

# **Safe Child Policy Guidelines For Safe Ministry With Children And Youth**

## **Introduction September 2004**

The Church Council recently approved a Safe Child Policy that was developed by the Board of Christian Education over the last year. The CE Board put this policy together after reviewing recommendations from the United Church of Christ, similar policies adopted by other area churches, school policies and policies used by other youth organizations such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. A copy of the Safe Child Policy can be found in the church office, on this church website and in the church library.

We hope this information will get you acquainted with the provisions of our new Safe Child Policy and help you understand and embrace the goals and duties this policy sets forth for those who volunteer or work with our church's children and youth.

## **Why Do We Need a Safe Child Policy?**

Child abuse can take many forms. It can be physical, emotional or sexual in nature. It occurs far more often than any of us expect. Although we would all like to believe "it can't happen here", we see from the experience of the Roman Catholic Church that it can happen just about anywhere. When abuse occurs, the consequences are devastating to all involved, including the church. We know we must take steps to educate our congregation about abuse and to prevent abuse. The Safe Child Policy is our effort to make our church a safer sanctuary for our children, and to protect our church as a whole.

In 2003, the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ adopted a resolution encouraging all churches to develop safe sanctuary policies. Although such a policy cannot completely prevent child abuse or exploitation, it can greatly reduce the risk for children, youth, staff, volunteers and the church as a whole.

## **What is a Safe Child Policy?**

A Safe Child Policy is a plan to develop policies for recruiting, screening and hiring staff and volunteers who work with children and youth. It is also a set of policies or guidelines that staff and volunteers working with our children must implement in their activities with children and youth. Lastly, it is a plan for responding to a reported or suspected case of child abuse or sexual misconduct.

## **What is Included In Our Safe Child Policy?**

The policy adopted by our Church Council has four separate sections.

(1) The first is a Statement of Policy. This section recites the policy's purpose, discusses those affected by the policy and provides a general description of the behavior the policy is meant to address. It promises that church leaders, employees and volunteers working with youth will be educated on the policy's provisions.

(2) The second section is Definitions. It explicitly defines the parties governed by this policy and the conduct prohibited by this policy. This section was adopted almost verbatim from recommendations made by the United Church of Christ.

(3) The third section, Basic Guidelines for Safe Ministry With Children and Youth, contains the practices the church will use in its youth ministry activities. The guidelines describe specific things those working with our children and youth should strive to do during youth ministry and children's activities. These are the most important things to be familiar with if you plan to volunteer or work with our children and youth in church sponsored activities.

These guidelines are not intended to take every step imaginable to prevent child abuse or sexual exploitation. Nor is every available screening tool going to be used to qualify volunteers for participating in our youth ministry. The goal was to adopt reasonable steps that are practical to implement and will minimize the opportunity for prohibited conduct to occur. These are written to be guidelines, not strict rules. It is specifically stated there are situations where strict adherence will not always be possible or practical, but that it is church policy to follow them when it is reasonably possible to do so.

(4) The final section is Reporting and Complaint Response Procedures. This section contains the process devised to report and respond to any case of suspected abuse or inappropriate behavior by an individual working with youth ministry.

It is important to note Sunday school teachers, youth group leaders, chaperones and volunteers all have a duty to report any complaints they become aware of that allege emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual misconduct or other inappropriate behavior by a person working with our children and youth ministry or activities. Such reports are made to the senior minister or to a member of the church moderator team.

Reports of misconduct will first be referred to the senior minister for initial follow-up. The senior minister will outline three possible responses that may be elected by the complainant. The first is to pursue a direct resolution with the party accused of misconduct. The second is to pursue an informal resolution with the party accused of misconduct through dialogue facilitated by the senior minister. The third is to pursue a formal resolution through the church moderator team after submitting a written complaint and allowing an investigation to ensue. The Safe Child Policy outlines the steps to be taken in this formal process, from the submission of the written complaint, to the investigation and through the disposition of the complaint through the moderator team's assessment and action.

Complaints involving the senior minister's activities will be referred to the Northwest Association Office of the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ for handling. Internally, First Congregational Church can decide whether it wishes to dismiss or maintain the employment of a senior minister so accused, or to suspend the senior minister until the Wisconsin Conference completes its investigation.

