



Clergy Guidelines for Reporting Child Abuse

Revised 2022

Allegations of Child Abuse/Sexual Misconduct within the Local Church

Each case of alleged abuse is different. This document is intended to help stimulate your thoughtful, pastoral, professional and intentional response to a very serious incident within the life of individuals involved and the entire congregation.

Georgia law defines mandatory reporters of child abuse to include “persons employed by or volunteering at a business or an organization, whether public, private, for profit, not for profit, or voluntary, that provides care, treatment, education, training, supervision, coaching, counseling, recreational programs, or shelter to children.” The list specifically includes clergy with the limit of a confessional exception defined as “information required to be kept confidential under church doctrine or practice.” Given that *The Book of Discipline 2016* (§341.5) requires all United Methodist pastors to consider themselves mandated reporters, United Methodist doctrine does not protect a pastor who receives information regarding child abuse through the confessional. Therefore, if you know that someone is alleging that a minor has suffered abuse (present or past), you must make an official report within 24 hours.

NOTE: The statute for mandatory reporters includes any adult associated in any capacity to the organization. This includes, but is not limited to, a person mopping the floors, volunteering in the food pantry, or the parent who accompanies their child on a church trip. Anyone affiliated with a volunteer agency that serves children and youth (i.e. a church) is considered to be responsible for the reporting of suspected child abuse.

You, as the pastor of a congregation, are accountable and serving in a supervisory position for all staff members and volunteers who suspect a case of child abuse. Therefore, regardless of whether you are directly involved when an allegation is revealed, you will need to train and be prepared to guide those in your churches who are now considered mandated reporters.

NOTE: If the allegation is against a member of the clergy, the protocol outlined in the Policy on Church Professional Misconduct and The Book of Discipline 2016 (§2702) must be followed. The Church Professional Misconduct Policy is included in your most recent Sexual Ethics Notebook and online at www.sgaumc.org/pastoralcounselor.

Action Outline

1. Document Everything

It is very important that you, as the pastor, simultaneously document your own actions as you deal with all aspects of the allegation. Don't trust your memory. Keep adequate and accurate records and encourage any other staff member, adult, or volunteer to do the same.

**See end of document for important details to include*

2. Make Determination Regarding Law Enforcement

If you determine that a minor child (under the age of 18) is in immediate danger (i.e. may be heading back home into an unsafe environment), contact your local Police Department or Sheriff's Office. If you don't have those numbers handy, 911 operators can connect you to the appropriate department.

If you are made aware of an allegation of abuse and you are certain that the child is not in immediate danger of being harmed or coerced, then proceed to the following action.

3. Make a Report to Appropriate Agency

- a. **Anytime** a pastor has knowledge that a child is alleging abuse.
- b. **Anytime** another church staff member, leader, or adult volunteer has first-hand knowledge that a child is alleging abuse.
- c. **Anytime** physical signs, symptoms, or behaviors lead you or another person to suspect abuse.

When to Call Family and Children Services

Family and Children Services (DFCS) needs to be contacted in these circumstances:

- The situation involves potential abuse by a familial person, caregiver, or someone closely related to the family.
- The abuse occurred at the child's home.
- The abuse is revealed in the context of a church day care center or school or is alleged to have occurred in that environment. (*Even when your program is accredited by **Bright From The Start.***)

An oral report must be made within 24 hours by phone to the Georgia Centralized Intake.

Centralized intake: 1-855-GACHILD or 1-855-422-4453.

When to Call Law Enforcement

- When the child is in immediate danger.
- When alleged abuser is non-related to the child's daily care or home environment.
- When abuse is between a minor and another minor (most likely this call should be made to a subgroup of law enforcement called Juvenile Justice).

- When alleged abuser is on staff or in a supervisory role at the church. This includes volunteers and laity.

Call 911 or your local Law Enforcement Office.

In a case where you are uncertain about whom to call, the person answering the phone at the Georgia Centralized Intake Office can help you make that decision. Family and Children Services works directly *with* law enforcement, but a phone call to one does not necessarily suffice for a phone call to the other. In cases where another staff member or adult volunteer is the person to whom the child has come for help, you can assist them in making the necessary call(s). The adult to whom the child reveals the abuse is considered the ideal reporter. However, a designated director/supervisor of a program or *you* as the pastor may call on behalf of that person.

It is recommended that the “Chain of Supervision” be in your Safe Sanctuaries Policy. Ultimately, once the alleged abuse is brought to the attention of the supervisor in charge, it then becomes his/her responsibility to ensure that the report has been made. In most church structures, the final burden of responsibility would rest upon the Senior Pastor or Pastor in Charge.

