

## **Tennessee Conference of The United Methodist Church Safe Sanctuary Policy For Children, Youth, and Vulnerable Persons**

**Abuse and neglect of children, youth, and vulnerable persons are prohibited by the Tennessee Annual Conference, its churches and its agencies.**

The Tennessee Conference seeks to create a safe environment for children, youth, and vulnerable persons in which opportunities for abuse are minimized by the provision of proper enlistment and supervision of those persons working with them. This document contains theological foundations, definitions of abuse, and policies related to prevention, response, and reporting.

Clergy and laity are encouraged to read this policy and make it an essential part of the operations of each local church. For procedures related to conference events and for resources related to local church policies and procedures visit [tnumc.org](http://tnumc.org) and go to the Safe Spaces Ministry page.

### **I. SCOPE**

The Tennessee Conference of the United Methodist Church affirms that all children, youth and vulnerable persons have the right to safety. Therefore, United Methodists of the Tennessee Conference are determined to provide an environment in which these persons are safe from neglect or abuse including sexual misconduct and harassment.

The scope of this policy and its provisions shall apply to all staff and volunteers, clergy or lay, who have direct or indirect contact with children, youth, and vulnerable persons in conference and/or district sponsored events. This policy should be implemented in conjunction with the Sexual Misconduct Policy for Church Professionals found at [tnumc.org](http://tnumc.org) on the Safe Spaces Ministry page.

Safe Spaces Ministry consists of the Safe Sanctuary Team, the Boundaries and Sexual Ethics Team, and the Conference Response Team for the Tennessee Conference. The Safe Spaces Ministry serves to assist in development, review and implementation of policies and procedures necessary for keeping ministry safe. This ministry will facilitate the availability of training for members of the Tennessee Conference.

The Safe Spaces Ministry will be responsible for annual review of the policy and will propose to the annual conference suggested revisions to the policy as needed. Each conference and/or district ministry event involving children, youth, or vulnerable persons shall create procedures to implement this policy.

### **II. THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION**

#### **Our Biblical Mandate:**

“Then Jesus took a little child and put her among them; and taking her in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’” (Paraphrase of Mark 9:36- 37) 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 Commitment in Baptism:**

The Church, above all institutions, is called to welcome and nurture the child. Our goal is to maintain a safe, secure, loving place where all children may grow and where those who care for them may minister to their needs in responsible ways.

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### **Our Mandate:**

The 1996 General Conference approved a resolution that called upon local churches and annual conferences to institute policies and procedures to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse in our churches and church-related activities. We, in the Tennessee Conference, accept the nature of this call and seek to expand it to include all forms of abuse and neglect that could be possible in these settings or that could come to our attention regarding all children, youth, and/or vulnerable persons in our care.

### **Statement of Covenant:**

As caring Christians, we are committed to protect and advocate for all children, youth, and vulnerable persons participating in the life of the church. The Church, at all levels of its organization, is entrusted with the responsibility of providing an emotionally and physically safe, spiritually grounded, healthy environment for all children, youth, adults, and vulnerable persons in which they are protected from abuse.

We uphold the idea that to report abuse is to be a witness to the world of the love and justice of God and fully recognize that reporting abuse is a form of ministering to the needs of those crying out for help. Simply, to report abuse can help to stop existing abuse and prevent further abuse.

Additionally, we care for victims of abuse and their families by offering resources that will contribute to healing. Further, we recognize the grace that God gives in upholding Christian community; we will look for grace-filled ways of dealing with both the victim and the accused.

Therefore, as a Christian community of faith and a United Methodist congregation, we pledge to conduct the ministry of the gospel in ways that assure the safety and spiritual growth of all of our children, youth and vulnerable persons, as well as all of the workers with children, youth and vulnerable persons. 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 of our workers with children, youth and vulnerable persons regarding the use of all 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 requirements of state law; and we will be prepared to respond to media inquiries if an incident occurs.

