

Alaska United Methodist Conference

Child Safety Policy and Procedures For Children, Youth and Vulnerable Adults

Policy

In so far as the Alaska United Methodist Conference (AUMC) provides ministries to children, youth, and vulnerable adults, it is the policy of this conference to put in place procedures that will protect their safety and well being.

We believe the promise we make at baptism is one that we take seriously. When a child or adult is baptized we agree to do whatever we can to provide a community that will love them and help them to grow to be faithful disciples. Moreover, because we are baptized, we include all children, youth and vulnerable adults whether baptized or not.

Each local church and conference entity in the AUMC which works with children, youth and vulnerable adults shall prepare and send to the conference their policy and procedures for protecting children, youth and vulnerable adults. These policies shall be reviewed yearly and updates included in the charge conference reports for local churches. Each local church will need to adapt its policy to fit its church building, size and programs. Conference staff is available to resource local churches in writing policies and training. The policies below have been updated in 2023 in light of the requirements of the General Board of Global Ministries for all of its partners with the expectation of an area wide update in the near future as new safe sanctuary guidelines become available.

Safe Sanctuary

The term "Safe Sanctuary" refers to a program to protect children, youth and vulnerable adults from abuse, authored and published by Joy Melton and used by many United Methodist Churches. It includes simple,

common-sense protective rules described below. This is also meant to protect staff and volunteers from unfounded accusations.

Definitions

Child: A Child is any individual under the age of 18, irrespective of local country definitions of when a Child reaches adulthood.

Volunteer: an individual who is not compensated for his or her time spent helping with a program or event.

Types of Abuse

- i. **Emotional Abuse:** A pattern of intentional conduct which crushes a Child's spirit or attacks the Child's self-worth through rejection, threats, terrorizing, isolating, or belittling. This can also include spiritual abuse where there is a misuse of power, authority or trust by any person in a position of spiritual power or authority (whether within an organization, institution, church or family), through controlling, coercing, manipulating, or dominating a child's spiritual development.
- ii. **Neglect:** The failure to provide a Child (where they are in a position to do so) with the conditions that are culturally accepted as being essential for their physical and emotional development and well-being.
- iii. **Physical Abuse:** Violent non-accidental contact which results in injury. This includes, but is not limited to, striking, biting, pinching or shaking. Injuries include bruises, fractures, cuts, and burns. iv. **Sexual Abuse:** Any form of sexual activity with a Child, whether at a Church, home, daycare or any other setting. The abuser may be an adult, or another Child

Procedures

Screening

Any adult who works with children, youth or vulnerable adults either as a volunteer or paid staff person shall be screened. The screening shall

include a background check. This background check shall be a national search. (The Alaska Conference currently uses "Ministry Safe" as our background check provider). It is recommended that someone be designated as the holder of information developed from these screenings. These shall be kept locked up so only the authorized person(s) shall have access.

Background screening shall be redone every other year to assure continued safety of all. The screening can be done through any of a number of resources. The conference office or website can be consulted for recommended services.

Screening shall also include having paid staff and volunteers fill out an application (samples can be found in the resource cited later in this document) to verify identity, address, employment history, experiences, prior church membership, personal references, permission to do the background screening and their signature affirming that the information provided is true.

Some churches introduce the Safe Sanctuary program as a part of new attendee/member classes. This allows the church to make all new persons aware that the church cares about protecting children, youth and vulnerable adults. It also gives the new participants the opportunity to be screened in the beginning if they think they might like to work with vulnerable persons.

Screening for driving records must be done on volunteers or staff who will be transporting children, youth or vulnerable adults. The screener will want to be concerned about the recent years of driving record. If as a young person an applicant had some trouble but is now long past those times, then he or she may be considered to be a safe driver.

See sample forms for gathering permission to do background screening on paid staff and volunteers in the safe sanctuary book listed under Resources.

Review of Background Screening

A responsible party shall be designated as the person(s) who reviews background screenings. This person(s) should be someone who can be depended on to keep the information confidential and who can determine what information on a background screening is relevant and what information is not because it is too old or not applicable to the situation.

