

# GRACE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH CHILD PROTECTION POLICY

## 1. PURPOSE

- a. To help Grace United Methodist Church (GUMC) provide a caring and secure environment for children and youth in all aspects of church life.
- b. To ensure that volunteers and paid staff desiring to work with children and youth within the church are properly screened, trained and interested in promoting the best interest of the child.
- c. To help GUMC reduce its legal risk and liability exposure.

## 2. THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

When we baptize a person in the United Methodist Church, in response to God's grace poured out in that moment, we make promises as a congregation. We say:

With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround this person with a community of love and forgiveness, so that they may grow in their service to others. We will pray for them, that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life. (United Methodist Hymnal, page 40)

Grace United Methodist Church seeks to express God's love of children and provide for their personal wholeness. This caring community seeks to prevent abuse of any form to our children and youth and to be in ministry to families where abuse may occur. The Bible is foundational to GUMC's understanding upon which our policies, procedures, and ministries stand.

*And they were bringing children to him, that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to 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 hands upon them. (Mark 10:13-16 NRSV)*

Jesus teaches us that children have the right and the keys to the kingdom of God. Our goal, then, is to maintain a safe, secure and loving place for children to grow; a place where caregivers, teachers and leaders (both paid and volunteer) minister appropriately to their needs.

## 3. VIRGINIA'S CHILD ABUSE LAW <sup>1</sup>

Under section 63.2-100 of the Code of Virginia, an "abused or neglected child" means any child less than 18 years of age:

1. Whose parents or other person responsible for his care creates or inflicts, 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, disfigurement,

---

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Law Website (2/2/2022), <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacodefull/title63.2/>

or impairment of bodily or mental functions, including, but not limited to, a child who is with his parent or other person responsible for his care either (i) during the manufacture or attempted manufacture of a Schedule I or II controlled substance, or (ii) during the unlawful sale of such substance by that child's parents or other person responsible for his care, where such manufacture, or attempted manufacture or unlawful sale would constitute a felony violation of § 18.2-248;

2. Whose parents or other person responsible for his care neglects or refuses to provide care necessary for his health. However, no child who in good faith is under treatment solely by spiritual means through prayer in accordance with the tenets and practices of a recognized church or religious denomination shall for that reason alone be considered to be an abused or neglected child. Further, a decision by parents who have legal authority for the child or, in the absence of parents with legal authority for the child, any person with legal authority for the child, who refuses a particular medical treatment for a child with a life-threatening condition shall not be deemed a refusal to provide necessary care if (i) such decision is made jointly by the parents or other person with legal authority and the child; (ii) the child has reached 14 years of age and is sufficiently mature to have an informed opinion on the subject of his medical treatment; (iii) the parents or other person with legal authority and the child have considered alternative treatment options; and (iv) the parents or other person with legal authority and the child believe in good faith that such decision is in the child's best interest. Nothing in this subdivision shall be construed to limit the provisions of § 16.1-278.4;

3. Whose parents or other person responsible for his care abandons such child;

4. Whose parents or other person responsible for his care commits or allows to be committed any act of sexual exploitation or any sexual act upon a child in violation of the law;

5. Who is without parental care or guardianship caused by the unreasonable absence or the mental or physical incapacity of the child's parent, guardian, legal custodian or other person standing in loco parentis;

6. Whose parents or other person responsible for his care creates a substantial risk of physical or mental injury by knowingly leaving the child alone in the same dwelling, including an apartment as defined in § 55.1-2000, with a person to whom the child is not related by blood or marriage and who the parent or other person responsible for his care knows has been convicted of an offense against a minor for which registration is required as a Tier III offender pursuant to § 9.1-902; or

7. Who has been identified as a victim of sex trafficking or severe forms of trafficking as defined in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, 22 U.S.C § 7102 et seq., and in the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act of 2015, 42 U.S.C. § 5101 et seq.

