

Safe Sanctuary Policy

First Methodist Church of Cameron, TX

Introduction to First Methodist Church Safe Sanctuary Policy

OUR CALLING AND OUR MANDATE IS TO ENSURE A SAFE SANCTUARY FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

After baptism, our congregation assumes a holy responsibility as we affirm: “[we] who witness these vows encourage [these persons] in the faith and do all in [our] power to support [these persons] in [their] life in Christ.”

Scriptures provide examples of how sanctuary is to be a community of protective nurture and harmony. As Christians we are called to create a safe sanctuary in our church. They must be holy, safe, and protective communities for all of God's children, regardless of age or ability. The purpose of this policy is to address the safety of our children and vulnerable persons at our church and Conference sponsored events. First Methodist Church of Cameron recognizes the need to have a formal, written policy with procedures in place (1) to protect children and vulnerable persons from abuse, (2) to help prevent the opportunity for the occurrence and the appearance of abuse of children and vulnerable persons and (2) to help protect staff and volunteers from false accusations and suspicions.

The following policy and procedures are not based on a lack of trust in workers, but are intended to protect our children, vulnerable persons, staff, volunteers and the entire church body. Careful and confidential documentation is essential to show compliance with policies, to verify information as needed, and to have an accurate record in the case of an incident.

Scope of Policy

This policy and its provisions shall apply to all persons including all paid and unpaid adults, whether lay or clergy who have any direct or indirect contact with children and vulnerable persons who participate in activities or events directed toward communities of such persons sponsored by First Methodist Church of Cameron.

Definition of Adult, Youth, Minor, Children, and Vulnerable Person

- *Adult* is a person who is (18) years of age or older.
- *Youth* is a person generally (12) - (18) years of age and would ordinarily be in 6th-12th grade in public school.
- *Minor* is a person who is (0) - (11) years of age.
- *Children* include Minors and Youth, i.e. all persons (0) - (18) years of age.
- *Vulnerable Persons* are adults who have functional, physical, and/or mental inability to care for themselves. (Note: Vulnerable Persons can also be children who are otherwise covered by this policy)

Definition of Childcare Provider, Youth helper, and Leader

- *Leader* is an adult who is an employee or volunteer with children or vulnerable persons. It is recommended that adult leaders of youth (12-18 years of age) be at least 20 years of age or older.
- *Childcare provider* is someone eighteen (18) years of age or older designated to have direct oversight over the immediate needs and welfare of Minors.
- *Youth Helper* is a Youth who is at least five (5) years older than the oldest Minor whenever possible; and who is supervised by a Leader or Childcare Provider.

Supervision

To achieve compliance with our Safe Sanctuary policy, it may be necessary to combine groups; recruit, train, and reference additional volunteers/staff; or cancel an event. Recognizing there is safety in numbers, children and youth will be instructed to use the “buddy system.” It is also strongly encouraged that there be present at least one leader who is trained and certified in First Aid and CPR.

General Principles

Activity Observation in rooms is essential and may be done through windows, open doors, glass doors, electronic technology, etc.

Two-Adult Rule shall be observed whenever possible. The Two-Adult Rule is defined as having two (2) adults per room and/or within line of sight of each other.

Rule-of-Three shall be observed at all times. Understanding that there is safety in numbers, one adult can be in contact with multiple children, but shall never be alone with a single child who is not their own without the express awareness of a second adult.

Pop-in Observation is a less-than-ideal measure which might become necessary. When a group is gathered with only one supervisory Leader or Childcare Provider, a second designated Leader will be assigned to randomly visit the group unannounced. This measure ensures that the Leader or Childcare Provider is held accountable to every moment of their interaction with children or vulnerable persons. Pop-in Observation will only be used upon the approval of the event leader on a case-by-case basis.

Physical Boundaries shall be understood as exclusively under the control of the adult persons working with children or vulnerable persons. The Church believes that appropriate personal relationships between adults, children, and vulnerable persons of the Church foster the Community of Christ. Common expressions of affection, affirmation, support, and/or physical caretaking are acceptable. However, they may not always be appropriate. Staff and volunteers shall take careful consideration to ensure that physical boundaries are kept and remain appropriate at all times.

Supervision for Nursery/Childcare

- There shall be a minimum of one (1) Childcare Provider and one (1) Leader per room, whenever possible.
- Exception to allow 1 Childcare Provider/1 Youth Helper may be made with the approval of the event leader on a case-by-case basis.
- Exception to allow Pop-In Observation may be made with the approval of the event leader on a case-by-case basis.
- Whenever possible, State Childcare Minimum Standards shall be followed, particularly in relation to the number of childcare providers to child ratio.

