

Shady Grove United Methodist Church

Safe Sanctuary Policy and Procedures

I Our Mission

Shady Grove United Methodist Church strives to provide a safe spiritual home for all people. A central tenet of the Christian faith is the inherent value and worth of all children, youth, and adults. Children, youth, and other vulnerable people are least able to protect themselves in our society and are particularly vulnerable to abuse and neglect. The United Methodist Church is eager to do all it can to protect the youth, children, and other vulnerable people who participate in the life of this congregation.

We believe implementing a policy and adopting procedures to protect our children, youth, and other vulnerable people recognizes that: Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to our children, youth, and other vulnerable people. The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church state, "...children must be protected from economic, physical and sexual exploitation and abuse." The Social Principles also state, "...all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God."

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children, youth, and other vulnerable people. Neglect, sexual abuse, and exploitation occur in churches, both large and small, urban and rural. The problem cuts across all economic, cultural, racial, and ethnic lines. God calls us to make our churches safe places, protecting children, youth, and other vulnerable people from abuse.

II. Purposes

The purpose of this policy is to help Shady Grove United Methodist Church to provide a caring and secure environment for children, youth, and the adults involved in ministering to such persons in all phases of the Church's life.

III. Biblical Foundation

Shady Grove United Methodist Church seeks to express God's love of young persons and to provide for their personal wholeness. This caring community seeks to provide an environment that is caring and secure for all persons. The Bible is the foundation to our understanding upon which all policies, procedures and ministries must stand.

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"And they were bringing children to Him, that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuke them, "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying His hands upon them."

Mark 10:13-16

Jesus teaches us explicitly that young persons have the right and the keys to the Kingdom of God. He demonstrated this through blessing and touch. Our goal in response to this Biblical mandate is to maintain a safe, secure and loving place where children may grow and spiritual mature, mature, and where care givers, teachers, and leaders minister to their needs.

- We should not allow possible risks to undermine or stop our ministry. Rather, we must:
- Acknowledge the risks and develop a practical plan to address these issues;
- Take steps to prevent harm to our children, youth, and other vulnerable persons; and
- Continue to answer the Gospel's imperative to be in ministry with children, youth, and other vulnerable persons, thus making a difference in their lives. (adapted from *Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church for Children and Youth*, page 10).

IV. The Virginia Code

Under Virginia Code, Section 63.1-248.2, an abused child is defined as one who is less than eighteen years of age, whose parents or others persons responsible for his/her care creates or inflicts, or threatens to create or inflict, or allows to be created or inflicted upon such child a physical or mental injury by other than accidental means, or creates a substantial risk of death or disfigurement, or impairment of bodily or mental functions. This includes the following: failure to provide care necessary for health, abandonment, commits or allows sexual exploitation, is endangered or neglected. Child abuse may be physical, sexual, emotional or mental, and may be the result of actions or omissions to act. (E.g., lack of care for a child).

Section 63.1.248.3 of the Virginia Code states that ***"Any person licensed to practice medicine or any of the healing arts, any hospital resident or intern, and person employed in a nursing profession, and person employed as a social worker, any probation officer, <u>and teacher or other person employed in a public or private school, kindergarten or nursery school, any person providing full-time or part-time care for pay on a regular basis,...and any person associated with or employed by any private organization responsible for the care, custody or control of children</u> who has reason to suspect that a child is abused immediately ...to the local department of the county of the city wherein the child resides or wherein the abuse or neglect is believed to have occurred or to the Department of Social Services' toll free child abuse and neglect hotlines."*** (Emphasis Added)

In addition, everyone should report any known or reasonably suspected child abuse immediately. Any report is confidential and the person making the report is immune from liability for making such a report, unless it is proven that such a person acted in bad faith or with malicious intent.

V. Types of Child Abuse

A. Definition

Child abuse refers to an act committed by a parent, care giver or person in a position of trust (even though he/she may not care for the child daily) which is not accidental and which harms or threatens to harm a child's physical or mental health or welfare. The following definitions and explanations in this section are from the Virginia Department of Social Services.

B. Types of Abuse.

1. Physical Abuse

A physical injury, threat of injury or creation of a real and significant danger of substantial risk of death, disfigurement or impairment of bodily functions. Such injury, regardless of intent, is inflicted or allowed to be inflicted by non-accidental means. Examples: asphyxiation; bone fracture, brain damage, skull fracture, subdural hematoma, burns, scaldings, cuts, bruises, welts, abrasions, internal injuries, poisoning, sprains, dislocation, gunshot, stabbing wounds.

