



Protection Policy

Trinity United Methodist Church
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grtumc.org

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Once a version is approved, it replaces all other versions.

This policy was formerly known as the *Child Abuse Prevention and Risk Management Policy* (2007-2024).
The policy is commonly referred to as the *Safe Sanctuary Policy*.

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Protection Policy

VISION:

The vision of Trinity United Methodist Church is: *“We strive to be an inclusive faith community that extends God’s love in our neighborhood and world.”*

PURPOSE:

Christians are called to live according to the gospel of Jesus. All persons are created by God. God intends all persons to have worth and dignity in their relationships. We are a connected body and when one part of this body is injured physically, emotionally or spiritually, the entire body is rendered less than God intended.

The scriptures witness to a God who brings about justice, mercy, and grace. This policy is an act of hospitality to all children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

The innocence of children is what best enables them to seek out God with fearless enthusiasm. That innocence is also what leaves them most vulnerable to abuse, bullying or neglect. Every 15 seconds a child is abused or neglected.¹ Often abuse occurs in settings where children, youth, or vulnerable adults should have been able to feel safe -- homes, schools, camps, and sadly the church. In more than three quarters of the reported incidents of child abuse, the victim was related to or acquainted with the abuser.²

Although the practice of abuse, bullying and neglect, or the making of false accusations is not to be condoned, we will continue to acknowledge that God’s grace is available to all. All persons are valued as human beings in God’s image.

The purpose of this policy is to protect all who come to us, to protect both our paid and volunteer staff from potential false allegations of abuse, and to limit the extent of legal liability of Trinity United Methodist Church. Therefore, this policy, prompted by the 1996 General Conference of The United Methodist Church, is designed to minimize the risk of abuse, bullying and/or neglect to children, youth, and vulnerable adults at Trinity events.

¹ Joy Thornburg Melton, *Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1998). Available through www.discipleshipresources.org and www.cokesbury.com. Rev. Melton is a deacon in the North Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church. She is both a Christian educator and an attorney.

² Ibid.

DEFINITIONS & TERMS:

Abuse means harm or threatened harm to the health and welfare of a child, youth, or vulnerable adult.

Adult means any person at least eighteen years of age.

Appropriate means consistent with the goals and objectives of this Policy.

Authorized staff or volunteers means those persons who have completed the *Employment & Volunteer Requirements* in this policy and are cleared to work with children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

Bullying means behavior intended to hurt, intimidate, or threaten harm to another person or group of persons. Bullying can be physical, verbal, emotional, social, spiritual, or sexual. Cyberbullying is the use of technology for the same.

Child means any person under eighteen years of age. When used alongside the term youth, it may further specify those under age twelve or 6th grade.

Event Director means the person (staff or volunteer) responsible for overseeing all personnel and programming at a Trinity function, event, or activity. See page 11 for additional details.

Leader means anyone responsible for overseeing a specific activity during a function or event.

Neglect is a failure to exercise the degree of care for the health, safety, and welfare of a child, youth, or vulnerable adult that a reasonably prudent person would do in the same or similar circumstance. In can include:

- Failing to prevent an act of abuse or omission of an act that would ensure the health, welfare, and safety of a child, youth, or vulnerable adult.
- Negligent treatment, including the failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care and protection from abuse.
- Placing a child, youth, or vulnerable adult at an unreasonable risk.

Parent or guardian means any parent, stepparent, foster parent, grandparent, or appointed guardian with legal responsibility for the health, education, or welfare of a child, youth, or vulnerable adult.

Sexual misconduct means the intentional touching of the intimate parts of a child, youth, or vulnerable adult, or the intentional touching of the clothing covering the immediate area of the intimate parts of a child, youth, or vulnerable adult, if that intentional touching can reasonably be construed as being for the purpose of sexual arousal or gratification, done for a sexual purpose, or in a sexual manner, or any other act constituting criminal sexual conduct under Michigan law.

Staff means any paid employee of Trinity.

Volunteer means a person who participates as a leader or assists a leader in activities related to any event or ministry without compensation.

Vulnerable adults means a person eighteen years of age or older whose ability to protect themselves from abuse, neglect, or exploitation is significantly impaired through social, physical, or mental disability or illness.

Youth means a person between the ages of twelve and eighteen or 6th to 12th grade.

COMPONENTS & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

1. This comprehensive document titled *Protection Policy* which contains detailed descriptions of all policies and procedures for reporting, follow up, and screening. This policy must be passed as described in the *Implementation & Revision* section below.
2. A policy highlight document titled *Protection Policy Highlights* which outlines in a less comprehensive manner the steps being taken for protection of children, youth, vulnerable adults, volunteers, and staff. This resource can be used for training & education purposes and can be updated by Program Staff as necessary without Trustees Committee and Vision & Leadership Board (VLB) approval.
3. Associated forms, training plans, and other materials related to the *Protection Policy* and various areas of service an individual is engaged in. These resources are not part of the formal *Protection Policy* and can be updated by Program Staff as necessary without Trustees Committee and Vision & Leadership Board (VLB) approval.

