

Safe Church Policy and Procedures Overview

United Church of Christ, Midland

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs." (Matthew 19:14)

We at United Church of Christ, Midland, believe that our church should be a safe church for all those who come in good faith. Most important, it should be a safe church for the children, youth, and vulnerable adults who are entrusted to us.

The physical or sexual abuse of a child is a tragedy no matter where it occurs; it is especially so when it takes place in a house of God. Abuse in a church is the ultimate violation of a sacred trust.

Acknowledging that child abuse is a reality, and that no church is immune from that possibility, we therefore enact this policy to establish and enforce rules and procedures to eliminate, as much as possible, the risk of abuse in our programs and activities for children and youth.

To that end, this policy:

- Requires that classes and classrooms be configured to eliminate the possibility of children being isolated, and mandates specific rules for each program and activity for children and youth, inside and outside the church building, to ensure safety
- Provides a systematic, regular program of education about child abuse for the congregation, parents, youth volunteers and staff, children, and visitors
- Requires that those who work with children and youth, paid staff or volunteer, be screened and educated about the issues of abuse, and trained to recognize signs of abuse
- Establishes a procedure to ensure that all allegations of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse against a child, by an adult or another child, be taken seriously and dealt with swiftly and appropriately, and that all involved be supported and treated with respect and compassion
- Encourages this congregation to find appropriate ways to continue to live in our vision of being "a Christ-centered place to belong with a loving, trusting, caring community of faith" that inspires lives of service.

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Children and Youth Ministries

Policy

- Maintaining child and youth safety within our church and understanding our practices is a matter for covenant within our congregation.
- Whenever possible, at least two non-related (for the purposes of this policy “related” means spouses, partners, intimates, family members) adults should be involved in any youth activity.
- When two adults cannot be present in a child and/or youth activity, random checks by another unrelated adult should be employed.
- The first page of our policy will be clearly posted at the official points of entry into our building, in the office, and in the education hallway.
- These guidelines and policies in their entirety will be clearly available in all classrooms and common spaces.
- All volunteers working with children and youth programs must participate in training at least once every three years.
- For the purpose of our Safe Church policies, youth will be considered to be any minor who participates in a church-sponsored youth ministry program. Adult leaders will be clearly identified beforehand.
- All designated youth volunteers must be at least seven years older than the children and youth with whom they are working. Volunteers within seven years of the youth do not count toward the requirement of two unrelated adults.
- Trained youth over the age of 14 may supervise Nursery activities, or assist a non-related adult with Sunday School activities.
- No one under the age of 21 will be allowed to drive other participants in any church-sponsored activity or event that requires the group to travel together to a destination outside the church building.

Procedures

General Ministries

Sunday School

1. Windows are required in all classroom doors, and must remain uncovered.
2. Education and screening (please see page 7) is required for all prospective teachers and other volunteers.
3. All activities will be kept in plain view.
4. Acceptable supervisory methods include the following:
 - a. Two teachers per class in the classroom.
 - b. One teacher per class, and a roaming screened volunteer.
 - c. Other methods may be used with approval of the Board of Educational Ministries.
5. If a child needs assistance in a bathroom for whatever reason, when possible the child’s parent will be asked to provide that assistance.

Nursery care

1. Education and screening (please see page 7) is required for volunteers and paid workers.
2. All activities will be kept in plain view.
3. If a child out of diapers needs assistance in the bathroom, when possible the child's parent will be asked to provide that assistance.
4. Acceptable supervisory methods include the following:
 - a. Two unrelated, trained and screened volunteers, always.
 - b. One trained and screened volunteer, and a roaming screened volunteer.
5. Other methods may be used with approval of the Board of Educational Ministries.

