

# Safe Sanctuaries in the Mississippi Conference

## MISSISSIPPI CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH *Safe Sanctuaries Policy and Minimum Requirements for Conference Ministries Guidelines for Local Church Ministries*

The 2006 Annual Conference approved a resolution that the conference "shall develop safety and risk-reducing policies and procedures for the purpose of providing protection to children, youth, and vulnerable adults that come to us, to staff and volunteers from unwarranted allegations of abuse, and to limit the extent of legal liability." A task group developed the following policy, which was presented and adopted at the 2007 Annual Conference.

### INTRODUCTION

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes a child...welcomes me" (Matthew 18:5). He also said, "If any of 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)

Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to those who cannot protect themselves. We affirm this responsibility for the safety of children at each child's baptism by our congregational response, pledging: "With God's help we will so order our lives after the example of Christ, that this child, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal." (*Book of Worship*, Baptismal Covenant, Congregational Pledge, 11)

### PURPOSE

Building on our theological and spiritual foundation, our purpose for establishing this policy and accompanying procedures is to demonstrate our absolute and unwavering commitment to create a safe environment that will foster the comprehensive health, growth, and development of all within our charge and care.

### INTENT

As a Christian community of faith, the Mississippi Conference of the United Methodist Church, we pledge to conduct the ministry of the gospel in ways that foster the safety and spiritual growth of all. Nothing in this policy or procedure is designed to hinder or prevent the investigation of suspected, reported, or confirmed violation of any Mississippi criminal laws.

We hereby declare our intent to:

1. Follow reasonable safety measures in the selection and recruitment of staff and volunteers.
2. Provide adequate training for staff and volunteers regarding the implementation of our policies and procedures.
3. Implement prudent operational procedures in all programs and events that will encourage the development of our adults and children.
4. Design a clearly defined procedure for reporting instances of injury, harm or abuse in accordance with the requirements of state and federal laws.
5. Respond with compassion and integrity to needs as they present themselves following incidents of harm, injury, or abuse.
6. Review our policies and procedures regularly to meet changing legal, health, and safety standards.

#### CONCLUSION

In all of our ministries, the Mississippi Conference of the United Methodist Church is committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each person is "surrounded by steadfast love ...established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal." (Baptismal Covenant II, *United Methodist Hymnal*, p.44).

#### DEFINITIONS

*Adult* - any person 18 years or older.

*Child* - any person under the age of 18.

*Children's activities* - any activity or program in which children are under supervision of staff persons or volunteers.

*Conference* - the Mississippi Conference of the United Methodist Church.

*National Background Check* - A background check that includes:

National Criminal Background Check  
National Sexual Offenders Check  
Social Security Number Verification

*Residential camping* - any overnight event is considered residential camping. This includes but is not limited to residential camping settings, conference camps, a conference or district lock-in, youth related overnight events, or mission work outside the boundaries of your residential dwelling.

*Staff person* - any person employed by the Conference who is responsible for youth or children's

activities.

*Supervisor* - the person who has direct and immediate oversight and responsibility for any event.

*Volunteer* - a person 18 years of age or older who assists in conducting youth or children's activities under the supervision of a staff person.

*Vulnerable adult* - any person over 18 years of age with diagnosed diminished physical, mental, or emotional capacities.

## 1. SELECTION AND RECRUITMENT OF STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

1.1 All persons employed to serve in a supervisory capacity for children/youth shall:

1.1.1 Be at least 21 years of age (in certain circumstances, such as Camp Wesley Pines and Camp Lake Stephens leadership, 18 years shall be the acceptable minimum age when combined with adequate training in the conference policies and procedures and competent oversight by a qualified adult, such as the camp director.)

1.1.2 No one shall be employed in a supervisory capacity unless he/she is at least four years older than the oldest student

1.1.3 Complete an application/commitment form

1.1.4 Provide three character references with full contact information

1.1.5 Demonstrate an active relationship with their local church for at least 6 months prior to employment

1.1.6 Be interviewed by the director of the ministry/program

1.1.7 Consent to a national criminal records check and a driver's license record check

1.2 All volunteers serving in a supervisory capacity for children/youth shall:

1.2.1 Be at least 21 years of age

1.2.2 Complete an application/commitment form

1.2.3 Demonstrate an active relationship with their local church for at least 6 months prior to serving in a supervisory capacity

1.2.4 Be interviewed by the director of the ministry/program

1.2.5 Consent to a criminal records check and driver's license records check

1.3 All volunteers serving in a helping capacity for children/youth shall:

1.3.1 Complete an application/commitment form

1.3.2 Be interviewed by the director of the ministry/program

1.3.3 Consent to a criminal records check and driver's license records check

1.4 In the event that a substitute worker needs to be brought in under last-minute circumstances, that person must:

1.4.1 Complete an application/commitment form

1.4.2 Complete a basic orientation/training provided by the director or other supervisor before actually beginning work.

1.5 All information obtained from background checks will be received and reviewed by the Conference Director of Connectional Ministries or their designee, who may, in their discretion, share applicable information with the appropriate supervisory staff person(s). Additionally, if the record of a staff member or candidate for a staff position shows a criminal conviction, the conference director of Connectional Ministries or their designee will consider the employment on a case-by-case basis. Otherwise all such information will be held in confidence, except for any disclosure required by lawful court action.

