

Safe Sanctuaries Policy

Song of Life United Methodist Church

Final Copy (adopted 2010)

As Christians and United Methodists, we are concerned for the care and well-being of the children and youth in our care. It is critical that we model best practices for the care and protection of children and youth in our meetings and events. In order to do so, we will operate with the following guidelines for their health and safety while participating in programs and meetings of Song of Life United Methodist Church.

The goal of these guidelines is threefold: first, to prevent abuse from happening to the children and youth in our care; second, to prevent false allegations of abuse against individuals and the church; third, to enable staff and volunteers to recognize and report suspected abuse.

There is no one thing that we can do to prevent the abuse of the children and youth in our care. A multi-pronged approach that includes annual training and continual practice will provide the best results.

1. Group of Three Rule

A child or youth should not be alone with another unrelated adult or child or youth at any time for any reason. Everything should be done in groups of at least three: at least two adults and a young person, or two young people and an adult. The ideal to strive for is that at least two unrelated adults be with children or youth at all times.

Rationale: Should an adult desire to do harm to a child, it is much more difficult to do so with another witness present. The purpose of a second unrelated adult is to provide a second adult who is not in a position to be intimidated by the first.

A secondary rationale for the Group of Three Rule is to prevent false allegations of abuse. A child or youth seeking revenge for discipline, or perhaps simply seeking attention could accuse an adult or another participant of abuse. With no witness, it is one person's word against another's word.

Implications:

Counseling Situations

Counseling situations should be managed in a manner that provides privacy of conversation but, if at all possible, visual contact with others. An office with a window into other populated office areas is one option; sitting in an outside area at the edge of a field or building where you may be seen but not heard is another option. At the very least, a door should be left ajar where a yell or struggle could be heard by others. The wise leader will ask another person to stay in visual range to ensure the safety of all involved. Song of Life will take these issues into account when planning new buildings.

Restroom Procedures

1. Nursery staff or volunteers should return the child to the parent for the parent to assist the child in the restroom.
2. Children under fourth grade must go in pairs to the restroom and be accompanied by an adult. Fourth and fifth graders may be sent in pairs without an adult.
3. Workers should make sure the restroom is unoccupied and safe before the child enters, shall exit the restroom, and then shall go back in only when absolutely necessary to assist a child.
4. Youth may go to the restroom unaccompanied.

Transportation Issues

Youth leaders, teachers and clergy should be careful not to be in a vehicle alone with a youth. Any volunteers transporting youth should arrange their trips so that the first they pick up and the last they drop off are two youth rather than one. At meetings, plans should be made to prevent one youth from being alone with an adult as parents are picking up or dropping off youth. If it is impossible for a second adult to be present, perhaps another youth and their ride can wait until the last arrives. If this is not possible, the adult should invite the youth to wait with them outside the building where they are at least visible to the public.

2. Background Checks:

Annual background checks should be performed on all staff and volunteers that have contact with children and youth at Song of Life programs. The minimum check is of the National Sex Offender Database, available at www.nsopr.gov. Driver's license checks should be made of adults transporting children and youth on behalf of the Church; this excludes parents driving their own children and youth to and from meetings or events. Staff and volunteers may be asked not to drive or volunteer with children's and youth events if undesirable results appear on these checks. National Criminal File checks should be performed annually on paid staff who work with children and youth. These checks may be performed at www.screennow.com, through their affiliation with Church Mutual.

Rationale: Someone who has been convicted of a sexual offense against children, youth or adults has no place as a volunteer at church events. Further, we desire to not place our children and youth at undue risk by placing them in a vehicle with a driver with recent serious violations on their record. The very act of being asked for a background check may deter a potential abuser from volunteering, or from acting on their desires. Finally, we need to know that the staff who work with our children day in and day out are without a recent criminal background.

Implications: Additional staff time will be required to run checks on all volunteers and to maintain those records. A system will need to be set up to ensure that checks are performed annually and that problems are reviewed and resolved quickly.

Anyone convicted of child or sexual abuse will be denied the opportunity to work with our children and youth.

DUI's or other serious violations happening within the last decade would be cause to restrict someone from driving children and youth. Likewise, a pattern of multiple and/or continued smaller violations would also be cause for restriction. Lesser issues will be at the discretion of the person performing the checks, in consultation with their superior. The seriousness of these issues could be a consideration in denying a person the opportunity to volunteer.

Privacy of information will need to be at the forefront of those performing the checks. Records should be kept in a secure location, and the person performing the checks will need to protect the confidentiality of those being checked.

3. Six-month Waiting Period for New Church Members to Volunteer

Persons new to our congregation should wait six months prior to being able to take a leadership role with children and/or youth.

Rationale: We do not wish to give strangers immediate access to our children and youth. A six-month waiting period for leadership gives the church time to get to know the new members/attendees while allowing them to volunteer with current leaders. . It will also deter a potential abuser who wishes to have quicker access to young people. This includes transporting children/youth to church functions.

Implications: Attendance registers can help track the six-month waiting period. If a new visitor expresses an interest in volunteering, explain the policy as part of your system to protect children and youth at church. Partner them with another church member who can get to know them and help welcome them during the waiting period.

An exception may be made when a new clergy or staff and their family arrive at the church. At the same time, a strong policy will ask all new staff and volunteers to undergo an annual background check—even clergy, who set the example for us.

