



Child, Youth and Vulnerable Adult Safety Policy

Approved June, 28, 2022

Safe Gatherings

Step 1:

We utilize Safe Gatherings as our comprehensive system that incorporates an online application, several levels of background checks, paperless reference checks, and online abuse prevention training. Certification is valid for two years.



To get started: **<https://safegatherings.com/app/registration>**

TRUSTED con CONFIANZA

Step 2:

The Rio Texas Annual Conference is committed to the well-being of every person entrusted to its care as well as those persons entrusted to the care of the districts and local United Methodist Churches throughout our conference borders. Therefore, we will strive to create safe places for all of God's children. Our safety policy and procedures help us to do this holy and hard work. For initial certifications, this training is approximately two hours in length.

Renewal

As part of the Rio Texas Conference safety policy implementation plan all clergy, staff, and volunteers in ministry with children, youth and/or vulnerable adults must attend a Trusted con Confianza Certification training either online or in person every two years as part of their certification process. This renewal session is approximately one hour in length.

CHILD, YOUTH & VULNERABLE ADULT SAFETY POLICY
MANDATORY STANDARDS FOR SAINT JOHN'S UMC

Church Council approved October 23, 2018

Updated: June 28, 2023

Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church

But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, so that those who love your name may exult in you. (Psalm 5:11 (NRSV).

Call

In response to God's call to care for the vulnerable, Saint John's is committed to the well-being of every person entrusted to its care. This commitment is in harmony with the Book of Resolutions (§162 Social Principles) and the baptismal covenant (pg. 39 United Methodist Hymnal).

Purpose

As part of the Rio Texas Conference, Saint John's is determined to provide an environment in which Participants (as defined herein) are safe from Neglect or Abuse. The scope of this policy and its provisions shall apply to all staff, volunteers, clergy, or lay persons in Saint John's who have direct or indirect contact with Participants (Children, Youth, or Vulnerable Adults). This policy sets forth minimum mandatory requirements for screening and training of clergy, lay, staff, or volunteers. Implementation of mandatory ministry procedures and accountability action is required for all ministry leaders within Saint John's and the Rio Texas Conference.

Commitment

For more information go to the Rio Texas Conference website riotexas.org/safe-steps, the Safe Gatherings website safegatherings.com and stjohnsaustin.org.

Definitions

A. **Abuse:** is any deliberate act that inflicts bodily or emotional harm to a Participant. Abuse includes: (a) the infliction of physical or emotional injury by other than accidental means; (b) the creation of a risk, or allowing the creation of risk, to a Participant by other than accidental means; (c) committing or allowing to be committed an act of Sexual Abuse, Sexual Exploitation, or prostitution upon the Participant.

B. **Adult Leader:** is any person including any paid employee, volunteer, clergy, or lay person in the conference, district, or local church who has the responsibility for the care and Supervision of a Participant at an event. Adult Leaders shall be High School graduates.

C. **Applicant:** is any person 18 years of age or older seeking to become an Adult Leader, who completed the forementioned steps, in a local church or for a district or conference event for children, youth and vulnerable adults.

D. **Assistant Leader:** is any person 16 years of age or older who has been approved and trained by Saint John's Staff but does not qualify for a background check. These are still considered to be Participants and cannot fill the role of a mandatory Adult Leader.

E. Day Ministry Event: is an activity, or occasion sponsored by Saint John's that involves a gathering and care of Participants during the hours of 7:00am-10:00pm and does not occur for more than four hours per day in duration of four or more consecutive days.

F. Exploitation: is obtaining or using another person's income, assets, or possessions with the intent to deprive the person of those resources.

G. Neglect: is failure to provide nutrition, medical, surgical, or any other care necessary for the well-being of the Participants.

H. Overnight/Extended Hour Ministry Event: a local church, conference, or district sponsored activity, or occasion that involves a gathering and care of Participants for more than four hours per day in duration of four consecutive days or involves an overnight stay.

I. Participant: is a Child, Youth, or Vulnerable Adult that is registered, enrolled, attending, or otherwise participating in an event or activity sponsored by Saint John's

1. **Child:** is any person 11 years of age or younger.