NOTE: Do not contact the child’s parent or guardian until you have asked DFCS or law enforcement whether it is appropriate to make that call. Even when one parent is considered by the child to be safe, that parent very often contacts the offending parent immediately. This is the most common mistake church leaders make. Let the appropriate officials make those judgments. If time is of the essence (for example, the parents are waiting to pick up the child and you aren’t certain that he/she will be safe), call 911 and get an officer on site until these important determinations are made.

In the case of the abuse being perpetrated by someone potentially outside of the family, do not contact the alleged victim’s family prior to the report being made. Victim’s families can try to take the law into their own hands and make matters worse. Sometimes, these families are unwittingly associated with the alleged perpetrator and may want to handle the situation themselves. Ask for guidance from the professional taking the report as to if, when, and how to make that notification.

4. Call Your District Superintendent

Occasionally it can be tempting to want to handle these situations on your own, especially when you have a close relationship with any of the persons involved. However, these serious incidents have a way of spiraling out of control quickly. Two heads are better than one. Make this phone call to your DS *after* you are confident that the child in question is safe.

Note: District Superintendents are expected to contact the Conference Crisis Response Team immediately upon receiving word of an allegation of abuse that occurs within the context of the church. This entails:

- Abuse that occurs on church property or during any church sponsored event.
- Situations in which a pastor or paid church employee is identified as the alleged perpetrator.

This Conference Crisis Response Team consists of the Bishop, the Office of Connectional Ministries, the Conference Pastoral Counselor and the Director of Communications. The Conference Chancellor and others

may be included in these conversations as needed.

5. Determine if Notification of Church Insurance Agency is Advisable

NOTE: When alleged victim and offender both belong to the church or if the offense takes place on church property, most church insurance companies require advanced notice of the allegations in order to provide coverage in the unlikely event a lawsuit is filed. It is better to err on the side of full disclosure, especially if the case will likely be prosecuted. In these situations, the insurance company becomes YOUR ADVOCATE. See your insurance policy for contact information.

Reporting & Rights of the Reporter

What do I report?

- “Reasonable cause to believe a child has been abused”.
 - Suspicions *are* reasons to report. You do not have to have direct evidence.
- Make the report even if you do not have *ALL* the information:
 - Name, age, address and current location of child.
 - Name and address of child’s parents or caretakers, if known.
 - Current phone numbers for any related party above.
 - Name and address of suspected perpetrator.
 - Location where maltreatment took place, if known.
 - The nature and extent of the child’s injuries. To the extent possible, use the child’s own words to describe what happened.
 - Any other information the reporter believes might be helpful in establishing the cause of the injuries and the identity of the perpetrator.
 - Names and contact information of relatives, friends, etc. who can intervene in the interim if the child needs to be relocated temporarily.

What are the rights of mandated reporters?

- **Anonymity or confidentiality** - If you, your staff member, and/or volunteer are uncomfortable, you can withhold your name(s). DFCS guarantees confidentiality regardless of whether you give your name(s) during the report. DFCS does not release the information of the reporter except through a judge's order. In order to receive confirmation of the complaint, a name and address will need to be given.
- **Knowledge of the outcome only of a report** - This can be a difficult aspect. You will not be kept “in the loop” during the investigation nor will you always be alerted to the outcome. You ARE entitled to documentation that the report has been made. Send that documentation immediately to your District Superintendent.
- **Immunity for “good faith” report** - Even if you feel it is a violation of the confessional, you will not be held legally at fault for making a “good faith report.” If it is a staff member or volunteer and the alleged abuse is found to be a false accusation, he/she will not be held legally at fault for making a “good faith report.”

- **Penalty for NOT reporting** - Any person or official required by Georgia law to report suspected cases of child maltreatment and who knowingly and willfully fails to do so shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.

Common Scenarios Requiring Additional Steps

When the allegation is made against a church staff-member:

1. Follow all steps above.
2. Do not meet with the staff member alone. Have a trusted church leader present.
3. Call the chair of Staff Parish.
4. Insist that the staff member be put on an immediate temporary administrative leave with pay pending the appropriate investigation. This ensures the safety of other children *and* serves to protect the staff member from any further allegations.
5. Document the actions taken and terms of the administrative leave in writing, requesting the staff-member to sign the document certifying his/her comprehension of those actions.
6. If allegations are proven against the staff-member, work with your District Superintendent and Staff Parish Chair toward appropriate termination of the staff-member.

