

Highlands United Methodist Church
Highlands, North Carolina
Smoky Mountain District
Western North Carolina Conference of the UMC

Safer Sanctuary Policy & Procedures

Contents of Policy and Procedure

The Highlands United Methodist Church Safe Sanctuary Policy includes the following:

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Introduction

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 the statement:

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes (a) child...welcomes me" (Matthew 18:5). Children are our present and our future, our hope, our teachers, our inspiration. They are full participants in the life of the church and in the realm of God.

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 Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to the little ones, the children. The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church states, "children must be protected from economic, physical, emotional and sexual exploitation and abuse (§162C).

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children. Child sexual abuse, exploitation, and ritual abuse ("ritual abuse" refers to abusive acts committed as part of ceremonies or rites; ritual abusers are often related to cults, or pretend to be) 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 within 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 2000, p. 180-181. Copyright © 2000 by The United Methodist Publishing House.)

Thus, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, we adopted our original Safe Sanctuary policy for the prevention of child abuse and neglect in our church and in accordance to the mandate by the 2005 Session of the Western North Carolina Annual Conference.

In 2023, with the publishing of the new resource: *Safer Sanctuaries: Nurturing Trust within Faith Communities*, we revised, updated, and approved this new policy and procedure document.

Church's Statement of Covenant

Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to those who cannot protect themselves. We affirm this responsibility at each person's baptism by our congregational response, pledging: *"With God's help we will so order our lives after the example of Christ, that this person, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal."* (Book of Worship, Baptismal Covenant, Congregational Pledge, 11)

As a Christian community of faith, we pledge to conduct the ministry of the gospel in ways that assure the safety and spiritual growth of all children, youth and vulnerable adults as well as those who serve in ministry with and to them. As such:

- We will follow reasonable safety measures in the screening and selection of leadership, both paid and volunteer.
- We will implement prudent operational procedures in all programs, events and ministries.
- We will educate all our leadership - both paid and volunteer - with children, youth and vulnerable adults regarding the use of all appropriate policies and methods.
- We will have a clearly defined procedure to reporting an observed or suspected incident of abuse that conforms to the requirements of state law, and we will be prepared to respond to media inquiries if an incident occurs.

Nothing in this policy or procedure is designed to hinder or prevent the investigation or suspected, reported or confirmed violations of any North Carolina criminal laws.

Scope of Policy & Procedures

This policy shall apply to all activities sponsored by Highlands UMC, regardless of location, as well as any activities utilizing its facilities.

Outside groups utilizing the church's facilities shall be required to adhere to this policy or adopt and adhere to equivalent policies. Where the two policies are in conflict, the more conservative approach shall be taken.

The church shall have adequate liability insurance for all ministries, including sexual abuse or misconduct coverage.

Definitions

For the purpose of this policy, we will use the following terms:

- Child or youth: Any person under the age of 18
- Adult: Any person 18 years or older
- Vulnerable adult: Any person 18 years or older who is in need of special care, support or protection due to diminished physical, mental or emotional capacities or at risk of abuse due to the power dynamics of the situation (e.g. mission work or visitation ministries)
- Leader: Any adult - paid or volunteer - who has supervision or management responsibilities for an event, program or ministry

Procedures

We will follow reasonable safety measures in the screening and selection of leadership, both paid and volunteer.

Screening and Selection

- All persons volunteering in leadership with children, youth or vulnerable adults shall be:
 - An active participant of the local church for at least six months.
 - At least 18 years of age.
 - At least five years older than the oldest person they are supervising/leading.
 - Exception: This does not apply to adults in ministry with vulnerable adults.
- As part of the selection process, applicants (paid and volunteer) must:
 - Submit an application and personal reference.
 - Participate in an interview process as determined by the Pastor/staff overseeing the ministry area.
 - Consent to a background check.
- All applications and references will be reviewed by the Pastor/staff overseeing the ministry area.
- There will be a designated staff member who will communicate with the background check company and receive the completed reports.
- After the background has been completed, the “Authorization for Background Check” forms will be shredded to protect any sensitive, private information
- Any registered sex offender or any conviction involving abuse of or harm toward children, youth, or vulnerable adults will disqualify the applicant from participating in any ministries or events with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. All other convictions will be reviewed by the pastor(s) in order to ensure the safety of all involved.
- All documentation collected as part of the application and screening process shall be maintained in a permanent secure file accessible only to the pastor(s).
- Background checks will be conducted on each staff member and volunteer every three years.

