

North Alabama Conference UMC  
Safe Sanctuary Policy  
Adopted June 3, 2011

1. Introduction

The North Alabama Conference of The United Methodist Church seeks to create a safe environment for children and youth in which opportunities for abuse are minimized by the provision of proper enlistment and supervision of those persons working with them. This document contains theological foundations, definitions of child abuse, policies and procedures related to prevention, response, and reporting.

2. Theological Foundation

**Our Biblical Mandate:**

“Then Jesus took a little child and put her among them; and taking her in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’” (paraphrase of Mark 9:36- 37) 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 your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matthew 18:6)

**Our Commitment in Baptism:**

The Church, above all institutions, is called to welcome and nurture the child. Our goal is to maintain a safe, secure, loving place where children may grow and where those who care for them may administer to their needs in responsible ways.

**Our Mandate:**

The 1996 General Conference approved a resolution that called upon local churches and annual conferences to institute policies and procedures to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse in our churches and church-related activities. We, in the North Alabama Conference, accept the nature of this call and seek to expand it to include all forms of child abuse or neglect that could be possible in these settings or that could come to our attention regarding children in our care.

**Statement of Covenant:**

We uphold the idea that to report abuse is to be a witness to the world of the love and justice of God and fully recognize that reporting abuse is a form of ministering to the needs of those crying out for help. Simply, to report abuse can help to stop existing and prevent further abuse.

As caring Christians, we are also committed to protect and advocate for children, youth, and vulnerable adults participating in the life of the church. The Church, at all levels of its organization, is entrusted with the responsibility of providing an emotionally and physically safe, spiritually grounded, healthy environment for children, youth, and adults in which they are protected from abuse. Additionally, we care for abused children and their families by offering resources that will contribute to healing. Further, we recognize the grace that God gives in upholding Christian community; and we will look for grace-filled ways of dealing with both the victim and the accused.

3. Definitions

Child - a person under 18 years of age (§ 26-16-2, Ala. Code 1975).

Conference-The North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church

Volunteer - a person 18 years of age or older who assists in conducting children’s activities under the supervision of a staff person

Paid staff - any person employed by the Conference who is responsible for activities involving children

Child abuse - harm or threatened harm to a child's health or welfare by a person responsible for the child's health or welfare or by a person in a position of trust, which harm occurs or is threatened through non-accidental physical or mental injury or sexual abuse (§ 26-16-2, Ala. Code 1975)

Sexual abuse - any touching of the sexual or other intimate parts of a child or any other conduct or action done for the purpose of gratifying the sexual desire of either party either (1) through physical force that overcomes earnest resistance or a threat, express or implied, that places a child in fear of immediate death or serious physical injury to himself or another person, or (2) by a person 18 years old or older against another who is less than 16 years old, or by a person four or more years older than the victim (§ 13A-6-60, § 13A-6-66, Ala. Code 1975)

Neglect - Harm to a child's health or welfare by a person responsible for the child's health or welfare which occurs through negligent treatment, including the failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, or medical care (§ 26-16-2, Ala. Code 1975)

Verbal Abuse – spoken or unspoken violence or emotional cruelty against a child

Ritual Abuse – regular intentional physical, sexual, or psychological violations of a child to appeal to a higher authority of power

Vulnerable Adult (“Adult in Need of Protective Services”) – Any person 18 years of age or older whose behavior indicates that he or she is mentally incapable of adequately caring for himself or herself and his or her interests without serious consequences to himself or herself or others, or who, because of physical or mental impairment, is unable to protect himself or herself from abuse, neglect, exploitation, sexual abuse, or emotional abuse by others, and who has no guardian, relative or other appropriate person able, willing and available to assume the kind and degree of protection and supervision required under the circumstances. (§ 38-9-2(1), Ala. Code 1975)

#### 4. Screening Procedures for Volunteers and Paid Staff working with Children and Youth

All persons, including Conference staff who intend to work with children at Conference-sponsored events, including overnight or longer events, must also be properly screened and attend an age-appropriate orientation/training session on child protection and abuse and have current background check. Documentation of this training will be kept in a confidential file maintained at the Conference Office.

##### Screening and Supervisory Procedures and Policies

- Written job description and/or expectations provided and must be signed and dated.
- An application/personal information form shall be completed. It will include: name and address, social security number, date of birth, race, phone number, emergency contact information, gifts, skills, relevant experience/training, education, two work-related references, church membership and number of years, pastor's name and phone number and a brief statement of reason for seeking position.
- Must complete and sign consent form authorizing criminal background check and a drug/alcohol screen.
- A background check should be provided for anyone staying overnight or longer. i.e. weekend retreats, summer camps. Backgrounds check must be renewed every three years.
- Personal interviews with summary documentation will be conducted by Safe Sanctuary team or Conference staff representative and kept in a confidential file maintained at the Conference Office.
- References will be checked with summary documentation in a confidential file and maintained at the Conference Office.