#### **4. TYPES OF CHILD ABUSE**

Child abuse refers to an act committed by a parent, caregiver or person in a position of trust, 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 are from the Virginia Department of Social Services:

a. 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 or threat of injury, regardless of intent, is inflicted or allowed to be inflicted by non-accidental means (e.g. skull fracture, scalding, bruises, etc.).

b. 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 threat to health or safety, such as a toddler left alone. Other types of neglect include abandonment, inadequate personal hygiene, malnutrition, inadequate clothing, supervision, shelter or food.

c. SEXUAL ABUSE

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

d. MEDICAL NEGLECT

Refusal or failure by a caretaker 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.

e. FAILURE TO THRIVE

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

f. MENTAL ABUSE/NEGLECT

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

g. EDUCATIONAL NEGLECT

The child's caretaker is directly responsible for the failure of the child to attend school or an alternative program of study such as home schooling.

h. BIZARRE DISCIPLINE

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

i. RITUAL ABUSE

When a child is violated in a physical, sexual, or emotional way by an abuser who may be involved in occult activity. It involves an intentional and stylized form of child abuse which may include cruel treatment of animals or repeated threats of harm to the child, other persons, or animals.

## **5. POLICIES FOR REDUCING THE RISK OF CHILD ABUSE**

In an effort to create the safest possible environment within GUMC, the following prevention measures will be used:

#### a. SCREENING OF VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF

- All volunteers serving in a leadership capacity to children or youth under the age of 18 must be members or active in GUMC for at least 6 months.
  - Exceptions:
    1. This requirement may be waived if a person transfers from another church AND provides references to the appropriate staff member. The verification of these references must be documented before allowing the person to begin to work independently with children or youth at GUMC.
- All volunteers and paid staff serving in a leadership capacity to children or youth under the age of 18 will be required to complete a criminal background check. The goal is to have the background completed again every three years.
  - No one who has had a formal child abuse accusation or conviction, or who refuses to complete the screening form will be permitted to work with GUMC's children or youth. While all persons are welcome to attend GUMC, those with former child abuse accusations or convictions will not be allowed in the areas of the church designated for children and youth for any reason. In addition, this person will be asked to refrain from child and youth-centered activities such as VBS, Youth Group, Sunday School, etc.

#### b. TRAINING OF VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF

All volunteers and paid staff serving in a leadership capacity to children or youth under the age of 18 will be asked to read the GUMC Child Protection Policy and sign a Statement of Understanding and Intent Regarding GUMC Child Protection Policy (located in Appendix A of this document).

#### c. EMPOWERING PARENTS, CHILDREN AND YOUTH

GUMC recognizes that by empowering parents, children and youth with information, that the risk of child abuse can be diminished. Parents are reminded to:

- escort their children to the restrooms during services. Remember the building is open much of the time and predators target churches and count on parents feeling relaxed in this environment.
- supervise their children during church socials, or at other times when children have not specifically been left in the care of a volunteer or paid staff member.
- disallow children from going to remote areas, parking lots, etc., alone during church services.
- talk to your children and youth about measures the child can take to stay out of high-risk situations.
- question leaders regarding the amount of supervision present at a given activity, particularly off-ground, or overnight activities.
- Report situations where they have been made to feel unwelcome by volunteers or leaders at any given activity involving children or youth.

#### d. TWO-ADULT RULE

Whenever possible, staff and volunteers will be assigned in teams of two or more. This may be 2 adults and/or an adult and a youth over the age of 12. This rule will apply to all classes and activities involving children and youth under 18. If the situation is deemed low risk (group of children as opposed to one-on-one, daylight as opposed to night, on-grounds as opposed to off-

grounds) then it is permissible to have 1 adult, however in these instances, where 1 adult is present, it is critical that the Open Visibility Rule and/or the Floater/Hall Monitor Rule are fully implemented. This is intended to be the exception rather than the rule.

e. OPEN VISIBILITY RULE

Open visibility should be maintained for all activities involving children and youth. This means that activities should take place in full view of routine pedestrian traffic through the building through either glass window panels or through open doors. Of note, when adults are required to assist toddlers in the restrooms, the door of the restroom should remain open at all times.

f. FLOATER/HALL MONITORS RULE

Whenever two adults are not present with each group during scheduled activities involving children or youth, a floater/ hall monitor will be assigned to walk the halls of the building where classes are taking place and to check all bathrooms at least 1 time during the course of the session.

