

NORTHWEST HILLS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
A POLICY STATEMENT FOR THE PROTECTION OF
CHILDREN, YOUTH AND VULNERABLE ADULTS
Adopted April 2006 by the Administrative Board

Northwest Hills United Methodist Church is a spiritual community which takes seriously its responsibility to provide a safe and nurturing environment for children, youth and vulnerable adults who participate in our ministries. All volunteers and employees who assist in these ministries are living out the vows we take in baptism to nurture our children and youth in the Christian faith. Every church worker plays a role in fostering the spiritual development of individuals and families in our church community.

The disturbing and traumatic rise of physical and sexual abuse of children has claimed the attention of our nation and society. The following statements reflect the commitment of Northwest Hills United Methodist Church to provide a safe environment for all children, youth, vulnerable adults, and church workers who participate in church sponsored ministries.

In an effort to provide a safe community, this church requires all church workers to commit themselves to the Policy Statement for the Protection of Children, Youth and Vulnerable Adults adopted by the Administrative Board of this church. In doing so, church workers will be asked to provide personal information, review the church policy and understand that they will be under the supervision of their respective leaders.

Events which are not church sponsored as defined below may not be communicated to either the membership or the community using any official church communication means as defined below, nor shall they be given the appearance of church sponsorship or approval by any other means.

Definition: Any sexual contact or interaction (i.e. indecent exposure and liberties, communication for immoral purposes, fondling, rape, etc.) between a church worker and children/youth/vulnerable adults is abusive. The appearance of consent does not mean consent was given. Force, threats, bribery, misrepresenting right and wrong are some of the ways this crime is perpetrated.

Definition: Church workers include all volunteer and paid employees. Paid employees will undergo a personnel application process which includes, but is not limited to, application, interview, reference checks, criminal history background checks, driving history background check, and annual job reviews.

Definition: A church sponsored event within the context of this policy is any event where the Director of Children's Ministry or Director of Youth Ministry is directly or indirectly involved, except for church-wide events where it can

reasonably be assumed that a significant number of adults are present, including parents or guardians of those in need of protection. All other events where children or vulnerable adults are invited or are present are not church sponsored within the context of this policy.

Definition: An Official Church Communication within the context of this policy includes but may not be limited to the church website, Yahoo Groups or similar mass Email method, which is moderated or controlled by the church the church bulletin, newsletter, poster, flyer or any other communication method specifically approved by the Director of Children's Ministry, Director of Youth Ministry, Senior Pastor or Associate Pastor.

Definition: Vulnerable Adults within the context of this policy means persons 18 years of age or older who do not have, or appear to a reasonable person not to have, the capacity to make decisions or protect themselves to the extent that is normally expected of persons of their age in general, due to mental, physical or other limitations.

Volunteers may be divided into two categories: supervisors and assistants. All volunteers must be at 5 years older than the oldest child, youth or vulnerable adult whom they will come in contact with and must have attended the church regularly for a period of at least six months. Supervisors have responsibility for a group or groups of children. They will undergo an application process which includes, but is not limited to, a volunteer application, interview, and criminal history background checks. Driving background checks will be completed as necessary. Supervisors will be at least 21, have at least one year of experience in a leadership position, and have demonstrated leadership abilities. Assistants may be asked to complete a volunteer application and have criminal history and driving background checks.

I. RECRUITING AND SELECTING CHURCH WORKERS

Principles:

All employees will complete the Employee Application Form and submit to a background check (see Appendix).

Volunteers will complete the Volunteer Information Form A as detailed in Appendix C.

References and agencies listed will be contacted. Documentation will be kept in a locked file cabinet and the information contained will be kept confidential.

Volunteers will only be allowed to work with children and youth after the volunteer has attended the church for a period of at least six months.

Anyone who has been convicted of, or plead guilty to, either child sexual or

physical abuse, will not work with children, youth, or vulnerable adults.

All church workers will agree to follow the policies.

Steps in Recruiting and Selecting Church Workers:

1. All church members, employees and volunteers will be made aware of the Policy Statement for the Protection of Children, Youth and Vulnerable Adults.
2. All church workers will be required to fill out the appropriate information form.
3. Statements in the information forms will be reviewed by the relevant supervisor.
4. References will be contacted and noted on the forms.
5. A check for arrest and conviction records will be made for all employees.
6. All church workers who have primary supervision responsibility will be at least 21 years of age and have at least one year of experience in a leadership position.
7. The church will seek to provide open lines of communication with parents and an open-door policy allowing parents access to programs at any time.
8. Church workers will attend an orientation and/or training session on abuse prevention.