When the allegation is made against a church volunteer:

1. Follow all steps above.
2. Together with another professional, staff member, or trusted adult leader, insist that the volunteer take a temporary leave of absence from all church functions that include children or youth pending the appropriate investigation.
3. Document the terms of that agreement and have the volunteer sign the agreement.
4. If allegations are proven to be true, require that church member to step down from his/her volunteer position and take measures outlined in your Safe Sanctuaries Policy to ensure that the volunteer will no longer be unsupervised when around children and youth at church or during any church-sponsored events. (See www.sgaumc.org/safesanctuaries for ideas regarding "Premises Protection.")

When the allegation is made against a church member or person involved in your congregation:

1. Follow all steps above.
2. Do NOT alert the church member that you are taking action.
3. Refer to your church's Safe Sanctuaries Policy, which should have outlined the recommended steps toward appropriate actions and response.

Note: In all situations, remember your mandate to be appropriately confidential. Whenever minor children are in danger, those rules are somewhat altered. However, the pastor should rarely be the conduit of information to parties who are not directly involved. Whenever you are contacted by concerned (or nosy) church members, use discretion. Consult with your District Superintendent, a trusted colleague, or someone else you respect.

Note: In any situation that may involve contact with the MEDIA, please consult the Conference Director of Communications before you make a comment to receive suggestions designed for various scenarios and/or tailored statements for your unique situation.

Questions for Documentation

Below are some questions that may help you as you begin to document the reported incident. Your District Superintendent will help you think through the specifics. Remember that you are not in this alone. These are questions to help you get your thought process started.

Initial Information Gathering Phase

Note: During this phase remember that you are not an investigator, only a reporter.

- What is the exact nature of the allegation? (i.e. dates, times, place, parties involved, specific acts of abuse)
- When did you receive the report of alleged abuse?
- Have you spoken directly to the individual making the allegation?
- Did you make notes and document the details of that conversation utilizing the alleged victim's own words?
- Are there any written documents (letters, emails, etc.) that help explain the alleged offense?
- Is the child in immediate danger?
- Do you need to report the allegation of sexual abuse to law enforcement as well as DFCS?
- Are you cooperating with the legal authorities (i.e. DFCS/Police/Sheriff)? If so, what is the status of law enforcement's involvement in this case?
- Are you documenting the information received and the steps taken?
- Has the alleged perpetrator been removed from service while the allegation is investigated?
- Is there an employment/volunteer file including the criminal records check for the accused perpetrator?
- Have the appropriate church leaders been notified of the incident and the investigation?

After the Initial Information Gathering Phase

- What pastoral care has been offered to the complainant and family?
- What care has been offered to the alleged perpetrator and family?
 - Occasionally a pastor will be put in a situation where he/she feels the alleged offender needs immediate pastoral care. Sometimes you may be even called upon by the alleged offender for support or to hear his/her confession. **CAUTION:** These are often situations that can easily lead to a pastor colluding in the abuse or being perceived as colluding in the abuse. In cases where you feel like the alleged offender or someone related to the offender who may be protective of the offender needs pastoral care, consider the option of calling a ministry colleague who is not associated with your congregation. Ask your colleague to step in for you. It is a conflict of interest in abuse cases to feel that you can be a pastor to all parties involved. Utilize your resources to ensure that all involved get the support and care that they or their family and friends feel is needed.
- What measures are being taken to ensure the safety of all participants?

- If Safe Sanctuaries policies are in place, are procedures being followed?
- What are the plans for letting others in the congregation know about the allegation and the Church's initial response? This statement will briefly announce that allegations have been made while protecting the identity of the victim and the accused. The Conference Director of Communications can help you form these statements.
- Do the pastor and/or District Superintendent feel that additional resources or collaboration may be helpful? The Conference Pastoral Counselor may be asked by the pastor, District Superintendent, or Bishop to play a role as part of the team managing a critical incident involving child sexual abuse. When a member of the clergy is accused, a Response Team may be designated and deployed upon approval of the Bishop.
- What proactive steps need to be taken in preparation for response to media inquiries and other general inquiries about this incident? The Director of Communications can be very helpful in this area of crisis communications. Early preparations are encouraged.

Additional considerations if the allegation is substantiated:

- Are there any additional "actual" victims of abuse, as in the case of a predator? If so, how are you dealing with those individuals?
- What care is being provided to the other "victims" (i.e., peers of the victim, peer's family, other co-workers or volunteers, the congregation, etc.)?
- What plans are in place to notify the congregation of the investigation's findings?
- Truth telling is an important part of the healing process. This meeting needs to be thoughtfully and prayerfully planned. Contact your District Superintendent during this process. Sensitive and strong leadership is needed for this meeting, so your District Superintendent, Connectional Ministries Team, and/or Conference Pastoral Counselor may need to participate.
- What continuing care and follow-up is needed to help with the healing process?
- What steps will be taken in the future to develop and implement policies and procedures to protect participants from abuse?