g. OPEN CLASSROOM RULE

Classrooms may be visited at any time without prior notice by church staff, parents or other church volunteers.

h. REGISTRATION FORMS

Registration forms shall be completed by parents or legal guardians of children through 6th grade attending Children/Youth Ministry Activities. These forms can include a list of allergies, contact information, photo release, medical alerts and persons that may pick up the child.

i. PARENT/GUARDIAN DROP OFF AND PICK UP POLICY

Parents/guardians or designees are expected to bring children through 6th grade to the appropriate classrooms. Parents/guardians or someone designated by written parental/guardian permission must pick-up children through 6th grade from activities. Children shall not be released to anyone who is not listed on the registration form completed by the parent or guardian as someone who may pick up the child.

## **6. BEHAVIORAL EXPECTATIONS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

The following expectations apply to children and youth participating in church-sponsored activities or for children using the church or church property (including vehicles) for any reason. It is expected that children and youth, to the best of their individual ability, will:

- Treat all people with respect.
- Accept the authority of teachers, leaders, team leaders and pastors.
- Listen when teachers/leaders are talking.
- Settle disagreements quickly, peacefully and fairly. Practice forgiveness.
- Treat church property, equipment, and supplies with respect.
- Not have or use alcohol, tobacco or illicit drugs on church grounds.
- Not have firearms or weapons of any sort on church property unless they are being used in a church-sponsored function and with proper adult supervision.
- Use appropriate language. Use of swear words and obscenities are strongly discouraged.
- Exhibit appropriate behavior. Disobedient, disrespectful or obscene behavior is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

## **7. DISCIPLINE GUIDELINES FOR VOLUNTEERS AND PAID STAFF WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

When dealing with children and youth it is sometimes necessary to exercise disciplinary action in order to facilitate learning, maintain order and carry out planned activities in a safe manner.

Planning ahead for success:

- Disruptive behavior is diminished if enough learning opportunities are planned to keep children and youth engaged. It is better to over-plan than under-plan by incorporating age appropriate good story-telling techniques, drama, puppets, arts and crafts, cooking, scientific exploration, games, etc. Incorporating a varied learning environment helps all types of learners remain engaged.
- For overnight activities, boys and girls should have separate sleeping areas.
- It is critical that the children, youth and parents know what the behavioral expectations are ahead of time and what the consequence will be for failure to meet the behavioral expectations.

When discipline becomes necessary:

- Volunteers and paid staff are authorized to handle minor discipline problems without need of involving parents or staff.
- Verbal re-direction may and should be exercised. Care must be taken not to embarrass the child/youth by yelling or shaming. Physical contact is forbidden.
- If verbal redirection is not successful and/or the nature of the problem indicates further counseling is necessary, the child /youth should be counseled with 2 adults present and/or with the parent present with consequences for continued misbehavior outlined.
- If the behavioral expectations are not met at this point, the promised consequences should take place quickly and without fanfare.
- It may be necessary to set up a parent-volunteer-paid staff conference if behavioral problems are chronic. By working together, it may be possible to come up with a plan to modify the misbehavior.
- Restriction of participation privileges may be enacted as the last resort.
- Alert the appropriate staff person any serious, reoccurring or chronic behavioral situations that concerns Sunday School or any other Christian education arena.
- Alert the pastors and/or leadership board of any serious, reoccurring or chronic behavioral situation involving paid staff.
- Notify the appropriate staff person of any serious, reoccurring or chronic behavioral situation involving groups that use the building but are not fully integrated into the church.

## **8. COMMUNITY GROUPS**

Leaders of community groups using the church facility and working with children or youth under 18 shall have access to this policy and expectations to adhere to it.

## **9. PLAN FOR RESPONDING TO ALLEGATIONS OF CHILD ABUSE**

Should there be an allegation of child abuse at Grace United Methodist Church, the matter should be reported immediately to the Manassas City Department Social Services, to the Senior and Associate Pastor, and the Chair of the Leadership Board. Together, these individuals shall

ensure that the appropriate actions will be taken. If the allegation involves one of the pastors, the matter should be reported to Social Services, the other pastor and the District Superintendent.

