

Safe Sanctuary Policy
for
Wildwood United Methodist Church
Approved by Board of Trustees July 14, 2026

Texas Annual Conference

Introduction

OUR MANDATE IS TO ENSURE SAFE SANCTUARY FOR ALL OF GOD'S PEOPLE.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus provides teachings on providing a peaceable kingdom for all of God's people, including our most precious gifts, our children and youth (Luke 18:15-17). God's peaceable kingdom begins with sanctuary.

Scriptures provide examples of how sanctuary is to be a community of protective nurture and harmony (Psalms 20:1-2, 27:4-5). As Christians, God calls us to create a safe sanctuary in our churches. They must be holy, safe, and protective communities for all of God's children, regardless of age or ability. The purpose of this policy is to address the safety of all vulnerable minors and adults at events sponsored by this church. This church recognizes the need to have a formal, written policy with procedures in place (1) to help prevent the opportunity for the occurrence and/or the appearance of abuse of children and youth and (2) to help protect workers from false accusations and/or suspicions.

The following policy and procedures are not based on a lack of trust in workers, but are intended to protect our preschoolers, children, youth, workers, employees, volunteers, and the entire church body. Careful and confidential documentation is essential to show compliance with policies, to verify information as needed, and to have an accurate record in the case of an incident.

Sexual abuse or misconduct is strictly prohibited and will not be tolerated. Wildwood United Methodist Church expects all employees, volunteers, and anyone aware of such behavior to report it immediately. Anyone reasonably suspected or believed to have engaged in sexual abuse or misconduct in any capacity will be removed from their position or employment. No employee, volunteer, or individual—regardless of title or role—has the authority to condone, commit, or overlook sexual abuse or misconduct.

Wildwood United Methodist Church prohibits retaliation made against any employee, volunteer, board member or other person who lodges a good faith complaint of sexual abuse or misconduct, or who participates in any related investigation. Making knowingly false or malicious accusations of sexual abuse or misconduct can have serious consequences for those who are wrongly accused. Wildwood United Methodist Church prohibits making false or malicious sexual misconduct allegations, as well as deliberately providing false information during an investigation. Anyone who violates this rule is subject to disciplinary action, up to and including termination of employment or membership and criminal prosecution.

Definition

A protected person is any person under 18 and/or any vulnerable adult.

Scope of Policy

This policy and its provisions shall apply to all persons including all paid and unpaid adults, whether lay or clergy who have any direct or indirect contact with protected persons who participate in any youth/children/vulnerable adult specific activities or events sponsored by this church.

Supervision

A minimum of two (2) Workers (“Two Worker Rule”) shall be present in any room or area where Protected Persons are participating. Exceptions to the above rule include:

- Escorting Protected Persons between on-campus buildings or in hallways
- Monitoring the arrival or departure of Protected Persons
- In cases of emergency care
- Understanding that there is safety in numbers, in large indoor areas or outside, one Worker can be in contact with multiple Protected Persons so long as they are in line of sight of other Workers.

If the required number of Workers cannot be obtained for the number of rooms or areas, then the group shall be combined with another group or the Ministry canceled.

The two (2) Worker rule shall be followed, except as noted below:

- Planned one-on-one Worker/Youth or Director/Youth lunches: provided they are held in public places and shall only occur if (1) permission has been given by the parent, (2) for Worker/Youth lunches, the Director has been notified, and (3) separate transportation is to be used.
- Youth/Director conferences: provided (1) the Director informs another Worker at the beginning and end of the meeting, and (2) the on-campus policies are followed.
- Before or after Ministry events, a Worker may “pick up” or “drop off” a youth at their home provided written permission has been given by the parent.
- Before or after ministry events, a Commercial Ride Share service can pick up protected person(s) provided advanced written permission has been given by the parent.

All persons seeking to work with children and/or youth must be members of the church for at least six (6) months, have written recommendation from the senior pastor at the church most previously attended, have written recommendation from two current members of Wildwood who have been members at least one year, or have approval from a Wildwood staff member.

