

# Safe Sanctuary Policy

## Aldersgate United Methodist Church

### Huntsville, Alabama

Aldersgate United Methodist Church (AUMC) believes that all persons are significant to the growth of God's kingdom and should have the opportunity to worship, to learn, and to serve in a safe and protected environment. We seek to provide an environment that is physically, emotionally, and spiritually safe for all persons who enter our doors, especially children, youth, and vulnerable adults. The Leadership Council, staff, and members of AUMC recognize that the most vulnerable are entrusted to the care of leaders in our church ministries and activities both on and off our campus. We therefore are committed to maintaining an environment where children, youth, and vulnerable adults are protected from abuse and in which church staff, teachers, volunteers, and other caregivers are protected from potential allegations of abuse.

To achieve these goals of preventing abuse, and the unfounded assertion of abuse, the following policy has been developed. This policy contains the theological foundations, definitions of abuse, and procedures for ministry areas. The policy and procedures set forth below will apply to all persons who provide supervision or have custody of children, youth, or vulnerable adults, or who have the opportunity to have contact with these said groups in church facilities or at church sponsored activities.

## I. THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

The Church, above all institutions, is called to welcome and nurture “..the least of these..”. Long before our Annual Conference called upon us to reduce the risk of abuse there was a biblical mandate to do so.

- Jesus took a little child to the center of the gathered group, held the child in his arms, and 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.” (Mark 9:36 – 37)
- Jesus also said, “If 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)

We are called to welcome children (and all those who cannot speak for themselves). As caring Christians our goal is to protect and serve as advocates for all participating in the life of our church.

## II. DEFINITIONS

The following definitions will be used in regards to AUMC Safe Sanctuary Policy:

**Child/Minor** – anyone under the age of 19 as defined in State of Alabama Code 26-1-1.

**Vulnerable Adult** – any person over the age of 19 whose behavior indicates that he or she is mentally incapable of adequately caring for himself or herself and his or her interests without adverse consequences to himself or herself or other, 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. (Adult Protective Services Act of 1976, Alabama Code (1975) 38-9-2-(2)).

**Employee** – anyone who is paid by the church on a full time or part time basis for work performed in any ministry area.

**Volunteer** – anyone not paid but serves/performs work in any ministry area.

- Authority Figures - volunteers who are at least 23 years of age, who are the primary leaders of children, youth, or vulnerable adult activities;
- Assistants - volunteers who assist the authority figures. Volunteers under the age of 19 will be allowed to assist in a support function only.

**Cohabiting Adults** – any two adults that live together within the boundaries of the law in blood, marriage or romantic relationships.

**Floater** – a person used to monitor the hallways and provide assistance where needed. Floaters may not cover more than one floor of the church.

**Child Abuse/Elder Abuse** – any act committed by a person in a position of trust (Parent, teacher, caregiver, church leader, pastor, volunteer, or other) which harms, or threatens to harm, a person's welfare including, physical, spiritual, or mental health. The four major types of abuse are:

- **Physical Abuse** – inflicting bodily harm
  - Examples include – assault with a knife, strap, or other implement; burns; fractures or bruises from being pushed down, shaken, struck or thrown.
- **Sexual Abuse** – use of child/vulnerable person for the intent of sexual stimulation
  - Examples include – fondling, sexual intercourse, forced participation in a sexual act, incest, pornography, or exposure to adult sexual activity
- **Emotional Abuse** – verbal assaults or emotionally cruelty against a person that can subject them to psychological trauma or otherwise interfere with their cognitive, emotional, psychological, or social development or self-esteem
  - Examples include – confinement (especially in small areas), threats, insults, intentional humiliation, racial remarks, excessive punishment, constant family conflict, use of profanity, permitting alcohol/drug abuse, ignoring peer abuse
- **Neglect** – not addressing the basic human needs for health, welfare, or safety, resulting in harm to the person (providing the parent/guardian is financially able to do so)

- Examples include – failure to provide food, shelter, clothing, education supervision, or health care; abandonment; unresolved health hazards in the home; ignoring need for human contact affirmation stimulation and nurture.

**Accident** – for purposes of this policy an accident is an event that happens unexpectedly and unintentionally, typically resulting in physical damage or injury.

- Examples include – falling, bumping into an object/person

**Incident** – for purposes of this policy an incident is an allegation of/or act of abuse.

- Examples include – see above examples of abuse

### **III. PREVENTING ABUSE**

All persons who intend to work with children, youth or vulnerable adults at AUMC must be properly screened and trained.