2. Physical Neglect

The failure to provide food, clothing, shelter, or supervision for a child if the child's health or safety is endangered. Physical neglect may include multiple occurrences or a one time critical or severe event that results in a threat to health or safety, such as a toddler left alone. Other types of neglect include abandonment, inadequate supervision, inadequate clothing, inadequate shelter, inadequate personal hygiene, inadequate food and malnutrition.

3. Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse includes any act defined in the Code of Virginia which is committed, or allowed to be committed, upon a child by his/her parent or other persons responsible for the child's care. Examples of such are: sexual exploitation, sexual molestation, intercourse/sodomy and other sexual abuse.

4. Medical Neglect

Refusal or failure by a caregiver to obtain and/or follow through with a complete regimen of medical, mental or dental care for a condition, which if untreated, could result in illness or developmental delays.

5. Failure to Thrive

A syndrome of infancy or early childhood which is characterized by growth failure, signs of severe malnutrition, and variable degrees of developmental retardation. Children are in this category only when the syndrome is diagnosed by a physician and is caused by non-organic factors.

6. Mental Abuse/Neglect

A pattern of acts or omissions by the caretaker which result in harm to a child's psychological or emotional health or development.

7. Education Neglect

The child's caretaker is directly responsible for the failure of a child to attend school or an approved alternative program of study.

8. Bizarre Discipline

Any actions in which the caretaker uses eccentric, irrational or grossly inappropriate procedures or devices to modify the child's behavior.

VI. Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse

Reducing the risk of child abuse and providing a safe sanctuary is a responsibility of the community of Shady Grove United Methodist Church. The following procedures are created to ensure the protection of the children, as well as the adults, of Shady Grove United Methodist Church. To create the safest possible environment within Shady Grove United Methodist Church, several abuse prevention measures will be utilized.

1. Building Security

- a. To ensure the building is safe to enter the building when not in use the building will be secured with the Dillard Alarm Company security panel to arm the system when leaving the building.
- b. During times of worship or other programs the side entry door will be locked to ensure the safety of anyone in the nursery or fellowship hall. Entry could be made without anyone in the sanctuary seeing them.

2.. Internet and Social Media Security

The use of electronics or media communications may be useful tools in supporting ministries with children, youth, and other vulnerable people. However, in such circumstances, the following requirements shall be met: • The volunteer or staff person shall never initiate a connection (friending, following, etc.) on social media.

- If a student initiates a connection, the child, youth, or vulnerable person's parent or guardian as well as the pastor in charge shall be notified.

- If an adult leader receives a private text from a child, youth, or vulnerable person that seems to be questionable, the adult leader should immediately end the conversation in the virtual space and offer opportunities to have the conversation in person and in compliance with the earlier guidelines for one-on-one conversations. The ministry supervisor and/or parent/guardian should be made aware of the incident immediately.

Note: If an in-person meeting is not possible, those involved will determine the most reasonable alternative in compliance with the earlier guidelines for one-on-one conversations.

- Adult leaders should post photos on social network sites only with **prior written permission** granted by a parent/guardian. When posted, PHOTOS MUST NOT BE TAGGED with names or location indicators. All photos must be appropriate and in keeping with the spirit of the ministry event.
- All in-person protection policies apply to online platform meetings like Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, Messenger, and so on. *(For example, two unrelated adults should be present in the virtual room just as they would be in a physical room.)*
- An official church account should be established and used for online activities, not a personal account. Communication about online meetings should be shared with parents/guardians as well as with children, youth, and other vulnerable people.
 - Adult leaders and participants should use their real names as usernames.
 - Attendance of online meetings should be documented.
 - All electronic communications shall be documented and retained.

3. Classroom policies and procedures

1. Employee and Volunteer Screening

The Staff/Pastor-Parish Relations Committee (S/PPR) will review the qualifications of staff or volunteers, who have reached the age of twenty-one, who work with children or youth within the Shady Grove UMC ministry. Before beginning service, each employed staff person or volunteer leader for children or youth ministries, children or youth teacher, child care worker, or youth worker will be required to sign a statement indicating that he/she has never been convicted of child abuse nor had such a conviction expunged. Employed staff persons, as a condition of employment will submit to criminal history and sex offender searches using a Virginia State Police form SP-167.

Virginia State Police form SP-167 can be completed online at.

<https://vspapps.vsp.virginia.gov/catspublic/public/publicHome.html>

The cost of the background check will be the responsible of the employee or volunteer

2. Six Month Rule - Volunteer Leaders

Shady Grove United Methodist church will not use anyone as a volunteer leader for children or youth ministries in the church unless such person has had continuous active involvement in the church for at least six (6) months. Persons with less than six months of involvement with the church may participate in ministries for children and youth if serving in the capacity as assistant to qualifying leader.

