

# SAFE SANCTUARIES POLICY

## North Bethesda United Methodist Church Bethesda, Maryland

The General Conference of the United Methodist Church in April 1996 adopted a resolution aimed at eliminating any potential for child sexual abuse in the church. The North Bethesda United Methodist Church (NBUMC) submitted its first Safe Sanctuaries plan to the Baltimore Washington Conference (BWC) in 2008 and included it in its Charge Conference report. This policy amends and supersedes that document.

NBUMC, as a reconciling church, celebrates God's gift of diversity. We welcome and affirm people of every gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation, who are also of every age, race, ethnicity, physical and mental ability, level of education, and family structure, and of every economic, immigration, marital, and social status, and so much more.

### **Purpose**

Our purpose for updating this policy and accompanying procedures is to demonstrate our total and unwavering commitment to the physical, emotional, and spiritual safety of all our children and vulnerable adults. In addition, we strive to protect both our paid staff and volunteers from potential false allegations of abuse, and to limit the extent of legal liability of NBUMC.

### **Definitions**

**Adult:** A person 18 years of age or older.

**Child abuse and child neglect,** as defined under Code of Maryland Regulations, section 07.02.07:

1. Child abuse means physical injury, not necessarily visible, of a child under circumstances that indicate that the child's health or welfare is harmed or at substantial risk of being harmed.
2. Child neglect means the failure to give proper care and attention to a child, including the leaving of a child unattended under circumstances that indicate that the child's health or welfare is harmed or placed at substantial risk of harm.

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3. Sexual abuse means an act or acts involving sexual molestation or exploitation, whether physical injuries are sustained or not.
4. Mental injury means the observable, identifiable, and substantial impairment of a child's mental or psychological ability to function.
5. Indicated means a finding that there is credible evidence, which has not been satisfactorily refuted, that physical abuse, neglect, or sexual abuse did occur.
6. Unsubstantiated means a finding that there is an insufficient amount of evidence to support a finding of indicated or ruled out.

**Child:** Any person under the age of 18.

**Vulnerable adult:** A person 18 years or older who is mentally, physically or psychologically challenged, and is unable to make responsible legal decisions about his or her welfare.

**Children's activity:** Any activity or program in which children are under supervision of staff persons or volunteers.

**Volunteer:** Any adult, who assists in conducting children's activities under the supervision of a staff person and/or has regular and direct contact with children, is 18 years or older, and is counted in the 2-adult rule.

**Applicant:** Any person wishing to become a volunteer or to obtain a staff position.

**Persons required to report child abuse:** Persons, who, in the course of their involvement with NBUMC as ministry team leaders, volunteers, staff or administrators, come into contact with children or vulnerable adults.

**We, Us, Our and Our Church:** The North Bethesda United Methodist Church of Bethesda, Maryland. (NBUMC)

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### **Staff Selection Policy**

All volunteer and paid staff who work with children or vulnerable adults at NBUMC will be subject to the following requirements:

- Be at least 18 years or older. Other persons under age 18 may serve as assistants to those in leadership positions but should not be left alone with children or vulnerable adults.
- Should be at least 5 years older than the oldest child they will be supervising.
- Non-staff children or adult leaders must have been a participant in the church community for at least six months before being allowed to work with children or vulnerable adults. An exception may be made during Vacation Bible School, but participant must be accompanied by an approved Safe Sanctuary leader.
- Complete and sign the *Safe Sanctuary Participation Covenant*, the *Sexual Misconduct Questionnaire*, and the related waivers giving permission to check references and background information. These forms must be submitted every year.
- Provide the names and contact information of 3 personal references.
- Undergo a criminal background check, at no expense to the applicant, if they will have supervisory program responsibility for children or vulnerable adults.
- Background checks should be repeated every 3 years.
- Individuals who have been convicted of physical or sexual abuse, or child neglect may not work in any church-sponsored activity or program for children or vulnerable adults.
- Individuals volunteering on a one-time or occasional basis need not go through all the checks nor fill out the application, but may only work with the children or vulnerable adults in the presence of another fully-vetted adult leader.

### **Staff Supervision**

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Requirements for activities involving children and vulnerable adults at NBUMC are:

- Two non-related adult leaders must be present in each space for a program involving children or vulnerable adults. If two adults per room is not possible, there will be a roving adult who moves among the rooms during the program period. This applies to classroom activities, activities away from the church premises, and when transporting children.
- One-on-one interaction with children or vulnerable adults will be with an open door and visibility to all.
- Children will be checked into and out of a church sponsored activity by their parent or legal guardian or persons authorized by a parent/legal guardian.
- Children in the nursery will be checked in and out by their parent, legal guardian or a person authorized by their parent/legal guardian.
- Physical affection should be limited and must be appropriate to the age of the child or vulnerable adult. Touching should ordinarily be initiated by the child and only in the presence of other workers. A child's preference not to be touched will be respected. The same policy holds for vulnerable adults.
- A child's or a vulnerable adult's expressed sexual orientation and/or gender identity will be respected.
- When taking young children to the restroom, the adult should remain outside the stall. If a child needs help, it should be given outside the stall when feasible.

