



Abuse Prevention, Risk Management Policy for Atlanta First UMC: Creating a Safe Sanctuary both In-Person and Online

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND COVENANT

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, in April 1996, adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of child abuse in the church. The adopted resolution reads:

Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes (a) child ... welcomes me” (Matthew 18:5). Children are our present and our future, our hope, our teachers, our inspiration. They are full participants in the life of the church and in the realm of God. Jesus 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 the little ones, the children. The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church state that “...children must be protected from economic, physical, emotional and sexual exploitation and abuse.” (§ 162C).

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children. Child sexual abuse, exploitation, and ritual abuse [“ritual abuse” refers to abusive acts committed as part of ceremonies or rites; ritual abusers are often related to cults, or pretend to be] occur in churches, large and small, urban and rural. The problem cuts across all economic, cultural, and racial lines. It is real, and it appears to be increasing. Most annual conferences can cite specific incidents of child sexual abuse and exploitation within churches. Virtually every congregation has among its members adult survivors of early sexual trauma. Such incidents are devastating to all who are involved: the child, the family, the local church and its leaders. Increasingly, churches are torn apart by the legal, emotional, and monetary consequences of litigation following allegations of abuse.

God calls us to make our churches safe places, protecting children and other vulnerable persons from sexual and ritual abuse. God calls us to create communities of faith where children and adults grow safe and strong. (From *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church – 2008*. Copyright © 2008 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.)

Thus, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, we adopt this policy for the prevention of abuse at Atlanta First United Methodist Church

Purpose

Our congregation’s purpose in establishing this Abuse Prevention Policy and accompanying procedures is to demonstrate our absolute and unwavering commitment to the physical safety, emotional wellbeing, and spiritual growth of all our children, youth,

and vulnerable adults.

Statement of Covenant

Therefore, as a Christian community of faith and a United Methodist congregation, we pledge to conduct the ministry of the Gospel in ways that assure the safety and spiritual growth of all our children, youth, and vulnerable adults, as well as all the workers with them. We will follow reasonable safety measures in the selection and recruitment of workers; we will implement prudent operational procedures in all programs and events; we will educate all of our workers with children, youth, and vulnerable adults regarding the use of all appropriate policies and methods (first aid and methods of discipline online); we will have a clearly defined procedure for reporting a suspected incident of abuse that conforms to the requirements of state law; and we will be prepared to respond to media inquiries if an incident occurs.

Conclusion

In all our ministries with children, youth, and vulnerable adults, this congregation is committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each child of God 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 Hymnal*, p. 44).

Definition of Frequently Used Terminology (As it relates to this document only)

1. **Accident:** An unintentional act and someone is hurt.
2. **Adult:** An individual over the age of 18 and is no longer a student in high school.
3. **AFDS or The Day School:** This refers to the Atlanta First Day School or the church preschool.
4. **Employed Staff Member:** A staff member who receives pay for either full-time or part-time work at the church.
5. **Ministry Area Director:** An employed staff member who is over an area that serves children, youth and/or vulnerable adults and/or supervises employees or volunteers who serve children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults.
6. **Volunteer:** An individual who serves in ministry with children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults that has been actively involved in this congregation for at least 6 months.
7. **The Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS):** Falls under the Georgia Department of Human Resources and is responsible for welfare and employment support, protecting children, foster care, and other services to strengthen families.
8. **Child:** Birth through fifth Grade.
9. **Youth:** Sixth-twelfth Grade.
10. **Vulnerable Adult:** A person age 18 or older who is mentally, physically, or psychologically impaired as such to be unable to make responsible legal decisions about their welfare.
11. **Church Sponsored Ministries:** Includes but are not limited to Grow Ministries, Children’s Ministry, Youth Ministry, Engage Ministries, Serve Ministries, Worship Ministries, and Visitation Ministry.
12. **Social Media:** All online, web-based, digital communication technologies used to facilitate the interaction of peoples both publicly and privately. Includes but is not

limited to texting, emailing, video chat, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, Zoom, and Skype.

Requirements of Volunteers and Employed Staff

1. Individuals must meet the criteria set forth under “Definition of Frequently Used Terminology” in this policy. Youth under the age of 18 may assist with Children’s Ministry activities only under the leadership of an adult.
2. All individuals wishing to volunteer with children, youth, or vulnerable adults must be a member of the church or a regular attendee of the church for a minimum of six months (employed staff are except from this rule).
3. Individuals must be interviewed by the respective Ministry Area Director for gifts and talents for ministry. References will be contacted as needed. Records of reference checks and approval/disapproval will be maintained in the church database.
4. Adults must consent to a full, national background check, which should include a multi-state criminal record. The report must show no major offenses especially pertaining to interaction with children or vulnerable adults. Background checks will be completed every three years.
5. Adults operating a church owned vehicle where children, youth and/or vulnerable adults will be transported, will also consent to a full driving check.
6. Individuals will be required to attend Safe Sanctuary Training, as well as read and sign this policy including the statement of covenant for the creation of a safe sanctuary community both online and in-person