Supervision of Minors and Youth

- The Two Adult Rule shall be observed whenever possible.
- Exception to allow 1 Leader/1 Youth Helper may be made with the approval of the event leader on a case-by-case basis.
- Exception to allow Pop-In Observation, may be made with the approval of the event leader on a case-by-case basis.
- One-to-one mentoring or counseling shall be conducted in sight of another leader whenever possible. Exception to allow public space one-to-one mentoring with Youth may be made with the approval of the event leader on a case-by-case basis and following the Rule of Three.

- When taking Minors to the restroom, Leaders should stay out of the restroom and supervise at the open door. If any assistance is needed (especially with young Minors), ask another Leader to be present with you.

Overnight Accommodations

Two (2) leaders shall be present in every room whenever possible. Recognizing accommodations may be restrictive in some cases one leader is adequate, so long as any one leader shall NOT be alone with any one-child/youth. Whenever possible a male leader and a female leader shall both accompany co-ed groups, but we strongly recommend all efforts be made to accommodate male and female groups in separate spaces.

Technology/Social Media

Given the increased use of technology and social media in the life of the church and its individual members, faith communities have a responsibility to define social media policies that uphold the covenant to create Safe Sanctuaries for children and vulnerable persons. We consider the digital spaces in which we gather to be an extension of our physical spaces. Therefore the general principles of this policy apply to digital spaces, with these particular considerations:

- All Church organized social media groups associated with children and vulnerable persons should be designated as “closed” groups, requiring approval to gain access. Administrators will be designated by church staff.
- Photos of children and vulnerable persons may only be published on social media after a photo release has been signed by their guardian. Photos must not include any identifying information without permission.
- Photos posted to social media must have express or implicit approval of page administrators. Adult staff and volunteers should not identify children or vulnerable persons in photographs posted online or in print. Individuals are welcome to identify (i.e. “tag”) themselves.
- When emailing, texting, posting, or messaging a child or vulnerable person, adults should copy another adult (ideally a parent or guardian) on the message, or post it in a public venue. This will allow adults to maintain the Two-Adult Rule principle when using social media.
- Staff and volunteers shall never initiate a connection (friending, following, etc.) on social media. If a child or vulnerable person initiates a connection, that individual’s parent or guardian as well as the volunteer or staff member’s supervisor shall be notified.
- If an adult leader receives a private text from a child or vulnerable person that seems questionable, the leader should immediately end the conversation in the virtual space and offer opportunities to follow up in compliance with the earlier guidelines of this policy.
- Platforms promising discrete conversations and secrecy (SnapChat, etc.) shall not be used by staff or volunteers to contact children or vulnerable persons.

Definition of Abuse

- *Sexual Abuse* is a form of child abuse that includes sexual activity with a minor. A child cannot consent to any form of sexual activity. Child sexual abuse does not have to include physical contact between a perpetrator and a child. Sexual abuse includes, but is not limited to, exposing oneself; fondling; intercourse; masturbation in the presence of a child or forcing the child to masturbate; obscene phone calls, text message, or digital interaction; producing, owning, or sharing pornographic images or movies of children; sex of any kind with a child; sex trafficking; any other sexual conduct that is harmful to a child’s mental, emotional, or physical welfare.
- *Neglect* is the failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision to the degree that the child’s health, safety, and well-being are threatened with harm.

- *Physical Abuse* is any non-accidental physical injury to the child and can include striking, kicking, burning, or biting the child, or any action that results in a physical impairment of the child. In Texas, physical abuse also includes acts or circumstances that threaten the child with harm or create a substantial risk of harm to the child's health or welfare; and human trafficking, labor trafficking, involuntary servitude, and trafficking of minors.
- *Emotional Abuse* injury to the psychological capacity or emotional stability of the child as evidenced by an observable or substantial change in behavior, emotional response, or cognition, and injury as evidenced by anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or aggressive behavior.

Screening for Staff, Leaders, and Childcare Providers

Careful screening is one way to prevent the abuse of children and vulnerable persons. Screening calls for a careful gathering and review of information in search of those who can provide safe and caring supervision in a safe environment.