Trips, Driving & Overnight Stays

Driving Rules

- When one vehicle is used for an event, the “Two Worker Rule” applies. When multiple vehicles are used for an event, a single Worker may drive if all the vehicles travel together. When multiple vehicles are required, one protected person shall not ride with one Worker.
- Occupants of vehicles shall wear seatbelts. Buses not equipped with seatbelts are exempt.
- Protected Persons, twelve (12) years and younger, shall not sit in the front seat of vehicles with air bags unless airbag can be disabled. Weight and height of front seat riders shall also be considered when determining if young riders should be allowed in the front seat of vehicles with air bags.

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- Before or after ministry events, a Commercial Ride Share service can pick-up protected person(s) provided advanced written permission has been given by the parent.
- All church bus drivers shall have undergone bus driver safety training and will be subject to annual motor vehicle records review. Driver’s License, Insurance, Registration of driver need to be on file. Workers shall be at least twenty-five (25) years of age to drive and must possess a valid Texas driver's license and proof of current insurance covering. A copy of each is required to be on file with the applicable director.
- **Overnight Accommodations**
- The two-Worker rule is required on all overnight trips, with one female and one male required on every mixed–gender overnight trip.
- When staying in a hotel, Workers shall sleep in separate rooms from Protected Persons; or if necessary for Protected Persons to share a room with Workers, Workers shall sleep in separate beds from Protected Persons so long as any one Worker shall not be alone with any one Protected Person.
- Recognizing accommodations may be restrictive in some cases, one Worker is adequate, so long as any one Worker shall not be alone with any one Protected Person.

Technology & Online Platforms

Adults working with children and/or students shall not communicate by text message or social media without the consent of a parent or guardian. Failure to comply shall cause an adult to become ineligible to serve with children and/or students.

- We strongly recommend that any communication with children and/or youth begin with a parent or guardian.
- This includes, but is not limited to, everything included in “Definitions of Abuse: Sexual Abuse of a Minor.” (see below)

Definitions of Abuse

1. Verbal Abuse- Any verbal act that humiliates, degrades or threatens any child or youth.
2. Physical Abuse – Any act of omission or an act that endangers a person’s physical or mental health. In the case of child or youth physical abuse, this definition includes any intentional physical injury caused by the individual’s caretaker. Physical abuse may result from punishment that is overly punitive or inappropriate to the individual’s age or condition. In addition, physical abuse may result from purposeful acts that pose serious danger to physical health of a child or youth.
3. Sexual Abuse of a Minor – Child or youth sexual abuse is the sexual exploitation or use of a child or youth for satisfaction of sexual drives. This includes, but is not limited to:
 - a. Incest
 - b. Rape
 - c. Prostitution
 - d. Romantic involvement with any child or youth
 - e. Any sexual intercourse, or sexual conduct with, or fondling of a child or youth
 - f. Sexualized behavior that communicates sexual interest and/or content
 - g. Sexual abuse includes mutually consenting romantic involvement or sexual activity with anyone under 18 years of age. All sexual activity of an adult with a minor is considered rape or sexual abuse.

Examples of sexual abuse of a minor include, but are not limited to:

- a. Displaying sexually suggestive visual materials
- b. Making sexual comments or innuendo about one's own or another person's body
- c. Touching or rubbing oneself in the presence of another person
- d. Kissing
- e. Sexual intercourse

Screening for Adults

Careful screening is one way to prevent the abuse of children and youth. Screening calls for a careful gathering and review of information in search of those who can provide safe and caring supervision in a safe environment.