1.6 Any prospective volunteer or candidate for a staff position with a conviction for a sex offense or abuse or neglect of a minor is prohibited from work with children or youth. All other convictions will be considered on a case by case basis.

## 2. TRAINING

2.1 Training must become a mandatory component of each event's design. The design team shall be responsible for assuring that adequate insurance for the specific event and/or activities either from the conference or the district is in place.

2.2 The design team must have a person available at the event who is trained and certified to receive any report of allegations of abuse and follow through according to the conference guidelines and the requirements of state law.

2.3 All workers shall be trained annually in safety, first aid, and child abuse prevention.

2.4 Training shall include information, explanation, and discussion of:

2.4.1 The annual conference policy

2.4.2 Behaviors or other indicators which may signal problems

2.4.3. Requirements of Mississippi law for reporting incidents of abuse

2.4.4 Procedures for response to incidents of abuse and for reporting incidents of abuse.

2.5 All persons serving as directors shall complete certification training for processing allegations and reports of child abuse.

2.6 All workers and leaders will sign a covenant to abide by the conference policy at the conclusion of each training prior to an event.

### 3. OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES FOR PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

All district and conference ministries with children/youth shall be governed by these guidelines:

3.1 Two unrelated adults shall be present at all times.

3.2 If there are both male and female participants, then the adult leaders should also include both males and females.

3.3 The number of adult leaders and chaperones required for each event (above the minimum of two) will be set by the established conference ratios as follows:

#### 3.3.1 Day Care/Nursery Programs (in compliance with MS State Regulations)

Infants (non-handicapped & not walking)	1 Adult to 5 Infants
Toddlers (walking, non-handicapped)	1 Adult to 9 Toddlers
2 years of age	1 Adult to 12 Children
3 years of age	1 Adult to 14 Children
4 years of age	1 Adult to 16 Children
5 years of age	1 Adult to 20 Children
6 years of age & older	1 Adult to 25 Children

#### 3.3.2 Mixed Age Groups

6 weeks to 30 months	1 Adult to 5 Children
2 to 4 years	1 Adult to 8 Children
2 to 3 years	1 Adult to 8 Children
2 1/2 to 3 years	1 Adult to 10 Children
2 1/2 to 5 years	1 Adult to 12 Children
3 to 5 years	1 Adult to 14 Children
4 to 5 years	1 Adult to 16 Children

Grades 1-4                      1 Adult to 16 Children  
Grades 5-12                    1 Adult to 20 Children

### 3.3.3 Residential Camping

Grades 1-3                    1 Adult to 8 Children  
Grades 4-8                    1 Adult to 10 Children  
Grades 9-12                  1 Adult to 12 Children

3.4 In residential camping situations, the adult chaperone must always be the same gender as the campers he/she is supervising.

3.5 Unauthorized visitors/volunteers will not be allowed to remain with the group.

3.6 Participants will not be allowed to leave the designated meeting area without permission/supervision.

3.7 During ministry events, one-on-one activities shall not be conducted "behind closed doors" or in isolated area away from trained supervisory persons.

3.8 All ministry events will be carried out in appropriate locations with adequate equipment and trained adult supervisors present.

3.9 Registration materials for activities in which children are outside direct supervision of their parents/guardians shall require a signed written permission forms that include pertinent health information in order to participate.

3.10 If the participants are old enough to understand, they shall sign a covenant of participation listing rules for all trips, overnights, etc.

3.11 This paragraph three (3) shall be advisory guidelines only, as applied to ministries in the local church and shall not be considered as requirement for the local church.

## 4. REPORTING INCIDENTS

4.1 All reporting of alleged incidents or actual incidents of child abuse must strictly follow Mississippi law.

4.2 A worker who has reasonable cause to suspect that child abuse has occurred should secure the safety of the child, if possible, and then immediately report the incident to the director/supervisor and the certified safety person of the ministry event. It is never the responsibility of a worker with children or youth to investigate allegations of child abuse. The director/supervisor and the certified safety person will then follow all appropriate procedures for reporting to the child's parents or guardian, authorities of the annual conference and/or district, and local law enforcement or child protective service agencies.

## 5. RESPONDING

5.1 A quick, compassionate and unified response to an alleged incident of child abuse will be initiated. All allegations will be taken seriously.

5.2 The communications director of the Mississippi Conference of the United Methodist Church, or her/his designee, is the only person authorized to make statements to representatives of the media. All requests for statements should be directed to the appointed Safe Sanctuaries person for the event.

5.3 Pastoral support will be available to all persons involved in the incident.

## CONCLUSION

We take our policies to reduce risk of child abuse seriously and we are committed to their enforcement for the safety and security of all our children, youth, and those who work with them. All conference and district ministry events are required to comply with these policies. Each conference ministry event shall be subject to review by the Safe Sanctuaries Committee of the conference Office of Connectional Ministries and the conference staff person related to that event.

Each district ministry event shall be subject to review by the executive committee of the district Council on Ministries or its equivalent.

Conference and district ministry events not sponsored by the conference Office of Connectional Ministries or the district council or its equivalent will be subject to review by the team, committee, or board that initiates the event.

Non-compliance with these policies shall result in potential loss of sponsorship by the conference Office of Connectional Ministries, district council, or the sponsoring team, board, or committee.

The conference Office of Connectional Ministries shall review these policies and procedures at least biannually.

Training procedures will continue in conference and district events annually.