II. SUPERVISING CHURCH WORKERS

Principles:

There are specific procedures for on-site and off-site situations.

Specific, parental permission is required for off-site meetings.

Specific, written, parental permission is required for adults to go out alone with a child or youth.

Suspicious behavior will be reported immediately.

The church will provide personnel based on the ratios listed below.

There will be a specific Nursery Identification Procedure.

On-site Procedures:

In order to protect the children, youth and church workers, workers shall not be left alone with a child or youth, out of sight of another adult.

Whenever possible, there shall be at least two workers assigned to an organized church activity.

Contact work (one-to-one or small group activities) shall only be allowed under the following circumstances:

1. Notification: Prior to any situation where it may be appropriate for a church worker to spend time with a child, youth or vulnerable adult in an unsupervised situation, the verbal permission must be obtained from the parent or the Director of Youth Ministries, the Director of Children's Ministries or one of the pastors must be notified of the intended meeting.

2. Where: Meetings and activities shall only be done in public places, e.g. restaurants, school events, open areas of the church. It is not appropriate for meetings and activities to be conducted in private residences without the knowledge of the child or youth's parents.

All rooms used by minors shall have a window in the door or remain open. On-site staff/child ratios will be determined on a per-event basis and shall not exceed the Minimum Standards for Day Care as set by the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services.

Off-site Procedures:

At least two adults shall supervise all groups of children and youth on off-site events except as noted below.

Exceptions: When transporting children and youth to events in private cars there may be one adult, with at least two children, in the car. The driving policy of the church will be followed. In addition, this two-adult rule does not apply in parent-child relationships.

In emergency situations, an attempt will be made to contact the child's parent or a supervisor before one adult transports a child.

Permission slips, including medical release information, shall be used for all off-site events.

Drivers must be licensed, insured, and at least 21 years of age and must meet the standards set by the Church Mutual Risk Management Program

Whenever possible, there will be at least one and preferably two adults assigned to each room for overnight stays. The adults will be the same sex as the children they are assigned to. At no time will there be only one adult and

one child sharing a room.

Providing Adequate Personnel:

Whenever possible, off-site programs that involve children and youth will include supervisory personnel according to the following ratios:

Children (ages 0-2) 1:4

Children (ages 3-5) 1:5

Children (ages 6-11) 1:6

Youth (ages 12-17) 1:10

Church Nursery Identification Procedure:

In order to release children to a properly identified and preauthorized caregiver and to make sure that the parent or guardian can be located in case of an emergency the church will:

Require all parents or guardians to sign-in their child for every event. The sign-in sheet will ask for the child's name, parent or guardian's name, where they will be during this event (sanctuary, Sunday School room etc.), expected time of return and identification of person(s) authorized to pickup the child.

Pickup persons will be positively identified by photo identification and may be asked for further identification.

III. REPORTING PROCEDURES

Principles:

The church recognizes a legal obligation and will comply with all state and federal laws.

The church recognizes its obligation for mutual accountability. (see definition below)

The church recognizes each person's moral obligation for personal responsibility.

The established line of reporting shall be followed in all incidents of suspicious activity, observed abuse and allegations by a victim.

The United Methodist Discipline and any Annual Conference policies that pertain to reporting procedures shall be followed.

The advice of legal counsel and the insurance company are to be obtained, as necessary.

Reporting obligations:

Church workers should be aware of state laws that govern the reporting of child abuse.

The obligation for mutual accountability includes being aware of what types of behavior are inappropriate with children, youth and vulnerable adults, and reporting questionable behavior to the proper individuals.

Church workers will understand that discrete and confidential reporting of suspected abuse is critical to abuse prevention. This reporting reflects caring and is not an act of disloyalty. It is a moral and legal obligation and a personal responsibility. It takes precedence over any fear of personal or legal recrimination.

Line of Reporting:

1. Any suspicious activity, observed abuse or victim allegations that are brought to the attention of a church worker must be reported immediately to the appropriate persons. These include two or more of the following persons, depending on the allegations:

- a. the pastor in charge
- b. the Director of Youth Ministries
- c. the Director of Children's Ministries
- d. the employee responsible for that area of ministry
- e. the Nursery Coordinator
- f. the Chairperson of the Pastor/Parish Relations Committee

2. The persons making the report of abuse and the person receiving the report of suspicious activity, should then document what, when, where and how, and the date, time and circumstances under which the report was made.