#### **Screening Process for Hiring Employees**

- Complete Application Form and submit personal resume complete with work history
- Complete a consent to release confidential information
- Complete National Background Check
- Minimum of three references checked and verified
- Complete interview by SPRC or Appropriate Staff
- Drug/Alcohol Screen if deemed necessary (should background check reveal a history or prior conviction of any drug or alcohol related incident a drug test will be mandatory)
- Signed Covenant Statement

*All offers of employment are contingent upon completion of a criminal background check, employment application, drug screen if deemed necessary, and reference check. All records, forms, and reports will become a part of the employee's confidential personnel file. These files will be kept by the Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC) and are available to the Sr. Pastor, the employee's immediate supervisor, and the members of Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC). The Church Administrator shall maintain copies of the staff background check information for purposes of keeping them current.*

#### **Continual Screening Process for Existing Employees**

- Update National Background Check every 3 years
- Annual Safe Sanctuary Training

- Submission to drug test at any time deemed necessary
- Signed Covenant Statement

*These files will be kept by the Church Administrator and are available to the Sr. Pastor, the employee's immediate supervisor, and the members of Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC).*

### **Screening Process for Volunteers**

- Complete Volunteer Application Form - Minors must submit a separate application form that has been approved by the Children's Director. Parents/Guardians are required to sign a minor's application.
- Complete a consent to release confidential information
- Complete National Background Check (any volunteer over the age of 18)
- Minimum of three references checked and verified
- Drug/Alcohol Screen if deemed necessary (should background check reveal a history or prior conviction of any drug or alcohol related incident a drug test will be mandatory)

*All records, forms, and reports will become a part of safe sanctuary filing system. These files will be kept by the Church Administrator and are available to the Sr. Pastor and the staff member whose ministry area the person is volunteering.*

### **Criteria for Volunteering**

- Age – Volunteers must be 23 years old to be an Authority Figure. The minimum age for volunteering is 12 years old. Assistants must be at least five years older than the age of the group they are volunteering with.
- Six month rule – Volunteers must have been an active participant at AUMC for at least 6 months, or transferring in good standing from another congregation. *(Only with approval of Sr. Pastor and Leader of the ministry area in which they are volunteering may a volunteer serve as an authority figure who does not meet the six month rule)*
- Complied with all the Volunteer Screening procedures
- Participate in annual Safe Sanctuary Training
- Submit to background check every 3 years if over the age of 18
- Signed Covenant Statement

\*Unfavorable Criminal Background Checks – In the event that an individual’s background check is deemed by the Sr. Pastor, Ministry Leader, or SPRC to be unfavorable, he/she will be notified by the Sr. Pastor and given the opportunity to correct inaccurate information. Should the information prove to be accurate, a covenant will be developed for the person’s participation in the life of the church. The covenant will be obtained from a panel made up of the Sr. Pastor, Leader of the ministry area in which they are volunteering, and Chair of the SPRC. The covenant will determine if the applicant may work with children/youth or vulnerable adults. The applicant will not be allowed to work with children/youth/vulnerable adults should it be determined that they have been charged with, convicted of, or plead guilty to a crime including, but not limited, to crimes against minors, molestation, pornography, sexual or physical abuse, or other crimes of violence.

### **Supervision Standards**

- **Two Adult Rule** – Two non-related and non-cohabitating adult workers will be present with children, youth, and vulnerable adults during church-related activities whenever possible except in emergency situations. An adult supervisor acting as a “floater” will make unannounced visits frequently when the two-adult rule is not feasible. In a room where there are cohabitating adults teamed, they will be considered as one worker for purposes of this policy.
- **Floater** – At events where more than 1 room is in use, reasonable attempts will be made to have floaters wandering the physical space. These individuals will be observing interactions in the rooms where the events are taking place, and monitoring the comings and goings participants as well as other people in the area. They are available to step in should any volunteer leave the room
- **Visual Access**– Reasonable efforts will be made to keep doors open and/or windows unobstructed where children/youth/vulnerable adults are in view during church-related activities. Windows in all classroom doors will be the standard to allow anyone outside the room to look into the room and view the activities within. Doors are not to be locked in occupied rooms. Workers will avoid being alone with a participant without being visible to those in the immediate area.
- **Church Sponsored Event** – any event, whether located on the church property or not, that is sanctioned by AUMC and has AUMC staff or volunteers leading the programming.
- **Local Activities** – Any activity that takes place within Madison County, AL. Compliance with this Safe Sanctuary Policy is required of all employees and volunteers during any church-related local activity.
- **Out-of-town Activities** – Any activity that takes place outside of Madison County, AL. A written parental consent form will be provided for all minor participants, and medical release form will be provided for all participants. A consent form may be kept on file for the period of one year and will be considered valid until expiration at the end of said year. Compliance with

this Safe Sanctuary Policy is required of all employees and volunteers during any church-related non-local activity.