2. **Youth:** is a person 12-17 years of age.

3. **Adult Vulnerable:** persons over 18 years of age with physical, mental, and/or developmental disabilities and/or diminished physical capacity.

J. Prostitution: to engage in, to offer to engage, or to force a Participant to engage in sexual contact by either soliciting or receiving a fee or other benefit.

K. Rule of Two: The presence of two unrelated Adult Leaders at all ministry events involving Participants. Any engagement with a Participant requires the presence of two Adult Leaders.

L. Safety Policy Administrator: Your church may choose to identify a staff person, lay person, or committee/task force with the maintenance, implementation, and enforcement of your safety policy. Our Church Business Administrator is the person at Saint John's charged with the maintenance, implementation, and enforcement of Saint John's Safety Policy. As the Safety Policy Administrator, they may put together a team to help with this task, but he/she retains overall responsibility. The Safety Policy Administrator reports directly to the senior pastor.

M. Sexual Abuse: is any sexual contact, sexually explicit language, gestures, or images directed to a Participant.

N. Sexual Exploitation: is any deliberate act that allows or encourages a Participant to engage in an act of obscene or pornographic photography, filming, or depiction of a Participant as prohibited under Texas law.

O. Supervision: is the leadership role of a person who oversees a group of Participants, giving direction, setting boundaries, disciplining appropriately, maintaining safety and being the leader in all situations.

P. Vulnerable adult visitation: When conducting congregational care visits with vulnerable adults we will operate under the rule of three in visits with the opposite sex or in a home setting.

SAFE MINISTRY MANDATES

In accordance with the Rio Texas Conference Safety Policy Saint John's commits to provide adequate Supervision from Adult Leaders.

A. All ministry events with Participants shall follow the Rule of Two with a minimum of one Adult Leader for every eight Participants.

a. infants- 1:3

b. toddlers- 1:4

c. children- 1:6

d. Youth- 1:8

e. Youth, children and adults with Special needs: Saint John's will assign an adult or assistant leader appropriate to the level of assistance needed as determined by consultation with the individual/family. (This is in addition to the required 2 certified adult minimum.)

f. Vulnerable Adults: Ideally, in home visits we will have a team of two when there is not another adult or care giver in the home. Opposite sex visits will always be conducted with at least two adult leaders. Hospital or rehab visits are acceptable for one adult leader when others in the facility are within reasonable distance and have full access to the vulnerable adult.

B. Any one-to-one mentoring or consulting:

1. Youth and Children: one-to-one mentoring shall be conducted in sight of another Adult Leader in an open space.

2. Adults: one-to-one mentoring and consulting shall be conducted in an open space or in an office with a windowed door.

C. Adult Leaders and Assistant Leaders working with children and youth must be at least five years older than the oldest Participants with whom they work. Children/youth less than 5 years of age difference may serve as a helper supervised by at least 2 certified adults.

D. Assistant Leaders must work under the Supervision of two Adult Leaders.

E. Overnight Ministry Events

1. Co-ed Overnight Ministry Events require co-ed Adult Leaders.

2. Sleeping accommodations shall include sleeping distance of no less than three feet between Adult Leaders, Assistant Leaders, and Participants.

3. Every Participant shall have a completed medical release and parental/legal guardian permission form before they will be permitted to participate at any Overnight Ministry Event

F. Travel

1. Only Adult Leaders will be permitted to drive Participants to ministry events. Drivers must:

a. Be between the ages of 25 to 75 years.

b. Have a valid driver's license

- c. Show proof of insurance at the state's minimum limits
 - d. Do not be otherwise disqualified from driving (i.e., under medication, impaired, etc.).
 - e. Drivers must have the Safe Gatherings driver's license certification.
2. Written permission from a parent/legal guardian is required for events requiring transportation to and from the event location.
 3. Traveling by car will require 2 adults to be present in every car organized by the church for ministry transportation. If you travel longer than 6 hours we require 2 certified adults to switch drivers, allowing the other to rest. For shorter trips if you are not able to have 2 certified adults in each vehicle, we will require people to follow each other remaining in the other's eyesight.

