

Safe Sanctuaries Policy

Appendix D of the South Georgia Conference Standing Rules

Adopted at the 2007 Annual Conference Session, Updated at the 2022 Annual Conference Session

In 2007, the South Georgia Conference adopted a Conference-wide Safe Sanctuaries Policy to protect our children, youth, vulnerable adults, and the adults who work with them. The adopted policy called for all churches and related agencies to have a policy in place by Dec. 31, 2008. These policies require adults who work with children and youth to complete an application form as well as agree to a background check, regardless of how long you have been a member or volunteered at that church. The policy also calls for strict supervision/guidelines and participation in all events.

The Importance of Having a Safe Sanctuaries Policy

Children hold a special place in God's family. Jesus taught that children were to be included and provided for within the community of faith. When the crowd tried to devalue children and keep them away from Jesus, he was quick to respond, "Let the children come to me for to such belongs the Kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16).

As Christians, we take our responsibility to nurture children very seriously. We acknowledge the "sacred trust to maintain an environment that is safe for people to live and grow in God's love. Sexual misconduct in the church and ministry settings impedes the mission of Jesus Christ. Leaders have the responsibility not only to avoid actions and words that hurt others, but also to protect the vulnerable against actions or words which cause harm" (Resolution 2081, *The Book of Resolutions*, 2016).

Neglecting to take adequate precautions against child abuse in our churches is one of the ways we fail in our nurturing responsibilities. While it is unlikely that we can completely prevent child abuse in every situation, it is possible for us to greatly reduce the risk by following a thorough, practical policy of prevention and supervision. This policy attempts to do just that for the Conference and District entities that offer ministry with children, youth and vulnerable adults (see "Definitions" section below).

It is the purpose of this policy to:

- protect the children, youth and vulnerable adults that participate in the ministries of the church;
- protect our staff, both paid and volunteer, from potential false allegations of abuse; and
- protect all the various ministry assets of the church for making disciples of Jesus Christ.

This policy presents a comprehensive plan that includes the areas of: Screening, Supervision, Reporting, and Response. The policies we have delineated are the **MINIMUM** necessary precautions for protecting children, youth and vulnerable adults. Your local church, agency, or organization may need to provide additional precautions in some circumstances.

Scope of the Policy

- A. This policy and its provisions shall apply to all adults, volunteer or staff persons, whether laity or clergy, who have any direct or indirect contact with children, youth, or vulnerable adults who participate in any activities or events sponsored by the South Georgia Conference and/or its Districts.
- B. The South Georgia Conference policy shall be applicable at all Conference and District activities involving children, youth and vulnerable adults.
 - a. Conference events are those events sponsored, promoted or financially supported by the Annual Conference.
 - b. District events are those events sponsored, promoted or financially supported by the District.
 - c. The South Georgia Annual Conference strongly urges other agencies and groups sponsoring ministries for children, youth or vulnerable adults to fully implement Safe Sanctuaries policies and procedures that meet or exceed those outlined in this policy.
 - d. The South Georgia Annual Conference strongly urges all Conference agencies and ministries to insist that outside groups using their facilities comply with Safe Sanctuaries policies and procedures that meet or exceed those outlined in this policy, which should be part of the church's facility use agreement.
- C. Each local church is required to adopt a Safe Sanctuaries policy for their church and complete the Safe Sanctuaries accountability form to their District Superintendent each year at the annual charge conference meeting.
- D. It is strongly recommended that every local church consult with their insurance company about adequate coverage, including but not limited to a Sexual Abuse and Molestation rider.

Area 1: Screening

Screening Procedures

Careful screening is one way to prevent the abuse of children, youth and/or vulnerable adults. Parents, congregational leaders and participants can rest assured that the most reliable, committed and experienced staff and volunteers are in place for every program that involves children, youth and vulnerable adults. Leaders who willingly submit to the screening process demonstrate the high value they place on the protection of children, the protection of all who offer supervision, and the protection of ministry assets for disciple-making.