It is important to note that our policy does require the senior minister to report complaints involving certain kinds of abuse to either civil or law enforcement authorities, as required by state (or federal) law.

## **Conclusion**

The adoption of the Safe Child Policy is meant to make clear the intent of our church to provide a safe and nurturing environment for our children and youth, as well as to create an environment of hospitality, respect and equality within the church as a whole.

We must all be aware of the impact of our words and actions on the well-being of our children and others. We must take care to appropriately minister to our youth, and make sure that everyone finds our church a safe sanctuary to experience God's love and kinship to Christ.

# Statement of Policy

## **A. Youth Protection**

First Congregational Church is committed to creating a safe and healthy environment in which young people can learn about and experience God's love. In order to ensure this, it is the policy of this church to provide adequate supervision for all youth activities. We also expect all employees or volunteers who work with minors to complete and submit an appropriate disclosure and/or acknowledgement form for the role the employee or volunteer will have within our youth activity programs.

## **B. Ministerial Conduct**

All persons engaged in the ministry of First Congregational Church, including elected or appointed leaders, employees, volunteers and authorized ministers, are responsible for knowing the possible impact of their words and actions in ministering to the emotional, mental, and spiritual needs of persons who come to them for help or over whom they have any kind of authority.

Because ministers, including elected or appointed leaders, employees, volunteers and authorized ministers, often deal with individuals who are emotionally and psychologically fragile or otherwise personally vulnerable, it is imperative that those engaged in the ministry of this church maintain their own psychological, emotional and spiritual health, and that they have adequate preparation and education for helping those individuals they seek to serve in the ministry. It is the policy of First Congregational Church to encourage its leaders, authorized ministers, employees and volunteers to nurture safety within ministerial relationships by being attentive to self-care, education and the importance of referring those in need to supportive and helpful resources. It is also expected that those engaged in providing ministry will complete and submit an appropriate disclosure and/or acknowledgement form for the role in our youth ministry each individual will fulfill.

## **C. Prohibition of Sexual Misconduct, Abuse and Other Discrimination**

First Congregational Church is committed to creating and maintaining a worship and work community in which members, friends, staff and volunteers can work together in an atmosphere free of all forms of discrimination, harassment, abuse, exploitation or intimidation. This church affirms its responsibility for creating an environment of hospitality for all persons, male or female, adult or child, that is free of sexual misconduct, free of physical and emotional abuse, and that encourages respect, equality, equity and kinship to Christ. We support equity among all persons regardless of ethnicity, situation, age or gender.

Specifically, all persons associated with First Congregational Church should be aware that the church is strongly opposed to sexual exploitation and harassment, and that such behavior is prohibited by church policy. It is the intention and responsibility of the church to take the action needed to prevent and

correct behavior that is contrary to this policy and, if necessary, to discipline any person who violates this policy. Sexual harassment or sexual exploitation of parishioners or other individuals by anyone engaged in the ministry of First Congregational Church is unethical and unprofessional behavior, and will not be tolerated within this congregation.

#### **D. Review and Education**

This policy was drafted, reviewed and approved by the Christian Education Board. The Church Council also reviewed and approved adoption of this policy.

The Christian Education Board will conduct periodic reviews of this policy and make any changes it deems appropriate as a result of its review. Church Council approval will be obtained before implementing any changes the Christian Education Board makes to this policy in the future.

This church commits itself to educating all church leaders, employees and volunteers who work with minors in our youth programs on the provisions of our Safe Child Policy so they are aware of their responsibilities within the framework of this policy, the rationale behind the development of this policy and the applicable guidelines to be followed in ministry. A copy of this policy will be available for review in the Church office and library. It will also be posted on the Church's website.

# Definitions

**Minister:** A person engaged by the church to carry out its ministry. “Minister” includes elected or appointed leaders of the church, employees and volunteers, as well as “authorized ministers”.

**Authorized Minister:** A person who holds ordained ministerial standing or has been commissioned or licensed by an association of the United Church of Christ.

**Ministerial Relationship:** The relationship between one who carries out the ministry of the church and the one being served by that ministry.

