

# CHILD PROTECTION POLICY

Medina United Methodist Church

Medina, Ohio

## I. Introduction

"People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them 'Let the children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly, I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.'" (Mark 10:13-16)

This incident from the ministry of Jesus speaks of the value our Lord placed on children and the example of faith that they provide for the rest of us. As followers of Jesus, we understand that children/youth are inherently valuable members of Christ's community.

Jesus highlighted not only the faith and openness of children, but also their vulnerability. This vulnerability puts children at risk, but it also places them close to God. Their dependence on God may be what Jesus was trying to get his disciples to see as a model for their own faith. This vulnerability and dependence makes the protection and support of the community of faith even more important. Jesus was teaching that, within the community of believers, there must be protection for each of us in our dependence on God and on each other. As followers of Christ, we resolve to protect children in their vulnerability and also to learn from them as we all grow in the faith.

Our culture appears to be experiencing an increase in the incidence of child abuse and neglect. As much as we do not like to think about abusive and hurtful things happening in the church, it is clear that it is our duty as the Church to guard and protect the children, youth, church staff and volunteers who participate in our ministries.

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

"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 and sexual exploitation, and abuse.'

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children. Child sexual abuse, exploitation and ritual abuse...occur 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. Most annual conferences can cite specific incidents of child sexual abuse and exploitation in their churches. Virtually every congregation has among its members adult survivors of early sexual trauma.

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

God calls us to make our churches safe places, protecting children and other vulnerable persons from sexual and ritual abuse. 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—1996*. pp. 384-386.) Since the 1996 General Conference, every annual conference in the U.S. has reported at least one incident of child abuse.

Thus, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, we adopt this policy for the prevention of child abuse in our church.

## II. Purpose

The purpose of the Child Protection Policy of the Medina United Methodist Church is to:

1. provide procedures specifically designed to protect children, youth, church staff and volunteers associated with the ministries of the church
2. establish appropriate ways of responding to alleged, reported, or suspected incidents of abuse.
3. be in a compassionate ministry with all affected persons -- the alleged victim, the alleged victim's family, the accused, the family of the accused, and the church family.

We hereby resolve to put into practice the procedures set forth herein with the intent to:

1. safeguard the children/youth of our church from abuse and neglect.
2. respond to all allegations in a fair and compassionate manner.
3. protect church staff and volunteers from potential false allegations of abuse.
4. limit the extent of our church's legal risk and liability.
5. strengthen our Christian educational children/youth ministries.

## PROCEDURES TO SUPPORT THE CHILD PROTECTION POLICY

### I. Definition of Abuse

"Child abuse" is defined in accordance with current Ohio law. At the time this policy was being written/adopted, the current law in Ohio defined child abuse to consist of any of the following:

1. Engaging in any sexual activity with a child, as defined under Chapter 2907 of the Ohio Revised Code; or
2. Endangering a child, as defined in Section 2919.22 of the Ohio Revised Code\*\*; or
3. Denial, as a means of punishment, of proper necessary subsistence, education, medical care, or other care necessary to a child for the child's health; or
4. Use of restraint procedures on a child that cause injury or pain; or
5. Administration of prescription drugs to a child without the written approval and ongoing supervision of a licensed physician; or
6. Providing alcoholic beverages or controlled substances to a child; or
7. Commission of any intentional act that results in any injury or death to a child; or
8. Infliction of physical or mental injury that threatens to harm a child's health, welfare, or safety.

\*\*In its present form, this law defines "child endangerment" to include any of the following: (1) abuse; or (2) torture or cruel abuse; or (3) corporal punishment or other physical discipline (e.g., such as spankings) or prolonged cruel restraint, which is excessive under the circumstances, and which could likely physically injure the child; or (4) repeated, uncalled-for discipline which if continued, would seriously impair the child's mental health or development; or (5) involving the child in any obscene, sexually-oriented, or nudity oriented activity or conduct.