Conference Summer Camps

The Camp Director will conduct the screening process for staff working in the Connectional Ministries sponsored summer camps.

Conference Retreats & Events Where Chaperones are Provided by the Conference

For retreats and events where chaperones are provided by the conference, the designated Camp Director will certify that the volunteers/staff working their event are in compliance with Safe Sanctuary screening, training, and supervising requirements. This certification of compliance will be made to the Director of Connectional Ministries at least two weeks prior to the event. In cases where enough certified workers are not available, event leaders will need to recruit, train and screen additional volunteers or cancel the event.

Conference Retreats & Events Where Chaperones are Provided by the Local Church

Each local church will conduct the screening process for the adult counselors or chaperones who accompany the participants from their church. Conference retreats require each church to provide at least one (1) adult counselor/chaperone for every six (6) children to actively supervise the participants from their church. Each church will be required to certify to the Camp Director/Event Coordinator that their chaperones meet the minimum screening standards and will practice the prevention procedures outlined in the policy prior to that volunteer's service at the event.

District Events

Each local church will conduct the screening process for the adult counselors or chaperones who accompany the participants from their church or who serve as a counselor at a District event. Each church will be required to verify the certification to the designated Camp Director that their chaperones meet the minimum screening standards and will practice the minimum supervisory procedures outlined in this policy.

Screening Standards

- A. All adults, volunteer or paid persons, whether laity or clergy, who have any direct or indirect contact with children, youth, or vulnerable adults who participate in any activities or events sponsored by the South Georgia Conference and/or its Districts shall be required to submit an application that includes the following **MINIMUM** screening standards:
- Standard contact information.
 - Experience and qualifications for the position.
 - Documentation of an active relationship with the local church for whom they will be offering leadership of at least six months before being allowed to be in a supervisory role in children's activities (summer camp staff will be expected to have at least six month active relationship with a local church or a campus ministry).
 - Signed voluntary disclosure of past criminal history and allegations of criminal history.
 - Listing of 3 non-related personal references. This list shall have complete contact information for all references. This portion of the application process is considered incomplete if full contact information for the references is not provided.
 - It is recommended that at least two independent references be contacted by the ministry organization when processing every prospective worker's initial application. To provide evidence of this practice, the written policy should include a statement indicating the ministry organization's commitment to checking at least two references when processing each prospective worker's initial application.
 - Waiver of confidentiality allowing the criminal background checks necessary for the position. The criminal background check should include a local, state and national search of the applicant's criminal record. (In the case of the Conference Summer Camps, the Camp Director will conduct the search. In the case of Conference Retreats or District Events, each local church will conduct the search for applicants. See Certifying Officer in "Definitions" section below).
- B. If any of the reports raise questions about the fitness of the applicant to serve, the application will be disapproved and the person will not be placed in service. For example, persons having a criminal history of any of the following types of offenses shall not be allowed to serve in any ministry with children, youth and vulnerable adults:
- If the applicant (paid or unpaid) is found to have been involved in any activity in which the applicant abused or exploited children, youth or vulnerable adults, the applicant shall not be approved. Any conviction of a crime against children, youth, or vulnerable adults shall disqualify any applicant.
 - Child abuse, whether physical, emotional, sexual, neglectful or ritual shall disqualify any applicant.
 - Violent offenses, including murder, rape, assault, domestic violence, etc., shall disqualify any applicant.
 - Persons having a criminal history of DUI or DWI conviction within the five (5) years immediately prior to the application shall not be allowed to act as a driver.
 - Persons having a criminal history of a drug related conviction within the five (5) years immediately prior to the application shall not be allowed to directly or indirectly supervise children, youth or vulnerable adults.
- C. No person will be allowed to supervise children without being completely screened, trained and having agreed to follow the minimum supervisory standards. The following persons will submit to screening: any new volunteer or staff person; any volunteer or staff person with a break in service of one year or more; and any person for whom it has been five (5) or more years since their last criminal background check.