Guidelines for Volunteer and Paid Staff working with Children and Youth at Conference-sponsored events:

- Persons should be at least five (5) years older than the age group with whom they are to work.
- Persons leading a group of child or youth should be eighteen (18) years of age or older.
- Six month rule: Any Volunteer working with children must be a member or attend regularly in the local church for at least six months.
- Two-adult rule: Two non-related adults must always be present in groups of children except in emergency situations and where not reasonably feasible.
- When the two-adult rule is not feasible, the adult supervisor will be required to spot check or make unannounced visits as necessary.
- Doors are never to be locked and are to remain open unless equipped with windows. Staff and Volunteers will avoid being alone with a child without being visible to others in the immediate surroundings.

Again, all Conference Staff and Volunteers will be required to read and sign that they understand the guidelines for working with children/youth at conference events.

Overnight trips/events: Adult chaperones with children/youth must be the same gender, must never share a bed with a child/youth or be alone in the room with them at any time. Large room multiple bunk settings allow two same gender adults to sleep with children/youth.

All parent/leaders should have documented contact information exchange and event information.

Transportation recommendations:

- All drivers should be screened including a review of their motor vehicle record.
- If using church bus, trustee guidelines for use of church owned vehicles should be followed.
- When using private vehicles for church-related events, adult must provide updated insurance and follow the two adult rule in each vehicle.
- All children/youth must provide a permission/liability form with emergency information signed by their parent/guardian. These are to be kept with the leader at all times during the travel event.

## 5. Reporting Procedures

With the exception of child daycare or school programs within the church setting, the Alabama statute on mandated reporting of suspected child abuse/neglect does not specifically require a faith-based ministry to report child abuse. The law does, however, encourage voluntary reporting, and the Conference supports and encourages voluntary reporting. In keeping with Christian beliefs that children should not be abused or neglected, the North Alabama Conference ministries will practice and advocate voluntary compliance with the Alabama statute on reporting of known or suspected abuse/neglect of children and vulnerable adults. Allegations of suspected abuse/neglect will be reported to the Department of Human Resources and local law enforcement. The North Alabama Conference will advocate for the adoption of this policy in the local church setting. Nothing in this policy is intended to call upon a pastor to violate the confidentiality of confession or clergy counseling relationships. However, as "mandatory" reporters under Alabama's child abuse and neglect statute, pastors are encouraged to report known or suspected cases of child abuse or neglect, even if the pastor learns of the abuse or neglect in the course of a confidential communication. If possible, the pastor should alert a person of the pastor's obligation and commitment so that the person, during a counseling session or other confidential communication setting, may choose not to share the information about the child abuse or neglect with the pastor.

Being mindful of the complex nature of Child Abuse Reporting, training and consultation will be available to both clergy and laypersons to prepare them for a faithful response. Dual relationships will be included in this training/consultation, e.g., clergy who are also involved in secular agencies (foster care, mental health, etc.).

Incidents of known or suspected abuse/neglect will be reported to the Safe Sanctuary team or representative and the team or representative will report to DHR within 24 hours. Immediate notification will also be communicated to the District Superintendent.

## 6. Response Procedures

A quick, compassionate and unified response to an alleged incident of child abuse is expected. All allegations will be taken seriously. Conference personnel are not to undertake an investigation of the incident. However, in all cases of reported or observed abuse in a children's activity, the entire staff of that activity shall be at the service of all official investigating agencies.

The Bishop and/or his/her designee are the only person/s authorized to make statements to representatives of the media. All requests for statements should be directed to the Director of Communication. Training in how to handle media requests should be a regular part of Conference staff training. A spirit of cooperation in helping the media find the "official spokesperson" is crucial.

If the allegation concerns activities or persons outside any relationship to a Conference-related event or activity, it is the responsibility of the staff person in charge of the Conference activity to make the initial contact to the appropriate authorities and/or agencies.

If the allegation is against a Conference staff person or volunteer or if it occurred in the course of a Conference children's or youth activity, the staff person in charge of the activity shall immediately report the incident to the Bishop or a District Superintendent, who shall then determine the appropriate action(s) to be taken.

(Camp Sumatanga will continue to use the Reporting of Incidents procedures already in place as well as the Camp's Injury/Accident Response procedures when appropriate.)