Computers and the internet make it very easy and quick to do national background screening of all kinds. Permission to do the screening should be kept in locked files. After the screening is done the person in charge of making the background check may shred or black out sensitive information such as social security number, drivers license number, etc. The permission form should be kept on file until a new permission form has been signed for the next screening. The old form can then be destroyed.

Training

Mandatory training will be provided at least annually for all persons working with children, youth and adults. The training shall include but not be limited to: recognizing signs of abuse; avoiding situations when abuse might take place or conduct which might be perceived as abuse; reporting requirements of the state of Alaska and the Alaska United Methodist Conference related to abuse and media response procedures.

General Rules

All activities involving children must be supervised by at least one screened and trained adult.

When feasible, each room set aside for children should have a door with a window or a window through with the child/children can be seen from the outside. Adults cannot be in a room alone with a child with the door closed so that they are outside the view of others or in a secluded area or hidden from view.

Any individual counseling sessions that needs to be done with a Child should be done with the door open and at a time when other adults are nearby, preferably with visual contact with other adults.

The two person rule will be used in all settings with children. "Two Person Rule" is defined as having at least two unrelated adults or setting (with the exception of individual counseling sessions discussed above) one of which must be a screened staff or volunteer.

Staff and volunteers will not swear or use offensive language.

Staff and volunteers will not have sexually oriented discussions, or use explicit language or innuendo with or in the presence of children

Staff and volunteers will not use tobacco or be under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs in the presence of Children.

Staff and volunteers will not have sexually oriented materials, including printed or internet pornography in the presence of child.

Staff and volunteers shall not abuse children in any way, including, but not limited to, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect or engaging in inappropriate or unacceptable behavior as defined above in this policy.

The locations where childcare is provided and where programs for children are held will be regularly observed. Staff should look for signs that a child is uncomfortable with an adult providing care.

Staff and volunteers should be knowledgeable in how to notify medical and other emergency personnel in case of an accident or medical emergency. Staff and volunteers should not hit, slap, pinch, push, hold against their will, or otherwise assault children. They should not let children hit, slap, pinch, push, hold or assault or bully other children. Strong and healthy boundaries shall be observed. No inappropriate touch (touching a child in any area normally covered by a bathing suit). No inappropriate dress.

Staff and volunteers will not engage in inappropriate verbal interactions with children which includes shaming, belittling, humiliating, name calling, using harsh language that may frighten, threaten, or humiliate a child, cursing or making derogatory remarks about a child.

Age Differences

The Safe Sanctuary materials recommend a minimum five-year age difference between the oldest participant and the youngest leader at any event. The Alaska UM Conference also recommends this standard when the participants who are not leaders are children and youth. This protects the worker and the children and youth.

Under Eighteen Years of Age

Anyone under the age of 18 shall not be left in sole charge of children, youth or vulnerable adults. When a supervising adult over the age of 18 is present the under 18 worker and those vulnerable are protected.

Windows in All Classrooms

The ideal for classrooms is for each classroom to have a window, which may be in the door to the classroom. When this is not possible doors to classrooms shall be left open and someone shall be designated to walk by randomly to check on each classroom.

Open Door Policy

Parents, Volunteers and Staff will be permitted, as reasonableness dictates, to visit and observe all programs and classrooms at any time. Parents and legal guardians must be given full information about events in which their Children will be participating and must give their permission for all aspects of the program

Cyber Safety

The world of computers, internet, and social networking is changing at a rapid pace. Churches and conference entities shall keep themselves up to date on what is happening and what is being recommended as best practices for safety of all involved. Children, youth and vulnerable adults shall be educated about internet safety. Staff and volunteers engaged in ministry with children, youth and vulnerable adults should not post or publish photos or videos of such children, or use these pictures in any way on the internet or in any media without the express written consent of the Child's parent or legal guardian. When emailing be sure to "bcc" so that a recipient does not have access to each addressee's email. When computers are available some kind of a parental control management feature shall be used.