- D. Great care shall be taken in establishing the protocols for conducting the review of the application, the reference checks, reviewing the criminal background check, verifying the required training, and maintaining the personnel records for each applicant. The certifying officer for Conference sponsored summer camp staff will be the Camp Director. The Camp Director shall verify the certification of all summer camp staff to the Director of Connectional Ministries prior to the first camp each summer. The certifying officer for each local church should be carefully selected and assisted in establishing the process they will use to certify persons working with their children, youth and vulnerable adults. Results of screens shall be kept under lock and key and revealed on a “need-to-know” basis. All forms and reference reports shall be kept as a part of an applicant’s secured personnel file maintained by the certifying officer. The certifying officer is responsible for reviewing and following up on each application prior to service. All applications, related forms, and requirements must be completed prior to service. In the event that a reference follow up is accomplished by phone, detailed notes of the conversation should also be included in the personnel file.
- E. When the Conference is hosting an event for which the local church is responsible for chaperones, we recommend that all promotional and registration materials contain language specifying these policies and procedures as **MINIMUM BASIC GUIDELINES** for all adults serving as chaperones at the event. Each church will be expected to certify that all their chaperones and counselors supervising their children meet or exceed these minimum requirements and will follow the preventive practices outlined in this policy.

Area 2: Supervision

Minimum Supervisory Standards

Conscientious and intentional supervision of participants and adults is the second step for providing a holy place of safety for children, youth and vulnerable adults. These supervisory procedures are designed to reduce the possibility of abuse to the children, youth or vulnerable adults and to protect staff persons and volunteers from unwarranted accusations. Again, these are **MINIMUM** Supervisory Standards. Each children’s activity may adopt more stringent requirements as necessary. **MINIMUM** Supervisory Standards require:

- A. All staff persons and volunteers working with children, youth or vulnerable adults in Conference activities receive an annual Safe Sanctuaries orientation. This orientation will include information regarding the Safe Sanctuaries Policy, the minimum standards of supervision, the signs of possible abuse, and the process for reporting suspected child abuse. Training modules are provided on the conference website.
- B. All children’s activities utilize the “two-adult rule” when supervising children. The two-adult rule requires that no matter the size of the group, there will always be two adults (not spouses) present. It is expected that there will be at least one male and at least one female adult supervisor when there are male and female participants. This may include the presence of an adult monitor who frequently moves in and out of rooms to supervise the activities. An assistant who is a minor shall not supervise other children regardless of age differentiation and therefore would not satisfy the two-adult rule.
- C. The two-adult rule is advisable at all times for the supervision of children, as described above. If there are periods of time when the Two Adult Rule cannot be implemented, the implementation of the Rule of Three for children and youth should be implemented. The Rule of Three requires at least three individuals (at least one being an adult employee or volunteer) be present at every function and in each classroom, vehicle, or other enclosed area during all activities involving children, youth, or vulnerable adults. For special circumstances that increase the likelihood of abuse or false allegations of abuse, the Two Adult Rule should be preferred. When the Rule of Three is adopted, other provisions (e.g., six month rule and premises monitor) should be more firmly stated than would otherwise be acceptable under the Two Adult Rule. It is also recommended that the age, capacity, and familial relationships of ministry participants be considered when approving the Rule of Three. Legal difficulties are posed by the competency and credibility of testimony from relatives, very young children, or individuals with other legal incapacities.

Limited Exception: Limited risk management exceptions to the Two Adult Rule and/or the Rule of Three include One-on-One Spiritual Counseling and Emergency Situations (e.g., isolation of a child during illness for the safety of the child and other children and workers). It is recommended that One-on-One Spiritual Counseling only occur with the prior written approval of the minor's parent or guardian and the advanced notification and consent of the worker's supervisor. It is also recommended that One-on-One Spiritual Counseling situations be limited in duration (30 minutes) and frequency (3-4 sessions).