Training of Volunteers, Employed Staff, and Church Leadership

1. Online training will be offered and renewed on an annual basis for all church and AFDS Employed Staff, Leadership Team Members, as well as Adults and Youth who work with children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults. Ministry Area Directors will oversee scheduling training for their volunteers and employed staff members that fall under their supervision.
2. All employed staff will complete a Safe Sanctuary training course within 90 days of their first day of service. All volunteers will complete an online Safe Sanctuary Training course *before* they begin serving in a ministry with children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults.
3. Ministry Area Directors will be responsible for following up with his or her volunteers and employed staff members to make sure training is complete. Records will be kept through PeopleFacts (formally called Trak 1).
4. Employed staff will be certified in basic first aid, CPR, and AED training which will be offered regularly through the church. Volunteers serving in ministries with children, youth, and vulnerable adults are strongly encouraged to receive training as well.

Atlanta First United Methodist Church Abuse Prevention Procedures

The following guidelines shall be used when planning supervision for all church sponsored

ministry gatherings where children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults will be in attendance:

1. At least two, non-married and/or non-related adults shall oversee any small group or class within the church building and/or in an online meeting space hosted by the church (such as Zoom). If only one adult is available, a floater may be used in physical spaces only and the classroom door must remain open. A floater will roam in and out of classrooms and check in on all children and youth in church sponsored ministries. This is referred to as the “Two Adult Rule.” If in an online space, a “waiting room” must be used. Hosts must be let at least one other Adult into the room prior to any children/youth to maintain the “Two Adult Rule.”
2. All in-person church sponsored ministries must be held in open view or within rooms with windows.
3. Volunteers must be five years older than the group for whom they are providing supervision.
4. Volunteers under the age of 18 must be paired with an adult.
5. In the State of Georgia, a married person cannot be compelled to testify against his or her spouse. Therefore, when a married couple volunteers together with children and/or youth, there must always be a third adult or floater present.
6. Visitors must be authorized by a Ministry Area Director. A visitor is defined as someone who is not the legal guardian of a child or youth in the church sponsored ministry and not an employed church staff member or a volunteer.
7. In situations where parents are not present, both in-person and online, written permission will be provided for the particular activity.
8. Children will not be released on their own from an in-person church sponsored ministry. Children must be signed out by an authorized adult.
9. When on church property children and youth should be in a designated church sponsored ministry, be with a legal guardian, or in childcare.
10. Written parental permission is required for children and youth riding to and/or from a church sponsored event in a church provided vehicle or in an approved rental vehicle (i.e., charter bus).
11. Children and youth at off-site, in-person events will be monitored by at least two volunteers from arrival until departure from the church property.
12. Groups of children and youth of fewer than four persons should not meet in areas outside the church building.
13. Anytime an adult has a private conversation with a child, youth or vulnerable adult, the conversation should take place in an open physical space or a second, non-related adult should be present.
14. Every effort will be made to always have access to a telephone for emergency purposes.
15. As a means of good record keeping and communication between legal guardians, employed staff members and volunteers, the enclosed Accident Report Form or Incident Report Form will be filed with the Ministry Area Director of the corresponding ministry area.

Special Guidance for Diapering and Restroom Activity

1. Diapering and toileting of infants and toddlers should be done by a parent/guardian or employed staff member as much as possible.

2. Remember the two-adult rule and never engage in diapering or restroom activities with children alone.
3. However, children should be allowed as much independence as possible when using the restroom.
4. For children over the age of three, check the restroom before sending a child in and stand nearby, within sound-range, allowing them to finish in privacy.
5. For children under the age of three, supervise by sight and sound with another adult present.
6. Document “accidents” and report them to parents as soon as possible.
7. Never send children into a multi-stalled restroom alone.
8. Two adults may accompany no more than four children to the restroom at a time.

Special Requirements for Overnight Activities and Trips

1. Written parental permission shall be obtained for church sponsored ministry groups who leave the church property or that stay overnight on the church property.
2. There shall always be two adult chaperones (or more depending on ratios) responsible for monitoring behaviors and reporting any inappropriate behavior. Adult chaperones should be the same gender as the children or youth they are responsible for. At no time is any adult to be alone with a child or youth. Ratios for off-site trips should be 1:6.
3. In any overnight situation, all youth/children should be assigned their own same-sex rooms and adults assigned their own same-sex rooms. Adults must not sleep in the same bed with a child or youth (except in the case of a father and son or a mother and daughter). Adults should check on the youth/children at random times throughout the night.
4. For vulnerable adults participating in off-site trips, medical and emergency information should be on file and available to the trip leader.

Special Guidance on Advanced Notice to Parents

A basic rule for ministry with children and youth is to always give the parents advanced notice and full information regarding the event(s) in which children will be participating. Advanced notice in this context means communicating schedules with the church office by publication deadlines to be printed in the church bulletin/newsletter and regularly sending emails to parents and guardians of children/youth to highlight upcoming events and activities.

