Reducing the risk of abuse in the church
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We do not give legal advice or services by providing these suggestions and model policies. You are encouraged to consult with your own legal counsel and other professional advisors as part of the adoption of your specific polices and procedures for the prevention of abuse.
Since 1996, there has been a push to encourage every church to have a Safe Sanctuaries® policy and procedure. See ¶3084 in the 2012 Book of Resolutions.

The United Methodist Church is the leader across all denominations in Safe Sanctuaries. Other denominations are coming to the UMC for policies and procedures as well as training.

Good policies and procedures minimize risks and protect vulnerable people.

When people are protected, our churches’ ministries are more respected in the community.
Motivated by our faith

Luke 18:15-16
People were bringing babies to Jesus so that he would bless them. When the disciples saw this, they scolded them. Then Jesus called them to him and said, “Allow the children to come to me. Don’t forbid them, because God’s kingdom belongs to people like these children.”
Motivated by John Wesley

“Where there are 10 children in a Society, we must meet them at least an hour every week; talk with them whenever we see any of them at home; pray in earnest for them; diligently instruct and vehemently exhort all parents at their own houses...

...Some will say, ‘I have no gift for this.’ Gift or no gift, you are to do this, or else you are not called to be a Methodist Preacher.”
Motivated by a problem

In 2014* in WI

901 substantiated cases of physical abuse
1,177 substantiated cases of sexual abuse
26 substantiated cases of emotional abuse
3,437 substantiated cases of neglect
13 children died from abuse or neglect

(This is the lowest number of deaths since 2005)

*most recent year with complete statistics
See http://dfc.wisconsin.gov/cwreview/reports.htm
Motivated by a problem

Yes, abuse happens in Wisconsin.
Yes, abuse happens in our communities.
Yes, abuse happens in churches.
   $10 million in lawsuits across the UMC.
Minimizing Risk

A Safe Sanctuaries policy, well-written and followed, will not eliminate all risk. Our goal is to minimize risk.

1) Have a written policy that aligns with best practices in the field.
2) Educate people about your policy.
3) Follow your procedures consistently.
4) Keep working on it.
   a) Annual trainings
   b) Repeat background checks
   c) Update the policy as facilities/programs change
Writing the Policy

What it should include:

Definitions
Screening
Procedures
Training
Reporting
Response
Writing the Policy

Definitions: making the implicit explicit
What age is a youth?
Who is ‘we’ in the document?
What about 18 year-old seniors?
Freewill assistance vs. directed volunteering
Writing the Policy

Screening: background checks
   National
   Verify Social Security Number
   Criminal record, sexual offender database
   May include credit report or driving record
Every 2 years
Everyone; every time
Must do your own (can’t accept from school, etc.)

BCRM and VIM use Trak-1
BOOM uses Trusted Employees
Writing the Policy

Screening: limitations
- Records for minors are sealed
- Cannot do a background check without a SSN
- Background checks only reveal convictions

References
- From non-cohabiting non-relatives
Writing the Policy

Procedures: minimizing risk

Two-Adult Rule: No fewer than two adults present at all times during any church-sponsored program, event, or ministry. Risk reduced further if they are not related.

Leader Maturity: To be a leader with responsibility, an adult must be at least 18-years-old AND five years older than the oldest youth. Adults should model behaviors and rules they wish youth to follow. Consider dress code, language use, prayer, etc.

Ratios: The number of children/youth an adult may safely supervise will increase with the age of the child/youth. (example: 1:4 for nursery, 1:10 for youth)

Safe Touching: Adults should not initiate hugs. Adults should always be the one to end the hug. Side hugs are best.
Writing the Policy

Procedures: minimizing risk

Visibility: Windows (or half-doors) remove the opportunity for secrecy and isolation. Should not be permanently covered. If there is no window, the door stays open. Others should be nearby, with a clear line of sight. Notify an adult that the meeting is happening. Full counseling should be limited to 2-3 sessions, then refer.

Photo/Video usage: Obtain permission before publishing photos or videos, either in print or online. Carefully observe for identifying information, about location or names. No tagging should be allowed on social media.
Writing the Policy

Procedures: older youth

Rule of Three: Youth may be allowed out of direct supervision with specific time/space boundaries, but should always be in groups of at least three.

Communication: Maintain ‘visibility’ in all communication. Parents, other adult volunteers, and/or church staff should be copied on whatever is sent to youth. Obtain parental permission before contacting youth directly (text, phone, Facebook, Snapchat, email, etc.).

Social Media: Who will be administrators on any church accounts? What filters, if any, will you apply? Are you open for comments? Who moderates comments? What is (in)appropriate content? Which types will/won’t you use? Are staff/volunteers allowed to ‘friend’ youth?

See “Safe Sanctuaries in a Virtual World”
by Joy Thornburg Melton and Michelle L. Foster
Writing the Policy
Procedures: travel

Transportation: Vehicles should be checked for safety. Drivers should be approved. Create a plan specifically for safety while driving, especially for long distances. Still can’t have an adult alone with a youth.

Sleeping Arrangements: An adult should never share a bed with a child. Genders should be separated. Adults should have separate sleeping areas from youth.