IMPLEMENTATION & REVISION:

This policy shall be reviewed and approved by local church leadership including Trinity United Methodist Church's Program Staff, Trustees Committee, and Vision & Leadership Board (VLB). Edits may be made to any part of this policy at any time to be in compliance with applicable Michigan laws or changed circumstances. Additions or changes to said policy will be brought to the VLB for final approval. The entire policy will be reviewed in full every two years by the VLB after an initial review by the Pastor, Director of Discipleship, and other Program Staff.

At the discretion of church leadership involved in approving any re-writes or changes to this policy, drafts may be shared with conference representatives, legal teams, and insurance companies for comment.

The day-to-day responsibility for carrying out this policy lies with the Director of Discipleship with support from the Pastor and other Program Staff. The Director of Discipleship shall implement and enforce the policy and develop procedures to that end.

All groups associated with Trinity United Methodist Church must adhere to the policies and procedures outlined in this document. This applies to any group that is entrusted with the care of children, youth, or vulnerable adults without the supervision of a direct family member.

OUTSIDE ORGANIZATIONS:

All persons/groups using the church facilities outside of the official programming of Trinity United Methodist Church will review this *Protection Policy* and sign a Building Use Agreement taking sole responsibility to implement appropriate screening and supervision procedures to protect children, youth and vulnerable adults, and to indemnify Trinity from all liability concerning damages, injury or cause.

ACCESS TO POLICY:

The Trinity United Methodist Church *Protection Policy* will be posted on the church website. Paper copies will be kept in the church office, in classroom Faith Formation binders, and near first aid stations.

EMPLOYMENT & VOLUNTEER REQUIREMENTS:

Application, Reference & Background Checks

All volunteers and paid staff who have significant contact with children, youth, and vulnerable adults are required to complete an application process which includes permission to run a background and reference check.

Effective 2023, Trinity is using *Safe Gatherings*, a service recommended by the Michigan Conference, as our preferred resource for facilitating registration, background, and reference checks. [<https://safegatherings.com/>] Alternative options for background and reference checks may be provided to select candidates at the discretion of the Pastor, Director of Discipleship, and the supervisor responsible for the ministry area.

Should our use of *Safe Gatherings* change, this policy will need to be updated to reflect new internal or service provider requirements and procedures.

The *Safe Gatherings* process including registration, background, and reference checks must be completed every three years. Other supplemental forms should be completed on the same schedule.

As part of their application, individuals will complete:

- *Volunteer Interest Form*
 - This form serves as a reference for contact, interest, and skill information. It is recommended for all applicants.
- *Safe Gatherings* Process including:
 - Registration
 - This includes questions on personal information, contact information, ministry area, and church & volunteer history.
 - Background Check
 - Background checks are of criminal and Registered Adult Sex Offender records and are to be pursued when possible with local, county, state and/or federal law enforcement agencies. *Safe Gatherings* provides this level of integrated check.
 - Reference Check
 - Reference checks will include no fewer than three (3) written references (non-familial, not of the same household). *Safe Gatherings* provides this level of reference check.
 - Training Course
 - For more information on training requirements, see pages 7-8. *Safe Gatherings* includes an online abuse prevention and boundary awareness training course that is required for all applicants.
 - The entire *Safe Gatherings* process is required for all applicants over 16 years old. Individuals working as helpers (ages 14-15) will have screening, training, and additional supervision as deemed appropriate by the Director of Discipleship in lieu of completing *Safe Gatherings*. All applicants under the age of 18 must have their parent/guardian's signature on their applications.

- *Volunteer Driver Application*
 - This form will be filled out if an individual will be transporting children, youth, or vulnerable adults during the course of an event. It requires a copy of a driver's license and proof of insurance. This form is not required for all applicants.
- *Digital Communication Policy Consent Form*
 - This Protection Policy contains a Digital Communication Policy. All volunteers and staff must complete the *Staff & Volunteer Communication Consent* form and agree to its terms.

The Director of Discipleship is responsible for ensuring participants complete *Safe Gatherings* or a comparable background/reference check process. Collecting additional forms/documents is the responsibility of the supervisor responsible for the ministry area with the support of the Church Administrator.

Interviews

Applicants being considered for a paid staff position will be interviewed by their direct supervisor and/or members of the Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC).

Applicants being considered for a volunteer position may be interviewed at the discretion of the Pastor, Director of Discipleship, or supervisor responsible for the ministry area.

Minimum Requirements

These requirements apply to all individuals working with children, youth & vulnerable adults unless otherwise stated.

1. All individuals working as a **leader** in a ministry area must be at least 16 years old. All leaders age 16-17 must serve with an adult leader who is at least 18 years old. Upon turning 18 years of age, the applicant must re-apply for authorization as an adult.
2. All individuals working as a **helper** in a ministry area must be at least 14 years old. All helpers between ages 14-17 must serve with an adult leader who is at least 18 years old. Upon turning 18 years of age, the applicant must re-apply for authorization as an adult.
3. All paid staff must be at least 18 years of age.
4. Paid staff and volunteers in supervisory roles will be at least 5 years older than the children or youth they serve. In some cases, this requirement may be waived (such as in the case of a student intern working with youth), but in such cases, the Pastor or supervisor responsible for the ministry will provide additional supervision and adequate screening.
5. Applicants for a volunteer position must be members or constituents of Trinity for at least six months before working with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. This requirement can be waived at the discretion of the Pastor, provided that other screening and supervisory measures have been satisfactorily completed.