Special Transportation Guidance

1. Church driving-approved volunteers may provide transportation to and from activities held away from the church.
2. They must have a valid driver’s license and insurance card on file with the church office.
3. The two-adult rule still applies and should be reflective of the genders present in the vehicle (i.e., if there are male and female children/youth in the vehicle there should be male and female unrelated adults in the car as well).

4. Youth are not allowed to drive other unrelated youth/children.
5. Owned/rented church transportation should be operated by adults with valid Chauffer's licenses and insurance on file with the church and comply with state statutes.

Social Media and Cellphone Guidelines for Abuse Prevention

Social media and cellphones can be powerful tools when used to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others. However, it is important to retain appropriate boundaries and remember in a lot of ways this technology can be a great equalizer. Power imbalances that exist in-person may not exist online. That is why it is especially important for church staff and volunteers to closely adhere to these best practices for social media and cellphone use:

1. Be collegial online and show respect. Remember John Wesley's General Rules: In all things, do no harm, do good, and attend to the ordinances of God, one of which is to love your neighbor as yourself. If you would not say something to someone's face in person, then do not say it on social media.
2. Remember you represent the United Methodist Church, but do not speak for the United Methodist Church. Take extra care to clarify where your political and social views might differ from the connectional voice found in *The Book of Discipline*.
3. Respect privacy:
 - a. It is a violation of church ethics and HIPPA guidelines to share prayer concerns and praises without prior permission.
 - b. It is illegal to post photos or videos of children, youth, or vulnerable adults to both personal and public pages without the written consent of a parent or legal guardian (see attached media release waiver).
 - c. Avoid physical and social name tags or other identifiers on children, youth, or vulnerable adults as much as possible. Photos should never identify children, youth, or vulnerable adults by name even when written permission is granted.
 - d. Social Media such as Facebook, Foursquare, Yelp, etc. that allow one to "check in" at one's current location should be used only with the permission of those "checking in." Never check-in children, youth, or vulnerable adults
 - e. Email addresses or social information of children and youth should be protected and not distributed.
4. No adult shall initiate Facebook contact with or "friend" a minor or vulnerable adult. When accepting the "friend" requests of minors, care should be taken to respect the ministry and discipleship work of the local faith community to which they belong. Any conversations on social media with minors or vulnerable adults shall occur in open channels, or with multiple parties present in the conversation thread.
5. When emailing, texting, tweeting, or private messaging a minor, adults should copy another adult (ideally a parent or guardian) on the message, or post it in a public venue (i.e., a Facebook wall as opposed to a private message). This will allow adults to maintain the "two adults present" Safe Sanctuaries standard when using social media. Platforms promising discrete conversations and secrecy (Snapchat) should be avoided.
6. Engaging in the viewing, creation, or distribution of child pornography is never permitted. It is a violation of civil laws, common Christian practice, and clergy ethics and

can lead to incarceration, the revocation of clergy credentials, and the termination of volunteer and paid positions in our ministries.

7. If you the adult has an existing relationship with a student where Atlanta First UMC is not the primary connection, they may be exempt from guidelines outlined in numbers 4-5. However, care should still be taken, remembering guideline one.

Reporting Procedures

The following should be reported immediately upon occurrence to the appropriate Ministry Area Director:

1. Accidents: An unintentional act which occurs and an individual is hurt. Use an Accident Report Form to report this type of incident.
2. Suspected Abuse Incidents: When a volunteer or employed staff member sees, has been told of, or suspects a child, youth or vulnerable adult has been abused in some way. Use Suspected Abuse Form to report this type of incident and the Follow Up to Suspected Abuse Form for reporting thus forth.

Reporting Plan

In Georgia, as of July 2012, all volunteers and employed staff members in ministry with children and youth are mandatory reporters of child abuse, as are all clergy. Those “having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been abused shall report.”

1. A person who has witnessed, been told of, or suspects child abuse should report it to the Ministry Area Director and Senior Pastor IMMEDIATELY (within 24 hours).
2. Details should be recorded of the accident, incident, or suspected abuse on selected forms and discussed with only appropriate employed staff members.
3. Incidents are handled by Ministry Area Directors who offer alternatives to the person in question, and records follow-up.
4. For suspected abuse, DFCS needs to investigate. (DFCS: 1-855-GACHILD) The reporter places the call with knowledge and support of the Ministry Area Director and Senior Pastor (or Leadership Team Chair).
5. The Insurance Company, attorneys, law enforcement, and the District Superintendent will be notified by the Senior Pastor and/or their designee as appropriate.
6. The accused individual(s) will be placed on leave and may have no contact with the church or AFDS until the investigation by DFCS and the church is completed.
7. Keep information confidential. Should the press become involved, only the Senior Pastor and/or designee will respond.

Atlanta First United Methodist Church Abuse Prevention Policy Revised: June 1, 2022.

A copy of this policy is on file in the North Central District Office of the North Georgia Conference, The United Methodist Church. 8045 Tara Blvd., Suite 252, Jonesboro, GA 3023