- D. No adult (age 18 or older) shall supervise an age group unless he/she is AT LEAST 5 years older than the children or youth with whom he/she is working.
- E. Each room or space where children are being cared for shall have a window in the door or the door shall be left open. All indoor activities should occur in open view. Should the children's activity be an outdoor program or occur in a setting which makes it difficult to comply with this policy, the staff person in charge of the activity shall take appropriate measures to adapt practices and procedures to the setting so all are properly supervised.
- F. Registration materials for activities in which children are outside of the direct supervision of their parents/guardians shall require signed written permission forms, which include pertinent health information and a participation covenant, in order to participate.
- G. The screening and supervisory requirements outlined in this policy shall be followed when a nursery is provided at Conference or District sponsored events.

Additional considerations:

- To achieve compliance with the Safe Sanctuaries policy it may be necessary to combine groups; recruit, train, and reference additional volunteers; or cancel an event. Recognizing that there is safety in numbers, children and youth will be instructed to use the "buddy system" wherein children are required to remain with at least one other partner at all times for help and protection.
- Creating a safe sanctuary goes beyond the physical building of the church and must include intentional thought about how adults in ministry interact with children, youth and vulnerable adults in the virtual world, which includes the use of cell phones, online meetings, email, text messaging, and social media. Additional procedures and resources for digital safety are included on our conference website.
- Church nursery workers and preschool teachers need to be educated about appropriate touch and boundaries with young children and protocol for bathroom use. Developing a restroom policy is strongly recommended and guidelines can be found on the conference website.
- It is also strongly encouraged that there be at least one leader present who is trained and certified in First Aid and CPR at all Conference and District events.
- Sleeping arrangements can make overnight activities challenging; however, there are several ways to manage the risks. It's a good idea for chaperones to sleep in separate rooms from young people, but youth should have a way to contact chaperones quickly in case of emergency. Keeping roommates to the same gender and age, placing a strip of tape across the door, and performing unannounced checks are just a few of the options. Additional ideas to consider are included on the conference website.
- It is recommended that a written policy be developed to provide accountability and appropriate monitoring of registered sexual offenders who may participate in organizational worship or other activities. An example of a premises/participation agreement can be found on the conference website.

Area 3: Reporting

- A. Once an incident of child abuse occurs or allegation of an incident is made, it is crucial that it be dealt with promptly and in a clearly outlined manner. We will take seriously all allegations received. The staff person or volunteer who observes alleged abuse or to whom such alleged abuse is reported shall report the incident immediately to the staff person in charge of the children's activity. The staff person in charge of the children's activity in which the alleged abuse was observed or disclosed shall provide immediate care

to ensure the safety and well-being of the victim. Further, the staff person in charge of the children's activity will obtain necessary information such as, the name of the alleged victim, his or her address and family contact information, the nature of the allegation, and the name of the alleged perpetrator. Also, the staff person in charge of the children's activity will contact his/her supervisor or the next person in the supervisory chain immediately. (In the case of Conference-sponsored events the Director of Connectional Ministries, or the equivalent, would be contacted. In the case of District-sponsored/supported events, the District Superintendent would be contacted.)

- B. The staff person in charge of the children's event and the supervisor will consult to determine the appropriate next steps of response. The Conference Crisis Team will be contacted to join in the consultation to support a comprehensive response to this incident.
- C. Following the consultation, the staff person in charge of the children's activity will implement a response plan formulated in the consultation. If the allegations fall within the list of child abuse offenses found in the Georgia code 19-7-5, which requires mandatory reporting, the staff person shall make a report to the proper authorities. The staff person in charge of the children's activity will cooperate fully with the investigation. The parents of the child shall be contacted and informed of the alleged incident and appropriately assisted by the staff person in charge of the children's activity.
- D. The person suspected of abuse (respondent) shall, for the safety and well-being of all involved, be removed with dignity from further contact with children, youth or vulnerable adults until an appropriate investigation has taken place. In the event that the respondent is the staff person in charge of the children's activity, the report should be made to the Director of Connectional Ministries, or the equivalent, who will place the staff person on leave of absence during the investigation, will ensure the safety of the camp participants and leaders, and will provide for the administration of the event.
- E. If the allegation concerns activities or persons outside any supervisory relationship to a Conference related event or activity, the staff person in charge of the Conference activity will consult with his/her supervisor immediately. If the allegations fall within the list of child abuse offenses found in the Georgia code 19-7-5, which requires mandatory reporting, the staff person in charge of the children's activity will make the initial contact with the Department of Family and Children's Services in a timely manner.
- F. The staff person in charge of the children's activity will carefully and contemporaneously document all information received and all actions taken in follow-up of the allegation.