G. Restroom Procedure: Children five years of age and younger should use a classroom restroom if one is available. If a classroom restroom is not available, workers should escort a group of children to the hallway restroom. They should always go in a group, never taking a child to the restroom alone. The workers should check the restroom first to make sure that it is empty, and then allow the children inside. The workers should then remain outside the restroom door and escort the children back to the classroom. If a child is taking longer than seems necessary, the worker should open the restroom door and call the child's name. If a child requires assistance, the workers should prop open the restroom door, and leave the stall door open as they assist the child.

For children over the age of five, at least one adult male should take boys to the restroom and at least one adult female should take girls. The worker should check the restroom first to make sure that the restroom is empty, and then allow the children inside. The worker should then remain outside the restroom door and escort the children back to the classroom.

For the protection of all, workers should never be alone with a child in a restroom with the door closed and never be in a closed restroom stall with a child. Parents are strongly encouraged to have their children visit the restroom prior to each class.

IMPLEMENTATION: SCREENING, TRAINING, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

A. SCREENING

1. Adult Leaders and Assistant Leaders will be invited and complete the process.
2. Applicants should be an active member in the local church/ministry for a minimum of six months for youth ministry programs, children's ministry and congregational care. In the case of new staff hires, references deemed adequate by the hiring supervisor will replace the six-month waiting period. In the case of Adult Ministry Leaders or Assistant Leaders, previous ministry experience within the Rio Texas Conference may be transferred in lieu of the six-month waiting period pending approval of Rio Texas Conference office.
3. References shall be checked via Safe Gatherings.
4. Adult Leaders shall:
 - a. Submit all required documents through Safe Gatherings prior to event or volunteer service. All volunteers will have 2 months to complete all Trusted con Confianza training. Staff will have 1 month.
 - b. If results of the screening raise questions about fitness of the Applicant, the Safe Gathering will notify the local Senior Pastor Results of criminal background screenings shall be kept confidential. Applicants can request that Safe Gatherings share the results of their criminal background screening with another district or local church in the Rio Texas Conference via a signed request authorization form.

B. TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION

All Adult Leaders and Assistant Leaders must be certified for their work at conferences, district, and local church events. Certification includes:

1. Evaluation of and submission of the local church policy every year.
 3. Safe Gatherings Certification every two years. Certification will include the following modules:
 - a. Overview of Rio Texas Conference policy.
 - b. Abuse prevention.
 - c. Creating safe spaces, best practices for ministry, sexual ethics and appropriate leader behavior.
 - d. Overnight/extended hour ministry training.
 - e. The certification process will be designed by the Rio Texas Conference and will be offered by trained people in every district.
4. Responsibilities
 - a. The Business Administrator will ensure all staff at Saint John's follow and complete all Safety Policy requirements. A staff member assigned to the ministry will ensure all volunteers at Saint John's follow and completes all Safety Policy requirements. The church staff will be responsible for maintaining an up-to-date list of qualified Adult Leaders showing the latest date of their qualification or recertification.

- b. The staff member assigned to the ministry shall ensure that each Adult Leader reviews the provisions of this Safety Policy at least annually.
- c. The Business Administrator and Pastor shall participate in the reporting of all allegations of abuse.

C. ACCOUNTABILITY

1. Every ministry of the Rio Texas Annual Conference, district, and local church shall have a policy that is compliant with the minimum standards of this Rio Texas Policy and must review their policy annually.
2. Local churches shall submit their policy and a report on how they are following their policy annually to the District Superintendent at their charge or church conference.
3. Clergy shall document the date and facilitator when they complete safety certification to their District Superintendent annually via the annual inventory/clergy consultation form.