### **III. ADOPTION OF POLICIES AND PROCEDURES**

Local churches within the conference will adopt and enforce their own Safe Sanctuary Policy For Children, Youth, and Vulnerable Persons. It is recommended that the congregational policy be equal to or exceed in strength of protection for all children, youth, and vulnerable persons the minimum standards here stated. The Tennessee Conference of UMC recommends the local church act as follows:

- A. **Responsibility for Implementation.** Implementing the Abuse Prevention Policy For Children, Youth, and Vulnerable Persons at a local church shall be the responsibility of the Pastor in Charge, the governing body, and a Safe Sanctuaries Committee (SSC) or its equivalent organized in compliance with the local church's governance process.
- B. **Safe Sanctuaries Committee or equivalent.** A Safe Sanctuaries Committee (this may be the age-level ministry committee or education committee) shall have the responsibility for developing local church safe sanctuaries policies and procedures; communicating with and educating the congregation concerning those policies and procedures; recruiting, screening, and training paid staff and volunteers; conducting site inspections and making recommendations; retaining records; and regularly reviewing conference policies and procedures, applicable state laws, and the insurance policy provisions and insurer

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requirements. It is recommended that this committee or its equivalent should have at least one representative each from Education, Age-level ministries, Trustees, and the Staff Parish Relations committees.

- C. **Training.** Such periodic training and education on the Safe Sanctuary Policy For Children, Youth, and Vulnerable Persons provided by the Tennessee Conference should be attended each quadrennium by the local church Pastor in Charge and SSC chairperson or other SSC designated member. Further, it is recommended that attendance at such conference-wide training include at a minimum, designees from the local church who will be personally coordinating and conducting safe sanctuaries training for employees and staff within the local church.
- D. **Annual Review of Policy.** The local church Safe Sanctuary Committee will conduct an annual review of the policy to facilitate implementation of best practices and compliance with current state and federal law. A report will be made to the Tennessee Conference as a part of their charge conference report.

### **IV. COMMON DEFINITIONS OF ABUSE**

1. **Child abuse** (under age 18) is the harm or threatened harm to a child's health or welfare by a person responsible for the child's health or welfare or by a person in a position of trust, which harm occurs or is threatened through non-accidental physical or mental injury or sexual abuse.
2. **Vulnerable Persons abuse** is the harm or threatened harm to a vulnerable person's health or welfare by a person responsible for the vulnerable person's health or welfare or by a person in a position of trust, which harm occurs or is threatened through non-accidental physical or mental injury or sexual abuse. A vulnerable person is any adult aged 18 or over who, by reason of mental or other disability, age, illness or other situation is permanently or for the time being unable to take care of him or herself, or to protect him or herself against significant harm or exploitation.
3. **Physical Abuse** is any non-accidental act that inflicts bodily harm to a person, or failure to protect from physical harm where a duty exists to do so.
4. **Neglect** is failure to provide for physical survival needs (such as nutrition, medical, surgical, or any other care necessary for the well being of any child, youth, or vulnerable persons) to the extent that there is harm, or risk of harm, to health or safety.
5. **Sexual Abuse** is any involvement of a child, youth or vulnerable person in intentional sexual acts or sexual conduct that produces sexual arousal or gratification for the perpetrator or sexual behaviors/situations in which there is a sexual component. Sexual abuse includes, without limitation, sexual contact or sharing of sexually explicit language, gestures, or images by a volunteer or staff person with, or directed to, a child, youth or vulnerable person.
6. **Verbal Abuse** refers to spoken or unspoken violence or emotional cruelty against a child, youth, and/or a vulnerable person.

### **V. SCREENING PROCEDURES FOR VOLUNTEERS AND PAID STAFF**

All persons, including Conference staff who intend to work with children, youth, and/or vulnerable persons at Conference-sponsored events, including overnight or longer events, must also be properly screened and attend an age-appropriate orientation/training session on child protection and abuse and have current background check. Local church Safe Sanctuary policies are expected to meet the minimum requirements

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set out below for training and screening. A Safe Spaces Verification form will be completed and submitted to the appropriate leadership prior to participation.

The following procedures should be followed:

- A written job description outlining duties and expectations must be provided, and shall be signed and dated by each person falling within the scope of the policy.
- An application/personal information form shall be completed.
- A Sexual Offender Registry check in any state where the applicant has resided during the past seven (7) years shall be conducted.
- Consent to a criminal background check. A background check should be provided for anyone staying overnight or longer, i.e. weekend retreats, summer camps.
- A new background check should be performed every 3 years as the standard.
- If the applicant is found to have been involved in any activity in which the applicant abused or exploited children, youth, or vulnerable persons the applicant will not be approved. Any conviction of a crime against children, youth or adults from vulnerable populations and any conviction of rape, sexual or physical assault shall disqualify any applicant. A person who has been convicted as a sex offender will not be approved. Affirmative responses to questions relating to crimes involving possession or use of drugs or suspension of a drivers' license within the past five years will prompt a heightened review of an application.
- Personal interviews with summary documentation will be conducted by the Safe Sanctuary team or Conference staff representative and kept in a confidential file maintained by the Conference ministry for whom the applicant will serve.
- References will be checked with summary documentation in a confidential file and maintained by the Conference ministry for whom the applicant will serve.