Note:< A qualifying leader is a person who has had continuous active involvement within the congregation of Shady Grove United Methodist Church for at least six months and has read and sign the Policy.

3. Staff Training

Before beginning their first year of service, employed staff, volunteer leaders, child care workers, and children and youth Sunday School teachers and youth workers will be required to:

1. Read the church's child protection policy; and
2. Sign a "[Participation Covenant Sheet](#)" indicating that they have read and that they understand the policy; and,
3. Agree to abide by this policy.

Anyone refusing, or failing to do so, will not be permitted to serve until the policy has been read and the covenant signed.

Leaders will be encouraged to attend training sessions offered by the Virginia Conference on child protection. Other workers having contact with children and youth will be encouraged to attend these training sessions, or similar sessions available in the community.

Leaders of community groups of children or youth, who use the church facilities, would be required to read the policy and sign the acknowledgment form. Church facilities, including outdoor facilities, will not be available to groups whose leaders refuse to read the policy and sign the covenant.

4. Two Adult Rule

This rule requires no fewer than two adults be present at all times during church-sponsored programs, events, or ministry involving children and youth. Risk will be reduced even more if the two adults are not related. In the event, where two adults will not be present for an activity the parents will receive advanced notification of the situation. Providing parents with advance notice and full information about activities must be a guiding principle in the church's ministries with children and youth. Advance information encourages parents to support the ministry by scheduling their child's participation. Most importantly, advance information demonstrates that the church takes its ministries seriously enough to plan thoroughly and to provide for the safest possible experiences.

a. Programs and ministry during normal Sunday Worship.

1. Sunday School.

Teachers will be assigned in teams of two or more whenever possible. In the event only one teacher is assigned per class, given the physical layout of the church with the classrooms being in a single location, we will rely on the closeness of another adult to assume the responsibility of the second teacher.

b. Single Events held at church.

Leaders will be assigned in teams of two or more for all children and youth activities. If the activity is of mixed gender, the leaders shall also be of mixed gender. If there are not two leaders available for each group, the group will be combined with another group to ensure the presence of two leaders. If two leaders are not available, then advanced notice will be sent to the parents.

c. Events held overnight at church or off the premises.

If any group stays overnight at the church or if a church sponsored group leaves the premises, two or more leaders must be present. If the group is mixed in gender the leaders must be mixed in gender.

d. Community groups using the church.

Community groups of children or youth meeting at the church must have two or more leaders present who have signed the Participant Covenant Statement. Mixed gender groups must have mixed gender leadership.

5. Classroom Discipline

All leaders and workers with children and youth will use the following discipline measure. If a child is behaving inappropriately, the leader or worker will tell the child specifically what he/she is doing that is not acceptable behavior and state what the expected behavior is, e.g., "We do not throw blocks. We use blocks for building." If this measure is not effective, the child will be guided to another activity. If inappropriate behavior continues, the child may be placed at a table to work alone away from the other students. If the child's disruptive behavior continues after these steps have been taken, the child may be taken to the Pastor, or the primary leader of the activity and left under his or her supervision. No physical punishment or verbal abuse, e.g., ridicule, is to be used at any time. If isolating the child within the classroom or removal of the child from the room becomes necessary, the situation will be discussed with the child's parents or guardian as soon as possible.

6. Open Classrooms

Classrooms or child care rooms may be visited without prior notice by church staff, parents, or other volunteer church workers, e.g., Sunday School Superintendent, or Christian Education Director at any time. Brief observations of child care rooms and classrooms of children and youth are conducted by the pastor or the primary leader during all activities.

7. Child Protection Committee

The committee shall include the pastor, lay leader, the Administrative Board chairperson, and the Staff/Parish Relationship chairperson. The committee shall annually review and propose any revisions to this policy and shall be responsible for the administration and interpretations of this polic.

VII. Allegations of Abuse.

Should there be an allegation of abuse at Shady Grove United Methodist Church, or events sponsored by the church off church premises, the following procedures shall be followed:

1. Any allegation of child abuse shall be treated seriously and handled confidentially.
2. Pray for the church and all persons affected by the allegation.
3. Immediately begin documenting all activities that occur in handling the allegation.
4. Immediately notify the pastor of the substance of the allegations, unless the allegations involve the pastor. As a responsibility of the pastor, and Lay Leadership Committee based upon the allegations and the information then in the possession of the Committee, whether a reason to suspect exist. In making such a determination, the Committee shall avail itself of such counsel as it deems necessary and as is immediately available, including, but not limited to consultation with an attorney, with the representative of the church's insurance company, with the district superintendent, and anonymously with the Virginia Department of Social Services.
 - a. If the allegations involve the pastor, the Chairperson of the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee shall be notified immediately and he or she shall immediately notify the district superintendent who shall direct the next steps taken by the church in responding to the allegations. The provisions of this Policy shall continue to apply except as the district superintendent directs that other steps are taken.