## **II. Selection and screening of church staff and volunteers**

Although our Christian concern for children/youth leads us to be saddened when any form of child abuse takes place anywhere, our major policy need is to be certain that abuse does not occur within the framework of any Medina United Methodist Church program or ministry with children/youth. This policy is intended to help our congregation make the Medina United Methodist Church a truly safe and caring place.

In an effort to create a safe environment within our church, each church staff person and volunteer who works with the church's children/youth programs will be screened and will be informed of child protection procedures.

The procedure for selecting and screening is as follows:

1. Each person being considered to work with children/youth in any church program, whether as a volunteer or paid staff person, shall read the Child Protection Policy and complete and sign an application form. The form includes a convictions statement attesting that the applicant has never been convicted of a child abuse charge and a statement of compliancy agreeing to abide by the church's Child Protection Policy and Procedures.
2. Before placing the applicant in a position of responsibility, the pastor, church staff member or lay person responsible for the ministry will review the written application and contact the references.
3. Each volunteer shall complete a Background Check Authorization form for submission to the agency contracted by the Medina United Methodist Church for a volunteer background check.

In the unfortunate situation where it is determined, based on the information obtained through the application, references, and/or volunteer background check, that an applicant should not work with children or youth, a pastor or the Christian Education director will review the information with the applicant. The church is to handle such a decision in a confidential manner which is sensitive to that person.

Volunteer applications and Background Check Authorizations are treated as confidential material and will be in a secured file in the church office for the length of the volunteer's service.

Active volunteers will be re-screened no less than every 3 years; a notification letter will be sent informing a volunteer prior to a re-screening.

## **III. Supervision of children and youth**

While recognizing the important role of youth volunteers in children/youth ministries, all activities involving children and youth will be supervised by at least one person who is at least eighteen years of age and at least five years older than those whom they are supervising.

Supervision of Classroom Activities:

It is preferable that at least two adults be present for all classroom activities involving children and youth. When two adults are not available, a designated person will periodically check the rooms and be aware of the children/youth's whereabouts if they leave the classroom area. Even when two adults are available per classroom, it is advisable to have periodic classroom checks. While recognizing the important role of youth volunteers in children/youth ministries, in an effort to assure a safe environment, all activities involving children and youth will be supervised by at least one person who is at least eighteen years of age and at least five years older than those whom they are supervising.

Open Door Policy:

Parents, volunteers, or staff of the church may visit and observe the program at any time.

Sign-in/Sign-Out Procedure:

Persons responsible for children who are infant through third grade will sign in their child and indicate the pre-authorized person(s) to whom the child may be signed out for both Sunday school and other children's activities. No child should ever be left unattended. Any child/youth left for thirty minutes or more after a program or activity is over will be turned over to the authorities if their parent(s) or guardian cannot be located.

#### Record Retention:

All children/youth activities should have a written record of the names of participants and supervisors. Records shall be kept for three years.

#### Supervision of Non-Classroom Activities:

With the exception of the circumstances identified under Special Rules for Supervision of Specific Activities, at least two adults will be present for all non-classroom activities involving children/youth.

#### Special Rules for Supervision of Specific Activities:

1. Youth Counseling: In instances of youth counseling where circumstances dictate that counseling is most effective on a one-on-one basis, a church staff person or volunteer may meet individually with a child or youth with the awareness and previous consent of that individual's parent or legal guardian. Exceptions to consent may be made for emergencies.
2. Dismissal from Group Events: In group events, it may be inevitable that one child or youth's transportation from the event arrives after all other children/youth's transportation has arrived. In those circumstances, a child/youth may unavoidably be in the individual presence of an adult. Because this circumstance may be simply unavoidable, the general rule which requires the presence of two adults is suspended and the adult is responsible for exercising his/her best judgment for the child or youth's well-being.

