

Susquehanna Conference Safe Sanctuaries Policies

Introduction

Heeding Christ's call to all people to love and serve one another (John 13:15,34); to serve those most vulnerable in his name, even the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40); and to welcome children and youth in Christ's name (Matthew 18:5), the Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church has developed this *Safe Sanctuaries¹ Policies* with accompanying procedures to reduce the risks of abuse to children, youth and vulnerable adults in the ministries of the local churches and the annual conference. This *Safe Sanctuaries Policies* comes out of the guiding covenant of the Susquehanna Conference, "...acknowledging that it is by God's grace that we live together in covenant agreement"², and focuses on the following covenant agreements:

- We covenant together as a conference to diligently seek God's will as we endeavor to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world; and,
- We covenant to do no harm by words or actions.³

The physical and emotional safety, as well as the spiritual growth of all God's children is a priority of the Susquehanna Conference whereby we embrace a commitment to the holistic well-being of each child, youth and adult entrusted to us in ministry through our Conference organization and individual congregations. As recognized in the 1996 General Conference resolution: Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church:

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children. Child sexual abuse and exploitation, and ritual abuse occur in churches, both large and small, urban and rural. The problem cuts across all economic, cultural, and racial lines. It is real, and it appears to be increasing. Most annual conferences can cite specific incidents of child sexual abuse and exploitation within churches. Virtually every congregation has among its members adult survivors of early sexual trauma. Such incidents are devastating to all who are involved: the child, the family, the local church, and its leaders. Increasingly, churches are torn apart by the legal, emotional, and monetary consequences of litigation following allegations of abuse.⁴

The Susquehanna Conference *Safe Sanctuaries Policies* seeks to provide a framework for local churches and the annual conference to practice cyber-safety in computer, internet, cell phone and other evolving cyber technologies to reduce the risk of abuse in our ministries to children, youth and vulnerable adults. United Methodists are a connectional people. As we work to fulfill the Great Commission of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:19), we use the ever-changing cyber technologies available to us to teach about God's love and to strengthen our connections as the Body of Christ in the world.

In our covenant together to do no harm by word or action, and to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, we outline in these Policies, a set of minimum standards and suggested procedures for local churches and the annual conference that is in keeping with the 1996 General

¹ Melton, Joy Thornburg. *Safe Sanctuaries, Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church*. 2008. Discipleship Resources: Nashville, TN

² Vision Team of the Central Pa and Wyoming Conferences, *Birthing a New Annual Conference, Our Guiding Covenant*. [LINK](#) Dec 2008/Jan 2009, page 1. Central PA Publication: Mechanicsburg, PA

³ Ibid

⁴ The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church, 1996 (p.384); 2004 (p.201). The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, TN

Conference *Safe Sanctuaries* resolution, which was reaffirmed in 2004 and 2008, expanded to include abuse risk reduction for vulnerable adults and cyber safety considerations.

The Susquehanna Conference shall:

- develop safety and risk-reducing policies and procedures for Conference-sponsored events such as camps, retreats, youth gatherings, childcare at conference events, mission trips, and other events for which the Conference or its agency or program is the sponsor;
- approve *Safe Sanctuaries Policy* and assign the Discipleship Resources Team for implementation. The Conference *Safe Sanctuaries Policies* shall be posted on the Conference website, circulated in Conference publications, and shared with lay professional and clergy at district or Conference seminars; and
- develop training opportunities to help local church leaders know the importance and understanding of creating a *Safe Sanctuaries Policies* for the local church.

Local churches in the Susquehanna Conference shall:

- develop a *Safe Sanctuaries Policies* for their church;
- develop and implement an ongoing education plan for the congregation and its leaders on the reality of child abuse, risk factors leading to child abuse, and strategies for prevention;
- adopt screening procedures (use of application forms, interviews, reference checks, background clearances, and so forth) for staff, volunteers, employees, and helpers (paid and unpaid) directly or indirectly involved in the care of children, youth, and vulnerable adults;
- develop and implement safety procedures for church activities such as having two or more nonrelated adults present in classroom or activity; leaving doors open and installing half-doors or windows in doors or halls; providing hall monitors; instituting sign-in and sign-out procedures for children ages ten or younger; cyber safety for e-mail, internet, and cell phone use, and appropriate abuse allegation or Policies violation reporting procedures.
- become informed as to who are mandatory reporters; may use this website for free training with mandatory reporting. www.reportabusepa.pitt.edu.
- advise children, youth, and vulnerable adults of ChildLine or a person outside as well as within the local church whom they can contact for advice and help if they have suffered abuse;
- become informed about any liability coverage carried by the Conference applicable to child safety;
- assist the development of awareness and self-protection skills for children, youth, and vulnerable adults through special curriculum and activities;
- be familiar with Annual Conference and other church policies regarding clergy and lay leader sexual misconduct; and
- designate the appropriate person/group within the local church to fulfill these (e.g. *Safe Sanctuaries* coordinator, task force, etc.).

This Susquehanna Conference *Safe Sanctuaries Policies*, with its minimum standards and recommended procedures, seeks to assist local churches and conference ministries in their covenant commitments to reduce the risk of abuse in ministries with children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

Definitions

What is Safe Sanctuaries?

In 1996, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church adopted the resolution, Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church. This resolution, reaffirmed at every General Conference since then, became the impetus for annual conferences and congregations to develop and implement abuse risk reduction policies. The General Board of Discipleship has identified *Safe Sanctuaries* as reducing the risk of abuse in the church for children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

What is abuse?

“Child Abuse” is defined under Pennsylvania’s Child Protective Services Law 23 PA.C.S.A §6303(b)(1) to mean any of the following:

- (i) any recent act or failure to act by a perpetrator which causes nonaccidental serious physical injury to a child under 18 years of age.
- (ii) an act or failure to act by a perpetrator which causes nonaccidental serious mental injury to or sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a child under 18 years of age.
- (iii) any recent act, failure to act, or series of acts or failures to act by a perpetrator which creates an imminent risk of serious physical injury to or sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a child under 18 years of age.
- (iv) serious physical neglect by a perpetrator constituting prolonged or repeated lack of supervision or the failure to provide essentials of life, including adequate medical care, which endangers a child’s life or development or impairs the child’s functioning.

Section 6303(b)(2) No child shall be deemed to be physically or mentally abused based on injuries that result solely from environmental factors that are beyond the control of the parent or person responsible for the child’s welfare, such as inadequate housing, furnishings, income, clothing, and medical care.

Pennsylvania Child Protective Services Law 23 Pa.C.S.A.§6303(b)(3) also provides that, “If, upon investigation, the county agency determines that a child has not been provided needed medical or surgical care because of seriously held religious beliefs of the child’s parents, guardian, or person responsible for the child’s welfare, which beliefs are consistent with those of a bona fide religion, the child shall not be deemed to be physically or mentally abused. The county agency shall closely monitor the child and shall seek court-ordered medical intervention when the lack of medical or surgical care threatens the child’s life or long-term health.”

In *Safe Sanctuaries, Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church for Children and Youth*, 2008, Discipleship Resources, Nashville, TN, Joy Thornburg Melton defines and describes five types of abuse:

1. Physical Abuse is “abuse in which a person deliberately and intentionally causes bodily harm to a child. Examples may include violent battery with a weapon (knife, belt, strap, etc), burning, shaking, kicking, choking, fracturing bones, and any of a wide variety of non-accidental injuries to a child’s body. (Melton 2008, pages 29-30)

2. Emotional Abuse is “abuse in which a person exposes a child to spoken and/or unspoken violence or emotional cruelty. Emotional abuse sends a message to the child of worthlessness, badness, and being not only unloved but undeserving of love and care. Children exposed to emotional abuse may have experienced being locked in a closet, being deprived of any sign of parental affection, being constantly told they are bad or stupid, or being allowed or forced to abuse alcohol or drugs. Emotional abuse is often very difficult to prove and devastating to the victim.” (Melton, 2008, page 30)

3. Neglect is “abuse in which a person endangers a child’s health, safety, or welfare through negligence. Neglect may include withholding food, clothing, medical care, education, and even affection and affirmation of the child’s self-worth.” (Melton, 2008, page 30) If a parent cannot provide adequate care for a child due to poverty, infirmity, or other disability, their negligence is not legally categorized as abuse, although the neglected person still needs to be cared for.

