

SAFE CHURCH POLICIES

A Safe Church is one in which everyone not only feels safe, but is safe. No church can completely eliminate all risks. All churches, including ours, should do all it can to minimize them. Being a Safe Church involves having a safe building, preventing physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual abuse, and maintaining trust. Children, youth and adults all deserve safety in the church. Our first efforts, however, should emphasize the protection of the first two groups.

Policies for Nurturing Children and Youth

The Second Congregational Church, U.C.C., of Bennington, Vermont, is committed to providing a safe and healthy environment in which young people can feel affirmed and can learn about and experience God's love. Achieving this requires:

- (A) efforts to insure that the spaces and equipment used by children and youth are safe and age appropriate
- (B) training and supervision to insure that activities are age appropriate and do not present undue physical or emotional risk.
- (C) screening, training, and supervision to insure that those working with children and youth will affirm and nurture them but not abuse their positions or those they work with.
- (D) response policies that protect the innocent and nurture the hurt.

Screening

- (1) Volunteers working with/supervising and/or transporting children and youth must have been members of the church for at least six months or friends of the church for one year. A "friend of the church" is defined as a person who has regularly participated in worship and/or other church activities and whose character is attested to by several church members.
- (2) All employees or volunteers who work with minors will complete the appropriate application or information form.
 - (a) All persons with church sponsored contact with children, including one time or occasional activities, will complete a form including background and experience information.
 - (b) Those with ongoing responsibility for care, teaching, or chaperoning of children will complete a confidential form with references and authorization for a criminal background check.
 - (c) The Coordinator of Children and Youth Ministries shall initiate background checks and safeguard reports received. The Coordinator, Pastor, and Chair of the Board of Christian Education shall be the only persons with access to the forms or reports.
- (3) In cases of employment:
 - (a) the Board of Christian Education, or a committee thereof, shall review all applications and check references.

- (b) a committee of the Board shall interview all eligible candidates.
 - (c) the committee shall, with the concurrence of the Pastor, make a recommendation to the Board.
 - (d) the Board shall make a recommendation to hire to the Cabinet which shall make the decision.
 - (e) the Chair of the Board of Christian Education will ensure that all candidates are notified that a decision has been made.
- (4) In the case of volunteers:
- (a) the Coordinator of Youth and Children's Ministries shall insure that the prospective volunteer meets the requirements in (1) above.
 - (b) the Coordinator shall with the concurrence of the Pastor, recommend acceptance to the Board.
 - (c) the Board shall make -a decision on acceptance.
 - (d) in the event that an individual is not accepted, the Pastor, Coordinator, and Chair of the Board shall agree on the most appropriate way of explaining the decision to the person.

Training

In addition to program content training at the beginning of new years or year segments, all new teachers and all continuing or renewing teachers at least every three years shall participate in training which includes, but is not limited to:

- the church's philosophy regarding affirming and nurturing while keeping safe including acceptable and unacceptable touching and ways of speaking.
- the basic principles involved in reducing the risk of child abuse.
- child physical and emotional safety precautions.
- basic information related to signs of abuse.
- basic health precautions.
- use of permission and medical information forms.

Selection of Curriculum and Activities

The Coordination of Children's and Youth Ministries shall have the primary responsibility for identifying appropriate curricula and programs. The Coordinator shall solicit selection guidance from the Board of Christian Education and the Pastor and, with the concurrence of the Pastor, make recommendations to the Board for adoption.

While the adopted curriculum or program provides the thrust and basic content of the offering, the individual teacher has the power to select among options or expand or vary activities based on the interests and needs of the children provided that the changes are age appropriate and do not expose the children or youth to risk. If the teacher is not certain that the proposed change meets these criteria, he or she shall clear it with 'the Coordinator. Consulting with the Pastor and/or Board as appropriate, the Coordinator can approve, reject, or approve with the condition that parent approval is first solicited.

The Coordinator shall assign appropriate space for classes or activities within the Christian Education area. Use of spaces outside that area shall be coordinated with other Boards and the Pastor. When a teacher or activity leader wishes to use a space or outside area other than the one assigned, this shall be cleared with the Coordinator.

Supervision Policies

Basic principles:

- (a) The greater the risk for abuse, the greater the need for supervision.
- (b) Major risk determiners are:
 - (1) The possibility for isolation or seclusion.
 - (2) The level of accountability for the situation.
 - (3) The level of power imbalance between participants.