Youth (6th-12th grade) Programming

1. Open spaces or rooms with windows in their doors will be used.
2. A minimum of two unrelated adults must be present for all activities. If two adults cannot supervise, then the activity must be cancelled.
3. Education and screening (please see page 7) will be required for all adult volunteers
4. All volunteers must be adults over the age of 21 and be a minimum of 7 years older than youth they are supervising.
5. Education (please see page 6) is required for all youth every year.
6. All participants are required to submit a signed legal guardian/parent permission slip for any youth activity that takes place off church property.
7. All activities must be kept in plain view.

Specific Ministries

Overnights

1. All activities must be kept in plain view using open spaces or rooms with windows in their doors.
2. Education and screening (page 7) is required for all adult volunteers.
3. Multiple adult volunteers will be required for all activities.
4. All volunteers must be adults over the age of 21.
5. All participants must sign an appropriate child and youth safety covenant that will be reviewed with group at beginning of overnight.
6. All youth participants must have a signed permission slip from a parent or legal guardian.
7. All activities must be kept in plain view.
8. Lights must be kept on except during specified sleeping hours or movie-watching.
9. Overnights must have a designated lock time.
10. Adult supervisors must actively seek to prevent inappropriate or abusive youth/youth behavior.

Confirmation

1. All activities must be kept in plain view using open spaces or rooms with windows in their doors.
2. All one-to-one meetings between confirmand and mentor will occur at church and will be visible and subject to supervision

3. Education and screening (page 7) will be required for all mentors.
4. Education (page 6) within the past year is required for all youth and their parents.
5. All activities must be kept in plain view.
6. All off-site activities require a minimum of two mentors and/or screened volunteers.
7. All youth participants must sign an appropriate child and youth safety covenant and have a signed legal guardian/parent permission slip.

Out of Town Trips

1. A ratio of one adult to every five kids is recommended.
2. At least two non-related adults must be present for all activities.
3. Education and screening (page 7) will be required for all adults.
4. All youth participants and a legal guardian/parent must have attended an education session (page 6) within the past year.
5. All activities must be kept in plain view.
6. All participants must sign an appropriate child and youth safety covenant and have a signed legal guardian/parent permission slip.

Pastoral Counseling for Youth and Adults

1. This policy and appropriate codes of ethics will be clearly posted.
2. Continuing education of appropriate and ethical boundaries is required of the pastor.
3. When a child or youth receives pastoral care, another adult must be present in building.

Rides for Children and Youth

1. Education and screening (page 7) is required of all drivers for authorized youth outings.
2. When traveling as a group, all the authorized and approved cars in the caravan must follow a planned route and must arrange a plan of communication for the time of travel.
3. Two screened non-related adults must be present at the church until all youth have been picked up.
4. UCC Midland is not responsible for any ride arrangements to and from activity sites.

Outside Groups Using Our Facilities

1. Must be provided with a copy of our policies and sign that they have read and understand our policies.
2. Must sign a liability release form to release UCC, Midland from any and all potential liability that may result from any activity undertaken on UCC, Midland property.

Recurring and Continuing Education about Child Abuse

Important components of a Safe Church Policy are recurring and age appropriate education about child safety/child abuse prevention and the UCC, Midland Safe Church policies and procedures. Consistent and routine education will be provided to the congregation including our children and youth.

Policy

- Children and youth volunteers will be educated about child safety prior to beginning their ministries.
- Education and training about child abuse will take place on a regular and systematic basis within the church and its programs.
- Adult and youth in the congregation who will be engaging in broad and potentially risky ministries, such as a youth mission trip or being a Confirmation mentor, will be provided with additional child safety educational opportunities.
- The Safe Church Team will provide opportunities to inform the congregation about State of Michigan and Midland County mandated reporting laws.
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Procedures

The education and training component includes the following:

1. The Safe Church Policy and Procedures Overview page will be distributed to the entire congregation.
2. Annual training on child abuse for the pastoral staff, the church moderator, the moderator-elect, and adult volunteers. This training will be publicized, and individuals from the congregation will also be invited to attend.
3. Annual education of all children in Sunday School about the issue of safety, with appropriate age level content, at or near the beginning of the fall term. The process should include notification to parents and/or legal guardians of Sunday School children that the safety education is taking place, with a description of what the education entails.
4. A review of Safe Church Policy and Procedures for all Sunday School teachers and volunteers for child and youth activities as part of the regular recruitment process.
5. Information about the Safe Church Policy and Procedures provided to new members as part of their new member classes.
6. Posting a Summary Page of the Safe Church Policy and Procedures in multiple designated areas of the church.