### **Administrative Requirements**

The following administrative requirements will be implemented by staff and volunteers:

- All children and vulnerable adults attending NBUMC activities must have an emergency contact form on file (attached). This form includes the

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names of emergency contacts other than the parent/guardian in case the parent/guardian is not available.

- Any parent, legal guardian, or authorized person, has the right to visit and observe the activity classroom or church sponsored activity at any time, unannounced.
- All classroom and office doors will have a window with visibility from the hallway or remain open while occupied.
- Windows will be kept free from adornment.
- If pictures are taken of an event for publication in a church newsletter or online, no names of minor children will be published, as a general rule. If an exception is warranted, written permission from the parent will be obtained. In addition, before posting any photos without names online, written permission from the parent will be obtained.
- Whenever NBUMC hosts an activity involving children or vulnerable adults from another church or community organization, the groups using the church facility should be made aware of and agree to follow NBUMC's safe sanctuary policies and procedures.
- Training on safe sanctuary policies and procedures will occur at least once a year and workers will be trained to recognize the warning signs of abuse and neglect.

### Transportation Away from the Church

The following requirements apply to non-related adults and children being transported to an off-campus event. The requirements do **not** apply to a parent/guardian transporting his/her own child/children or vulnerable adult to an off-campus event.

- Drivers must be at least 25 years old and have good driving records.
- Designated drivers should never transport a child or vulnerable adult without another adult being present. The transport should be approved and covered by church's insurance company.
- Drivers should go through the same screening process as all other paid staff or volunteers who interact with children or vulnerable adults

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unless preauthorized by the pastor or Director of Christian Education in writing.

### **Overnight Outings**

For overnight or out-of-town outings, the following requirements apply:

- All children or vulnerable adults participating in out-of-town or overnight outings where they are not under the direct supervision of their parents/guardians must have written consent and a medical release form. Medical release forms may be completed for a one-year period and must be renewed annually.
- No one under the age of 25 will be permitted to drive others (whether adults or children) on any church-sponsored outing.
- Transportation arranged by the church for children or vulnerable adults should have at least two adults (at least one of whom has fulfilled all the Safe Sanctuary requirements) in each vehicle.
- For overnight events, two or more adult leaders must be present and must include at least one male and female if the group is of mixed gender. We respect situations where a person's identity preference is different from the sex assigned at birth, and will work with the child or vulnerable adult and his/her/their parents/guardians to provide satisfactory accommodations.
- Female staff will supervise female children or vulnerable adults in their sleeping quarters and male staff will supervise male children or vulnerable adults in separate sleeping quarters. Exceptions for an individual child or vulnerable adult may be made after discussion with the child's or vulnerable adult's parents/guardians. Married couples will not stay together but observe the female/female and male/male sleeping arrangements.
- Adults will not share a hotel room, bunkhouse, or tent with children or vulnerable adults unless there are at least two non-related adults and at least two children or vulnerable adults present in that space. Except for a parent/guardian and child combination or a parent/guardian and vulnerable

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adult situation, no adult volunteer or paid staff will occupy the same bed or sleeping bag as a child or vulnerable adult.

- There must be access to a phone or cell phone when groups are away from the church property.
- Attendance records of children, vulnerable adults, and leaders must be taken at all overnight or out-of-town events. Upon return to the church, at least two adults must remain until all the children or vulnerable adults have been picked up.

### **Responding and Reporting**

If a suspected incident of child or vulnerable adult abuse or neglect occurs or is revealed to a volunteer or paid staff person at an NBUMC-sponsored activity, the adult in charge of the activity will ensure the safety of the child or vulnerable adult first. In addition:

- If the church becomes aware of alleged abuse done by a church staff member or volunteer, that person will immediately be removed from contact with children and/or vulnerable adults until the reported incident has been resolved.
- All allegations will be taken seriously.
- Upon learning of an alleged incident of abuse, the pastor, in consultation with the District Superintendent and/or the Bishop and the Chair of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, will consult legal counsel as to whether the allegations are subject to state law reporting requirements and, where appropriate, will make a report to the local department of social services and/or the police.
- If the allegation concerns a staff member or pastor, the Chair of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee and the District Superintendent will be contacted immediately.
- The pastor or a designee will keep a written record of all steps taken to report the alleged abuse.

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- Requests for public statements about the incident will be referred to the pastor and/or the District Superintendent.
- Pastoral support will be available to all persons involved in the incident.

**Conclusion:** In all of our ministries with children and vulnerable adults, this congregation is committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each child and vulnerable adult will be “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 Book of Worship*. P.96)

*This policy was approved by the Church Council on December 15, 2021 and will be available on the NBUMC website at <https://www.northbethesdaumc.org/>.*

#### Attachments:

Safe Sanctuary Participation Covenant  
Sexual Misconduct Questionnaire  
NBUMC Emergency Contact Information