#### Trip and Retreat Supervision:

There shall be at least two adults present for all trips, retreats, and other times children/youth gather at or away from the church building. (Please note that at least three adults are preferable so that in the event of an emergency, there will be adequate supervision.)

There shall be at least one adult of each gender present at co-ed overnight events. At single gender overnight events, at least one of the two or more adults present will be of the same gender as the children/youth.

In situations where two adults are not available per room where children/youth are staying overnight, then no adult should stay alone in a specific room with the children/youth. In those circumstances where adults are not staying in the rooms with children/youth, special measures should be taken to assure the children/youth's safety and supervision, such as adult hall monitors, "taping" doors, and periodic room checks by two adults of the same gender as those being checked. Parents should be made aware of housing accommodations.

Permission slips including permission for emergency medical care shall be carried by the person in charge of each trip and/or retreat.

#### Rules for providing transportation for church events:

- Driver must be known to the designated leader of the event
- Driver must be at least twenty-one years old
- Driver must have a valid state driver's license for the vehicle being operated
- Driver must have proof of insurance

- Driver must be accompanied by at least two children or youth
- Driver may transport only as many passengers as there are working seatbelts in the vehicle being used
- Driver must have read and signed an acknowledgment form indicating that the policy has been read and will be followed

#### **IV. Response by Church Workers to Injuries and Accidents**

In order to assure proper attention was given to an injury, illness or accident, an incident report must be completed by the adult supervisor within 2 hours of the incident whenever a child/youth is injured.

#### **V. Response by Church Workers to Allegations of Abuse**

As caring Christians, we are committed to protect and advocate for children/youth participating in the life of the church. The Church is entrusted to provide an emotionally safe, spiritually grounded, healthy environment for children, youth and adults in which they are protected from abuse. It is our legal and moral responsibility to report suspected abuse whenever it comes to our attention regardless of where that abuse takes place. We shall report suspected abuse to stop potentially existing abuse and to prevent further abuse. To report abuse is to witness to the world of the love and justice of God Reporting abuse is a form of ministering to the needs of those crying out for help. If abuse occurs, it is our intention to act as an advocate for all affected persons, providing support, information, assistance and intervention. We seek to provide a supportive atmosphere, offering both objectivity and empathy as we seek to create a climate in which healing can take place.

If abuse is suspected by, observed by or disclosed to a volunteer and/or paid staff member of the church, that person shall report the incident immediately to the Director of Christian Education. (If the accused is Director of Christian Education, the pastor shall handle reporting the incident.) Be prepared to do the following:

*Please note: many steps should be done simultaneously.*

- IMMEDIATELY notify the proper authorities (children services board, the county department of human services exercising the children services function, or a local law enforcement agency in the county in which the child resides or in which the suspected abuse occurred.) This is a requirement of the law. (Reference section 2151.421 of the Ohio Revised Code.) Do not attempt an investigation. This should be left to professionals who are familiar with these cases.
- Simultaneously notify the parents of the victim and take whatever steps are necessary to assure the safety of the child/youth until the parent(s) arrive. It is important to emphasize that the proper authorities must be notified even if the parent(s) does not wish the incident to be reported.

Note: If one or both of the parents is the alleged abuser, contact the proper authorities. Follow their advise about notification of the parents.

- Take any allegations seriously and reach out to the victim and the victim's family. Showing care and support help to prevent further hurt. Extend whatever pastoral resources are needed. Remember that the care and safety of the victim is the first priority. Respond in a positive and supportive manner to the alleged victim and the victim's family.
- After having reported the suspected abuse to the proper authorities, the incident is to be reported immediately to the church's attorney, the church's insurance company, and the district superintendent. The district superintendent will report the allegation to the bishop's office. Do not try to handle this without professional assistance. If the accused is a clergy member of an annual conference, local pastor, or diaconal minister, provisions of Paragraph 358 and paragraphs 2623-2629 of *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* must be followed.
- A written report of the basic information shall be kept to ensure on-going ministry to, and advocacy for, victims and others involved. A form for this purpose shall be available in the church office. The report shall be brief and

contain only factual information relevant to the situation. It shall be filed in a secure place in order to ensure confidentiality. It shall be written in ink or typed to prevent it from being changed. The church must also file a copy of the report with the bishop's office of the East Ohio Conference, where it shall remain confidential.