Volunteer and Paid Staff Screening

All volunteers and staff will be carefully screened and educated before beginning their ministry with children and youth at UCC Midland. A Safe Church Team will facilitate the screening process to ensure 1) that the screening of volunteers and paid staff is adequate and complete, 2) that the privacy of the volunteers is protected, 3) and that recurring and continuing education is available to volunteers, children, youth and other members of our congregation. The following policy statements reflect our congregation's commitment to preserving our church as a place of safety and protection.

Policy

- No adult who has been convicted of child abuse (that is, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect or physical abuse) will be accepted as a volunteer to work with children and youth for any church-sponsored activity.
- The Safe Church Team will receive training about screening of volunteers and staff from an expert in the field.
- Frequent and long-term volunteers will have a tri-annual background check to keep screening as up to date as possible.
- Each volunteer must have been a member of UCC Midland for at least six months or a regular worship attendee for one year prior to volunteering in children and youth ministries.
- Paid staff and volunteers working with children and youth shall attend training and educational events, as referenced above in policy.

Procedure

1. The Safe Church Team will create a screening process based on criminal justice protocols and the latest research in the field of child abuse prevention, and follow UCC Midland church by-laws for background check procedures as outlined for the Personnel Committee.
2. All adult volunteers will complete a Voluntary Disclosure Form before beginning their ministry with children and youth.
3. Background checks will be required for all applicants and volunteers over the age of 18.
4. The Safe Church Team will review applications and background checks which will remain confidential to protect the privacy of our members, including keeping the files in a locked cabinet as stated in the UCC Midland Church By-laws for background check procedures as outlined by the Personnel Committee.

The Safe Church Team

As part of this policy, a Safe Church Team of three people will be established to provide ongoing review and implementation of the policy. Team members will undergo background checks and training on the issue of child abuse before being allowed to serve. The team will conduct screening of staff, teachers, and volunteers who work with children and youth and oversee the educational component of the policy. These appointed positions will be approved by Church Council. It is recommended that one Safe Team member be a representative from the Personnel Committee, a second member be a representative from the Board of Educational Ministries, and the third member be from the congregation at-large. The three members of the Safe Church Team cannot serve simultaneously on the abuse response team.

Members of the Safe Church Team will commit to a three year term, in such a manner that the term of one member expires each year. A Safe Church Team member may serve two consecutive terms, and then shall be ineligible for one year. The Safe Church Team is tasked with ensuring the confidentiality of all volunteers and potential volunteers. The Safe Church Team will be available to the search committee for information and training.

With assistance from the Director of Educational Ministries, The Safe Church Team will be responsible for organizing and scheduling education and training sessions, providing educational materials, and informing members of the congregation about educational and training sessions and materials available.

The Safe Church Team will review these policies and procedures on a triennial basis and will take any suggested changes to the Council for approval. If changes are needed before the triennial review, those changes will also be approved by the Council.

The Abuse Response Team

The Abuse Response Team will consist of the church moderator, the moderator-elect, and the past moderator. Its responsibilities are spelled out in detail in the Allegations of Abuse and Congregational Response section of the policy.

The members of the Abuse Response Team have the responsibility of receiving and acting on allegations of abuse.

Allegations of Abuse and Congregational Response

Policy

It is the policy of The United Church of Christ Midland that allegations of physical and sexual abuse of children and youth are to be taken seriously and resolved fully and responsibly.