**Emotional Abuse:** Involves verbal or non-verbal violence toward a child that gives the child the message that the child is “no good” and never will be. It includes using harsh, abusive language meant to revile, malign or hurt the one it is directed at.

**Physical Abuse:** Involves physical violence toward a child, including any type of physical aggression directed at a child in anger, including corporal punishment.

**Sexual Misconduct:** Includes “sexual exploitation” and “sexual harassment” as defined in this policy. It occurs when a person within a “ministerial relationship” engages in sexual contact or sexualized behavior with a congregant, client, employee, student, staff member or volunteer.

**Sexual Exploitation:** Sexual activity or contact (not limited to sexual intercourse) in which a minister engaged in the work of the church takes advantage of the vulnerability of a participant by causing or allowing the participant to engage in sexual behavior with the minister.

**Sexual Harassment:** Repeated or coercive sexual advances toward another person contrary to his/her wishes. It includes behavior directed at and about a person’s sexuality or sexual orientation with the intent of intimidating, humiliating or harassing the other person, or subjecting the person to public discrimination. Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute “sexual harassment” when:

submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly as a term or condition or circumstance of instruction, employment or participation in any church activity;

- submission to, or rejection of, such conduct by an individual is used as a basis for evaluation in making personnel or church-related decisions affecting an individual; or
- such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual’s performance or participation in church activities or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive work or church environment.

Prohibited “sexual harassment” includes unsolicited and unwelcome contact that has sexual overtones, particularly:

- written contact, such as sexually suggestive or obscene letters, notes or invitations;
- verbal contact, such as sexually suggestive or obscene comments, threats, slurs, epithets, jokes about gender-specific traits or sexual orientation, or sexual propositions;
- physical contact, such as intentional touching, pinching, brushing against another’s body, impeding or blocking movement, assault or coercing sexual intercourse, and
- visual contact, such as glaring or staring at another’s body, gesturing, displaying sexually suggestive objects or pictures, cartoons, posters or magazines.

“Sexual harassment” also includes continuing to express sexual interest after being informed directly that the interest is unwelcome – and using sexual behavior to control, influence or affect the career, salary, work, learning or worship environment of another.

It is impermissible to suggest, threaten or imply that a failure to accept a request for a date or sexual intimacy will affect a person’s job prospects, church leadership or comfortable participation in the life of the church. For example, it is forbidden either to imply or actually withhold support for an appointment, promotion or change of assignment; to suggest that a poor performance report will be given because a person has declined a personal proposition; or to hint that benefits, such as promotions, favorable performance evaluations, favorable assigned duties or shifts, recommendations or reclassifications, will be forthcoming in exchange for sexual favors.

# Basic Guidelines

The following guidelines are important to our commitment to prevent abuse of our youth.

They are to be followed when reasonably possible. Strict adherence to these guidelines is not always possible or practical so it is important to note these are guidelines only. These guidelines are not listed in order of importance.

**1. The “Two Adult” Policy:** This policy suggests that no fewer than two unrelated adults be present at all times during any church-sponsored program, event or ministry involving children and youth. However, it is expressly understood that Sunday school classrooms will not always be staffed with two unrelated adults. When classrooms are not staffed with two unrelated adults, a “roamer” will be used who will move in and out of the classrooms during the program, event or ministry.

**2. “Windows and Doors” Policy:** There will be windows in the classroom doors where child or youth ministry occurs, or doors will be left open to accommodate open access to the rooms where child or youth ministry occurs.

**3. The “Five Years Older” Policy:** It is desired that all workers or volunteers with youth be at least five years older than the youth or children they are leading. If there is a young adult or another youth who wishes to volunteer with child or youth ministry who is less than five years older than the age of the youth in ministry, such volunteers will be paired with an adult leader who is at least five years older than the age of the ministered youth whenever possible.

**4. The “Six Month” Policy:** No volunteer may be accepted to work with youth until that volunteer has been an active participant in our congregation for at least six months unless that volunteer is paired with an adult who has been an active participant in our congregation and who has worked or volunteered with our child or youth ministry for at least six months.

**5. First Aid/CPR Training:** All workers and volunteers who work with youth will be encouraged to obtain training in basic CPR and first aid. The church will provide all workers and volunteers with information on where such training may be obtained. However, the church will not pay the costs of such training unless advance approval is obtained from the senior minister or the board that will provide the funds for such training.