- **Over-Night Activities** – Activities that do not end at midnight will be considered over-night activities. Males and females will have separate sleeping areas. There will be male and female chaperones if there are male and female participants.

### **Special Considerations for overnight trips**

- Rooming – An adult shall not share the same bed with a child/youth/vulnerable adult. An adult should make every effort to not be alone in the room/bathroom with child/youth/vulnerable adult. The Two Adult Rule shall be applied to rooming situations. In instances where this is not possible, adults may stay in neighboring rooms so as to facilitate appropriate chaperoning. In lodge/dorm type settings where only one adult is present per room, doors shall remain open.
- Room Checks – room checks should be made by two adults of the same gender as the room residents
- Adults should in all circumstances be fully clothed in the presence of children/ youth/ vulnerable adults.
- **Transportation** – Any activities that require transportation of minors will adhere to both the policies contained within this document and the Vehicle Usage policy.
  - All drivers shall be screened and trained in accordance with this policy and meet the requirements to be considered an authority figure as defined in this policy.
  - When transporting using private vehicles, a copy of a driver's personal auto insurance and driver's license will be kept in the safe sanctuary files
  - Reasonable attempts will be made to comply with the two adult rule in vehicles. If two adults are not provided in every vehicle, all cars will be required to leave from the same location, at the same time, following the same route. If male and female passengers are traveling in the vehicle then a male and female chaperone will be needed.
  - Passenger records or a copy of the records will be kept in the vehicle the participant is traveling.
  - All drivers must avoid distracted driving. Use of cell phones, texting, and any other electronic device is prohibited while driving, unless the phone is on speaker or Bluetooth.
  - Staff and Volunteers should make every effort not to transport a child/youth/vulnerable adult to or from a church related activity without a second adult in the vehicle. In the

event that this scenario cannot be avoided, the staff or volunteer should have the parent's permission and then phone a friend (as defined below) keeping that friend on speaker or Bluetooth, until participant has been delivered to their home. Friend should be a non-related, non- cohabitating adult or staff/volunteer.

- **Sign in/Sign Out** –The arrival and departure of Children/Youth/Vulnerable Adults at any church event will be tracked by the Staff/Authority Figure Volunteer responsible for the event. The system by which the arrivals and departures are tracked will be left up to the person in charge. These records will be maintained for a period of 2 years from the time of the event and may be reviewed by staff, the safe sanctuary task force or SPRC at any time.
- **Bathroom Guidance** –
  - Diapering should be done in an open and visible area.
  - Preschoolers should be supervised but allowed as much independence and privacy as possible. If an accident requires a change of clothes remember the two adult rule.
  - School aged children should be allowed complete privacy. However, the bathroom should be checked first to make sure no one is lurking around. If privacy is not compromised by doing so, it is best to leave the bathroom door open. In case of an emergency remember the two adult rule. Children under the age of 12 should be accompanied to and from the restroom.
  - Youth and vulnerable adults should be allowed complete privacy. In cases of emergency or for extenuating circumstances - remember the two adult rule.
- **Mentoring** – we believe it valuable when Christian adult workers have the opportunity to mentor our children/youth/vulnerable adults. However, mentoring relationships must maintain clear boundaries while maintaining the confidentiality the situation may require.
  - Mentoring relationships are best male to male and female to female
  - Use 2 adult rule if possible
  - Outings should be in public areas. Never conduct a mentoring session in your home.
  - One to one mentoring should take place in an area with visible access and people in the surrounding area
  - Never visit children/youth /vulnerable adults that are home alone
- **Disciplining**
  - Never discipline a child/youth/vulnerable adult alone behind closed doors. Use the 2 adult rule