- Volunteers, clergy and other paid staff members working directly with children and youth who have knowledge of or suspicion of abuse of children must immediately report that knowledge or suspicion to an Abuse Response Team member within the church who is designated to deal with such incidents.
- It is the hope of UCC Midland that anyone with knowledge or suspicion of abuse will approach a member of the Abuse Response Team.
- The Abuse Response Team will in turn immediately report any incidents to the local authorities (as detailed in the procedures section below), when deemed appropriate by UCC Midland executive officers, appropriate officials at the Covenant Association of the Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ, and/or law enforcement.
- The Council and the Abuse Response Team will cooperate with all aspects of the investigation and will share information with the congregation when possible.
- The pastor will offer support and counsel to alleged abuse victims and their families, and to alleged perpetrators of abuse and their families, if appropriate and if allegation is not related to the pastor. Our church community will pursue additional measures to support alleged abuse victims and their families and/or alleged perpetrators and their families.
- While an allegation or investigation is pending for an individual volunteer or staff member, he or she must suspend activities within child or youth programs at UCC Midland.

Procedures

1. All allegations of abuse shall be regarded seriously, and alleged victims will be treated with respect and courtesy. Concerns will be reported immediately to the police and to child protection officials and alleged victims or alleged perpetrators will not be interviewed by church personnel.
2. All childcare or youth workers are mandated to report any suspected or known child abuse immediately to proper church authorities. These authorities will be the church moderator, the moderator-elect, and the past moderator who will function as the Abuse Response Team. If a youth worker cannot follow the normal procedure of reporting an incident to a member of the Abuse Response Team for any reason, (for example, if a group is on a mission trip or other out of town youth event.) he or she should immediately contact the local police department.
3. If the alleged perpetrator is a member of the pastoral staff or is a moderator, the church youth worker will inform the non-accused members of the Abuse Response Team and UCC leaders outside of the church, in this case to the

Associate Conference Ministers serving the Covenant Association of the Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ at 517-332-3511.

4. The Abuse Response Team will immediately contact the MI Child Protective Services at 855-444-3991, and the Midland Police Department at 911. If appropriate, the alleged perpetrator will be given the courtesy of being informed that contact with authorities has been made. In the event that said perpetrator is a minor, a parent/guardian will be notified.
5. In consultation with MI Child Protective Services and local law enforcement, a decision will be made as to whether the Abuse Response Team will talk with the person or persons reporting the allegations.
6. When an allegation of abuse is made, the recipient of the report should write down what has been alleged using the child's/reporter's words. The reporter is to take down the information without asking investigative or leading questions to the child. This can hurt the investigation. This report should be made available to the investigating authorities.
7. The Police Department/Michigan Child Protective Services will be the investigative body and deal with the alleged perpetrator concerning the accusation.
8. The Abuse Response Team will report any allegation to the Covenant Association of the Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ, when deemed appropriate by law enforcement.
9. In consultation with the appropriate legal authorities and in a timely manner, the Abuse Response Team will notify Church Council of the incident, respecting all privacy issues as appropriate to the situation.
10. Church Council, in consultation with the Abuse Response Team and the investigative authorities, will determine when and how to best communicate the situation with the congregation.
11. The moderator is designated as the only spokesperson for communication with the media, if there are media requests for comment or information. If the allegation is against the moderator, this responsibility will go to the past-moderator. During the investigative stage of any allegation, the church spokesperson should limit statements to the fact that the church takes any allegation seriously and is fully cooperating with authorities. Under no circumstances should a spokesperson discuss any aspect of a case. When an allegation is resolved, members of the pastoral staff or the moderator should consult with the Church Council before issuing any statement or making any comment.
12. If there is a documented false accusation, the Abuse Response Team will work to insure the congregation is thoroughly informed that the falsely accused person(s) has been exonerated.
13. After all the necessary investigative avenues have been followed, the Safe Church Team and others asked by the pastor will work to facilitate a healing process and foster a safe and affirming environment for the victims of the abuse, any falsely accused person(s) and for the entire congregation.