Notify Parents: Always give parents advance notice and full information about events. Require written, advance permission when appropriate. Obtain necessary medical permissions.
Writing the Policy

Training

First Aid/CPR: *Provide annual training for those who work with children and youth. Consider training others as well.*

Safe Sanctuaries: *All who work with vulnerable people must sign a covenant that they have attended and understand the church’s policies/procedures. Include:*  
- Policies for prevention of abuse  
- Procedures to be followed  
- Steps to report an incident  
- Details of applicable state laws  
- May include other covenanted behaviors
Writing the Policy

Response – if it’s not reportable

Incident report forms: Make blank incident report forms available to all who work with vulnerable populations. These allow you to record details of accidents, injury, or other events.

Keep a record: Forms should be kept by the pastor or other designated person. Review the forms annually to see if there is a pattern. Events of a sensitive nature should be kept in a locked file.

Continuity and confidentiality: Events of a sensitive nature, or relating to personnel, should be kept in a locked file. Only those with a need should have access to this information. With a new appointment, it is critical for the outgoing pastor to share this information with the incoming pastor. The pastor may decide to share necessary information with additional staff/volunteers, as allowed by law.
Writing the Policy

Response – if it is reportable

Reporters: Any concerned individual can report suspected abuse or neglect (see dcf.wisconsin.gov for details). Under Wisconsin state law, clergy are required to report suspected abuse or neglect. State law protects reporter confidentiality.

Collect Information: Reports are time-sensitive and should be made within 24 hours. Your job is to collect facts, not to do research or to judge if facts are relevant. Information to provide:

- What happened
- Who was involved
- Who else witnessed the event
- Names/contact info

Pastoral Care: Remember to provide ongoing care and support for those who are involved.
Writing the Policy

Response – if you suspect a problem at home

Listen, believe, document: Write everything down. Make blank incident report forms available to all who work with vulnerable populations.

Confidentiality: Keep information limited to those who need to know. Outline in the policy which people need to be informed.
Writing the Policy

Response – if it happens at church

Get help: *The pastor should contact the District Superintendent.*

*Clarify in the document who will take the lead role if the pastor is implicated in the incident.*

Public Relations: *Only one person should distribute information to the congregation/general public. Typically this will be the pastor.*
Living the Policy

Awareness: Not everyone needs to be trained, but everyone should know about it. Those who aren’t trained may be supervised by those who are.

Training: Offer a training session once a year for new and ongoing volunteers.

Screening: Repeat background checks every 2 years.

Review/Revision: Have an annual meeting to look at any incidents from the prior year. What have we learned? Do we need to change the policy? Do we need to teach something differently? Are there new realities that need to be added to the policy?

The only thing worse than having no policy is having a written policy that you don’t follow!
Resources

Books by Joy Thornburg Melton
Foundational resource
Widely available online
Sample policies
Ask your circuit, community
Every building/congregation has unique requirements to consider.
Resources

Discipleship Ministries (GBOD)
www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/safe-sanctuaries
  Articles
  Webinars
  Logos
Questions
Applying what we’ve learned about reducing the risk of abuse in the church
We’re going to split up into small groups and discuss some scenarios related to Safe Sanctuaries practices.
You should split up from the people you’ve come with.
A group should have 3-5 people in it.
You have 8 minutes to get into groups and answer these questions:

What is your name?

What is your church?

What is your role/connection to Safe Sanctuaries for your church?
THE SCENARIO: You are implementing mandatory background checks as a part of your Safe Sanctuaries policy. Four volunteers insist to you that they don’t really need a check completed.

- Greta has been teaching Sunday school here for 37 years.
- Wayne is an ordained United Methodist pastor, currently appointed as a hospital chaplain. He is driving older adults to worship on Sundays.
- Rob had a background check done for the Conference 6 months ago when he went on a VIM trip. He would like to work in the food pantry.
- Rob’s wife Sarah also went on the VIM trip. She helps lead the youth group on Sunday nights.

Which of these volunteers need background checks? How would you explain to each one why/why not?
THE SCENARIO: John attends a small church. He is the only youth group volunteer, so they always meet when the sewing circle is across the hall. This week, he’s planning to show a new movie and discuss the themes. Only one youth shows up. John lets the circle know the situation, and leaves the lights on and door open during the movie. After the movie, the youth asks for a ride home.

What did John do right?

What options does John have now?

How can small churches be creative AND still minimize their risk?
THE SCENARIO: Helen is a college student who helped lead the summer mission trip. She is friends on Facebook with several of the youth. She calls you one day to report that one of the juniors is constantly contacting her, desperate for attention and friendship. Helen lives 4 hours away, and feels helpless to do anything for this youth.

What do you tell Helen on the phone?

How might you revise your Safe Sanctuaries policy after this incident?
THE SCENARIO: Dennis has been attending this church for a decade. A few parents tell the pastor they are uncomfortable with him, but no one can describe a specific incident or problem. The pastor asks Dennis to stop handing out candy to children. A year later, Dennis invites a child to sit with him during worship. The child’s grandmother notices the child is sitting on Dennis’ lap. She confronts him and asks him to have no further contact with her grandson. The next Sunday, Dennis is talking with her grandson alone. She asks SPRC and the pastor for help with this situation.

Has anything reportable been done?

How should SPRC respond?

How should the pastor respond?
THE SCENARIO: You are the pastor. A recent visitor stops by your office to express interest in joining the church. He also tells you he is a convicted sex offender.

What is the boundary of God’s grace? Where do we draw the boundary of participation in church? (Front door? Altar? Leadership role? Pulpit?)

How can our congregation be equipped for this ministry?

Who has a need to know this information?

Real World Scenario

10 minutes
Questions
Thank you for making our churches safe places for everyone!