Qualifications

1. No one shall serve with children, youth and/or vulnerable adults if they are known to have been previously convicted of, or pled guilty or no contest to, any crimes involving abuse or sexual misconduct. This includes financial abuse of a vulnerable adult. This qualifying rule shall apply no matter how long ago the crime occurred.

2. Applications will not be accepted from anyone who the Michigan Department of Health & Human Services has departmental findings on with confirmed abuse. This qualifying rule shall apply no matter how long ago or whether a civil or criminal verdict was rendered.
3. Applications will not be accepted from anyone who has acknowledged or admitted that they have engaged at any time in any abuse or sexual misconduct involving a vulnerable adult, child or youth. This qualifying rule shall apply no matter how long ago or whether a civil or criminal verdict was rendered.
4. If Trinity determines that the person is unsuitable to serve, the application shall be denied and the applicant shall be notified. Trinity reserves the right to not accept any person for volunteer or paid service. If at any time, before or after authorization, the applicant is found to be unsuitable, we have the authority to review and revoke participation.

Confidentiality & Document Access

All documents and information obtained on all applicants shall remain confidential except as noted below.

1. All consents by parents or guardians will be accessible to leadership for use in promoting the health, welfare, and safety of participants at church related functions and events.
2. All documents and information obtained during the applicant screening process may be disclosed when there is a duty to inform and/or it is reasonably necessary in the context of any criminal or civil litigation involving the volunteer/staff person of the local church.

Records Retention

A record of completed applications will be kept on file for ten years following the date the volunteer/staff person ended their association with Trinity. Paper records will be kept in a locked cabinet in the Church Office.

Safe Gatherings maintains digital records of registration, background, and reference checks. The *Safe Gatherings* database will also serve as the digital record of individuals approved to work with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. A Google spreadsheet will be utilized to track the overall status of each candidate's forms, paperwork, and background check. No personal information outside of candidate name will be logged in the spreadsheet.

TRAINING & EDUCATION:

Trinity United Methodist Church will provide education and training to staff members, volunteers, and other members of the congregation.

1. All staff and volunteers working with children, youth or vulnerable adults will be required to become acquainted with Trinity's *Protection Policy*.
2. In-person (or virtual when appropriate) Trinity specific trainings shall be completed by all staff and volunteers once every three years. The Director of Discipleship at Trinity shall be responsible for training applicants on the *Protection Policy* and related Trinity specific documents.
3. As part of the *Safe Gatherings* process, applicable staff and volunteers will also complete the more generic *Safe Gatherings* online abuse prevention and boundary awareness training course once every three years.

4. Optional safety, first aid, and CPR/AED will be offered periodically to all staff and volunteers working with children, youth and vulnerable adults. This training may be required for certain staff positions.
5. All new members will be introduced to Trinity's *Protection Policy* during New Member's classes.

GUIDELINES:

Who Is Responsible?

Parents or guardians are responsible for the supervision of their children, youth, or vulnerable adults whenever their children, youth, or vulnerable adults are on church premises and not checked into a church activity or program.

Authorized staff and volunteers will support parents to the best of their ability during these non-activity times, but ultimately the parent/guardian is responsible for their child, youth, or vulnerable adults' safety and supervision.

Staff & Volunteer Supervision

1. Proper supervision is necessary to avoid creating the opportunity for abuse, bullying or neglect, and false accusations of abuse, bullying or neglect to occur.
2. Proper supervision includes providing staff & volunteers with *Protection Policy* training.
3. Supervision during staff and volunteer performance of their responsibilities shall give special attention to high-risk settings such as nurseries, restrooms, and overnights.
4. Other adults not directly involved with an event: devotional leaders, event speakers, musicians, or other specialists providing services such as food or entertainment may be present, but may not be alone with children, youth, or vulnerable adults.
5. Parents, legal guardians, and special needs care givers may be present with their children or care recipient, but may not be alone with other children, youth or vulnerable adults unless they have completed the application, background check, and reference process.

Adequate Staffing

1. All church functions, activities, and events involving children, youth and vulnerable adults shall be staffed to meet the standards of this Policy.
2. When staffing guidelines cannot be met, the childcare/child/youth event portion of the event may need to be cancelled.
3. Per the State of Michigan guidelines, the following staff to child ratio and group size will be adhered to. Guidelines are available at: www.michigan.gov/michildcare. When groups are of a mixed age, the ratio should be adjusted to reflect the youngest child/youth being supervised.

Age	Ratio (Staff: Child)
Birth to 12 Months	1:3
13-30 Months	1:4
31-35 Months	1:5
3 Years Olds	1:7
4-5 Year Olds	1:8
6-10 Year Olds	1:9
10-12 Year Olds	1:10
13-18 Year Olds	1:12

Two Care Provider Rule

At least two authorized staff or volunteers, one of which must be over 18 years old, shall be present at each function, activity, or event involving children, youth, or vulnerable adults. The two providers should be non-related and non-cohabitating.

However, when multiple classes/programs are being offered simultaneously and it is not possible to have at least two non-related and non-cohabitating authorized staff or volunteers present in each space, a designated, authorized staff or volunteer will “roam” or “float” through the rooms on a random basis.

The two-care provider rule in the preceding paragraph may be waived at the discretion of the ministry area supervisor in the following situations.