### **VI. RECIPROCITY**

The Safe Spaces Ministry Team may accept training provided by other United Methodist Conferences or United Methodist churches in other conferences after a review of the policies and procedures implemented in the other conference or church. Screening will be accepted provided that there has been a copy of the National Screen that included a national criminal check conducted by the other conference or church submitted with the request.

### **VII. REPORTING OF INCIDENTS**

Incidents may involve inappropriate behavior by staff/volunteers or other participants toward a participant and call for immediate on-site corrective action. Incidents may involve the abuse, neglect or exploitation of participants by staff/volunteers or other participants and mandate reporting through the Tennessee Child Abuse hotline (1-877-237-0004) or the Adult Protective Services hotline (1-888-277-8366). In case of an emergency, immediately call 9-1-1.

A call to the hotline is required to be made by staff/volunteers if there is reasonable cause to suspect that abuse of a participant has occurred. When the necessity of reporting occurs, the protection of children, youth, and vulnerable persons must be paramount. Cooperation with the Tennessee Department of Children's Services, the Tennessee Commission on Aging and Disability and law enforcement is required in all such incidents.

In case of allegations of abuse occurring in the church or ministries affiliated with the church or having the potential to impact the ministry of the church, the District Superintendent and/or Bishop shall be notified immediately. The Safe Spaces Ministry Staff Person will also be notified following notification of the appropriate state or local law enforcement authorities. Parents or legal guardians will generally be notified; however, in circumstances in which the parent or guardian is alleged or suspected to be the perpetrator or may have been complicit in the neglect

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or abuse, notice may be withheld in appropriate circumstances. When doubt exists legal counsel should be consulted.

### **VIII. STATEMENT TO THE MEDIA**

The Media Crisis Response Plan should be enacted to insure proper protocol is followed.

The Bishop or alternate spokesperson shall provide conference and district ministry groups with guidelines for communications with media about the incident(s) which may have been reported.

### **IX. FUNDAMENTAL SAFE SPACES PROCEDURES FOR THE CONFERENCE AND DISTRICT**

1. **Appropriate Boundaries:** All persons, staff and participants, will maintain boundaries appropriate to their specific roles, age, and relationship to another.
2. **Two Adult Rule:** At least two adults should be present during all conference events such that no one adult will be alone with any number of children, youth, or vulnerable persons. At least two of the adults present should be non-related and non-cohabitating. For small group activities where one adult supervises one group, two or more groups are to meet in sight and sound of each other. The ministry leader may also decide to combine groups to ensure the safety of all parties. Small Group sizes will be determined by the size of the group, but should not exceed reasonable adult/participant ratios. (When both genders of students are represented, both genders of adults should also be represented.)
3. **Five Year Older Rule:** Persons supervising children and/or middle school youth (grades 6th-8th) will be at least 18 years old and will be at least 5 years older than the oldest child/youth participant.
4. **Four Year Older Rule:** Persons supervising high school youth (grades 9th-12th) will be at least 4 years older than the oldest youth participant.
5. **Open Doors:** Doors to meeting spaces without windows must remain open when children, youth, or vulnerable adults are utilizing the space. Doors with windows may remain closed provided that sight lines to all areas of the room are clear.
6. **Medical Release/Registration Form:** All persons attending Conference events with children, youth, or vulnerable persons shall have a completed medical release form and completed parental permission form. The medical release form will be valid for a 1 year period beginning August 1 of the current year and expiring July 31 of the next year. It is expected that a new form will be submitted if a change in medical status, change in residence, or other life event occurs. All forms will be maintained by the local church ministry leadership and will be available upon request for verification during Conference event check-in.
7. **Local Ministry Leader Responsibility:** It is expected that the children/youth coordinator/director from the local church is responsible for the care and supervision of that local church's participants at the conference/district event.

**POLICY REVISION DATE:** May 2017

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