- Do not have any physical contact with a child/youth/vulnerable adult while you are disciplining them
- Choose your words carefully and remember the old adage of counting to ten before you speak or act
- **Accidents** - Should an accident occur during an event in the area you are volunteering, stay calm and evaluate the injury. Call for the floater if you need to remove the participant from the area. If the injury is critical call 911 and send someone to get the staff person in charge of the event. Every accident occurring at a church sanctioned event (no matter how slight) will be reported on an Accident Report Form and filed with the Staff member in charge of the ministry area.
- **Interpersonal Boundaries** – all volunteers must be attentive to appropriate dress, use of language, and demonstration of affection and encouragement while supervising church programming.
  - Dress – Volunteers should at all times be dressed in a conservative manner appropriate for the event and in accordance with instructions given by staff or authority figure.
  - Language – At no time shall profanity or sexual innuendo be used at any church event. This includes language/innuendos used on clothing.
  - Alcohol/Tobacco/Firearms – (ATF) For the duration of the church event they are supervising, alcohol, tobacco, or the carrying of firearms are not permitted by staff or volunteers.
  - Appropriate Touches – side hugs, “A” frame hugs, pats on the shoulder, back, arm; handshake/high five; sitting beside, kneeling down for hugs with small children, holding hand while walking small children.
  - Inappropriate Touches – lengthy embraces, kissing, sitting on a lap if over 3 years old, touching any area that would be covered by a bathing suit, wrestling, tickling, piggy back rides, massages, showing any affection in an isolated area.

#### IV. REPORTING ABUSE

All allegations of child abuse will be taken seriously. In accordance with State of Alabama §26-14-3, Code of Alabama (1975), certain persons, including but not limited to, day care workers or employees, members of the clergy, or any other person called upon to render aid or medical assistance to any child, shall report known or suspected child abuse or neglect. In addition to the requirements set forth in §26-14-3, Code of Alabama, (1975), §26-14-4, Code of Alabama (1975), permits any person to make a report of known or suspected child abuse or neglect if such person has reasonable cause to suspect that a child is or has been abused or neglected.



- **Reporting Guidelines -**

- Reports of abuse or suspicion of abuse that are obtained at any church related event are to be reported to church staff by the person with the most direct knowledge.
- If immediate danger exists call the proper authorities. 911 is always the fastest option.
- If there is no immediate threat, church staff will contact the proper authorities. In addition, Sr. Pastor will be notified.
- Document the report with a written record. Reports should be brief, void of speculation and unsupported information not relevant to the situation. Reports should be signed and dated.
- Cooperate with any investigation
- Once reported, do not discuss the allegation or the investigation with anyone

Should the incident of abuse happen within the church or at a church sponsored activity, all of the above guidelines shall be followed. In addition:

- The Sr. Pastor shall contact the District Superintendent. In the event that the Sr. Pastor is the accused, Chair of SPRC will contact the District Superintendent.
- Unless accused, the Sr. Pastor shall file report with the insurance company and church legal counsel.
- Unless accused, the Sr. Pastor will be the sole spokesperson for the church in regards to media and statements to the congregation and shall consult with the Conference Director of Communication and the District Superintendent before statements are made public.
- An in depth investigation shall be carried out by civil authorities rather than by church personnel.

## **V. IMPLEMENTATION OF POLICY**

- Policy Instruction – Annual training on the Safe Sanctuary Policy shall be required of all volunteers and staff and documentation of that training will be kept on file. Training shall also include review of Aldersgate’s evacuation safety plans.
- Parent, Family, Congregation Education - All parents, relevant family members, and the congregation as a whole will have the opportunity to be trained in this policy at least once a year.
- Safe Sanctuary Task Force – A sub-committee of the Leadership Council will be appointed to oversee the Safe Sanctuary Policies and Procedures of Aldersgate UMC. The duties of this

Task Force are as follows:

- Meet at least once per calendar year
  - Review and Renew the policy annually or as needed
  - Ensure compliance with the policy and be advocates for the policy
  - Ensure that copies of the policy are available upon request and answer questions pertaining to the policy
  - Be available to staff to help with policy implementation and enforcement
  - At least once a year evaluate the physical structure of the rooms being used for children/youth/vulnerable adult ministries and report issues to the Trustee's
- Church Administrator – The Church Administrator will serve as the central point of contact for maintaining the records required in this policy. Because of the confidential nature of the information contained in these records, the church administrator will sign a non-disclosure agreement. Their duties shall include:
    - Maintain a file on each staff member that includes current background check report, documentation of annual safe sanctuary training, and signed covenant statement and copy of driver's license and proof of insurance if transporting participants.
    - Maintain a file on all volunteers that includes consent to background check, current background check report, application, reference check form, documentation of safe sanctuary training, and copy of driver's license and proof of insurance if volunteering includes transporting participants.
    - If electronic processing is not used for background check submission, the church administrator will submit the background check for clearance.
    - Receive the background check reports. The administrator will notify St. Pastor of any negative reports. The administrator will notify the staff member in charge of the ministry when a volunteer's report has come back clear. The administrator will notify the supervisor when a potential staff person/current staff persons report has come back clear.
    - Provide a list of expiring background checks to staff responsible for that area of ministry.