1. Prior to employment or acceptance as a paid or unpaid adult worker/volunteer, the event leader in charge of an event or program shall direct each prospective applicant to complete the application/consent form. By signing the form, the applicant gives permission to this church to contact references and perform the necessary investigation to complete the review of the application.
2. This church is responsible for conducting background check screening. This screening shall be done through the company with which Wildwood UMC has contracted. All persons shall be screened annually.
3. If any of the reports raise questions about fitness of the applicant, this church will disapprove the application. This church reserves the right to turn away any persons for service.
4. If the applicant (paid or unpaid) is found to have been involved in any activity in which the applicant abused or exploited children or youth, the applicant will not be approved. Any conviction of a crime against children or youth shall disqualify any applicant.
5. Results of screens shall be kept confidential. The determination of whether a particular crime from a person's background check is serious enough to result in this church giving a negative recommendation shall be made by this church in its sole discretion. Without in any way limiting those crimes which this church may determine to be serious, these are guidelines:

Persons having a criminal history of any of the following types of offenses shall not be allowed to serve in any ministry with children and youth:

- Child abuse, whether physical, emotional, sexual, or neglectful
- Violent offenses, including murder, rape, assault, domestic violence, etc .
- Persons having a Criminal History of DUI or DWI conviction within the five (5) years immediately prior to application shall not be allowed to act as a driver.
- Persons having a Criminal History of a drug related conviction within the five (5) years immediately prior to application shall not be allowed to participate in the event.

Training

This church shall develop and implement training and orientation procedures for all persons (including youth assistants) who work with protected persons. Training shall include this policy, and appropriate discipline, appropriate physical and emotional boundaries, and leader misconduct as described in this policy. Once training is completed, the church office will keep a file on each volunteer which includes a copy of their "Safe Sanctuaries Training Certificate," a signed acknowledgment of training, and a summary of their background check (a youth worker will not have a background check).

No person shall, after this policy becomes effective, have any direct or indirect supervision with children and/or youth until they have completed this training program before previous Safe Sanctuary Training has expired. We recommend that at the beginning of each event a review of this policy be conducted by the staff member overseeing the event.

The guidelines of these policies and procedures create a status of Safe Sanctuary Certification with this church. Certified adults are entrusted with the title “Certified Local Church Safe Sanctuary Worker with Children and Youth”.

Reporting of Incidents

1. When an adult leader of an event or activity suspects that abuse or any suspected violation of the Texas Penal Code is taking or has taken place, he or she shall call 911 when needed and report the abuse to the appropriate local law enforcement agency and/or the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (800-252-5400). The adult leader shall contact a church pastor or staff person immediately and cooperate fully with the investigation conducted by law enforcement officials or child protective services.
2. Address any needs the child or youth may have, medical or otherwise. And report any incidents to the parent(s) and/or legal guardians(s).
3. The person suspected of abuse shall, for the safety and well-being of the protected person, be removed with dignity from further contact with the protected person until an appropriate investigation has taken place. The matter shall remain confidential. If the adult event leader is the one accused or suspected of abuse, then the report should be made to the pastor or that person’s supervisor.
4. Following the report of an incident, the adult event leader, or church staff person in charge shall document the report, and then speak with the alleged victim, being careful to use open-ended questions.
5. All such conversations shall be documented. Careful and confidential documentation is essential. The documentation should include the following:
 - a. The name of the adult leader observing or receiving the disclosure of abuse, including the date, time and place and any action taken by this person.
 - b. The alleged victim’s name, age, and date of birth.
 - c. Any statement made by the alleged victim.
 - d. Name of the person accused/suspected of abuse, the date, time and place of any conversation or any statement made by the person suspected of abuse.
 - e. Any action taken, i.e. suspension of the person suspected of abuse.
 - f. Date and time of call to the appropriate agency, name of worker spoken to, content of that conversation and case number assigned.
 - g. Date and time of call to law enforcement agency, name of officer spoken to and content of that conversation.
 - h. Date and time of any other contacts made regarding this incident.
6. Immediately notify the Senior Pastor.
7. It shall be the goal to provide supportive care to both the victim and the person suspected of abuse and to restore such persons to wholeness. Supportive care can include the procedures of the criminal justice system, provisions of the current *Book of Discipline*, appropriate counseling referrals and continued pastoral visitation.
8. Confirmed reports of proven incidents of abuse shall be retained in a confidential file for future screening purposes.