We will implement prudent operational procedures in all programs, events and ministries.

Two-Adult Rule

- It is our goal for two adults to be present at all times during any event involving children, youth, or vulnerable adults. One adult may be a roamer (a designated person who makes periodic and unannounced checks on classrooms to make sure everything is okay and no help is needed.) It is preferred, but not required, that the adults be unrelated.
 - Exception: When only one adult is present, the door must remain open or the room must have a window that allows full view of the entire room.

Nursery

- There will always be at least 2 adults (preferred) or one adult and one youth in the nursery.
- The following procedures are to be followed in the nursery area:
 - The nursery is specifically available for children birth through 4 years of age.
 - Nursery staff/volunteers should be present a minimum of 15 minutes prior to the “opening” of the nursery for the activity/worship/event.
 - When more than six children are present, staff/volunteers should evaluate ages of children and utilize the pre-school room across the hall as necessary. Children in the preschool room should be two years and older (no infants or toddlers). One adult will be in each room with the doors open if a second staff/volunteer is not available for each room. Whenever possible, staff/volunteers should look for additional help when the number of children or ages of the children necessitate using more than one room.
 - Sign In Policy: Nursery staff/volunteers are to ensure that parents/guardians have properly signed their children in and have left a cell phone number for emergencies. Parents/guardians should indicate any specific needs of children and their approximate location during worship/activity/event. Each child should be given a name tag with parent/guardian information written on it. Tag is to be placed on child’s back.
 - If a child cannot be soothed, controlled, or becomes ill; nursery staff/volunteers should contact parents/guardians by phone or retrieve parent from worship/activity/event or seek assistance from the staff member overseeing Children’s & Youth Ministry to help sooth or to make contact with parents.
 - Children under the age of two are not allowed to use the playground equipment but may use the grassy area outside of the big preschool room. Infants may be in playground area in a stroller.

- All children are to be accompanied by an adult when walking to and from the playground. Access to playground should be through big preschool room.
- Shoes must be worn at all times by children who are walking, both inside and outside. No exceptions to this rule.
- Nursery staff/volunteers should provide a caring and nurturing environment for all children and should contact the staff member overseeing Children's & Youth Ministry when needs and concerns arise.
- Diaper Changing Policy: Diapers should be checked every 30 minutes and changed as necessary. A child should never be left in a wet/soiled diaper. Use a fresh pair of gloves for every change. Dispose of diaper and gloves in appropriate container. Clean changing table after each change. Wash hands before handling any other child.
- Toilet Assistance Policy: Ask child if he/she needs help. If child says no, supervise toileting by standing by open doorway. IF child says yes, assist and talk the child through the steps of toileting. Bathroom door should remain open at all times when an adult is helping a child. Wash child's hands afterwards as well as your own.
- Pick Up Policy: Children are ONLY to be released to parent/guardian that is listed on sign-in sheet. Children are ONLY to be released to an adult (not to older siblings/ cousins etc.). Parent/guardian must sign child out before child will be released.

Attendance Records

- Attendance of staff, volunteers and participants will be recorded for all church-sponsored activities and events in which youth and children participate.
- Attendance forms are available in the office of the staff member overseeing Children's & Youth Ministry.
- All attendance forms will be kept on file in the office of the staff member overseeing Children's Ministry (or in a designated storage) for seven years.

