary: _____

10. Other contacts: _____

Date/time: _____

Spoke with: _____

Summary: _____

Signature of Reporter

Signature of Pastor

Date

Date

The above policy has been written, read, and approved by the 2023 Safe Sanctuary Committee, and has been submitted for approval by the Staff Parish Relations Committee.

***Amendment to age/screening requirements for Nursery workers made 3/27/2023.**

2023 Safe Sanctuary Committee

| | | |
|----------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Chris Carroll | <u>Chris Carroll</u> | <u>4/2/23</u> |
| Sarah Torrance | <u>Sarah Torrance</u> | <u>3/27/23</u> |
| Cassie Neal | <u>Cassie D. Neal</u> | <u>4/2/23</u> |
| Ashley Sasser | <u>Ashley Sasser</u> | <u>3/21/23</u> |
| Jana Owen | <u>Jana Owen</u> | <u>3.29.23</u> |
| Paul Cook | <u>Paul Cook</u> | <u>3/29/23</u> |

2023 Staff Parish Relations Committee Chair

| | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|----------------|
| Lisa Chesser (Chair) | <u>Lisa Chesser</u> | <u>4/19/23</u> |
| | Signature | Date |