Media Response

The Senior Pastor and District Superintendent shall be informed of all investigations or allegations of abuse. If investigations or allegations of abuse should come to the attention of the media, a response shall come from a designated church spokesperson or a spokesperson in the Conference Communications Office or as designated by the Bishop. Refer all inquiries to the spokesperson. **Do not give out any information, simply state that all inquiries will be answered by our Texas Annual Conference spokesperson.**

Appropriate Discipline

Protected persons should be made aware that appropriate behavior is expected at all events. Gentle reminders are always necessary when dealing with children and youth. When these reminders don't work, then discipline needs to move to the next step. In cases where behavior has to be addressed, designated event adults should handle it. In no case is physical discipline an appropriate measure to deal with problems. A reasonable response might include a period of "time out" for the child or youth. This should be done with necessary supervision keeping safe sanctuary guidelines in mind.

Keeping parents involved is important. They need to be kept up to date on their child's behavior. For serious offenses, the appropriate response will be to send the child or youth home immediately. Parents and the leaders will help make proper arrangements.

Appropriate Physical and Emotional Boundaries

Physical boundaries are most important in dealing with protected persons. Persons working with protected persons have to understand and respect those boundaries. Obviously, these boundaries change as children grow older. A young child sitting in the lap of a caregiver may be entirely appropriate, whereas an older child or youth sitting in an adult's lap would not be acceptable. Hugs and kisses from a toddler to an adult are much different than the same from a youth.

Emotional boundaries are also important. As a child grows older it is important for the adult to maintain appropriate boundaries in relationships. It is important for those working with children and youth to not step outside of those lines and allow the younger person to become too emotionally attached to them. It is important for the older person to be careful where conversations might lead and to steer clear of inappropriate talk. When an adult recognizes that there might be an issue with emotional boundaries with a child or youth, they should allow significant space to come between them and the child or youth in question. If that does not solve the problem, then the event leadership should address the issue.

Leader Misconduct

It is a privilege to work with protected persons. Great responsibility is required. Those who violate this policy shall immediately be removed from contact with children and youth and appropriate authorities shall be notified immediately.

Spiritual Boundaries for Safe Sanctuary

As we seek to lead young people in the development of their faith story, it is essential that we guide them and do not manipulate their emotions. This is especially true at longer youth/children's events. The attendees may be exhausted by longer and more active days than they are accustomed to and thereby more susceptible to emotional manipulation. It is therefore necessary that, as we present the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the opportunity to follow Jesus in a life-long journey, we present the invitation with "no-strings-attached." We must allow each person involved to make their own decisions without stigma, coercion, or pressure in any form. As we do this faithfully, we will see more fruitful commitments in the lives of all our participants.

Employee/Volunteer's Printed Name _____

Employee/Volunteer's Signature _____

Witness's Signature _____

Date of Annual Review _____

SUMMARY

APPLICATION PROCESS

1. All adults shall complete an application/consent form. By signing the form, the applicant gives permission to have and background screening completed by the appropriate authority.
2. The application will be processed with all references checked and background screening completed by the company with which Wildwood United Methodist Church has a contract.
3. All applicants must attend Local Church Safe Sanctuary training and sign the policy.

REPORTING OF INCIDENTS

1. If an adult worker/volunteer observes or suspects a violation of the Safe Sanctuary policy, these steps must be taken immediately.
 - A. Address any immediate needs the child or youth may have.
 - B. Immediately report concerns to event coordinator and senior pastor.
 - C. Cooperate with leadership and authorities throughout the crisis.
2. If an adult suspects that abuse or any suspected violation of the Texas Penal Code is taking or has taken place, he or she shall call 911 when needed and report the abuse to the appropriate local law enforcement agency and/or The Department of Protective and Regulatory Services. (800.252.5400)

Recommended Resource: *Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church* by Joy Thornburg Melton (Discipleship Resources, ISBN 0881772208)