Space

- Each room or space where children, youth, or vulnerable adults are being supervised should have a window in the door or the door should be left open.
- All activities including outdoor activities should occur in open view.
- Should the activity be an outdoor program or occur in a setting which makes it difficult to comply with this Policy, the staff/volunteer in charge of the activity shall take appropriate measures to make sure the setting suits the activity and the children, youth, or vulnerable adults are properly supervised.

Ratio of Adults to Children/Youth

- The following ratios should always be followed based on the age-level of children/youth:
 - 0-12 months: 2 adults, 8 children max (1:4)
 - 1-3 years: 2 adults, 12 children max (1:6)
 - 3-5 years: 2 adults, 20 children max (1:10)
 - School Age: 2 adults, 24 children/youth max (1:12)

Drop Off and Release of Children & Youth

- Sign in/out policy for nursery is stated above in the “Nursery” section.
- Children (older than nursery) are to be signed-in to any activity/worship/class by a parent/guardian. Parent/guardian must state on sign-in those who have permission to pick child up.
- No child should be released to anyone under the age of 18 years. This should be conveyed to parent/guardian at drop off.
- Parents should pick up children/youth at the designated ending time. A grace period of 5 minutes will be allowed before staff/volunteer calls parent/guardian.
- Youth (grade 6-12) may sign themselves in to any activity/worship/class.
- For a youth to leave with someone under 18 years old who is not related to them, written permission from parent/guardian is required.
- Staff/volunteer of youth event should note on attendance sheet who picked up each youth and the time picked up.

Permission Forms & Medical Releases

- Children and youth registration, medical release, and transportation forms shall be filled out by parent/guardian annually and kept on file in the office of the staff member overseeing Children’s & Youth Ministry.
- Parents should always be given advance notice and information regarding any activity in which their child/youth will be leaving the church property.

Transportation

- Any driver of a church vehicle must adhere to all policies and procedures set forth by the Board of Trustees on vehicle use.
- When possible, church vehicles should be used for any children/youth/vulnerable adult transportation.

- In the event that a personal vehicle is used, there must be at least two children/youth with the licensed driver who is over 18 and approved by the staff member overseeing Children's & Youth Ministry.
- Occupancy shall be limited to the number of seatbelts available in the vehicle.
- Written permission must be attained from parents/guardians before children/youth/vulnerable adult may travel in personal vehicles to/from church functions with licensed driver (over 18). Permission forms are available in the office of the staff member overseeing Children's & Youth Ministry.
- Drivers are expected to comply with all federal, state, and local laws and traffic regulations.

Overnight Trips

- On overnight trips, it is preferred that children/youth have separate bedrooms from adults. In cases where parents prefer an adult be in a room with their child, they must provide written permission.
- If all males share one room and all females share one room (such as in a retreat setting), there will be a minimum of 3 persons when youth & adults share the same room.
- No children/youth shall ever share a bed with an unrelated adult.
- Whenever possible, there should be at least one chaperone per twelve children/youth. These chaperones should room as close as possible to the children/youth rooms.
- At no time shall males be in female rooms or females be in male rooms.
- Sleeping arrangements in one large room: at the time established by the person in charge, males and females will be separated for the remainder of the evening.

Social Networking, Blogging, Internet Connection, and Texting

In general, our congregation views social networking sites (such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and so forth) personal websites, and blogs in a positive light and respects the wishes of staff members and volunteers to use them as a medium for self-expression. If a paid staff member chooses to identify himself or herself as an employee of our congregation in these venues, we are aware that some readers may view this employee as a representative or spokesperson of the congregation. In light of this possibility, our congregation requires, as a condition of employment, that paid staff members observe the following guidelines when referring to the congregation, its programs and activities, its members, and other paid staff or volunteers, on social media, personal websites, or blogs. Furthermore, we highly recommend that volunteers abide by these same guidelines.

- Staff/volunteers must be respectful in all communications and blogs related to or referencing the congregation, its members, and other staff or volunteers.