**6. Alcohol, Drugs and Tobacco:** Alcohol, recreational drug and tobacco use are prohibited on any church-sponsored program, event or ministry involving youth or children.

**7. Seatbelts:** Seatbelts will be worn by all participants, but especially by youth and children, during any church-sponsored event that requires transportation in a car.

**8. Driver's License and Insurance:** Workers and volunteers that agree to transport youth or children on any church-sponsored event must have a valid driver's license in order to drive any youth or child on the church-sponsored event. In addition, workers and volunteers should not transport youth or children in a vehicle unless they have liability insurance on the vehicle they are using to transport the youth or children. Whenever possible, drivers should be adults over the age of 21. However, it is understood drivers under the age of 21 may be used from time to time, especially if the event is a day trip within a reasonably short distance of the church.

**9. Emergency Contact Card:** Children and youth participating in church-sponsored events or activities outside the church premises are expected to provide emergency contact cards from parents or guardians that contain information on who to contact for the child or youth participants in the event of an emergency. These contact cards will also contain a general grant of permission for the child or youth to participate in the event or activity, and authorize supervising adults to seek emergency medical care if necessary. The absence of a completed emergency contact card will not prohibit a youth from participating in a church-sponsored youth activity or event. The primary goal is to inform parents, guardians and hosts that emergency contact information should be made available to those supervising youth events.

**10. Orientation and Acknowledgment:** Each year the church will offer an orientation for all full-time or part-time workers and volunteers who work with youth and children. The orientation will include a review of the church's Safe Child Policy and the guidelines First Congregational Church strives to use in all its youth and children's ministries. Procedures for reporting and investigating incidents or complaints regarding inappropriate behavior, misconduct or alleged violations of the Safe Child Policy will also be reviewed.

All leaders, workers and volunteers in youth and children's ministries shall provide a signed acknowledgment form indicating they have reviewed the church's Safe Child Policy, are familiar with its provisions and goals, and agree to give their best effort to the ministry and to adhering to the guidelines established by the Safe Child Policy.

# Reporting & Complaint Response Procedures

## I. REPORTING

Complaints alleging emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual misconduct or any other inappropriate behavior that violates the Safe Child Policy should be reported to the senior minister or to a member of the church moderator team.

All complaints, except those involving the activity of the senior minister, will be referred to the senior minister for initial handling.

If the complaint involves the activity of the senior minister, the complaint should be referred to the moderator team for initial handling. The moderator team will immediately refer such a complaint to the Northwest Association Office of the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ for handling. First Congregational Church will cooperate fully in any process conducted by the United Church of Christ related to the senior minister's ministerial authorization, but it retains the right to employ or designate its ministerial leadership, interim or otherwise, within First Congregational Church as it determines is best during the handling of any complaint involving conduct of its senior minister.

In certain cases, as required by state or federal law, the senior minister must comply with mandatory reporting requirements and report certain types of abuse allegations to the appropriate county department of human services and/or local law enforcement agencies. (§§48.981(2)(bm), 48.981(3), Wis. Stats. and 2003 Act 279)

## II. RESPONSE PROCEDURES

### A. Senior Minister's Initial Contacts

Upon receipt of a complaint, the senior minister will promptly contact the complainant to discuss the options available to address the complaint. A copy of the Safe Child Policy will be provided to the complainant at this time. The parents or guardians of any minors involved will be notified so they can assist in choosing the appropriate response option and participate in the response process.

### B. Response Options

#### 1. Direct Resolution

The complainant may choose to attempt resolution by making direct contact with the person whose conduct the complaint involves.

#### 2. Informal Process – Meeting With Senior Minister

The complainant may choose to have the senior minister attempt resolution of the matter. The senior minister will offer to meet with the accused party, either individually or jointly with the complainant, to bring the issue raised to the accused party's attention, and to resolve the issue to the mutual satisfaction of all involved.

### **3. Formal Process – Written Complaint with Investigation**

This option involves the following steps.

#### **(a) Written Complaint**

This option is initiated by the complainant filing a written complaint describing the incident(s) giving rise to the complaint and identifying the person whose conduct the complaint involves.