REPORTING ABUSE Saint John's procedures for reporting Abuse are as follows:

- A. All reports of alleged abuse should be documented in writing and brought immediately to the attention of the Senior Pastor, appropriate ministry staff representative, and the state of Texas as a mandatory reporting state. Reports of Abuse, Neglect, Exploitation or Sexual Exploitation of Participants shall be made within 48 hours of suspicion to the Department of Family and Protective services through the Texas Abuse Hotline: 1-800-252-5400 or www.txabusehotline.org.
- B. Any Adult Leader or Assistant Leader accused of Abuse shall be immediately temporarily relieved of duties related to any conference, district, or local church event until an investigation is concluded.
- C. In the case of Abuse allegations, the senior pastor, District Superintendent, and/or Bishop shall be notified immediately. Parents or legal guardians should be notified in appropriate circumstances.
- D. It shall be the goal to provide supportive care to both the victim and the accused and to restore such persons to wholeness. Saint John's shall provide a supportive atmosphere to all those who are affected, offering both objectivity and empathy as it seeks to create a climate in which healing can take place. Affected area (children, youth or vulnerable adults) staff member will consult with senior pastor in a timely manner to develop a care plan for all involved.
- E. Statement to the Media: All contact with local media will be directed to church administrator in consultation with senior pastor and Rio Texas Conference leadership.

Social Media & Digital Communication Best Practices

Based on the Rio Texas Policy with additional Saint John's guidelines.

In response to God's call to care for the vulnerable, Saint John's and the Rio Texas Annual Conference is committed to the well-being of every person entrusted to its care, as well as those persons entrusted to the care of the districts and local United Methodist Churches throughout our conference borders. This commitment is in harmony with the Book of Resolutions (§162 Social Principles) and the baptismal covenant (United Methodist Hymnal).

The internet, portable devices, and digital technology offer important tools for fruitful ministry. These electronic tools also present some inherent risks when not used with care. Therefore, it is important that all churches and organizations have a communication policy that outlines what tools they will use to communicate and how they will use these tools for safe ministry.

Listed below are some helpful best practices for communicating and using social media for ministry with children, youth, and vulnerable adults

Get permission

Prior to taking or posting pictures or other comments digitally via e-mail, websites, or social media, and prior to sharing any contact information, all ministry leaders should make sure to have parental/guardian permission to take and post pictures, post, comment, or tag children, youth and/or vulnerable adults, or share contact information. Staff and Volunteers who do not have immediate access to consent forms should check with staff person responsible for maintaining these records. Written consent should be received for:

1. Taking and posting of photos, messages, or videos for any use.
2. E-mailing, Instant Messaging, calling, texting, or sending data to a child, youth, or vulnerable adult by computer, cell phone, or other digital technology.
3. The sharing of any full name or contact information.

Decide what information you will share

Once you have written consent to communicate with children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults it is essential to discern what information you will communicate:

1. Move with caution when transmitting easily identifiable information like event dates, times, locations, or participants.
2. Use high level security and strict privacy settings provided by social networking sites, making every effort to prevent participants from being introduced to objectionable content.
3. All adult leaders engaged in ministry with children and youth should consider the content and nature of any posts that will be seen or read by others. Adult leaders should remember children, youth, and vulnerable adults look to them as role models and representatives of the church.
4. Do not post or share inappropriate comments, photos, etc. Humor and sarcasm can be easily misinterpreted and should be used only where appropriate. Remember- all comments sent to a

vulnerable person can be shared in a number of ways that misinterpretation of those comments may occur.

5. Encourage children, youth, and vulnerable adults you are in ministry with to follow these guidelines and/or your church/organization policy too.

Post photos with care and intentionality

1. Churches/Organizations should have policies that limit or prohibit the use, publication, or public sharing of photos of children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults taken by personal cameras, cell phones, or video cameras of any kind on all personal websites, personal blogs, social networking sites, and online photo albums.
2. Photos of children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults who have appropriate photo releases from parents/guardians on file should only be uploaded to the ministry organization's moderated pages, website, or other designated forms of communication as stated in the photo release form and communicated to parents/guardians.
3. Designated leadership posting photos to authorized sites should refrain from using names and never use last names or identifiable information.
4. Check photos for vulnerable/compromising situations and make sure they uphold your mission.
5. Block "save photo as" options on websites
6. Limit access to photos by employing the use of a password.