- One authorized individual remains while the other temporarily leaves the area or room for a medical, family, or other reasonable necessity, i.e., escorting a child, youth, or vulnerable adult to the rest room.
- One authorized individual remains while the other must leave for an unexpected medical, family, or other reasonable necessity.
- An authorized individual is transporting a child, youth or vulnerable adult to or from a function, activity, or event. A *One-on-One Interaction with a Vulnerable Person Consent Form* must be completed for each child, youth, or vulnerable adult.
- An authorized individual temporarily remains with a child, youth or vulnerable adult while waiting for others to arrive or while the child, youth or vulnerable adult is waiting to leave a function, activity, or event. When this occurs, the authorized individual is responsible for exercising their best judgement for the participant’s well-being as well as their own. For example, have the parent/guardian or another authorized individual on the phone with you until they arrive or stand in a public place.

In these discretionary instances, every attempt should be made to arrange for a designated, authorized staff or volunteer to “roam” or “float” through the rooms on a random basis.

Classroom & Building Use

- When rooms are in use, interior doors are never to be locked and should remain open whenever possible.
- Interior doors may be closed if equipped with windows.
- The church will make a reasonable effort to provide supervision of the building to maintain security. Trustees will provide additional policies and procedures related to building security and safety.

Sign-In & Sign-Out Procedures

An Event Director is the person (staff or volunteer) overseeing all personnel and programming at a Trinity function, event, or activity. This is typically a program staff member like the Director of Discipleship or Community Ministries Director. They are responsible for establishing a sign-in and sign-out procedure for their participants that ensures participant safety.

The procedures apply to all events for which children, youth, or vulnerable adults are checked into an activity or program supervised by staff/volunteers and at which their parent/guardian is not also a participant. For example, they apply to faith formation classes but not inter-generational events.

Best practices for Event Directors to consider when establishing sign-in and sign-out procedures include:

- Children in 5th grade and under classrooms need to be signed-in and signed-out by a parent/guardian or authorized pick-up. Authorized pick-ups will be specified on the annual “Children & Youth Registration Form” or a comparable form and the names shared with leaders.
- Youth in 6th-12th grade classrooms can be released from classes without a parent/guardian or authorized pick-up unless a parent/guardian requests otherwise.
- Sign in/sign out sheets will be kept by the applicable Event Director for at least 6 months after a program is completed.

Restrooms

Children in classrooms for 5th grade and under should be escorted to the restroom by an authorized volunteer/staff person.

The adult should:

- Check the restroom for safety before the child enters.
- Wait outside in the hallway until the child exits.
- Avoid being alone with a child(ren) inside the restroom.

If a child or vulnerable adult requires assistance in the restroom, the two adult rule applies, making every effort to balance privacy with accountability. Only authorized volunteers/staff may assist children in the restroom.

For children in the nursery, appropriate procedures will be created and followed for diapering and assisting in the restroom. Only authorized volunteers/staff may assist with these tasks and there should be two adults present in the nursery when they take place.

Discipline Procedures

All staff and volunteers are responsible for providing and maintaining a loving, respectful, and caring atmosphere in which children, youth, and vulnerable adults can learn, play, worship, and interact with each other safely. Occasionally, leaders may need to correct or redirect inappropriate behavior.

Acceptable means of correction are: appropriate verbal correction; withholding a privilege for a brief time; separating a participant from activity for a brief time; and calling the Event Director or parent/guardian if a child does not respond to other efforts. It is unacceptable to show any type of physical, emotional, verbal or spiritual abuse. No yelling, hitting or use of any disrespectful or threatening language is ever appropriate.

Counseling/Mentoring

Certain ministries may require that adults meet with children, youth, and vulnerable adults on a one-to-one basis. When this is the case, the Pastor or supervisor responsible for the ministry will rely on the screening, supervision, and accountability of volunteers & staff to ensure the well-being and safety of our children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

In instances of counseling/mentoring, volunteers & staff should:

- Attempt to have the conversation in a room with an open door while still maintaining confidentiality in the discussion.
- Hold conversations when other authorized adults are nearby and aware of the session.
- Get prior written approval from parents/guardians and have them complete a *One-on-One Interaction with a Vulnerable Person Consent Form*.
- Notify the Pastor or supervisor of the ministry area that the counseling/mentoring session will be taking place and/or document the interaction in another way.

When counseling/mentoring does not require a private setting, staff and volunteers will meet with children, youth or vulnerable adults in public places.

Exceptions to parent/guardian consent through the *One-on-One Interaction with a Vulnerable Person Consent Form* may be made for emergencies or confidentiality concerns, but in such cases, the supervisor responsible for the ministry should be informed preferably before, or, if necessary, after the counseling takes place.

Event Director Responsibilities

The Event Director is the person (staff or volunteer) overseeing all personnel and programming at a Trinity function, event, or activity. This is typically a program staff member like the Director of Discipleship or Community Ministries Director.

