

WALKERSVILLE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH	
SAFE SANCTUARIES POLICY	APPROVED: June 17, 2008 by Church Council
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Purpose

Walkersville United Methodist Church seeks to establish reasonable procedures to reduce the risk of physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children and youth as they participate in church ministries, and to protect staff and volunteers from false allegations of misconduct.

Overview

To create the safest possible environment for children and youth within Walkersville United Methodist Church, several abuse prevention measures will be utilized. These measures include the recruitment, screening and qualification of workers; standard procedures and practices for safe ministry, and training of workers. The policy also describes the process for responding to allegations of abuse and plans for caring after abuse. The Weekday Nursery Program complies with the applicable regulations and licensing requirements for preschool programs.

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Note: In this document, the term “Worker” refers to staff and volunteers that work with children and/or youth.

1.0 Recruitment, screening and hiring procedures for volunteer and paid staff

Persons who routinely work with children and youth will be recruited, screened, qualified, and trained in accordance with the church’s Safe Sanctuaries policy. Occasional Workers may be utilized to assist with children/youth activities and will volunteer under the direct supervision of a fully qualified Worker. Workers whose participation in child/youth activities become more than occasional will be formally screened, qualified and trained before continuing participation in children/youth activities.

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NOTE: Occasional workers may include persons who occasionally help in a Sunday School class, drive youth to an offsite activity, chaperone a youth retreat, and attend an activity solely for the purpose of supervising or spending time with their own child/youth.

1.1 Volunteer recruitment and application

Routine child/youth workers will be recruited from the congregation and from parents and guardians of the children and youth that participate in activities. Routine Workers will complete an application that collects information on the volunteer’s name, address, previous experience with children/youth, special skills, etc. The application may also include questions that will help church staff or event organizers optimally utilize their talents and skills in their potential work assignments with children or youth. The applicant also provides names and contact information for individuals that can be used for a reference check. The application will include or be accompanied by an authorization for the church to conduct a reference check and a criminal background check.

1.2 Sexual Misconduct Questionnaire

Workers will complete the Sexual Misconduct Questionnaire. This form requires the applicant to provide information on any accusations of sexual misconduct or any issues involving the applicant’s circumstances or background that would call into questions their suitability to supervise, guide and care for children and/or youth. This form is updated annually.

NOTE: Sexual misconduct is an abuse of power through sexual contact or activity, not limited to sexual intercourse, in which a lay person violates the free choice, or abuses the vulnerability of any other person, client, church staff person or colleague with whom the lay person comes into contact because of the lay person’s position or area of responsibility within the church. (Manual on Policies and Procedures, Baltimore-Washington Conference, ¶2820.1.c.1.)

1.3 Volunteer Covenant

Children/youth workers sign a covenant that acknowledges their commitment to the protection of children and youth and their commitment to comply with WUMC policies for the protection of children/youth. This covenant is renewed annually while the worker continues to participate in child/youth activities.

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1.4 Qualification of the children/youth worker

The qualification of Workers is the responsibility of the SPRC and will be based on the results of the application, sexual misconduct questionnaire, reference checks and criminal background checks. Once qualified, continuing qualification of a Worker is contingent on compliance with the church’s Safe Sanctuaries policies.

NOTE: Various provisions of worker qualification have been in-place for a number of years, however, the requirement for criminal background checks and checking personal references are being put in place starting with the 2008-2009 program year. The SPRC will conduct personal reference and background checks for all new Workers. However, in order to even the yearly workload in checking references and in running criminal background checks, a phased approach in these controls is being utilized for currently qualified returning Workers. Returning Workers will be grouped into 3 categories. SPRC will conduct personal reference and background checks for these Workers in subsequent years. (Therefore, returning Workers group 1 will be checked prior to the start of program year 2009/10, group 2 for program year 2010/11 and group 3 for program year 2011/12.) All Workers that continue to participate routinely in child/youth activities will have reference and background checks re-evaluated by the SPRC every 4- 5 years.

1.4.1 Reference checks

Reference checks are conducted for all new Workers by the SPRC. Applicants give permission for SPRC to conduct these checks. (See note at 1.4, above). The results of reference checks are documented and maintained in WUMC SPRC files. The SPRC re-checks personal references every 4 – 5 years or after a break from the congregation of 12 consecutive months.