Connecting via social networks and other digital apps

General Guidelines

1. Set privacy settings to limit who can see your profile.
2. Use judgment and follow your church/organization policy in accepting requests from children, youth, or vulnerable adults that you are in ministry with (see below- connecting on social media).
3. Use high level security and strict privacy settings provided by social networking sites, making every effort to prevent participants from being introduced to objectionable content.
4. All adult leaders engaged in ministry with children and youth should consider the content and nature of any posts that will be seen or read by others. Adult leaders should remember children, youth, and vulnerable adults look to them as role models and representatives of the church.
5. Do not post or share inappropriate comments, photos, etc. Humor and sarcasm can be easily misinterpreted and should be used only where appropriate. Remember- all comments sent to a vulnerable person can be shared in several ways that misinterpretation of those comments may occur.
6. Encourage children, youth, and vulnerable adults you are in ministry to follow these guidelines and/or your church/organization policy too.

7. Do not contact minors or vulnerable adults on Snapchat or other messaging apps where photos will disappear.

Connecting on Social Media

1. Adults should not submit friend requests to children or youth.
2. Church leaders and adult volunteers should avoid accepting a friend request from a minor unless a previous relationship (family friendship, etc) has been established and parental/guardian permission has been granted.
3. Church leaders and adult volunteers should not add or invite children or youth to any groups, events, pages, chat rooms etc that are not administered by the church/organization.
4. Parental/guardian permission is required prior to accepting a minor's request to join a church/organization's digital group.

Commenting/Posting/Sharing

Adult leaders should seek to protect the privacy and identity of children, youth, and vulnerable adults. When commenting, posting, or sharing adult leaders should:

1. Include another adult in all communication, making sure there are at least two adults present in any digital conversation, including chat rooms or video conference calls.
2. Use good judgement regarding the time you contact minors through text, email, social media, or any other forms of digital communication. Work hours (8:00-5:00) provide a helpful basic rule of thumb. Exceptions might include emergency situations or other conversations initiated by the child, youth, or vulnerable adult with parental/guardian knowledge. Adult leaders should respond to these exceptions at their discretion and according to their church/organization communication policy. In these cases, it is helpful to copy a parent/guardian or another adult. It is also helpful to make sure that children, youth, and vulnerable adults know who they can call in the event of an emergency.
3. Do not use "broadcast" emails. Instead, use the "BCC" (Blind carbon copy) so that each recipient sees only his or her address when a message is received.
4. Conduct any communications in a professional manner.
5. Responding to messages that raise concern:
 - a. If a topic in an e-mail or digital communication raises concern, send a BCC to a parent/guardian or a member of your pastoral team or designated staff person. Honor privacy but not secrecy.
 - b. Save all communications with children, youth, and vulnerable adults (instant messages, texts, e-mails, chat boards, etc). A paper trail is important.
 - c. Remember that e-mail or texting is not an appropriate communication method for matters that are pastorally sensitive, emotionally charged, or that require extensive conversation. Model helpful pastoral care by setting a time and place for a face-to-face meeting/conversation.
 - d. E-mail may be more appropriate for matters deemed to be legally sensitive.
 - e. If abuse is divulged electronically, follow standard reporting procedures.

Administering Church/ Organization Social Media or digital groups

1. Each church related social media site, group, or page should have a minimum of two unrelated and Trusted con Confianza certified administrators as well as a staff member of Saint John's United Methodist Church.
2. Monitor sites frequently to allow for quick responses in the event urgent, crisis, or inappropriate responses are posted. Any inappropriate material posted to a church related social media site, group, or page should be deleted and addressed.
3. Review the group regularly to remove inactive or former participants or adult leaders.

Zoom Meetings/Gatherings

1. Two unrelated Safe Gathering certified adults when youth, children or vulnerable events are on zoom calls without parents or guardians.
2. A passcode or waiting room must be enabled
3. When sharing materials through screen share make sure material being shared is appropriate as well as delete all other tabs opened, folders and materials on desktop needs to be cleaned/labeled appropriately.
4. Setting: dressed appropriately and be sitting in an appropriate place.
5. Please make sure non-group chat is disabled.

Safe Communication

When communicating with children, youth, and vulnerable adults, make sure you:

1. Have a consent form signed by the person's parent/guardian.
2. Copy parent/guardian on all communication.