

Safe Sanctuary Policy

West University United Methodist Church
3611 University Boulevard
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Introduction

Our calling and our mandate is to ensure a Safe Sanctuary for God's people. Throughout the gospels, Jesus provides teachings on providing a peaceable kingdom for all of God's people, including our most precious gifts, our children and youth (Matthew 5:9, Luke 18:15-17). The peaceable kingdom begins with sanctuary.

Scriptures provide examples of how sanctuary is to be a community of protective nurture and harmony (Psalms 20:1-2, 27:4-5). As Christians, we are called to create a safe sanctuary in our churches. They must be holy, safe, and protective communities for all of God's children, regardless of age or ability. The purpose of this policy is to address the safety of our children and youth at West University United Methodist Church (WUM). WUM recognizes the need to have a formal, written policy with procedures in place (1) to help prevent the opportunity for the occurrence and/or the appearance of abuse of children and youth and (2) to help protect workers from false accusations and/or suspicions.

The following policy and procedures are not based on a lack of trust in workers, but are intended to protect our preschoolers, children, youth, workers, employees, volunteers and the entire church body. Careful and confidential documentation is essential to show compliance with policies, to verify information as needed, and to have an accurate record in the case of an incident.

Scope of the Policy

This policy and its provisions shall apply to all persons including all paid and unpaid leaders, whether lay or clergy who have any direct or indirect contact with children and youth who participate in any activities or events including all events both on and off church property and all related transportation sponsored by WUM. This policy is applicable to all activities involving children and youth at WUM

Definition of a Care Provider

- A care provider is a paid staff or volunteer providing supervision for children and youth under the age of 18 years old.

Supervision

- There shall be a minimum of two (2) care providers per room, when otherwise stated, within this policy
- Any one-to-one mentoring or consulting shall be conducted either in sight of another care provider or in an office with an open door or clear window view.

- Understanding that there is safety in numbers, one care provider can be in contact with multiple youth (6th grade to 12th grade) so long as any one care provider should not be alone with one child/youth.

Overnight Accommodations

At events requiring overnight accommodations

- We strongly recommend that at least two (2) care providers be present in every room
- When staying in a hotel, care providers shall sleep in separate rooms from children/youth; or if necessary for children/youth to share a room with a care provider, care providers shall sleep in separate beds from children/youth so long as any one care provider shall not be along with any one child/youth
- Recognizing accommodations may be restrictive in some cases; one care provider is adequate so long as any one care provider shall not be alone with one child/youth.

Definitions of Abuse

- 1) Verbal Abuse – Any verbal act that humiliates, degrades or threatens any child or youth
- 2) Physical Abuse – Any act of omission or an act that endangers a person’s physical or mental health. In the case of a child or youth physical abuse, this definition includes any intentional physical injury caused by the individual’s care provider. Physical abuse may result from punishment that is overly punitive or inappropriate to the individual’s age or condition. In addition, physical abuse may result from purposeful acts that pose serious danger to the physical health of a child or youth.
- 3) Sexual Abuse – Child or youth sexual abuse is the sexual exploitation or use of the same for satisfaction of sexual drives. This includes, but is not limited to: (1) incest, (2) rape, (3) prostitution, (4) romantic involvement with any child or youth, (5) any sexual intercourse or sexual conduct or fondling of a child or youth, (6) sexualized behavior that communicates sexual interest and/or content. Examples are not limited to: displaying sexually suggestive visual materials, making sexual comments or innuendo about one’s own or another person’s body, touching another person’s body, hair or clothing, touching or rubbing oneself in the presence of another person, kissing, and sexual intercourse.
- 4) Phone, Text, and Internet Abuse – Any kind inappropriate communication with a child or youth. Examples include but are not limited to sexualized language or photographs or negative or sexualized remarks.

Plan for Reducing the Risk of Abuse

- I. Requirements for Care Provider applicant consideration:
 - a. WUM membership/constituency for six (6) months prior to beginning of volunteer service (for persons who were active in a previous church, for VBS, and for some off-site activities). **Exceptions will be allowed only if** applicant provides a letter from pastor and/or relevant staff person at prior location or if written recommendations are received from three (3) current WUM six-plus-month members)