For all events, the Event Director shall:

- Ensure a safe and appropriate location that is conducive to the health and welfare of the participants.
- Provide adequate supervision of children, youth, and vulnerable adults.
- Implement these policies and related procedures including reporting and documentation of alleged incidents.
- Establish and communicate to all staff/volunteer expectations and procedures for the event, for instance, procedures regarding medications, medical situations (universal precautions) and emergencies and how they will be handled during the event.
- Establish a sign-in and sign-out procedure of participants (see above section for details).
- Establish a procedure to obtain copies of permission slips, release forms, medical permission and other necessary paperwork in compliance with applicable laws and regulations of the State of Michigan and other requirements of the local church.
- For off-site events when Trinity is responsible for children, youth, and vulnerable adults not accompanied by their own parent/guardian, the Event Director will ensure the applicable permission slips, release forms, medical permission and other necessary paperwork is carried by the person in charge of the trip and/or retreat.

TRANSPORTATION:

Transporting children, youth, and other vulnerable people is an important concern. Their safety can be at risk in a variety of ways. Therefore, certain discretion must be used depending upon the event attended, the locale of the event, and the age group participating. This policy includes both requirements and guidelines. When feasible, there should be adherence to the guidelines. It is expected that the requirements will always be followed.

Requirements:

- All drivers must complete the *Trinity Volunteer Driver Application*. They must have and show proof of a valid driver's license and auto insurance.
- All drivers must be at least 21 years of age unless transporting only their own siblings/immediate family.
- All drivers must be screened to ensure they are safe to drive others. Drivers may be denied authority to drive others for church events if there are red flags on records.
- When transporting children, youth, and vulnerable adults in a vehicle for a Trinity-sponsored event or trip, the two-adult rule applies. If it will not be possible for any part of a trip, a *One-on-One Interaction with a Vulnerable Person Consent Form* needs to be completed.
- Vehicles carrying more than 12 passengers will not be used unless driven by a professional with a valid State of Michigan license to operate such vehicle.
- There must be a seatbelt or appropriate restraint available for every person and every person must wear a seatbelt or other appropriate restraint.
- For all children and youth, their parent/guardian must provide a signed *Consent to Transport Minor Waiver & Release Form* with emergency information. These are to be kept with the Event Director at all times during the event.

Guidelines:

- Youth who drive their own vehicles should have parent/guardian permission to transport themselves and any applicable siblings to events. For children 5th grade (age 11) and under, parents/guardians need to let the Event Director know if said youth will be signing-out and transporting their younger siblings.
- Any use of a ride-share service by children or youth should be scheduled by a parent/guardian and drop-off/pick-up confirmed with the Event Director.
- Because of a relationship that extends beyond the church, there are times when a parent/guardian may choose to have a child, youth, or vulnerable person transported to/from a church event by means that do not follow church policies or guidelines. In such cases, it must be clear that the driver is not acting in their capacity as a church representative.

OVERNIGHT EVENTS:

Overnight events at Trinity and off-site trips/retreats can call for additional children, youth, and vulnerable adult protection requirements, depending on the circumstances. What follows are requirements and guidelines of this policy. The requirements should always be implemented when children, youth, or vulnerable adults are participating in off-site trips/retreats without their parent/guardian present. Depending on the circumstances of the setting, who is in attendance, etc., some or all of the guidelines should be implemented as needed. Those in charge of the trip or retreat should be mindful of both requirements and guidelines, in addition to applying their own wisdom to the needs of a given occasion.

Requirements:

- There will be at least two non-related and non-cohabitating authorized staff or volunteers present for all trips, retreats, and other events where children, youth, and/or vulnerable adults gather overnight at, or away from, the church and not under the care of their parent/guardian.
- There will be at least two authorized adults of the same gender identity as the children, youth, vulnerable adults who are present. Exceptions should be rare and require express permission from the Pastor and the applicable Event Director.
- The Event Director will ensure the applicable permission slips, release forms, medical permission and other necessary paperwork is carried by the person in charge of the trip and/or retreat.
- When arranging overnight accommodations adults shall not share a bed with any child, youth or vulnerable adult.
- When arranging overnight accommodations, adults shall not be alone in a room with any non-related child, youth, or vulnerable adult.

Guidelines:

- In large room or multiple bunk settings, adults and children, youth, or vulnerable adults can share the same space, but there must be at least three participants per room. It is preferred that the adults and children, youth, or vulnerable adults should be of the same gender identity.
- In multiple room settings, best practice is for there to be separate sleeping quarters by gender identity with two authorized staff or volunteers of the same gender identity assigned to each room.
- If there is an overnight event in which someone without a claimed gender is present, this person's individual needs will be taken into consideration when assigning sleeping arrangements.
- At trips or retreats where family units are traveling and rooming together, parents/guardians are responsible for creating and maintaining a safe environment for their children or youth.

DIGITAL COMMUNICATION POLICY:

Trinity United Methodist Church desires to promote safety and to create a healthy environment for smartphones, instant messaging apps, texting, and other forms of digital communication between its volunteers, staff, and students who participate in activities where children, youth, and vulnerable adults are involved.

Photo & Video Release

A photo & video release is required before Trinity staff post, publish or disseminate media or material that includes children, youth, or vulnerable adults. For children and youth, this release may be included in annual program registration forms.

No volunteer is allowed to post photos, videos, or personal identifying information about children, youth, or vulnerable online. Volunteers may repost publicly shared information already published on an official Trinity social media account.

Blanket photo & video release language shall be posted at main entrances to notify all participants that worship services are subject to photo & video documentation including live streaming.

