

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES FOR

Safe Sanctuary Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse

At

Bethany United Methodist Church

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to 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, and to specify policies and procedures for reducing the possibility of child abuse in the church.

The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church state that “children must be protected from economic, physical, emotional, and sexual exploitation and abuse”. (162C)

The church would be taking a needless risk that harm may be done to our children or our workers with children without these policies and procedures.

This document shall be reviewed and updated as necessary each year because the State of Georgia requirements for handling cases of child abuse may change and because of the expected year-to-year growth in our church.

Background

Anyone who reads newspapers, watches television, or listens to the radio knows that child abuse and violence against children happen all too frequently in our society. Reports range from allegations of inappropriate forms of punishment to allegations of sexual abuse. 'More than three million reports of child abuse and/or neglect are reported each year to protective service agencies, and studies have estimated that 1 out of 3 girls and 1 out of 7 boys have been sexually abused before the age of 18.' (1) These numbers may be underestimated since many children are reluctant to report such abuse.

Child abuse is generally categorized as: (2)

1. Physical Abuse- in which a person deliberately and intentionally causes bodily harm to a child;
2. Emotional Abuse- in which a person exposes a child to spoken and /or unspoken violence or emotional cruelty;
3. Neglect-in which a person endangers a child's health, safety, or welfare through negligence.
4. Sexual Abuse- in which sexual contact between a child and an adult (or another older and more powerful youth) occurs ,or
5. Ritual 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.

In light of the statistics, it would appear that any organization involved with children is a place where abuse could occur. Churches may be at risk for several reasons. One reason is that churches behave as relatively trusting organizations, relying upon their members and leaders to conduct themselves appropriately. A second reason is that churches are notoriously lax when it comes to screening their employees and/or volunteers who work with youth. A third reason is that churches routinely provide opportunities for close contact and close personal relationships with children.

Churches are not immune to litigation arising from child abuse. Punishment for such abuses may be in the form of monetary damages against the perpetrator and/or the institution in which the perpetrator worked or volunteered. Hence, churches must be responsibly attentive to reducing circumstances where child abuse could occur.

(A) Selection of Staff

The place to begin in reducing the risk of child abuse at Bethany United Methodist Church is in the recruitment, screening, and selection of people who will work with children and youth of the church. This process, which shall apply to full-time, part-time, paid, volunteer clergy, or lay personnel requires that an applicant at the church:

- (a) Complete an Employment Application Form or Volunteer Application and Personal Reference Form,
- (b) Consent to a Criminal Background Check and complete necessary form,
- (c) Agree to the conditions set forth in the Participation Covenant Statement,
- (d) Agree to participate in church training programs for the prevention of child abuse, and
- (e) Be interviewed and approved by the Pastor and another representative of the Task Force on Child Abuse.

As the church implements the screening procedure, it will be necessary for current church staff who are working with youth/children to complete the appropriate forms. (Authorization for criminal records check and covenant statement)

It is frequently necessary to find "substitutes" for childcare workers who must be absent from their duties because of sickness, travel, or family obligations. If possible, a bank of church members should be created who can be called upon when such absences occur. These volunteer members shall be required to undergo the screening process just as if they were permanent childcare workers. (volunteer application, references, authorization for criminal records check, and covenant statement)

The process of selection paid personnel who will work with children and youth shall be the responsibility of the PPR Committee and the Pastor.

(B) Training of Staff

At Bethany all new staff, whether paid or volunteer must annually attend a training session on the prevention of child abuse. The Pastor and Task Force on Child Abuse will develop this training session. (Possibly the District will provide) The continuing staff shall attend training session each year for review and update.

Approach to Reducing Risks

Reducing the risk of child abuse at Bethany United Methodist Church will require:

- (A) The careful selection and screening of staff and volunteers who will be involved in children and youth activities in the church.**
- (B) The training of personnel about the nature of child abuse and its consequences, ways to prevent abuse, and ways to respond to abuse.**
- (C) Child abuse prevention guidelines for day-to-day operations of children and youth ministries.**
- (D) Procedures for reporting alleged abuse.**
- (E) A congregational plan for responding to allegations of abuse.**
- (F) The support of the congregation in developing and implementing policies and procedures for reducing the risk of child abuse.**

The following paragraphs document the specific policies and procedures for reducing the risk of child abuse at Bethany. Adherence to these policies and procedures will help prevent the likelihood of such abuse in our church. Furthermore, should an incident occur, the fact that such policies and procedures are in place enhances the chances of reducing the legal liability of the church should litigation ensue. The following policies and procedures should not be circumvented for any reason for these reasons.