Church Staff and Volunteers working with Children are prohibited from emailing, texting or sending private messages, including photographs and videos, through social media to an individual child whom they interact with at a ministry, program or event.

Any communications sent through social media must be sent to a group rather than to individuals, or messages should be communicated through parents or guardians.

All communications with Children and parents/guardians must comply with this policy and not include any abusive, inappropriate or harmful language, photographs, videos or other content.

Ministry Staff and Volunteers working with Children should not send “friend” requests through social media to Children whom they interact with at a ministry, program or event.

Convicted Abusers Attending Church

The internet makes available to the public names and locations of registered sex offenders. If someone in your church is a registered sex offender people in your church will be likely to find out because many parents are advised to check out the website to see if there are registered sex offenders in their neighborhoods.

Churches and conference entities are advised to check their church membership out on these websites and to be proactive if there is someone in your congregation who is a registered sex offender. We want to welcome both those who have been abused as well as those who have been abusers.

However, it is extremely important for the registered sex offender to be monitored while he or she is in your church building or facility where you have programming for children, youth and vulnerable adults. A team from the church (possibly pastor, trustee chair, SPRC chair...) should meet with the registered sex offender and develop a plan that will allow the offender to attend church for worship and other activities but that would restrict the offender from being anywhere in the building where he or she might be alone with children, youth or vulnerable adults.

Churches and conference entities should assign someone to monitor the offender’s movements while he or she is in the church building or other facility. This may be in the form of a written agreement with the offender. For more information on how to handle this situation call the Director of Connectional Ministry or the Conference Superintendent.

See The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church 2008, as Resolution 8009.

Educating the Congregation

The Alaska Conference shall regularly offer training to local churches and individuals. It is recommended that local churches develop a plan to educate their congregation, including children, youth and vulnerable adults on Safe Sanctuary. It is also recommended that the church find a way to celebrate when their policy is written, approved and filed with the conference office.

Reporting of Incidents

A plan for responding to allegations of abuse shall be established. The book, Safe Sanctuary has a chapter devoted to this. Those working with children, youth and vulnerable adults shall be aware of the state laws for reporting abuse. They shall also put together a plan to respond to the spiritual needs of those involved. Faithful response to the victim will include taking the allegation seriously and respecting the victim's privacy. Once abuse or neglect is reported, the following should be followed:

- a. Immediately, yet with dignity, the accused should be removed from further involvement with Children. Once the proper authorities have been contacted and the safety of the Child is secured, the accused should be informed that the abuse or neglect was reported.
- b. Notify the parents/guardians of the Child and take whatever steps are necessary to assure the safety and well being of the Child. An exception to this rule is if notifying the parents/guardians would put the Child in further danger.
- c. A written report should be kept of the steps taken by the church or agency in response to the reported abuse. The report should be brief and contain only factual information relevant to the situation. It should be kept in a secure place. It should be written in ink or typed to prevent it from being changed.
- d. Any contact with the media should be handled through Global Ministries' Child Safety Office. All Global Ministries Staff and Volunteers who interact with Children must be familiar with and follow the mandatory reporting laws

for the jurisdiction in which they work. If assistance is needed with determining such requirements, the Child Safety Office can assist.

Confidentiality: To protect all parties from further harm through exposure and to preserve the integrity of the process, the Alaska Conference expects that a “need to know” position will be strictly adhered to throughout the reporting and investigative process once a violation of this policy is reported.

No other members of leadership teams are to be involved in the investigative process other than those necessary to conduct investigations or reach final determinations regarding action to be taken as a result of the investigation.

It is presumed the parents or legal guardians of the victim are part of the “need to know” group unless they are themselves involved in the abuse or pose a threat.

While every attempt is made to keep issues related to reports of violations of the child safety policy confidential, absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed as details will need to be discussed with witnesses in the course of the investigation, the person against whom the report is made will need to be told of the report and when applicable persons in a position of authority (for example Law Enforcement and/or a clergy person’s conference/Bishop) will need to be informed.