1.4.2 Criminal background check

Criminal background checks are conducted for all new Workers by the SPRC. Applicants give permission for SPRC to conduct these checks. (See note at 1.4, above). The results of criminal background checks are documented and maintained in WUMC SPRC files. The SPRC reruns criminal background checks every 4 – 5 years or after a break from the congregation of 12 consecutive months. The criminal search includes:

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Broad Screen Criminal Search: Includes Multi-State Criminal and National Sex Offender Search.

Specific State Criminal Search (when required): Includes a criminal search of state records for states not included in the multi-state criminal search above. A search of specific state records will be conducted if the applicant has lived in any of these states within the past 7 years.

Social Security Trace: A social security trace will identify a history of previous addresses and the month and year of birth of every person that has used that SSN. This information will help identify data returned from the search that is not related to the applicant.

2.0 Basic Procedures and Practices for Safe Ministry

The following standard procedures and practices are in place during children/youth ministry programs. For unexpected situations (for example, unannounced Worker illness, etc.) when standard procedures cannot be followed, the situation will be managed to provide the highest level of protection for the child/youth and for the Worker that is possible under the circumstances.

Adult supervision:

Children and youth will be supervised during children/youth classroom activities by at least 2 adults who are at least 18 years old and at least five years older than the age of the child/youth they will be supervising. Teenage volunteers (less than 18 years of age) or who are less than 5 years older than the class are welcomed to participate as assistants in children/youth classroom activities, but are not counted as a qualified adult.

One-on-one situations (one child/youth to one unrelated adult) will be avoided when possible.

Exceptions may be made in the following circumstances:

- In the event of an emergency when reasonably necessary for the safety or well-being of any person or to comply with emergency procedures,

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- For a reasonably short period of time (for example to find an additional teacher or leader, to retrieve supplies, or to counsel a child, etc)

Roving Adult:

During children/youth activities where children are grouped into various classrooms, an adult will visit classrooms during activities for supervision and to provide assistance to classroom volunteers.

6-month wait period for new volunteers:

Workers must develop at least a 6-month history with the church before they can be considered for formal qualification as a routine Worker. Volunteers with less than a 6-month history with the congregation, or whose history is not recent, may volunteer under the supervision of another qualified Worker.

Discipline:

Disruptive behavior will be addressed with disciplinary actions that help the child regain self control and without use of physical punishment, verbal abuse, ridicule, etc. Progressive discipline will be used. If the situation continues so that it becomes necessary to remove the child from the classroom, the situation will be reported to the child's parent/guardian as soon as possible. Children / youth that pose a threat to Workers or other activity participants, or who repeatedly refuse to behave as requested, may be suspended from participating in children/youth activities. For significant events of disruptive behavior, a "memo to the file" detailing the pertinent information will be written in a timely manner and forwarded to the SPRC for filing.

One-on-one counseling:

Counseling of a child/youth will occur in public areas when feasible. When that is not feasible, counseling will occur in an environment with an open door or where the room is visible to general church traffic. For example, rooms with an interior window where activities within the room can be observed from the hall are acceptable environments for meeting one-on-one with children or youth. Rooms like basements, garages, cars, etc. are not suitable environments for meeting with children or youth on a one-on-one basis.

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Transportation for Child/Youth Activities:

Adults will transport children and youth as needed during church-sponsored activities. Drivers must hold a valid driver’s license. As part of church-sponsored activities, a youth may drive only with permission from a parent or guardian and cannot drive other children/youth passengers. Seat belts for all vehicle passengers are required at all times.

Advance notice to parents of activities:

Standard, on-going programs (like Pathways or High School Ministries) require a general Program Release signed by a parent or guardian. This release will indicate what types of activities will or might be offered as part of the routine program. For non-routine (for example activities like “IMPACT”) or activities that extend beyond normal program times, a specific release for that activity will be required.

Overnight policies (Youth):

Achieving adequate supervision of youth for overnight activities may be challenging based on the accommodations available. Adult leaders will need to manage these situations to provide the highest level of protection both for the child/youth and for the worker that is possible under the circumstances. Separate sleeping, bathroom and shower accommodations will be provided for each sex. Youth and adults of the same sex may share sleeping quarters. A youth and adult may only share a bed if they are related. A youth and an unrelated adult may not share sleeping quarters by themselves.

When feasible, adults and youth will avoid the simultaneous use of shower facilities. This can be accomplished by physically separate facilities or separate shower times for youth and adults.

One-on-one situations (one child/youth to one unrelated adult) will be avoided when possible.

Appropriate Environments:

Activities will be organized and provided in a safe and age-appropriate environment.