4. Sexual Abuse is “abuse in which sexual contact between a child and an adult (or another older and more powerful youth) occurs. The child is never truly capable of consenting to or resisting such contact and/or such sexual acts. Often, the child is physically and psychologically dependent upon the perpetrator of the abuse. Examples of sexual abuse may include fondling, intercourse, incest, and the exploitation of and exposure to child pornography or prostitution.” (Melton, 2008, page 30)

5. Ritual Abuse is “abuse in which physical, sexual, or psychological violations of a child are inflicted regularly, intentionally, and in a stylized way by a person or persons responsible for the child’s welfare. The abuser may appeal to some higher authority or power to justify the abuse. The abuse may include cruel treatment of animals or repeated threats of harm to the child, other persons, and animals. Reports of ritual abuse are often extremely horrifying and may seem too grim to be true. Children making such reports must not be ignored.” (Melton, 2008, page 30)

Definitions

1. A child is anyone under the age of 18 years.
2. A youth is a child in the age range of 12 to 18 years, and is a colloquial term used in ministries to mean junior and senior high school age groups.
3. A vulnerable adult is any person, 18 years and older, who because of physical or mental infirmity or emotional disability or other physical, mental, or emotional dysfunction may be vulnerable to maltreatment. Or vulnerable adult is any adults who have been abused either as a child or an adult.
4. Staff Person – a person engaged in ministry to children, youth, or vulnerable adults through the Conference or Local Church who: has been screened and trained in *Safe Sanctuaries Policies*; performs tasks specified in a mutually agreed upon job description; and, is accountable to a supervisor for work habits and products.
5. Helper – a person engaged in ministry to children, youth, or vulnerable adults through the Conference or Local Church who has been screened and trained in *Safe Sanctuaries Policies*, but who works only in an assisting role under supervision of a staff person.
6. Employee – a person who works in ministry to children, youth, or vulnerable adults either as a staff person or a helper for compensation.
7. Volunteer – a person who works in ministry to children, youth, or vulnerable adults either as a supervisor or a helper without compensation.
8. Designated Reporter – a person in charge of an activity or event or the Site Director at any of the camping sites the conference owns
9. Conference Response Team – a group of people trained in handling situations of abuse. They assist congregations, camps, and events in dealing with the recovery process.
10. Mandated Reporter - An individual paid or unpaid, who, on the bases of the individual’s role as an integral part of a regularly scheduled program, activity or service, accepts responsibility for a child. A clergyperson, priest, rabbi, minister, Christian Science practitioner, religious healer or spiritual leader of any regularly established church or other religious organization.

What are the “children, youth, and vulnerable adult ministries and/or activities” covered under this Policies?

The Conference referred to in this Policies is the Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church. Ministries and/or activities are defined as any ministries to children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults that include

any programming or activities in which children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults are under the supervision of the Conference through its staff persons or volunteers.

Cyber Space and Cyber Safety. While ministries and activities take place in a variety of venues, new forms of communication via the Internet and wireless cell-phones and other hand-held devices constitute a new space for ministry and activities for children, youth, and vulnerable adults. Cyber Space includes: communications via email, instant messaging, and cell phone (speaking and texting), and other devices; communicating on social networking sites such as Facebook.; web-surfing and downloading of materials from the Internet; and gaming. Cyber Space is a fluid space which changes more and more as communications become more portable and websites change with increasing frequency.

Cyber Safety is the part of our *Safe Sanctuaries policies* that seeks to encourage those in ministry with children, youth, and vulnerable adults to update their knowledge of Cyber Space; provide ground rules for ministries and activities in Cyber Space; encourage critical thinking among those ministered to for posting, reading, and seeing; encourage good sense and safety in Cyber Space; and, model appropriate Cyber Space behaviors. The dangers of direct access to age-inappropriate content, risky social contacts, intimidation, threats, bullying, remade and/or inappropriate photos, information that could increase risks for abuse, and more in Cyber Space make Cyber Safety an important part of *Safe Sanctuaries*.