The senior minister will explain to complainants electing this option that the privacy of all individuals involved will be maintained to the greatest extent possible, but that absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Information will be shared only as needed to properly investigate the complaint and decide upon an appropriate course of action.

The written complaint will be referred to the three-member moderator team for review and further action.

A moderator may choose to abstain from further participation if a conflict, real or perceived, exists that renders the moderator incapable of impartiality. The two remaining moderators can elect to proceed or to choose a 3<sup>rd</sup> person to replace the abstaining moderator.

#### **(b) Investigation**

*(1) Investigative Team Appointed:* The moderator team will promptly appoint a two person investigative team, comprised of one member of each gender, to conduct an investigation of the complaint.

It will be within the moderator team's discretion to decide whether the accused party's volunteer service continue, be restricted or completely suspended during the investigation. If the accused party is a church employee, the pastor-parish committee will decide whether the employee's service will continue, be restricted or suspended during the investigation, or terminated.

*(2) Investigation Conducted:* The two person investigative team will meet separately with the complainant and the accused party to gather statements and information about the facts and circumstances surrounding the events or activities that involved the alleged misconduct. A parent or guardian of any minor involved shall be present unless they choose not to be.

It may also be necessary for the team to meet with others who were present at the activity or event involved to gather pertinent information about the facts and circumstances surrounding the allegations in the complaint.

*(3) Investigative Team Report:* No more than thirty (30) days after appointment, the two member investigative team will prepare a report to submit to the moderator team. This report should include the following information:

- A summary of the steps taken in the investigation.
- A restatement of the nature of the complaint made and a summary of the information obtained from the complainant during the interview process.
- A statement of the response to the complaint and a summary of the information obtained from the accused party during the interview process.
- A summary of information obtained from other parties in the investigation.
- A recommendation for action.

Both the complainant and the accused will be given the opportunity to review the investigative team's summary of their respective interviews. Each will be asked to sign a statement indicating the investigative team's summary of their respective interview is a fair representation of the facts as that person reported them.

**(c) Moderator Team Action:** The three person moderator team will review the investigative team's report and decide on an appropriate course of action. The moderator team may direct the investigative team to gather additional information if the moderator team believes it is necessary to make a proper determination.

The moderator team will order one of the following actions. If the complaint involves the alleged misconduct of a church employee, the moderator team will consult with the pastor-parish committee to decide on the appropriate course of action.

*(1) No Action Recommended:* This order is appropriate when the investigation reflects no inappropriate conduct took place, or when the complaint has been resolved through some other means.

*(2) Private Discussion/Reprimand:* This order is appropriate when the investigation reflects the complaint involved miscommunication or misunderstanding between the parties more than anything else, and is appropriate when education on sensitivity may be all that is needed to resolve the issue.

*(3) Dismissal/Removal:* This order is appropriate when the investigation suggests inappropriate conduct violating church policy was engaged in, whether knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, and where it is determined it is best to remove the person complained of from their position of contact with the church's youth and children.

The adjudication of the moderator team and/or pastor-parish committee will be put in writing and should include an explanation of its findings.

The moderator team will choose at least two of its members to meet with the complainant to review and explain its findings and its decision.

### **III. RECORD KEEPING**

A. The senior minister shall keep a log of all complaints made, and should include notes that indicate the response options the complainants elected and the outcome of the response options elected.

B. If a formal written complaint was submitted, a full record of the proceedings conducted to investigate and dispose of the complaint must be maintained. The record should include:

- A copy of the written complaint.
- The materials gathered and produced by the investigative team.
- The moderator team's or pastor-parish committee's written decision regarding the course of action taken to dispose of the complaint.
- A summary of the final meeting held with the complainant.

C. Records of all complaints and proceedings must be kept a minimum of seven (7) years following final disposition, or, if the complainant is a minor at the time of the event, until the complainant reaches the age of forty-five (45).

D. Access to these records will be limited to the church moderator team, pastor-parish committee and senior minister. These records may also be disclosed to cooperate in an investigation conducted by the Wisconsin Conference of the UCC, law enforcement officials, the county department of human services, the church's insurer or the church's legal counsel.