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3.0 Storage and Handling of Forms and Data

The SPRC will hold the paperwork associated with qualifying a Worker (application, sexual misconduct questionnaire, reference check information, background check data, etc) in a locked file located at Walkersville United Methodist Church. When possible, social security numbers on documents will be redacted to present only the number's last four digits.

4.0 Response to allegations of abuse

Workers should be prepared to report suspected child abuse:

- 1) when there is evidence to suggest that the child/youth that they are supervising has been the victim of abuse, or
- 2) if they have reason to believe that a child or youth has been abused on church property or at a church-sponsored activity. (See also Section 2820 of the BWC Policy Manual)

NOTE: Abuse means:

- (1) the physical or mental injury of a child by any parent or other person who has permanent or temporary care or custody or responsibility for supervision of a child, or by any household or family member, under circumstances that indicate that the child's health or welfare is harmed or at substantial risk or being harmed; or
- (2) Sexual abuse of a child, whether physical injuries are sustained or not.

[Annotated Code of Maryland §5-701(b)]

Neglect means:

The leaving of a child unattended or other failure to give proper care and attention to a child by any parent or other person who has permanent or temporary care or custody or responsibility for supervision of the child under circumstances that indicate:

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- (1) That the child’s health or welfare is harmed or placed at substantial risk of harm; or
- (2) Mental injury to the child or a substantial risk of mental injury

[Annotated Code of Maryland §5-701(b)]

Suspected abuse shall be reported to Frederick County Department of Social Services (301-600-4555) or to the local police department. Suspected neglect shall be reported to the local police department. (Names of individuals who make reports of child abuse or neglect cannot be released according to Maryland law.)

A person who is the subject of the report will be required to refrain from participating in all child/youth activities until any necessary investigation is completed. This requirement implies neither innocence nor guilt on the part of the accused Worker. Care should be taken to handle this situation in a discreet manner.

All allegations will be taken seriously. Appropriate steps should be taken immediately to assure the safety of the alleged victim. The parent or guardian of the alleged victim will be notified as soon as possible and the child/youth will be released to their custody (or alternately to the custody of civil authorities). The staff member responsible for the activity will assist the parents/guardian in obtaining medical assistance if that is needed.

In addition, for suspected abuse that is alleged to have occurred on church property or during a child/youth activity, the Pastor will be notified immediately. If the Pastor is the subject of the allegation, the Chair of the Staff Parish Relations committee (SPRC) will be notified. As soon as reasonably feasible, the District Superintendent and the Church’s liability insurance company shall be notified.

The Church Council members will be available to assist as needed. All volunteers or staff involved in the activity during which the abuse is alleged to have occurred will cooperate fully with investigators.

The Pastor is the only person authorized to make statements to representatives of the media. If the Pastor is the subject of the allegation, or is not available, the Chair of the SPRC will authorize a person(s) to make statements to representatives of the media.

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5.0 Plan for Caring After Abuse

Both the alleged abuser and the alleged victim need care. Both will be treated with respect. Retaliation is prohibited against anyone who, in good faith, reports allegations of abuse or against those who assist in investigating charges.

Church staff will also assure that the alleged abuser is treated with compassion and support. Church staff in cooperation with the SPRC will work to develop an appropriate course of action once the investigation has been concluded and the facts of the situation have been determined.

The SPRC will make a decision regarding the re-qualification of the Worker, or other appropriate measures, based on the results of the investigation.

6.0 Periodic Review and Updating of Procedures and Processes

This Safe Sanctuaries policy is approved by the Church Council and overseen by the Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC). The SPRC will review procedures at least annually and propose revisions to the Church Council as needed. Feedback from parents, church staff, and child/youth workers will be considered during review periods.

7.0 Training of Workers

All Workers will receive an initial orientation to provide information on the church’s policies for the prevention of child abuse, standard procedures and policies, appropriate steps for reporting any incidents of abuse, and details of Maryland law regarding child abuse. Returning Workers will receive annual update training. This training may be conducted in a group setting or in one-on-one meetings. This training is documented.

Workers will be encouraged to attend basic first aid/CPR training and opportunities for this training will be offered at least annually.

8.0 Reporting on Status of Policy to Charge Conference

The Church will certify at the Charge Conference annually that a Safe Sanctuaries policy has been developed and is in use.

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9.0 Requirements for Outside Groups Using Facilities for Children / Youth Activities

All outside groups involving children and youth, which uses the church building must take responsibility for those in their organization who work with children and youth. The SPRC will contact the head of each group and require them to certify that they have implemented policies and procedures at least as protective as those detailed in this policy.

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