Area 4: Response

Response Plan

- A. A quick, compassionate and unified response to an alleged incident of child abuse is expected. All allegations will be taken seriously. In all cases of reported or observed abuse in a children's Conference activity, the entire staff of that activity shall cooperate with all official investigating agencies and appropriate conference officials.
- B. The staff person in charge of the children's activity will immediately contact one of the members of the Annual Conference Crisis Team (Bishop, Director of Connectional Ministries, or Director of Communications). The staff person in charge of the children's activity and the Conference Crisis team will consult to assess the incident, offer support to the staff person in charge of the children's activity, and determine the appropriate comprehensive response to this situation. This consultation will continue as the response is implemented.
- C. The Conference Crisis Team will designate the official spokesperson for this incident. This designated person is the only person authorized to make statements to representatives of the media. All requests for statements should be directed to the Conference Communications Director, who will provide access to the spokesperson. Those answering phones or receiving in-person inquiries for information will politely refer all those seeking information to the Conference Director of Communications.
- D. Pastoral care and support will be available to all persons involved with the incident.

Accountability

Because we highly value protecting the children, youth and vulnerable adults that participate in the ministries of the church, protecting our staff both paid and volunteer from potential false allegations of abuse, and protecting all the various ministry assets of the church for making disciples of Jesus Christ, we expect full implementation of this policy.

- A. The Director of Connectional Ministries will be held accountable for fully implementing this policy for Annual Conference events sponsored by the Office of Connectional Ministries.
- B. Each District Superintendent will be held accountable for fully implementing this policy for events sponsored by the District.
- C. Each District Superintendent will hold local church pastors and congregational leaders accountable for developing and adopting a Safe Sanctuaries policy. The pastor of a church failing to comply with this requirement will be subject to an Administrative Complaint (§ 362.2, *The Book of Discipline*, 2016) being filed against him or her.
- D. Local church pastors will be held accountable to the Annual Conference for the full implementation of the local church policy after it is adopted.
- E. Churches who do not comply with the Annual Conference policy will not be permitted to participate in Conference and District children/youth events.
- F. The Office of Connectional Ministries will be accountable to offer periodic Safe Sanctuaries training for volunteers and staff, for local church certifying officers, and for local church staff persons in charge of children's activities. Additional resources will be developed and made available to local churches (e.g., sample policies for local churches, sample forms, sources for conducting criminal background checks, etc.).

Definitions

The following terms are defined for the specific purpose of this document.

- A. "Adult" means a person 18 years of age or older who engages in supervisory responsibility. The adult definition is used to define an adult as it relates to supervision, screening, reporting and responding within the conference policy. The term does not apply to program participants.
- B. "Adult Monitor" is an adult who frequently moves in and out of rooms or activity areas adding additional supervision where two adults (not spouses) are not available to care for the children.
- C. "Assistant Who is a Minor" are persons under 18 years of age who help with activities (e.g., crafts or recreation) but are not in a supervisory role. An "Assistant Who is a Minor" does not satisfy the two unrelated adults rule.
- D. "Certifying Officer" is the individual who receives applications, conducts background checks, assesses results, verifies requirements are met, and certifies a person for supervision of children.
- E. "Child abuse" is a harmful act against any person under 18 years of age that presents themselves in the following forms or types:
 - a. Verbal Abuse – Any verbal act that humiliates, degrades or threatens any child or youth.
 - b. Physical Abuse – Any act of omission or an act that endangers a person's physical and mental health. In the case of child or youth physical abuse, this definition includes any intentional physical injury caused by the individual's caretaker. Physical abuse may result from punishment that is overly punitive or inappropriate to the individual's age or condition. In addition, physical abuse may result from purposeful acts that pose serious danger to the physical health of a child or youth.
 - c. Sexual Abuse – Child or youth sexual abuse is the sexual exploitation or use of minors for satisfaction of sexual drives. This includes, but is not limited to:
 - i. incest,
 - ii. rape,