VIII. Procedures to report an abuse incident.

1. If there is reason to suspect that child abuse may have occurred, then the following steps shall be taken:
 - a. Immediately notify the pastor;
 - b. Complete an Incident Report using:
[Report of Suspected Incident of Child Abuse](#) form.; and give it to the pastor.
(Completed forms will be kept at the District Office for confidentiality.)

- c. Notify the parents of the incident if it is not known they have knowledge and if they are not the alleged perpetrator;
 - d. Notify the district superintendent;
 - e. Notify the Virginia Department of Social Services of the allegation, only when the facts presented indicate a reason to suspect abuse or neglect.
2. If the accused has assigned duties within the life of the church and the Lay Leadership Committee determines that the steps outlined in paragraph VIII above are appropriate, that person must be temporarily relieved of their duties until the investigation is concluded.
 3. The pastor should extend whatever care and resources are necessary to those impacted by the allegation, but under **no** circumstances should the pastor or any church leader or members investigate the allegation. In providing care to the principals (alleged victim and the accused) and their families, the pastor or church leader, should under **no** circumstances be drawn into a discussion of the truth or falsity of the allegation which could contaminate the investigation. Do not assign blame or take any steps that involve establishing or refuting the allegation.
 4. It is appropriate to show care and comfort for the alleged victim. This should be the pastoral objective from the moment the allegation is received or otherwise made know.
 5. Observe confidentiality for both the alleged victim and the accused until advised to the contrary by the Lay Leadership Committee or the pastor.
 6. There shall be a single spokesperson for the Church in matters regarding allegations of child abuse. The pastor or the District Superintendent shall be the single spokesperson for the Church regarding Child Protective Services issues.

XI. Congregational Covenant and Adoption

Shady Grove United Methodist Church's purpose for establishing this Child, Youth, and Vulnerable Person Safe Sanctuary Policy and accompanying procedures is to demonstrate our total and unwavering commitment to the physical wellbeing, emotional safety, and spiritual growth of all our children, youth, and vulnerable people. We adopt this policy in accordance with the statement we as a congregation make at each baptism—that we will “nurture children and youth in the Christian faith and life and include them in our care.” With this policy, we renew our baptismal pledge to “live according to the example of Christ” and surround children, youth and other vulnerable people with a “community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God, and be thus confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.” (Baptismal Covenant II, United Methodist Book of Worship, p.96).

This policy coordinates and supersedes the previous policies used by Shady Grove UMC. As a Christian community of faith and a United Methodist congregation, we are committed to conduct the ministry of the gospel in ways that assure the safety and spiritual growth of all our children, youth, and vulnerable people, as well as all the workers with the children, youth, and vulnerable people. By this policy and its accompanying procedures, we implement prudent operational procedures in all programs and events.

a. Training: We will conduct training on this policy and its procedures to assure that adults involved in activities with children, youth, and vulnerable people are aware of these standards and will abide by them.

b. Screening: All adults and minors above the age of fourteen who have a direct involvement with activities covered by this policy and its procedures will be screened in accordance with Virginia Annual Conference policy. All people who are subject to this policy will be rescreened every three

(3) years. Any person who was screened but, for whatever reason, has been absent from the Shady Grove UMC community for more than one (1) year and thereafter returns, will be rescreened.

c. Supervision: All activities covered by this policy and its procedures will be supervised by the appropriate number of screened adults.

Conclusion

In all our ministries with children, youth, and vulnerable people, Shady Grove United Methodist Church is committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each of God’s children here will be “surrounded by steadfast love, established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.” (“Baptismal Covenant 11,” *United Methodist Hymnal*, p.44.) This Child, Youth, and Other Vulnerable People Protection Policy is adopted by action of the of the Shady Grove United Methodist Church this (DAY) day of (MONTH) , (YEAR) .

Appointed clergy and/or supply pastor(s): Rev David E Craig

Chair, Staff Parish Relations Committee: Elizabeth Oakes

Chair, Church Council: Boyd Elliott

Adopted by vote of the Called Administrative Council on 25 August 2024