- Immediately, yet with dignity and respect for the sacred worth of the accused, remove the accused from further involvement with children and/or youth.
- Once the proper authorities have been contacted and the safety of the child or youth is secured, the pastor or other designated person may tell the accused that a report has been made. If the accused is a volunteer or paid staff of the church, that person shall be relieved temporarily of his or her duties until the investigation is finished. If the accused is a paid staff person of the church, arrangements should be made to either maintain or suspend his or her income until the allegations are cleared or sustained.
- Any contact with the media should be handled by a pre-determined spokesperson. Care will be taken to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of all involved. The spokesperson should generally convey that the matter is under investigation and any comments made prior to the conclusion of the investigation would be premature.

## **VI. Education of Persons Who Work With Children and Youth**

The church shall provide regularly scheduled training focused on issues of child protection for those working with children and youth. Attendance at this training or a district or conference sponsored training session shall be required of all adults and youth helpers who will have direct contact with children or youth in the church's ministry.

The training may include:

1. The definition and recognition of abuse
2. The church's policies on reporting abuse and appropriate forms
3. The purposes of the policy as protection for children/youth and for church staff/volunteer workers
4. The meaning and importance of confidentiality
5. The maintenance of a positive learning classroom environment, including appropriate discipline and age-level characteristics
6. The appropriate behavior for teachers and leaders

## ADDENDUM TO CHILD PROTECTION POLICY

The Child Protection Policy is always the resource to reference for policies and procedures. If something is not referenced in the Child Protection Policy, then common sense should prevail. In any emergency situation questions may be directed to the Director of Christian Education, our Legal Counsel, or any of the Church Administrators of Staff. Copies of the Child Protection Policy are located in the Church Office. Forms for field trip drivers, parental permission for child/youth participation, and medical treatment authorization are located in the Church Office. Incident report forms are located in each classroom, in First Aid boxes, and in the Church Office. The Profile to Work/Volunteer with Children and/or Youth files are located in the Church Office.

The following are suggestions for specific situations:

**Illness:** If you suspect a child/youth may be ill, the parents(s)/guardian(s) should be contacted and asked to pick up the child/youth to prevent the spread of any contagious illness and in the best interests of the affected child.

**Discipline:** Any child/youth who is uncooperative and/or disruptive should be asked to correct his/her behavior. Under no circumstance will a child/youth be punished by a volunteer or staff person in any way that may result in physical harm or by complete isolation. If a child/youth continues inappropriate behavior, the Director of Christian Education or Youth Pastor should be notified to discuss the situation with the parents or guardians.

**First Aid:** First Aid supplies are available in the Church Office and on each floor of the building. A kit must be taken with a group that is leaving the church building, and may be obtained in the Church Office.

**Attendance:** All children/youth need to be registered for the program they are attending. Registration cards will be in the Sunday School boxes and additional cards are located in the Church Office. Attendance must be taken at every program session and at every special event. The attendance records should indicate all children, youth, and adults present, and must be retained by the Church Office for one calendar year.

**Materials:** Additional supplies for classroom use are located on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, Room 309, and in designated cabinets in Room 205. Volunteers may purchase additional supplies with prior approval of the Christian Education Director or Youth Director. Receipts are required for reimbursement.

**Snacks:** The Medina United Methodist Church is a peanut-free environment as indicated by notices posted by classrooms. Approved snacks are available in Room 301 and in the kitchen snack supply cupboard. Donated snacks may be used only if the item is listed on the "safe snack list" posted by each classroom. Additional label scrutiny is required.