Likewise, churches should plan on how to welcome families with children, who have parents who would like to volunteer more quickly. A possible solution would be to have them paired full-time with a seasoned volunteer during the waiting period.

A six-month waiting period may seem counter-productive to churches that struggle to find volunteers. Not yielding to the temptation to immediately use “warm bodies” that show up and want to volunteer will provide an important level of safety for our children and youth.

4. Appropriate Age Difference Between Leaders and Participants

Leaders of children and youth should be at least four years older than the participants that are under their immediate supervision.

Rationale: Leaders whose age is within four years of the participants may not exercise appropriate boundaries in their relationships with those in their care. They may not have developed the level of judgment needed to be placed in responsible situations with children and youth. Finally, they may not command the respect of those they are entrusted to supervise.

Implications: Song of Life will work to provide younger volunteers the opportunity to volunteer in situations where this age difference can be maintained.

5. Appropriate Age Range Among Participants

Events should not be planned that include only youth and young adults as participants.

Rationale: While little developmental difference may be observed between a 17 year old and a 19 year old, there is in the United States a vast legal difference. An adult in an intimate relationship with a minor could be charged with child abuse or rape. There is a further discomfort in U.S. culture with high school youth building relationships with legal adults, even college students.

Implications: Recent high school graduates may desire to continue “reliving” their high school youth or camp experiences. The church may be called to help some of these young adults move on to new areas of involvement.

Young adult event participants—some of whom may be out of school and in professional positions—should not be expected to abide by the same rules and curfews as youth participants. It behooves us to honor these young adults by treating them as such. Avoiding events that create these situations will be to everyone’s benefit.

Some meetings and events attended by youth such as Annual Conference will be multi-generational and among unscreened adults. Flexibility and intentionality will be required to enable the youth to participate fully in these events while maintaining safe boundaries for their time at the event.

6. Appropriate Written and Electronic Communication Between Youth and Adults

Written and electronic communications between adults and children and youth should be as open and public as possible. Persons wishing to post information on the internet may do so only with permission of the sponsoring organization.

Rationale: Private conversation between a youth and adult, whether written, texted, e-mailed, phoned, or otherwise sent could signify or be construed as an inappropriate relationship between the adult and the young person. Staff and volunteers may take appropriate photographs and movies of children and youth, but do not have legal authority to post those on-line. Finally, webpages, blogs, social networking sites, etc about the camp or event that are not maintained by the sponsoring organization are beyond the Church’s control and could confer false information.

Implications: Adults needing to communicate by phone with children or youth about a meeting or similar issue should try to talk to the parents or guardians either at the beginning or end of the phone call; likewise, they should copy electronic communications such as e-mails to the parents. A good strategy is to include several issues in a single message, and copy both youth and adults on the message. Adults should avoid private communication with individual children and youth where they can't be observed by others (see counseling suggestions in group of three rule).

Conference permission forms request permission to use photos of the participants in printed and electronic materials. This does not confer permission to individuals to post pictures on their own websites, myspace pages, etc. Persons that set up pages about camps or events, while usually well meaning, have posted information that is beyond the control of the sponsoring organization. These postings may or may not represent the organization in the best light. Participants, volunteers and staff should covenant to not post information about the camp or event on-line without the express permission of the sponsoring organization.

Volunteers and staff should be aware of their own "web presence." Were an on-line search for their name done by a child or youth, would anything—photo or written word—come up that they would be embarrassed to have a young person see? Are there links from pages they operate that lead to material that is inappropriate for children and youth? Again, we can ask volunteers and staff to covenant to maintain an appropriate web presence.

7. Reporting Suspected or Known Child Abuse or Neglect

We are both morally and legally responsible to report actions that surround suspected or known child abuse.

When we suspect that a child or youth in our care has been subjected to abuse or neglect in their home, we should notify Children's Services. In Arizona, report suspected abuse 24 hours a day at 1-888-SOS-CHILD.

When it is alleged that a child or youth in our care has been subjected to abuse by someone in the church or Conference event setting, the pastor and/or team leader is to be notified and shall help make three contacts immediately. The first is local law enforcement authorities; the second is the Superintendent of the district where the incident occurred; and the third is the Conference Communications Director, who will activate the Conference Crisis Communications Team.

When it is suspected that a child/youth is doing harm to themselves, the pastor and/or parents will be notified and appropriate measures shall be taken.

Rationale: Our fundamental goal is the protection and well being of the children and youth in our care. Abuse or neglect cannot remain a secret, nor can it be tolerated—if it is, then we are helping to perpetuate it in this and possibly other children or youth. We are not to be concerned about "our getting someone else in trouble". We are not responsible for the actions of others outside of our realm of supervision. We are however responsible both morally and legally to promptly report actions that surround suspected child abuse.

Implications: Staff and volunteers will need to be trained and resourced in recognizing and reporting signs of suspected child abuse and neglect. Health and registration forms used at camps and other Conference events will provide helpful information to state agencies or law enforcement. Once reported, trained professionals from state agencies or law enforcement will conduct interviews to determine if abuse actually has or has not occurred, and will determine further steps to be taken.

A person making a good-faith report cannot be sued for doing so, and their identity will be kept confidential by those receiving the report. Likewise, we will need a system of recordkeeping and covenants to maintain confidentiality of all parties involved.

If abuse has occurred while a child or youth is in our care, providing the Superintendent and Director of Communications with notification—along with local law enforcement authorities--will ensure appropriate communications among church officials and between church officials and media representatives.