(C) Prevention Guidelines

The following comprehensive prevention strategy is designed to reduce the possibility of harm to the children, youth, and workers of the church and needs to be adhered to :

The Two-Adult Rule- At least two adults shall be present at all times during any church-sponsored program, event, or ministry involving children.

Supervisory Worker Age- All persons serving in a supervisory capacity for children/youth shall be at least 18 years old and have been a member of the church's congregation for at least six months.

The Five-Years-Older Rule- All persons serving in a supervisory capacity for youth shall be at least 5 years older than the youngest youth.

Location of Classrooms- Classrooms and other meeting areas for children and youth shall not be located in an isolated area of the church property.

Classroom Door Rule- Each room used for children and youth activities shall have a half door, a door with a window in it, or a door that is left ajar. An alternative to this rule is the Roving Adult Rule.

Roving Adult Rule- A representative designated by the Task Force on Child Abuse shall, on a random basis, visit each classroom or other area where children and youth activities are taking place.

Open-Door Counseling- At any counseling session for children or youth, the door of the room shall remain open for the entire session. If possible, the session should be conducted at a time when others are nearby, even if they are not within listening distance.

Telephone Access- There shall be access to a telephone at all meetings of children and youth.

Unauthorized Visitors- Unauthorized visitors shall not be allowed to remain at any children and youth activities.

Special Events Supervision- Ministries with children and youth may involve a variety of events at various locations: church sanctuaries, classroom, camp cabins, playgrounds, retreat centers, tour buses, hotels, parks, and homes. At any event at any location, supervision by at least two adults shall be provided. Written parental permission shall be obtained when groups participate in special events or leave church property and children and youth students shall not be allowed to leave the designated meeting area without permission/supervision. For the general safety of the children/youth and the protection of the supervisor(s), at least one parent will accompany the group leaving the church property.

(E) Response to Abuse

When a child or youth in the church is abused, there are many victims. In addition to the child who was harmed, these victims include the abused child's family, peers of the child and their family, other child and youth workers in the church, the family of the accused abuser, and the congregation as a whole. Obviously, any incident of child abuse will bring emotional and spiritual turmoil to each of these victims.

While the abuse of a child must be handled with respect for privacy and confidentiality honest and open communications with the congregation about what happened will be helpful in suppressing feelings of fear, anger and confusion about the incident. If the Pastor is not the alleged abuser, then the Pastor and the Chairperson of the PPR Committee shall prepare a letter for churchmembers which briefly states that an incident of child abuse has occurred and that the incident has been reported to the proper authorities. It shall also identify actions taken to assure the continuation of a safe ministry for church children and youth. The letter shall be sent as soon as possible after the incident of alleged child abuse as a means of dispelling rumors, gossip, and speculation about the incident.

If the Pastor is the alleged abuser, then the Chairperson of the PPR Committee shall prepare this letter.

A follow-up report to the congregation shall be prepared after the investigation of any alleged child abuse. This report is necessary to inform the congregation of the results of the investigation. Although a letter report could again be used, it is recommended that these results be presented at a congregational meeting. A meeting allows personal interaction and permits any questions by the attendees to be answered.

(F) Educating the Congregation

As an initial step in educating the congregation of issues related to the nature and prevention of child abuse, this policy, when adopted by the Church Council, will be presented to the congregation as a whole with copies available for each family. We will encourage each member of the congregation to be alert and caring protectors of these children and youth "that by our teaching and example they may be guided to accept God's grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life."

(D) Procedures for Reporting Alleged Abuse

If an adult should suspect any abuse or if a child should report any abuse by any member of the church staff or any person present at a church sponsored activity, the following procedures shall apply:

- (1) The adult in charge shall immediately notify the parents of the victim and assure the child's safety until the parents arrive.
- (2) The accused abuser shall not be confronted, but immediately removed from further involvement with youth or children.
- (3) The adult in charge shall document the incident in writing and sign and date the report and notify the Pastor. If the Pastor is the person accused, the report shall be directed to the Chairman of the PPR Committee and the District Superintendent.
- (4) The Pastor or Chairman of the PPR Committee shall notify the State of Georgia Department of Family and Children's Services, the District Superintendent, and the church insurance carrier. It is also recommended that an attorney and a Pastoral Care Consultant be contacted.
- (5) The Task Force on Child Abuse shall:
 - (a) Keep a written record of the steps taken by the church in response to the alleged abuse.
 - (b) Assist the Pastor or other designated person in preparing any necessary statements or responses to the news media.
 - (c) Assist in briefing the congregation about the alleged incident of abuse. This briefing should not give any unnecessary details, place blame, interfere with the alleged victim's privacy, or violate any confidentiality concerns.
 - (d) Be prepared to cooperate fully with any investigation conducted by law enforcement officials or child protection services.