



Protection Policy Highlights

Trinity United Methodist Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Updated: October 2024

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 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.

REFERENCE, BACKGROUND CHECKS & MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS:

- 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 these checks.
- 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.
- All individuals working as a leader in a ministry area must be at least 16 years old. All individuals working as a helper in a ministry area must be at least 14 years old. All paid staff must be at least 18 years of age.
- Paid staff and volunteers in supervisory roles will be at least 5 years older than the children or youth they serve.
- 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.

QUALIFICATIONS:

- 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.
- Applications will not be accepted from anyone who the Michigan Department of Health & Human Services has departmental findings on with confirmed abuse.
- 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.
- If Trinity determines that the person is unsuitable to serve, the application shall be denied and the applicant notified. Trinity reserves the right to not accept any person for volunteer or paid service.

TRAINING:

- All staff and volunteers working with children, youth or vulnerable adults will be required to become acquainted with Trinity's *Protection Policy*.
- In-person (or virtual when appropriate) Trinity specific trainings shall be completed by all staff and volunteers once every three years.
- 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.

GUIDELINES:

- All church functions, activities, and events involving children, youth and vulnerable adults shall be staffed to meet the standards of this Policy.
- 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.
- 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.
- Event Directors are responsible for establishing a sign-in and sign-out procedure for their participants that ensures participant safety.
- Children in classrooms for 5th grade and under should be escorted to the restroom by an authorized volunteer/staff person.
- 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.

DIGITAL COMMUNICATION POLICY:

Trinity 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. As such, a *Digital Communication Policy* is included in the *Protection Policy*. Highlights include:

- 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. Youth (ages 12-17) and their parents/guardians must also fill out a *Youth Communication Consent* form before communicating with staff & volunteers.
- 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.

REPORTING SUSPECTED ABUSE, BULLYING, OR NEGLECT:

- 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.
- 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).
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.
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.
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, and c) the 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.

Follow Up After Reporting

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

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.

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.

To view the Protection Policy in its entirety and find associated forms, visit grtumc.org/safe-sanctuaries/, see our classroom binders, or contact Laura Johns, Director of Discipleship at l.johns@grtumc.org.