

Safe Sanctuaries Procedures for Local Churches

This resource was written by Bruce Jeffries, chair of the **Safe Sanctuaries Task Force**, Missouri East Conference, October 2001.

The following **questions** and **answers** are directed to local United Methodist congregations as they develop their local church *Safe Sanctuaries* Policy and Procedures. They are based on the Statements from the Policies on Child Abuse Prevention in the Missouri Conference.

What is the difference between a *Policy* and a *Procedure*?

- A. **Policy** is the structure by which the issues are spelled out; a policy should answer the questions, *Who? What?* and *Why?*
- B. **Procedures** should be devised to help in the implementation of the Policy; procedures should answer the questions: *When? Where?* and *How?* Both are necessary. A Policy must be written and approved prior to the Procedures being implemented.

What are considered *reasonable safety measures in the selection and recruitment of workers with children and youth*?

- A. *Background checks* are available through the State of Missouri for \$5 each. These include multi-agency information from the State Police, Dept. of Family Services, Dept. of Health, Dept. of Mental Health, and other agencies. This is recommended by the **Conference Safe Sanctuaries Task Forces**.
- B. Have two unrelated adults in Sunday school classes and at other times and places when children and youth gather.
- C. Windows in doors [or Dutch doors] in rooms where children and youth meet, or have open-door spaces.
- D. Adults who supervise children and youth should be at least five years older than those they are serving, and no one 18 years of age or younger should be given **primary** responsibility for the care and supervision of children and youth.
- E. New persons may not have unsupervised access to children and youth until they have been in the congregation at least six months.
- F. Have standard forms for doing background checks with references, and have persons sign *Covenants of Conduct*.
- G. Write procedures that will also guide the unique ministries that relate to your local situation: Youth Trips, Scouting groups that meet in your building, After-School programs, etc.

When the Conference Policy tells us that we are to educate workers on policy and procedures, and monitor for compliance, how often should this be done?

- A. With the turnover that naturally occurs among Sunday school teachers and youth workers, it is not out of line to do so annually. Reviewing the Policy and Procedures on a regular basis will remind those who are serving that they must be vigilant in their care of children and youth. Perhaps your church, or a cluster of churches in your area could plan for some extended time that might include some role-playing from different situations, viewing some videos (many are available in the Conference Resource Library), keeping folks abreast of any changes in the state laws, or even CPR or First Aid classes, specifically geared to children and youth.
- B. Teachers and youth workers also need to be made aware of *signs* that may indicate when abuse is taking place.
- C. Your policy and procedures should also spell out who will be responsible for organizing this training, and how often it should occur.

Where would I go to find out if we are in compliance with laws relating to Child Abuse in Missouri?

- A. Your local offices for State **Departments of Health** or **Family Services** can provide you with that help. They can also help you obtain forms needed for background checks.
- B. Be aware of laws that apply to Licensed Daycare Centers, should your church decide to engage in such a ministry.

How would we know if we have *sufficient liability coverage*?

- A. Your local **Board of Trustees** is responsible for insurance coverage on your facilities; they need to take responsibility for this.
- B. In many places, *Liability Insurance* can be obtained only after Child Abuse Prevention Policies are in place. Your insurance provider may have resources to give guidance to your local church.

What kinds of procedures do we need to consider if child abuse does happen in our church?

- A. Safety is a priority! Perpetrators must not have access to the victim, or any potential victim. This includes:
 - 1. Other children or youth in your church.
 - 2. Parents or guardians of victims.
- B. Remember that your church should act with pastoral care for both the victim and the perpetrator—we are all children of God.

Why do we need to be concerned about communication with families and media?

- A. Communication involves both talking and listening. It is important to have a group of people with these skills who can *jump* into action and be assigned to deal with the victim and their family, the public media, and who know how to contact the District Superintendent and Bishop.
- B. Child abuse incidents are *news worthy* to the public media. Procedures to have designated persons on hand to address media with appropriate statements are a must.
- C. The Bishop's office has suggested the following statement: *We, here at _____ United Methodist Church are saddened by the allegations that have been brought. We have attempted to create an environment here that is welcoming and safe, whereby all persons might experience the Good News in Jesus Christ. We are cooperating fully with local officials who are investigating this incident. Our Bishop's office has also been notified, and an investigation will also be conducted through that office. If you desire more information, we will help you get in touch with our Bishop. This is all we can comment on at this time.*

Why does there need to be a copy of our Child Abuse Prevention Policy in the DS's Office?

- A. The Conference Policy charges the DS with oversight in making sure local churches have complied with the Conference and General Church's mandate to make every local church a safe environment. Having your Policy on file in the District Office helps to assure this.
- B. When pastoral appointments change, the DS can also help educate the new pastor into local church expectations, if the Policy is available.

Why do we need ongoing structures in our local church to implement and monitor our policy and procedures?

- A. In most cases where litigation has resulted from incidents of child abuse against churches, the reasons have been either failure to implement a policy and procedures, or failure to comply with what the stated policy and procedures require.
- B. Depending on the size and depth of your ministries relating to children and youth, your church can determine how this needs to be implemented in your church.

Where can we go to find persons or resources to help us in this process?

- A. There are persons trained in each District to assist churches in this process. Check with your pastor or DS to find out whom that person is.
- B. The book, *Safe Sanctuaries—Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church*, is available through Cokesbury, Discipleship Resources, or there should be a copy available in your District Office.