Paid Employment Procedures

1. Prior to paid employment, each prospective applicant shall complete the application/consent form. By signing the form, the applicant gives permission to the local congregation to contact references and perform a legal background check to complete the review of the application.
2. The local church is responsible for conducting references for screening. This will be done through the local church office.
3. The Pastor shall receive the completed forms and reports and review them in consultation with the Administrative Board. If any of the reports raise questions about fitness of the applicant, the Administrative Board may disapprove the application. We reserve the right to turn away any persons for service.
4. If the paid applicant is found to have been involved in any activity in which the applicant abused or exploited children or vulnerable persons, the applicant will not be approved. Any conviction of a crime against children or vulnerable persons shall disqualify any applicant.
5. Results of screens shall be kept confidential.

Paid Staff or Unpaid Volunteer Procedures

1. Prior to service, volunteers shall complete a consent form that will be kept on file in the church office. By signing the form, the applicant gives permission for screening to include a background check.
2. Staff and volunteers will be trained to understand the procedures and stipulations of this policy.
3. Staff and volunteers will be tested on their knowledge of the policy and training. Results of this test will be kept in the local church office as evidence of the training and consent to follow the policy.

Persons having a criminal history of any of the following types of offenses shall not be allowed to serve in direct or indirect contact in any ministry with children or vulnerable persons:

- Child abuse, whether physical, emotional, sexual, or neglectful.
- Violent offenses, including murder, rape, assault, domestic violence, etc.
- Persons having a Criminal History of DUI or DWI conviction within the five (5) years immediately prior to application shall not be allowed to act as a driver.
- Persons having a Criminal History of a drug related conviction with the five (5) years immediately prior to application.

Training

First Methodist Church of Cameron shall develop and implement training and orientation procedures for all persons, staff or volunteers, who have direct or indirect contact with children and/or vulnerable persons through ministry programs directed to such persons. Training shall include but is not limited to appropriate discipline, appropriate physical and emotional boundaries, leader misconduct, and this policy. No staff person or volunteer shall, after December 31, 2022, have any direct or indirect contact with children and/or vulnerable persons through ministry programs directed to such persons until they have completed this training program. We recommend that once a year a review of this policy is conducted prior to September 1.

Reporting of Incidents

Concerns about suspected or actual abuse should only be shared with the staff or volunteer's supervisor and should not be discussed with other co-workers or volunteers. Keep a written record of your concerns and follow-up actions. Name specific behaviors and state your reaction. Call 9-1-1 in an emergency.

1. Address the immediate needs the child or vulnerable person may have, medical or otherwise.
2. The incident shall be immediately reported to the event leader. If the event leader is the person suspected of abuse (i.e. "respondent"), then the report should be made directly to the pastor.
3. The Pastor shall be notified of the incident. If the Pastor is the respondent, then the Pastor's presiding elder and the President of the Administrative Board shall be notified.
4. The incident shall also be reported legally in accordance with Texas State Laws. (The State of Texas has a mandatory reporting law meaning if you witness or suspect abuse, you must legally report the incident).
5. It shall be the sole responsibility of the event leader or their supervisor on staff to inform the parent(s) and/or legal guardian(s) of the child(ren) or vulnerable person(s) involved.
6. The respondent shall, for the safety and well being of the children or vulnerable persons, be removed with dignity from further contact with children and vulnerable persons until the matter is resolved. The matter shall remain confidential.
7. The event leader and/or pastor shall document the report, with special attention given to such details as:
 - a. The name of the leader observing or receiving the disclosure of abuse, including the date, time and place, and any action taken by this person.
 - b. The alleged victim's name, age, and date of birth.
 - c. Any statement made by the alleged victim.
 - d. Name of the respondent, the date, time, and place of any statement made by the respondent.
 - e. Any action taken, i.e. suspension of the respondent.
 - f. Date and time of call to the appropriate agency, name of worker spoken to, content of that conversation and case number assigned.
 - g. Date and time of call to law enforcement agency, name of officer spoken to and content of that conversation.
 - h. Date and time of any other contacts made regarding this incident.
8. It shall be the goal to provide supportive care to both the victim and the respondent and to restore such persons to wholeness. Supportive care can include the procedures of the criminal justice system, provision of the current *Transitional Book of Doctrines of Discipline of the Global Methodist Church*, appropriate counseling referrals and continued pastoral visitation.
9. A written report of incidents of suspected abuse will be retained confidentially at the church office.

Media Response

The presiding elder shall be informed of all investigations or allegations of abuse. If investigations or allegations of abuse should come to the attention of the media, a response shall come from a person designated by the presiding elder. Refer all inquiries to the spokesperson. **Do not give out any information, simply state that all inquiries will be answered by your spokesperson.**