Two adults, at least one of whom is 21 or older, should be present during any church activity including any transportation that is a part of a church activity. Transportation to and from a church activity will be provided by a parent or guardian or a person designated or approved by a parent.

Church School rooms are to remain accessible at all times when they are occupied by children or youth and a designated supervisor will make random, unannounced observations or visits. If doors are closed, the viewing windows will be uncovered.

For overnight youth activities, at least two adults must be present. If the youth are of both sexes, at least one adult will be of each sex. Situations in which one adult is secluded with one youth will be avoided.

All children and youth must provide a permission slip signed by -a parent or guardian prior to traveling to or attending any church-related event that is located away from the church property. If there are situations in which an adult has a legitimate reason to be alone with a child or youth for an extended period of time, parental consent will be obtained before the event. If such isolation results from an emergency, the Pastor and the Coordinator of Children and Youth Ministries will be promptly informed of the circumstances.

Nursery Policies

All children who are dropped off for nursery care during the church service or other church function must be registered with the care provider. If snacks are to be provided at a time or in an area where parents are not present, registration will include permission to receive them. If a parent or guardian will not be physically present in the building, a medical emergency information and release form must be completed.

If a different adult will be picking up the child, this person's name must be provided to the childcare provider in a written note. Children will be released only to properly identified and pre-authorized adults.

Procedures and Responses when Misconduct is Alleged

Assumptions

Policies and procedures have two functions.

- 1) To prevent occurrences of sexual misconduct;
- 2) to insure that where allegations are made the response of the church will be both just and compassionate.

All persons involved in incidents of sexual misconduct are in need of healing. A major role of the church is to see that pastoral care is provided for all involved parties when allegations of misconduct have been made. This will include the alleged perpetrator and victim but also may include any witnesses involved.

Those accused shall be presumed to be innocent until the occurrence of misconduct has been established, while safeguards to protect the alleged victim may be adopted at once.

Definitions of sexual misconduct

Sexual abuse is sexual molestation of any person. This includes, but is not limited to, any sexual involvement or sexual contact with a person who is a minor or who is legally incompetent. The State of Vermont has statutes establishing criminal penalties and reporting requirements concerning such abuse.* It is the church's policy to report immediately in accord with the provisions of these statutes and to cooperate fully with law enforcement officials in investigating the allegation.

Sexual harassment is when a person engages with another person using unwanted sexually-oriented humor or language; questions or comments about sexual behavior or preference; undesired physical contact; inappropriate comments about clothing or personal appearance; or repeated requests for dates or social engagements. It is also when an employee, volunteer, or colleague exploits his or her ministerial position by attempting to develop a sexual or romantic relationship (consensual or not) with another person with whom he or she has a pastoral relationship.

Procedures

All incidents of alleged sexual misconduct shall be reported immediately to either the Coordinator of Children and Youth Ministries or the Pastor.

Where there is an allegation of sexual abuse the Coordinator or Pastor is to report it to the relevant law enforcement authorities and cooperate with them in the investigation. They shall also notify legal counsel and the insurance carrier. This does not end the church's responsibility, however. The pastor or coordinator should endeavor to secure for each party in the incident appropriate pastoral care. The pastor or coordinator may refer to the executive committee of the Cabinet the question whether the church should take action. In any case, while the case is pending the accused person shall be suspended from any position that he or she held at the time of the incident.

Where there is an allegation of sexual harassment the Coordinator or Pastor shall counsel with the accused person and with the victim. He or she shall assure the accuser that the allegations will be promptly and thoroughly investigated if necessary. However, if appropriate he or she may arrange for mediation to discover if the problem can be resolved between the parties. If this fails, and either party is not satisfied, then the matter shall be referred to the executive committee of the Cabinet. The committee shall investigate and may seek resolution or refer the matter to the Cabinet as a whole for adjudication. While the case is unresolved the accused may be asked to withdraw from the position he or she held at the time of the incident.

Response

In cases of harassment it is within the competence of the Church Cabinet to decide whether the accused is guilty or not, and also to decide what course of action to take. This may include suspension or exclusion from position, engaging in a counseling relationship, or in extreme cases, dismissal from membership in the church. With regard to abuse, it is also within its competence to decide, after legal steps have been finished, how best to deal with the person. If guilty what relationship should they continue to have with the church? If not guilty, then are there nonetheless matters that should concern the church and how should they be dealt with? A record of any proceeding shall be made and kept.

*See the appendix for copies of the relevant statutes.