- b. Adults who have been convicted of a crime involving either sexual or physical abuse should not volunteer and will not be permitted to serve in any church-sponsored activity or program for children or youth.
 - c. A safe, secure environment is best achieved by using two (2) or more adults when supervising any child or groups of children or youth. We will use the “two-adult” rule in classroom settings. The “two-adult” rule will be a core value for all setting for children, youth and vulnerable adults, but we recognize that there will be instances, activities, events and circumstances which will preclude us from always having a minimum of two (2) adults. When possible, parents will be notified of this in advance.
 - i. Individual instruction of children and youth in the WUM School of Fine Arts will be a continuing exception from the “two-adult” rule but only after a parent or guardian of each such student seeking admittance signs a form by which the parent (a) is informed of this safe sanctuary policy. (b) agrees to this variance from the “two-adult” rule and (c) agrees to be responsible for the safety of the student. Every effort will be made to assure line-of-sight observation of all such instruction from the hallway and parents of students will be urged to participate in supervising the instruction to assure the safety of their children.
 - ii. On church sponsored off-site activities, the “two-adult” rule will be observed if at all practical, including during church provided transportation of children and youth.
 - iii. For reasons of general safety as well as the safety of children, youth and staff, no care providers should drive any person under the age of 18 years old in their personal vehicle to or from the church or off-site events unless a signed, written waiver is on file at the church.
 - d. Paid and unpaid care providers must, by signature, verify that they have read and understood the WUM Safe Sanctuary before they begin serving.
 - e. Adult and youth volunteers as well as paid staff should immediately report to the Senior Pastor any behaviors which seems abusive or inappropriate according to policies and procedures of WUM.
- II. Screening for paid and volunteer personnel:
- a. All paid and unpaid care providers must complete the Texas Annual Conference Consent to Perform Criminal History/Background Check (which including biographical data, references, criminal history, and all counties and states of residence)
 - b. All paid employees in the building during preschool hours must also submit to background checks and finger printing through the West U Methodist School.

Screening for Care Providers

Careful screening is one way for prevent the abuse of children and youth. Screening calls for a careful gathering and review of information in search of those who can provide safe and caring supervision in a safe environment.

- I. Prior to employment or acceptance as a care provider (paid or unpaid), the event leader in charge of an event or program shall direct each prospective applicant to complete the Texas Annual Conference Criminal History/Background Check form. By signing the form, the applicant gives permission to the event leader to contact references and perform the necessary investigation to complete the review of the application.
- II. If the applicant (paid or unpaid) is found to have been involved in any activity in which the applicant abused or exploited children or youth, the applicant will not be approved. Any conviction of a crime against children or youth shall disqualify any applicant.
- III. Results of the screens shall be kept confidential. The determination of whether a particular crime is serious enough to result in WUM giving a negative recommendation shall be made by WUM in its sole discretion.

Plan for Response to Known or Suspected Incident of Abuse

- I. Any volunteer or paid staff who learns of or suspects an incident of abuse as described in this Safe Sanctuary policy must take the following action as soon as possible.
 - a. Provide emergency healthcare as appropriate
 - b. Notify the appropriate leaders of WUM. The appropriate leaders for notification are (1) Senior Pastor, or (2) the chair of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, unless either of those individuals or anyone related to one of them by blood or marriage is the alleged abuser, in which case the appropriate leaders for notification are the person above named who is not the accused, and (3) the Chairperson of the Board of Stewards
 - c. Notify parent and/or other legally responsible adult
- II. Take precautions to secure the area: Maintain the integrity of the area and protect all evidence for the professional investigation
 - a. Assisting the victim and victim's family
 - i. Obtain medical help as needed. The care and safety of the victim is the first priority
 - ii. Take all allegations seriously and do not pre-judge the situation
 - iii. Offer and provide pastoral resources as needed
 1. Show care and support to prevent further hurt
 2. Arrange for crisis counseling/therapy and/or long-range counseling where deemed appropriate
 - b. Determine Communication Goals
 - i. Notify legal authorities as required
 1. Report incident to Child/Adult Protective Services or police, as appropriate
 2. Full cooperation must be given to civil authorities under the guidance of church attorney

- ii. Senior Pastor or designated representative will be informed of all details of the incident and will release any information that is to be disseminated to the media
 - 1. Church staff will be informed of the incident on a “need to know” basis (to insure privacy of the victim and/or accused) and their support enlisted as need.
 - 2. Confidentiality should be maintained as completely as possible in order to protect all parties
- c. Document Actions Taken
 - i. Document all your efforts at handling the incident
 - ii. Do not attempt an in-depth investigation
 - 1. This should be left to professionals who are familiar with this type of case. This is to protect the rights of the victim and the accused.
 - 2. Individual files will be kept with all documented actions, conversations, etc.
 - iii. File will be retained in a locked and secure area to insure privacy and confidentiality
- d. Dealing with the Accused
 - i. Remove the accused from any further contact with children, youth, and staff
 - ii. Treat the accused with dignity and support
 - 1. Do not confront the accused until the safety of the child or youth is secured.
 - 2. Offer and provide pastoral care to family of the accused as appropriate.
 - 3. Recommend outside counseling services as appropriate
 - 4. Refer to outside clergy if deemed more desirable or as requested by the family

Spiritual Boundaries for Safe Sanctuary

As we seek to lead young people in the development of their faith story, it is essential that we guide them and do not manipulate their emotions. This is especially true at longer youth/children’s events. The attendees may be exhausted by longer and more active days than they are accustomed to and thereby more susceptible to emotional manipulation. It is therefore necessary that, as we present the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the opportunity to follow Jesus in a life-long journey, we present the invitation with “no-strings-attached.”

We must allow each person involved to make their own decisions without stigma, coercion, or pressure in any form. As we do this faithfully, we will see more fruitful commitments in the lives of all of our participants.