It is recommended that conference authorities (superintendent or the presiding bishop) be notified as soon as allegations of abuse are received.

The conference has a plan in the journal for responding to clergy abuse which should be followed if the pastor is the accused abuser (AUMC 2022 Journal, p189 R7.52 Guidelines for Dealing with the Abuse of Power and Authority of the Clergy Office in Areas Relating to Clergy Sexual Misconduct).

The Alaska Conference takes seriously all reports of child abuse and implements a survivor-centered approach to all allegations, which means that the needs and wishes of survivors guide our response, that

survivors are treated with dignity and respect, and the rights of survivors to privacy and support are prioritized. All suspected violations of this policy must be reported immediately by calling the Child Safety Office hotline at 1-888-230-2157 or reporting the violations online at www.alertline.com. Current mandatory reporting guidelines of the state must be followed.

There is excellent material on the Alaska DHS site:

<https://dhss.alaska.gov/ocs/Pages/childrensjustice/reporting/welcome.aspx>

Here are the instructions from the Alaska OCS website:

If you suspect a child was abused or neglected, immediately contact the Office of Children's services (OCS) hotline. As of September 1, 2020, all reports of sexual abuse should be made to both OCS and to law enforcement. You can call at anytime, any day of the week. The OCS hotline is open 24/7. Care enough to call: 1-800-478-4444 Email: reportchildabuse@alaska.gov or Fax: 907-269-3939.

Media Communications

A plan for responding to the media shall be put in place. This plan should include who will be designated to speak to the media. The conference staff that has had crisis communication training can be consulted for advice on a plan as well as at the time of a crisis

Resources

Recommended resources for writing, reviewing and implementing policy and procedures for Safe Sanctuary include:

Safe Sanctuary: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church for Children and Youth written by Joy Thornburg Melton, Disciples Resources. *This book includes many other resources for information and training – including a list of videos.*

Safer Sanctuaries: Nurturing Trust Within Faith Communities - Scheduled to come out in April 2023. Pre-order form and webinars may be found at <https://www.upperroom.org/safersanctuaries>

Other helpful resources:

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/equipping-leaders/safe-sanctuaries>

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/safe-sanctuaries-a-comprehensive-abuse-prevention-policy-development-guide>

Book of Discipline 2016

Paragraph 226 Care of Children and Youth (Baptism of children and youth).

Paragraph 226.4 (Duty of pastor, parents, officers, teachers and congregations to children of the church).

Book of Resolutions 2016

Paragraph See Social Principles, ¶ 162C : Reducing the risk of Child Sexual Abuse in the Church

Policy and Procedure Review

This policy shall be reviewed yearly and any changes brought to the AUMC Annual Conference for approval.

Alaska Conference Safe Sanctuary Original Committee
Leila Disburg, Director of Connectional Ministry, attended Safe Sanctuary training years ago in Iowa and in Nashville November 2009, has experience writing a number of church policies.

Judith Goodrum, St. John UMC member, Attended Safe Sanctuary training in Nashville November 2009.

Kris Ann Wilcox, clergy on family leave, Unalaska, attended Safe Sanctuary training and has had extensive experience writing policies for church.

Laura Skiba, clergy North Star UMC, Nikiski, Chair of Conference Youth Council.

Abbe Dunning Newbury, Alaska Conference Chancellor, member of Chugiak UMC, worked on their safe sanctuary policy and was invaluable as the conference policy and procedures were written.

Lonnie Brooks, Alaska Conference Lay Leader and member of East Anchorage UMC. Lonnie's work in the denomination is extensive and invaluable as the conference policy and procedures were written.

Revised in 2023 to meet the current standards and requirements of the General Board of Global Ministries

<https://umcmmission.org/global-ministries-child-safety-policy/>

Christina DowlingSoka, Alaska Conference Superintendent

Susie Smalley, Safe Sanctuary Coordinator