Digital Communication – General

- Staff members or authorized volunteers are not to communicate directly with children under age 12 using smartphones, instant messaging apps, emails, group chat, social media websites or texting.
- All staff members or authorized volunteers of Trinity who wish to communicate with youth or vulnerable adults using smartphones, instant messaging apps, emails, group chat, social media websites or texting must sign a *Staff & Volunteer Communication Consent* form and agree to follow this communication policy.
- The parents/guardians of youth (ages 12-17) who wish for their youth to communicate with staff members or authorized volunteers of Trinity through electronic formats, must fill out a *Youth Communication Consent* form outlining expectations and guidelines for said communication.
- Youth who wish to communicate with staff members or authorized volunteers of Trinity through electronic formats must fill out a *Youth Communication Consent* form agreeing to the expectations and guidelines for communication.
- Employees of Trinity, volunteers, and program participants are not to transmit any content that is illicit, unsavory, abusive, pornographic, discriminatory, harassing, or disrespectful when communicating with each other or with minors involved in ministry activities.
- Trinity staff and authorized volunteers are not to communicate with youth via electronic devices on a one-on-one basis. All communication with youth will include either a parent of the youth, be a part of a group message including at least one other unrelated staff member, or take place in a public venue (e.g. a Facebook wall as opposed to a private message).
- When legitimate, private, electronic communications are necessary (ex. in an emergency situation), they should be documented and reported to the person in charge of the ministry area.

- The only exception to above guidelines is for counseling/mentoring relationships, in which case a *One-on-One Interaction with a Vulnerable Person Consent Form* should be completed. That said, social media and texting, even though they offer convenient and private channels, are not an appropriate medium for long-term counseling - especially with minors. Whenever possible, begin or transition counseling/mentoring conversations into an approved in-person model (ex. office with windows, two adults, etc.).
- Trinity staff and authorized volunteers who become aware of abuse through digital media must immediately begin the reporting procedures contained in the *Protection Policy*. Applicable questionable electronic communications should be documented and retained.
- Cellphone usage during program activities is to be determined by the leaders of the event. Participants in said event must adhere to the direction given by its leaders.

Online Meetings

- All in-person protection policies apply to online platform meetings such as Zoom, Skype, Discord, etc. For example, two non-related, non-cohabitating authorized adults should be present in the virtual room just as they would be in a physical room.
- All online platform meetings should use the official church account, not a personal one.
- Adult leaders should use their real names as usernames.
- Attendance in online meetings should be documented.

Any person who violates this policy may lose electronic communications privilege and/or be removed from their Trinity staff and authorized volunteer position. If a minor is involved, a parent or guardian will be notified of any violation.

POLICY FOR REPORTING SUSPECTED ABUSE, BULLYING, OR NEGLECT:

Persons Required to Report

- All authorized staff or volunteers who work with children, youth or vulnerable adults and who have reasonable cause to suspect abuse or neglect of a child, youth, or vulnerable adult shall report all known and suspected cases of abuse or neglect which:
 - a. occur on the local church premises;
 - b. occur at a church function, activity or event, or;
 - c. are disclosed during a church function, activity or event.

All other persons may report known and suspected cases of abuse or neglect in accordance with this Policy and the laws of the State of Michigan. This Policy supports mandatory reporting in compliance with the State of Michigan.

- If any child, youth, or vulnerable adult arrives at an event with signs of abuse or neglect, the Event Director shall immediately implement this Policy's reporting procedures in compliance with state law.

- The reporting requirements in this Policy are the minimum requirements. This Policy does not preclude anyone from reporting a known or suspected case of abuse or neglect to others for the protection of children, youth, and vulnerable adults. Unless such protection requires otherwise, however, confidentiality of the information reported or received shall be respected to protect the rights and interest of the victim, the alleged perpetrator, and their families.
- Under Michigan law, anyone reporting in good faith a known or suspected case of abuse or neglect to Children's Protective Services or Adult Protective Services is immune from civil or criminal liability which might otherwise be incurred thereby.

Required Reporting Process

1. The authorized staff or volunteer's first step shall be to ensure the safety of the victim. At a minimum, this means separating the victim from the suspected or alleged perpetrator, but it can also include providing medical care or trauma support.
2. If the authorized staff or volunteer interrupts or witnesses suspected abuse, their next immediate step shall be to notify the police by calling 911.
3. The authorized staff or volunteer shall immediately report the known or suspected abuse or neglect to the Event Director. For events without an Event Director, notify the Director of Discipleship.
4. For the protection of all parties, if the suspected or alleged perpetrator is in/on the premises, they are to be isolated from the program and have no contact with the children, youth, or vulnerable adults.
5. As soon as possible and in all cases within 24 hours, the reporting person shall telephone an oral report to Children's Protective Services or Adult Protective Services using the Centralized Intake 24-hour toll free number for the State of Michigan (855-444-3911). This oral report shall be made in conjunction with the person who made the observations or received the disclosure. The following information is typically required in the oral report:
 - a. Name, age and gender of the alleged victim and other family members.
 - b. Address, phone number and/or direction to the alleged victim's home.
 - c. Parent's place(s) of employment (if known).
 - d. Name and address of alleged perpetrator.
 - e. Description of the suspected abuse.
 - f. Current condition of the alleged victim.
6. Within 72 hours, the authorized staff or volunteer who observed or received the disclosure, shall submit a completed State of Michigan "*DHS-3200 Report of Known or Suspected Child Abuse or Neglect*" form to Children's Protective Services or its equivalent to Adult Protective Services in accordance with the directions given at the time of the oral report. The Event Director or Director of Discipleship may be a resource for completing this form.
7. The reporting authorized staff or volunteer in partnership with the Event Director will submit a Trinity *Suspected Abuse, Neglect or Bullying Report Form* on the incident to the Director of Discipleship. This form tracks action steps taken for Trinity's records. A copy of the completed *DHS-3200 Report of Known or Suspected Child Abuse or Neglect* form should be included.

