

# Safe Sanctuary Policy and Guidelines

## Trinity United Methodist Church

### Orange, Virginia

The General Conference of the United Methodist Church, in April 1996, adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of abuse in the church. The adopted resolution includes the following statement:

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes a child welcomes me" (Matthew 18:5). Children are our present and our future, our hope, our teachers, and our inspiration. They are full participants in the life of the church and in the realm of God.

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 neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6). Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to the little ones, the children. The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church state that "children must be protected from economic, physical, emotional and sexual exploitations and abuse" (P 162C).

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places. Abuse of all kinds occurs 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.

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 emotional, legal, and monetary consequences of litigation following allegations of abuse.

God calls us to make our churches safe places, protecting children, youth, and other vulnerable persons. God calls us to create communities of faith where children and adults grow safe and strong. (From *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church*, pp. 384-386)

Thus, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, Trinity United Methodist Church (TUMC) adopts this policy for the prevention of abuse in our church.

## **Purpose**

Our congregation's purpose for establishing this Safe Sanctuary Policy and accompanying procedures is to demonstrate our total and unwavering commitment to the physical, emotional, and spiritual, safety and spiritual growth of all our children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

## **Screening/Staff Selection Policies**

All volunteer and paid staff who work with children and youth at TUMC shall be:

- At least 5 years older than the oldest child/youth they supervise
- At least 15 years old
- Active in a local congregation at least 4 months prior to supervising

All volunteer and paid staff who work with children and youth at TUMC shall:

- Complete and sign an application and the related waivers giving permission to check references and background information
- Provide the names and contact information of at least 2 references
- Undergo a criminal background check (paid for by TUMC)  
\*\*Individuals who have been convicted of physical or sexual abuse or neglect may not work in any church-sponsored activity or program for children, youth, or vulnerable adults.

## **Supervision Guidelines**

Whenever supervising activities involving children and youth at TUMC:

- Two non-related adults shall be present at all times
- Children and youth shall be checked in and out of church sponsored activities by their parent or legal guardian, or an individual authorized by their parent/legal guardian
- One-on-one interactions with children and youth shall be with an open door and visibility to all. In addition, a designated adult shall randomly provide a check in with the adult and any children in the room.
- Children and youth are discouraged from exiting church sponsored activities, including corporate worship, prior to the activity's conclusion. In the case of emergency, a minor shall be accompanied by a parent/legal guardian

Whenever TUMC transports children or youth away from the church campus:

- A non-parent/legal guardian should never transport a child/youth alone
- Drivers shall go through the same screening process as all other paid/volunteer staff
- When a non-parent/legal guardian picks up a child/youth from a church sponsored activity, they must have permission from the parent/legal guardian

Whenever TUMC hosts an activity involving children or youth from another church or community organization:

- The group using the church facility shall follow TUMC's Safe Sanctuary Policy and procedures
- Exceptions will be made if the organization has its own child protection policy commensurate with TUMC's policy

## **Reporting**

Any known or reasonably suspected act of abuse should be reported immediately according to State Law and the policy of our Virginia Annual Conference. In response to the report of abuse, volunteers and staff of Trinity United Methodist Church will follow these procedures:

1. Treat any allegation of abuse seriously; do not ignore the issues in the hope that they will go away.
2. Notify the Pastor and chair of the Pastor Parish Relations Committee
3. Document all procedures observed in handling the allegation.
4. Report the allegation to the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) as required by state law. If you are uncertain about what has happened or how to proceed, you may call anonymously. VDSS will help you determine the next steps and/or will conduct an investigation if warranted.
5. Call the Charlottesville District Superintendent: (434) 977-4254.
6. Report the allegation to the church insurance carrier immediately upon notifying the District Superintendent.
7. Notify the victim's parents/guardians if they do not have previous knowledge of the alleged incident or are not suspected themselves.
8. Any worker accused of abuse should report the incident to his/her supervisor immediately.

## Follow-up Response

1. Pray for the church and all persons affected by the allegation.
2. Do not confront the accused with the allegation. If the accused has assigned church duties with children, youth, or vulnerable adults, that person shall be relieved temporarily of his/her duties until the investigation is concluded. If the person is a paid employee, the question of continuing or suspending compensation during the investigation should be addressed.
3. Extend whatever pastoral care and resources are necessary, but under no circumstances should the pastor investigate the allegation. In providing pastoral care to the alleged victim and the alleged victim's family or to the accused or the family of the accused, the pastor should, under no circumstances, be drawn into a discussion of the truth or falsity of the allegation. Do not assign blame or take any steps that involve establishing or refuting the allegation.
4. It is appropriate to show care and comfort for the alleged victim. In fact, this should be the pastoral objective from the moment the allegation is received or otherwise made known.
5. Observe confidentiality for both the alleged victim and the accused until the investigation is complete.

## What is considered abuse?

### A. Definition:

Abuse refers to an act committed by a parent, care-giver, or person in a position of trust which is not accidental and which harms or threatens to harm a person's physical or mental health or welfare. The following definitions and explanations in this section are from the Virginia Department of Social Services, referenced under Virginia law Section 63.1-248.2 and Section 63.1-248.3.

### B. Types of Abuse:

1. **Physical Neglect**: The failure to provide food, clothing, shelter, or supervision for a person if the person's health or safety is endangered. Physical neglect may include multiple occurrences or a one-time critical or severe event that results in a threat to health or safety, such as a toddler left alone. Other types of neglect include abandonment, inadequate supervision, inadequate clothing, inadequate supervision, inadequate personal hygiene, inadequate food and malnutrition.
2. **A physical injury**, threat of injury or creation of a real and significant danger or substantial risk of death, disfigurement or impairment of bodily functions.

Such injury, regardless of intent, is inflicted or allowed to be inflicted by non-accidental means. Examples: asphyxiation, bone fracture, brain damage skull fracture, subdural hematoma, burns, scalding, cuts, bruises, welts, abrasions, internal injuries, poisoning, sprains, dislocations, gunshot, stabbing wounds.

3. **Sexual Abuse**: Sexual abuse includes any act defined in the code of Virginia that is committed or allowed to be committed, upon a person by his/her parent or other persons responsible for the individual's care. Examples of such abuse are sexual exploitation, sexual molestation, intercourse. Non-touching abuse includes verbal comments, pornography, obscene phone calls, exhibitionism, forcing or allowing a child to witness sexual activity.
4. **Mental Abuse/Neglect** : A pattern of acts of omission by the care-taker which result in harm to a person's psychological or emotional health or development.
5. **Bizarre Discipline**: Any actions in which the caretaker uses eccentric, irrational, or grossly inappropriate procedures or devices to modify a person's behavior.

## **Policy Review**

This Safe Sanctuary policy will be reviewed annually, and a follow-up report will be made each year at Charge Conference to insure the integrity of the policy and procedures. Implementation is the responsibility of all church staff and volunteers. The Chairs of both the Pastor Parish Relations (PPR) and Education committees will monitor required training and documentation. This policy is on file and available at all times for all who wish.

## **Conclusion**

In all of our ministries with children, youth, and vulnerable adults, this congregation is committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ, so that each person is "surrounded by steadfast love, ...established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal" ("Baptismal Covenant II," *United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 44)