- Staff/volunteers must not use obscenities, profanity, and vulgar language or images.
- Staff/volunteers should not use social media, personal websites, or blogs to disparage the congregations, members of other staff/volunteers.
- Staff/volunteers must not use social media, personal websites, or blogs to harass, bully, intimidate others, particularly members of the congregation and other staff/volunteers. Behaviors that constitute harassment and bullying include, but are not limited to, comments that are derogatory with respect to race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, color, or disability; comments that are sexually suggestive, humiliating, or demeaning; and threats to stalk, haze, or physically injure another person.
- Staff/volunteers must not use social media, personal websites, or blogs to discuss engaging in conduct that is prohibited by congregational policies, including, but not limited to, the inappropriate or illegal use of alcohol, the use of illegal drugs, sexual behavior, sexual harassment, and bullying.
- Staff/volunteers may not post pictures or videos of any children, youth, or vulnerable adults involved in any church sanctioned activity to their personal social media, website, or blog. (Exception: if it is the staff/volunteer's own child/youth/vulnerable adult and there are no other children/youth/vulnerable adults in the picture with them.)
- Each church event will have ONE designated person to be the official photographer. Only this person is permitted to take any photos/videos. The designated photographer will be given a list of any participant who has opted out of their likeness being used by the church. All event photos must be deleted by the photographer after transferring them to the designated staff member.
- Only the staff administrators of the church's social media have permission to post any pictures of children, youth, and vulnerable adults as long as parental permission has been obtained.
- Parent/guardian option to give permission to use photos, videos, or likenesses of children/youth/vulnerable adults will be included on all registration forms.
- Any group emails sent by staff/volunteers should use the BCC option so that personal emails are kept private.
- All electronic communication (texts, chat room conversations, emails, etc.) with children, youth, and vulnerable adults should only be in a group form. If any communications are sent to individuals, saving all communications will become necessary.
- Staff/volunteers should consider not being connected to any children, youth, or vulnerable adults on any social media. Staff/volunteers should never initiate a social media connection to any child, youth, or vulnerable adult.
- Any staff/volunteer found to be in violation of this policy will be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal from employment or leadership duties.

First Aid/CPR

- Staff and volunteers who routinely work with children, youth, or vulnerable adults are strongly encouraged to obtain and maintain first aid and CPR certification.
- First aid kits are available throughout the building and on each vehicle.
- Medication Policy
 - Medications will not be dispensed without the expressed written permission of a parent/guardian. Permission forms for dispensing medication are available in the office of the staff member overseeing Children's & Youth Ministry.
 - Prescription medications must be in the original container with the name of the recipient, dosage, prescribing doctor, and pharmacy information written on the label.
 - All medication (prescribed or OTC) will remain with the staff/volunteer leader of the ministry/event/activity.
 - A written record must be kept of the date, time, dosage, and recipient's name. Medication dispensing records are available in the office of the staff member overseeing Children's & Youth Ministry.
 - In the event there is a child, youth, or vulnerable adult with a medical condition that may require emergency medical treatment, such as diabetes, asthma, or life-threatening allergies, the parent/guardian must fill out the "Allergy/Life Threatening Condition Plan" form. The parent/guardians will need to train the staff/volunteer on how to administer any emergency medicine such as epi pens. The parent/guardian may give written permission for any emergency medical treatments to be in the possession of their child, youth, or vulnerable adult.
- In the event of an accident or injury:
 - If minor injury:
 - Attend to the injured immediately as needed.
 - Notify parents/guardians immediately if serious but not life-threatening (e.g. broken bone, head bump, deep cut).
 - Notify parents/guardians at pick-up of any minor cuts, bruises, or bumps.
 - If life threatening:
 - One adult stay by injured's side and call 911.
 - If CPR needed, 2nd adult retrieve auto-defibrillator.
 - 3rd adult remove other children/youth to a different space and stay with them.
 - Call the staff member overseeing Children's & Youth Ministry (or any staff that are in area) immediately to assist.
 - Call parents/guardians/emergency contact immediately.
 - If injured person is transported to hospital:
 - One adult/staff travels to hospital to be present until parents/guardian/family member arrives.