1. Every allegation of child abuse will be treated seriously.
2. Pray for the church and all persons affected by the allegation.
3. Immediately begin documenting all procedures observed in the handling of the allegation.
4. Immediately notify the Virginia Department of Social Services of the allegation.
5. Immediately notify the parents if it is not known that they have previous knowledge. (In the case the suspected abuser is the parent, they would not be notified.)
6. Immediately notify the church's insurance company when necessary
7. If the accused have assigned duties within the life of the church that person may be temporarily relieved of his/her duties until the investigation is concluded.
8. 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 known.
9. Observe confidentiality for both the alleged victim and the accused.

**Appendix A**

**GRACE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

Statement of Understanding and Intent Regarding GUMC Child Protection Policy

I, the undersigned, have read GUMC's Child Protection Policy, understand what it means, and agree to abide by it.

I (my organization) will abide by GUMC's policy when working with children or youth both on and off church premises.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Numbers: Home \_\_\_\_\_ Work \_\_\_\_\_

Name of organization using the church facility if other than church affiliated activity:

\_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B**

### **Tools for Assessing the Risk/Reducing the Risk**

There are 3 areas to consider when assessing the potential risk of a given situation. Volunteers and paid staff will consider these 3 areas during the planning of and during actual events that involve children and youth.

1. Degree of Accountability: Assess the degree of accountability.
  - Have adult leaders for this activity completed the screening process?
  - Have adult leaders for this activity signed a Statement of Understanding and Intent Regarding GUMC Child Protection Policy?
  - Have adult leaders for this activity completed Child Protection training?
  - Is the 2-Adult Rule and/or Open Visibility Rule being maintained during this activity?
  - If the activity is off grounds, has parental consent been sought from all participants?
  - When accountability increases, risk decreases. When accountability decreases, risk increases.
2. Degree of isolation: Assess the degree of isolation.
  - Is this an overnight activity? (If yes, opportunity for isolation increases.)
  - Is this activity taking place off-grounds?
  - Is this activity taking place in remote buildings or in classrooms that are isolated?
  - Will adult volunteers or paid staff ever be alone with a child or youth during this activity? (In a car, etc.)
  - Will a youth ever be alone with another youth or child, or will a child ever be left alone with a child?
  - When isolation increases, risk increases. When isolation decreases, risk decreases
3. Degree of balance of power: Assess the degree of balance of power.
  - Will adult volunteers or paid staff ever be alone with a child or youth during this activity? (For instance, in a car, etc.)
  - Will an older, bigger, stronger or more “popular” youth or child ever be alone with another youth or child that is younger, weaker, and less “popular”?
  - Will children of the same age be able to “buddy” each other to the bathroom etc.? This is preferred over having an older child escort a younger child. When there is a balance of power, risk decreases. When there is an imbalance of power, risk increases.

#### **Low-risk situations include:**

- Activities where a group of children or youth are present for an activity (such as Christian Education classes, bible study, etc.)
- where the activity takes place on church grounds during daylight hours
- where open visibility into a classroom situation is maintained at all times
- where floaters/hall monitors are present during the activity.
- In all settings it is always preferable to have 2 adults, however in low risk setting it is permissible for one adult to be present as long as all other criteria are strictly maintained.

**High-risk situations include:**

- activities where one or few children or youth are present for an activity with one adult and the opportunity for one-to-one interaction between adult and youth/child is high, OR
- where a large group of children or youth are present but the activity is spread out across an area to such an extent that children and youth cannot be adequately supervised by adults
- where the activity is an overnight activity
- where the activity takes place either off church grounds
- where visibility is limited due to isolation are deemed high potential risk situations.

Volunteers and paid staff should recognize these situations as potentially high risk and take steps to reduce the risk to themselves and to children and youth by increasing the number of participants or adults present, by changing the venue for activity to a less remote location or moving the activity on grounds, or by changing the time of the activity. If the risk cannot be reduced, then the activity should be canceled.