3. In the case of suspicious behavior or behavior in conflict with the church policies, the persons receiving the initial report will determine the validity of the complaint and when to inform church legal counsel, the church insurer and the state authorities to obtain advice. In cases of clergy sexual misconduct or diaconal sexual misconduct the policies of the Southwest Texas Annual Conference shall be followed.

Notes (the following items are important):

Take all allegations seriously. Be gentle and protective of both victim and alleged abuser.

Document as stated above. Anonymous allegations should be reported to counsel.

Persons who are the object of the report will refrain from all children and youth activities until it is determined if further action shall be taken. In any removal of an alleged party from any activities, care should be taken to handle this in a discrete manner, recognizing that an investigation is still being conducted.

IV. RESPONDING TO ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE

If there is an allegation of abuse, then the following steps will be taken.

1. A report will be made to Child Protective Services.
2. A Response Team will be formed and will be assigned to take any further actions that are required. The Response Team will follow the advice of legal counsel and the bishop (or the bishop's designated representative).
3. The Response Team will be made up of the pastor in charge, the chairperson of the Pastor/Parish Relations Committee and a mental health professional.
4. The Response Team will appoint one sole spokesperson.
5. The spokesperson must present a clear position statement of the church regarding abuse and include the policies and established procedures. This person will be the only person communicating to the press, the congregation and the authorities.

The Response Team may be asked to:

Document all findings and all effort in the investigation.

Cooperate with local and state civil authorities.

Notify the parents.

Determine the eligibility of the church worker to continue in that area of ministry

The pastors may be asked to offer appropriate counseling.

A proper response plan includes the following principles:

1. Records of allegations will be retained for 20 years. Records will be stored in a secure location.
2. Prepare a response with professional help. This is your opportunity to influence public opinion positively. Let them know that you have taken this risk seriously, and that you have acted responsively.
3. Do not engage in denial, minimization, prejudgment or blame.
4. Do not prejudge the situation, but take the allegations seriously and reach out to the victim, the victim's family, the accused and the family of the accused.

5. Use the text of the prepared public statement to answer the press and to convey news to the congregation. Be careful to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of all involved.

V. CARE OF DOCUMENTS

All forms filled out by volunteers and employees working for Northwest Hills United Methodist Church will only be reviewed by the appropriate supervisors.

All information will be treated in a confidential manner. Except in the case of a response to a report of suspicious activity, only appropriate leaders, professional staff and the Staff Parish Relations Committee shall have access to the information on these documents. In the case of a report of suspicious activity, the Response Team and appropriate legal authorities will have access to the information.

References will be contacted before service begins. Each reference will be asked if she/he knows of any reason why the person should not work with children and/or youth.

Documentation must be made for each reference call.

Maintain adequate records (employee and volunteer information forms, references etc.) for seven years.

Any new supervisors will be made aware of and required to review the information.

Criminal history and driving background checks will be renewed every two years.

APPENDIX

- A. The Application Process
- B. The Employee Application
- C. The Volunteer Information Form
- D. The Parent Information Form
- E. Code of Ethics and Rules
- F. Interview Procedures
- G. Consent for Criminal Background History Check
- H. Background Check Request Form
- I. Child, Youth, and Adult Safety Policy of the Southwest Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

“As God who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct.” 1 Peter 1:15 NSRV

“Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not under compulsion, but willingly, not for sordid gain, but eagerly, not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.”
1 Peter 5::2 NSRV

“You know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness.” James 3:1 NSRV

Anyone interested in working for Northwest Hills United Methodist Church as an employee or a volunteer in a supervisory capacity* will pick up the appropriate application in the church office. The application packet can be filled out at the church or in the privacy of the applicant’s own home. The application packet will include the application, a background check release form, a hand-out on recognizing child abuse, our policies on reporting suspected abuse, and a statement of ethical conduct.

These church workers will be interviewed. Questions may be asked about previous ministries they have been involved with, drug and alcohol history, and personal lifestyle preferences. If at any point, the applicant wishes to stop the interview, no questions will be asked. No information will be released without the applicant’s written permission and files will be kept in a secure location

Parents who will be assisting an employee or a supervising volunteer in supervision of an off-site activity will complete a Parent Information Form.

*A volunteer in a supervisory capacity is a volunteer who is responsible for an ongoing activity which involves contact with children, youth, or vulnerable adults and who must be present at all times during the activity.

Adopted April 2006