- After all is calm and injured person is taken care of, an “Incident Report” must be filled out by the leader-in-charge of activity/program/worship. (Exception: if a minor cut, bruise, or bump.)
 - “Incident Report” forms are located in the office of the staff member overseeing Children’s & Youth Ministry.
 - A copy will be made for the parents/guardians/family member.
 - Original copy will be kept on file in the office of the staff member overseeing Children’s & Youth Ministry.

Discipline Policy

- HUMC will follow positive discipline practices that seek to build children’s esteem and promote emotional growth and social well-being. Staff and volunteers will use positive, age-appropriate, responsive language that allows for a two-way dialogue between adult and child, youth, or vulnerable adult.
- Suggestions for strategies that may help divert a younger child include redirection, seating them next to an adult, or removing them from the group for a short time.
- The following forms of discipline are always unacceptable at HUMC:
 - Physical punishment of any form, including spanking, slapping, pinching, shaking, etc.
 - Psychological punishment such as humiliation by derogatory remarks, harsh or profane language, or actual or implied threats.
- Children will not be punished or shamed for bathroom accidents.
- Food that is served to the group will neither be forced or withheld as punishment.
- If the adult leader is not able to control a child or group of children in a constructive, positive manner, then the leader should send for additional help or notify the parents/guardians of the child involved for assistance.
- The staff member overseeing Children’s & Youth Ministry will provide behavior management training for all volunteers.

We will educate all our leadership - both paid and volunteer - with children, youth and vulnerable adults regarding the use of all appropriate policies and methods.

Safer Sanctuary Training

- The staff member overseeing Children's & Youth Ministry will be the designated staff member to receive any conference/denominational Safer Sanctuary training. He/she will be the designated staff member to implement training at HUMC.
- All leaders (staff, Board of Trustees, Church Council, and volunteers) shall be trained annually in the practices of Safer Sanctuary.
- A record of all training attendees shall be kept on file for a minimum of seven years.
- All volunteers who will be working with children, youth, or vulnerable adults shall receive a full training on the Safe Sanctuary policies and procedures before being allowed to work with any children, youth, or vulnerable adults.
- The church community shall be informed of the Safer Sanctuary policy and how the church is working to prevent abuse of children, youth, and vulnerable adults. The church community shall also be notified and invited to all Safer Sanctuary training opportunities.
- Leaders of outside groups that utilize the church facilities for activities with children, youth, or vulnerable adults shall receive Safer Sanctuary training.

Youth Helpers

- Youth helpers are considered youth, ages 11-18 (middle & high schoolers), who assist with ministries (e.g. Vacation Bible School, After-School, Summer Camps).
- Youth helpers shall follow all of the same guidelines as adult leaders.
- Youth helpers will be trained in Safer Sanctuary policies and procedures before being allowed to work with children.
- Youth helpers shall never be left with children without an adult present.

We will have a clearly defined procedure to reporting an observed or suspected incident of abuse that conforms to the requirements of state law, and we will be prepared to respond to media inquiries if an incident occurs.

North Carolina Mandated Reporter Law¹

- Who must report?
 - Anyone who suspects abuse must report it. (NC Statute 7B-301) The usual exceptions for privileged communications (clergy, marital) do not apply.
- When must you report?
 - NC requires a report when you have “any cause to suspect” abuse. That standard is lower than the usual “reasonable suspicion” standard. Any time you have ANY cause to even suspect abuse, you must report it. There is no specific time to make the report, but as soon as possible is the safest course of action.
- Where must you report?
 - The statute requires a report of the Department of Social Services in the county where the child resides or is found.
- Why must you report?
 - Knowingly or wantonly failing to report suspected abuse is a Class 1 misdemeanor, punishable by up to 120 days in jail and a fine in the discretion of the Court.