- iii. prostitution,
 - iv. romantic involvement with any participant,
 - v. any sexual intercourse, or sexual conduct with, or fondling of an individual enrolled as a child or youth in Conference or District sponsored activities,
 - vi. sexualized behavior that communicates sexual interest and/or content. Examples of sexualized behavior include, but are not limited to: “displaying sexually suggestive visual materials, making sexual comments or innuendo about one’s own or another person’s body, touching another person’s body, hair or clothing, touching or rubbing oneself in the presence of another person, kissing, and sexual intercourse” (Resolution 2081, *The Book of Resolutions*, 2016).
- d. Ritual Abuse – Any act of physical, sexual, psychological violence or manipulation inflicted on a minor, intentionally and in a stylized way, by someone or multiple people that appeals to a higher authority or power to justify the abuse.
- NOTE: This includes any acts utilizing electronic means that could be construed as verbal, physical, sexual, or ritual abuse.
- F. “Child abuse” in this policy also includes abusive acts against vulnerable adults. “Vulnerable adults” are any person 18 years of age or older with diagnosed diminished physical, mental or emotional capacities.
 - G. “Child” or “Children” or “Minor” means any person(s) under the age of 18.
 - H. “Children’s activities” means any activity or program in which persons under the age of 18 are under supervision of staff persons or volunteers.
 - I. “Conference” means the South Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.
 - J. “Conference Crisis Team” is composed of the Resident Bishop, the Director of Connectional Ministries, and the Director of Communications. Others will join the consultation process depending on the situation (i.e., the Conference Chancellor, the District Superintendent in whose district the incident occurred, etc.). The Conference Crisis Team will assist in determining and implementing a comprehensive response to a crisis.
 - K. “Safe Sanctuaries” is the name commonly given by United Methodist Annual Conferences and local churches to their individual efforts to make conference, district, and local church programs welcoming and safe for children and youth.
 - L. “Staff person” means any person employed by the Conference who is responsible for children’s activities (as defined above).
 - M. “Staff person in charge of a children’s activity” means the Conference employee responsible for the supervision of this activity.
 - N. “Supervisor” means any staff person or volunteer who leads, directs, counsels, teaches, mentors, chaperones, transports or assists in programs and activities related to children, youth, or vulnerable adults.
 - O. “Volunteer” means a person 18 years of age or older who assists in conducting children’s activities.
 - P. “Vulnerable adult” means any person 18 years of age or older identified by a caregiver, staff person in charge or him/herself as an individual unable to take care of him/herself, or unable to protect him/herself against significant harm or exploitation due to diagnosed diminished physical, mental or emotional capacities.
 - Q. “We” means the South Georgia Annual Conference.
 - R. “Youth” means persons 20 years of age or younger who are strictly participants, holding no supervisory responsibility, in a conference or district sponsored activity.

Amendments

- A. Editorial changes that clarify the policy without changing its requirements may be made by the Conference Secretary in consultation with the Safe Sanctuaries Team.
- B. Substantive changes that alter the requirements outlined in this policy must be presented to the Annual Conference for approval.

Note: The policies were developed utilizing the resources developed by the Reverend Joy Thornburg Melton available through Cokesbury or Discipleship Resources.

Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church

Safe Sanctuaries for Youth: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in Youth Ministries