8. The Event Director and the entire staff of the function, event, activity, or program shall cooperate with Children's Protective Services or Adult Protective Services.
9. Following contact with local Children's Protective Services or Adult Protective Services, the Event Director or Director of Discipleship shall inform:
 - a. The Pastor
 - b. Relevant church leadership
 - c. District Superintendent and Bishop
10. Notification of a parent or legal guardian of the alleged victim of abuse or neglect shall be determined by Children's Protective Services or Adult Protective Services. The Event Director shall follow the parent's or legal guardian's wishes regarding the continued participation of the involved child, youth or vulnerable adult, unless otherwise instructed by Children's Protective Services or Adult Protective Services.
11. Matters of known or suspected abuse or neglect are to be kept confidential, except as required by law, to assist appropriate agencies in their investigations, or as disclosed to local church representatives with a need-to-know such information consistent with the requirements of the law. The incident is not to otherwise be discussed with persons other than those involved in the reporting.

Reporting When the Alleged Perpetrator is Authorized Staff or Volunteers, Event Director, or Clergy

- If there is a report of alleged abuse or neglect by a staff member, authorized volunteer, Event Director, Pastor, or clergy person at a Trinity event, the procedures in the *Required Reporting Process* above shall be followed.
- If the suspected or alleged perpetrator is on the premises, they are to be isolated from the program and have no contact with children, youth, or vulnerable adults.
- If the suspected or alleged perpetrator is the Event Director, the Director of Discipleship shall serve as the primary support and contact for reporting.
- If the suspected or alleged perpetrator is the Director of Discipleship, the Pastor shall serve as the primary support and contact for reporting.
- If the suspected or alleged perpetrator is the Pastor or a member of clergy, the applicable Event Director and/or the Director of Discipleship shall serve as the primary support and contact for reporting.

Reporting When The Alleged Perpetrator Is Another Child, Youth or Vulnerable Adult

- If the suspected or alleged perpetrator is on premises he or she is to be isolated from the program and have no contact with children, youth or vulnerable adults.
- The Event Director shall follow the procedures outlined in the *Required Reporting Process* above.
- Unless instructed otherwise by Children's Protective Services, Adult Protective Services, or the local enforcement agency, the Event Director may confidentially inform the contact person for the facility hosting the event (if applicable) and the parents or guardians of involved parties. Best practice would be to notify the parents/guardians of the involved parties separately.

Reporting All Other Suspected Cases of Abuse, Bullying or Neglect

In all other cases of suspected abuse, bullying or neglect, the Event Director and the Pastor shall be immediately notified, and the reporting procedures referenced in the *Required Reporting Process* shall be implemented.

Reporting Bullying

According to Section 380.1310b of the State of Michigan Law addressing bullying in schools, bullying is not a mandated reportable offense. However, it is behavior that must be reported to Trinity to protect participants, authorized staff, volunteers, and church ministries. Reporting procedures are as follow:

1. The Event Director will be notified of alleged bullying incidents.
2. The Event Director will determine what, if any, follow up steps are to be taken. Consultation with the Pastor, Director of Discipleship, or other program staff is recommended.
3. Together the Event Director, in consultation with relevant staff, shall determine what notification, if any, is appropriate to give to the parent or legal guardian, or the victim and the perpetrator, or others.
4. The Event Director will submit a *Suspected Abuse, Neglect or Bullying Report Form* on the incident to the Director of Discipleship. It may be determined that the District Superintendent should be informed.

FOLLOW-UP AFTER REPORTING:

General Goals & Objectives

After reporting procedures have been completed, the following goals and objectives as prioritized below shall be addressed:

- Protection for the alleged victim and other children, youth, and vulnerable adults from any continued exposure to abuse, bullying, or neglect.
- Care for the spiritual, emotional and physical well-being of the alleged victim and the alleged perpetrator.
- Respect and preservation of the legal rights of both the alleged victim and the alleged perpetrator.
- Safeguarding the privacy of all parties involved.
- Care for the spiritual and emotional well-being of the local church.
- Protection of the legal and financial interests of the local church.

Investigation

- In accordance with the laws of the State of Michigan, Trinity staff and volunteers shall not conduct any investigation of reports or accusations of abuse or neglect.
- Trinity shall cooperate in any proper investigations by the Children's Protective Services, Adult Protective Services, law enforcement agency, liability insurer and the parties involved.
- Trinity may obtain the advice of an attorney if deemed necessary by church leadership.

Additional Response Requirements

- Trinity will work with our insurance company, an attorney, and/or our District Superintendent to determine further steps.