Documentation and Reporting

- The staff member, volunteer, or helper who observes or suspects any alleged abuse or has any alleged abuse reported to them, must report the incident immediately to the Pastor(s). That person then becomes the “reporter”.
- If the offender is a staff member, then the reporter shall make the report to the chairperson of the Staff/Parish Relations Committee (SPRC).
- The Pastor(s) or chairperson of the SPRC will assist the reporter with filling out the “Incident Report”
- If the allegation is against a staff member or volunteer, the Pastor(s) or chairperson of SPRC will notify the parent/guardian immediately of the child/youth/vulnerable adult who was affected by the abuse.
- Parents/guardian of the victim will be notified by the Pastor(s), and steps will be taken to insure victim’s safety and well-being until parents/guardians arrive.

¹ <https://firstwnc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/4.-North-Carolina-Mandated-Reporter-Law.pdf>

- If one or both parents is the alleged abuser, Pastor(s) will follow advice of the authorities concerning notification.
- If the abuser was another child/youth, the Pastor(s), will notify their parents/guardians immediately.
- The Pastor(s) will notify the Department of Social Services in Macon County
- The Senior Pastor will report the allegations/incident to the District Superintendent within 24 hours.

Response

- All allegations shall be taken seriously.
- A quick, compassionate, and unified response to an alleged incident of child or adult abuse will be initiated following the direction of the Senior Pastor and in consultation with the District Superintendent.
- In the case that the alleged incident involves the Senior Pastor, the response will be directed by the District Superintendent.
- Response will include appropriate pastoral care and support for all involved in the allegation, including the alleged perpetrator(s), alleged victim(s), and their families.
- Any person named as an alleged perpetrator in a complaint shall immediately be required to cease any contact with the children, youth, or vulnerable adults ministries. The alleged offender may resume activities at such time as the Senior Pastor and SPRC deem it appropriate.
- No reporter shall ever take on the responsibility to investigate allegations of abuse.

Interactions with the Media

- The Senior Pastor, chairperson of the SPRC, or District Superintendent (or an assigned designee by one of these), are the only persons authorized to make statements to representatives of the media.
- All request for statements must be directed to the Senior Pastor, chairperson of the SPRC, the District Superintendent, or authorized representative.
- If approached by the media, all others should not comment and instead endeavor to help the media find the authorized spokesperson(s).

Policy Review

A team comprised of the Senior Pastor, the staff member overseeing Children's & Youth Ministry, the chairperson of SPRC, and the chairperson of the Board of Trustees, as well as others whom they invite to participate in the team's work, shall be responsible for reviewing this policy on an annual basis for relevance and adherence to requirements by the Western North Carolina Conference.

Date Adopted & Approved

Approved by Board of Trustees: October 2023

Approved by Church Council: November 2023

Adopted: November 2023

Covenant Statement

The congregation of Highlands United Methodist Church is committed to providing a safe and secure environment for all children, youth, vulnerable adults, staff, and volunteers who participate in ministries and activities sponsored by the church. The Safer Sanctuary policy and procedures reflect our congregation's commitment to preserving this church as a holy place of safety and protection for all who would enter and as a place in which all people can experience the love of God through relationships with others.

I have read all of the Safer Sanctuary Policies and Procedures, and I agree to observe and abide by all policies and procedures set forth.

I agree to attend the annual Safer Sanctuary training and any other training opportunities for my staff/volunteer role.

I agree that I meet all stipulations to be a volunteer within the children, youth, or vulnerable adult ministries.

- I am 18 years or older.
- I am at least five years older than the oldest child/youth I will be working with.
- I have been active at HUMC for at least six months.
- I have completed a volunteer application.
- I have consented to a background check.
- I will attend Safer Sanctuary trainings.
- I have never been convicted of child/elder abuse.

I understand if I violate any of these Policies and Procedures, I may be asked to vacate my role as staff/volunteer.

Signature of Staff/Volunteer Applicant: _____

Print Full Name: _____

Date: _____