Church Mutual Insurance Company
3000 Schuster Lane, PO Box 357, Merrill, WI 54452
800-554-2642

Western Waters District Office
Jodie Flessner, District Superintendent (2024)
jflessner@michiganumc.org
616-459-4503

- If the media is involved, the Michigan Conference Director of Communications (see below) should be contacted. At any point during an investigation, only the Pastor or the Michigan Conference Director of Communications is to have any contact with the media.

Mark Doyal, Michigan Conference Director of Communications (2024)
mdoyal@michiganumc.org
517-347-4030 x4030

Response to The Victim(s) And The Accused

Trinity recommends that appropriate sensitive care be expressed to the victim and the accused, as well as their families. Although the practices of abuse, bullying, neglect, or the making of false accusations are not to be condoned, we will continue to acknowledge that God's grace is available to all.

PARTICIPATION OF KNOWN SEXUAL OFFENDERS:

The presence of a convicted sex offender in the church community is an exceptional circumstance, although becoming more common as the church seeks to be open and inclusive of all persons. However, such presence warrants measures that are unusual in a place we treasure in part for this very openness and welcome. In the face of likely resistance to a public disclosure, we need to remember that the offender's status is already public, since there has been a conviction. Secrecy is dangerous, putting potential victims at higher risk. A carefully constructed and openly negotiated covenant between the offender and the church community has the best chance of achieving a solution satisfactory to all sides allowing the church to reduce the risk of abuse while at the same time offering the church's ministry to all who seek it.³

When a registered sex offender requests being a part of the congregation:

1. It is the responsibility of the offender to disclose status as a sexual offender. The church is a place of safety for children and vulnerable adults, and no offender or former offender should participate without disclosure to the pastor and adherence to all policies and procedures.

³ This paragraph is a direct quote from "What if the Abuser is One of Us? A Model for Congregational Response" by Peggy Halsey. The full document was originally found on the West Michigan Annual Conference website under the Resources heading.

2. If possible, someone in church leadership should have a conversation with any government official(s) supervising the sex offender, including but not limited to a parole or probation officer to better understand the offender's situation. Whether or not this conversation is possible, the church may also seek outside expert evaluations to gauge the health of the offender, potential risks, and safety measures.
3. The offender will need to agree to and abide by all provisions in a *Limited Access Agreement* created by the Pastor with input from applicable Program Staff. If an offender is not willing to agree to the terms of the agreement, Trinity is not the right place for them to participate in church functions.
4. If an offender is removed from the Registered Sex Offender Registry, the *Limited Access Agreement* will be re-evaluated. The church continues to reserve the right to have some agreement in place, even if it's not the full *Limited Access Agreement*.
5. When a *Limited Access Agreement* is initiated, and annually thereafter, all appointed pastors, key program staff, and the Chair of VLB will be notified of the agreement. This will continue as long as the offender is part of the church, whether or not a *Limited Access Agreement* remains in place.
6. When a *Limited Access Agreement* is in effect, the church will at least semi-annually publish, typically via email, a notice to all church members about the policy to allow limited access for certain registered sex offenders.

Sample Notice Language: It is the policy of Trinity to allow certain registered sex offenders to participate in certain functions of the church, with significant safeguards and controls. No offender or former offender can volunteer with or for any ministry for children or vulnerable populations. If you have questions or concerns, please reach out to the Pastor.

7. Copies of all effective *Limited Access Agreements* will be kept in a locked cabinet in the Church Office.

CONCLUSION:

As Christians, we are called to live according to the gospel of Jesus. All persons are created by God. God intends all persons to have worth and dignity in their relationships. We are a connected body, and when one part of this body is injured physically, emotionally or spiritually, the entire body is rendered less than God intended.

The scriptures witness to a God who brings about justice, mercy, and grace. This policy is an act of radical hospitality to all children, youth, and vulnerable adults and to all people who may be at risk due to their age, size, gender, race, sexual identity, and mental and /or physical capacities.

While the vast majority of those who work with our programs are of the highest moral and spiritual character and are deeply committed to the needs of those they minister to, the reality is the potential for abuse, bullying, and neglect is present.

We understand that those with clear backgrounds and records may find this process burdensome or over the top. Yet if we take our responsibility to our children, youth, and vulnerable adults seriously, then all staff and volunteers must be treated in the same manner.

Thank you for your understanding and cooperation as we endeavor to make our programs safe and secure for all those that participate.

RESOURCES:

Safer Sanctuaries: Nurturing Trust within Faith Communities (c. 2023)

Resource Book from Discipleship Resources / Upper Room Books. This resource is recommended by the Michigan Conference and replaces Safe Sanctuaries resources from the late 1990s. It includes helpful guidelines and best practices.

Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church (c. 1998)

This is the original Discipleship Resources source used by many congregations when drafting protection policies in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Michigan Department of Health & Human Services

Children's and Adult Protective Services

Centralized Intake Number: 855-444-3911

<https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/adult-child-serv/abuse-neglect>

Michigan UMC Conference Resources on Church Protection Policies

<https://michiganumc.org/resources/church-protection-policy/>

Rev. Kathy Pittenger, Associate Director of Connectional Ministry (2024)

kpittenger@michiganumc.org

QUESTIONS:

Questions about Trinity's Protection Policy should be directed to:

Laura Johns, Director of Discipleship (2024)

l.johns@grtumc.org

616-456-7168