

**Benton First United Methodist Church
Benton, Arkansas**

**POLICY OF BENTON FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH FOR THE
PREVENTION OF ABUSE OF CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND VULNERABLE
ADULTS.
(aka “Safe Sanctuaries Policy”)**

Introduction:

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, in April 1996, first adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of child sexual abuse in the church. Updated policies regarding the protection of children, youth, and vulnerable adults (protected persons) were adopted by the Arkansas Conference in 2022 and created “Safe Gatherings Certification” that provided guidelines for and the screening process of persons who wish to work within these ministries.

In covenant with all United Methodist congregations, members of Benton First United Methodist Church (Benton FUMC) recognize the need to have a formal, written policy and procedures to help prevent the opportunity for abuse or neglect of protected persons or the appearance of abuse or neglect of protected persons. The following policy and procedures are not based on lack of trust in workers, but instead are intended to protect protected persons, volunteers, employees, and the entire church body.

Statement of Purpose

Benton FUMC is committed to providing an environment which is as safe as possible for children, youth, and vulnerable adults who attend the church or any church-sponsored programs or activities, and to take the necessary precautions to protect church workers from false accusations or suspicions.

I. Volunteer and Paid Staff Recruitment and Screening

A. Age

All workers must be at least 18 years of age and at least four years older than any child they will be supervising. (This does not apply to staff or clergy). Volunteers under the age of 18 must have written notification from a parent or guardian prior to serving.

B. Application

Volunteers should be active members of the local congregation for at least six months prior to serving. All workers must complete and sign appropriate applications and related waivers giving permission to check references and background information and complete Safe Gatherings Certification through the Arkansas United Methodist Conference.

C. Certification and Training

1. Individuals who have expressed interest in volunteering with children, youth, or vulnerable adults will be invited to attend a volunteer orientation and training session. Such sessions will be conducted annually and as needed to keep volunteers up-to-date on procedures and policies regarding ministries to children and youth.
2. Once orientation is complete, volunteers will then be required to complete certification through Safe Gatherings as required by the Arkansas Annual Conference. (Certification will be required to be renewed every two years.)
3. All applicants must agree to undergo a reasonable background check, checked and maintained by Safe Gatherings, that will include at least an Arkansas maltreatment and criminal history check.
 - a. Individuals who are listed on the Arkansas child or adult maltreatment or similar registries, or who have criminal convictions of a violent, neglectful, abusive, or sexual nature will not be permitted to serve in a capacity involving direct contact with children/youth/vulnerable adults.

F. Agreement of Reading of Policy Statement

Upon completion of application, background checks, and orientation, the volunteer or paid staff person will read and sign a statement that they have read the Benton First United Methodist Church's Safe Sanctuary Policy.

II. Guidelines for Interacting with Children, Youth, and Impaired Adults

A. Two Adult Rule

All meetings, gatherings, and events associated with protected persons must have two certified adults present or one certified adult and one approved, trained youth volunteer. Exception for youth group: if there is just one adult, there should be more than one youth in the group. This applies to Sunday School classroom activities, activities away from the church facility, and when transporting children and youth.

1. When necessary, another adult may be used to move in and out of separate rooms in which an event is being held and where only one other staff, clergy, or certified volunteer is present. If it is simply not feasible to do so, doors will be open and/or windows will be in doors with one adult and a helper that floats between rooms.
2. It is recommended that all rooms used for children have a window in the door, or to the side of the door, or a dutch door.

B. Classroom/ Group Ratios

Each gathering, regardless of size, will require 2 adults minimum. For large gatherings over 20 protected persons, one additional adult is required for every additional 10 protected persons.

C. Boundaries

Adults and youth volunteers will respect appropriate physical and emotional boundaries and will refrain from conduct that includes profane or abusive speech, threatening, or inflicting physical injury, solicitation or completion of sexual conduct or contact; sexually orientated or demeaning humor, photos or comments; the use of alcohol, tobacco, drugs, or firearms during church-sponsored event; and any other behavior that is prohibited by law.

D. Classroom Discipline

All clergy, staff, and volunteers will work to protect the dignity of a child. If a child must be corrected, this will be done privately, away from the rest of the group, where you can be seen by others. Corporal punishment is never permissible. No verbal abuse should be used at any time. Physical restraint should be used only in order to protect the health and welfare of the child/youth/impaired adults, others in the group, volunteers, and staff.

1. Best Ways to Address Behaviors:

- a. Use a firm, gentle voice addressing and redirecting behavior. Address the behavior, don't focus on the child.
- b. Never restrain a child/youth/impaired adult unless the child/youth/impaired adult or another is in danger. Supervisors must be called immediately.
- c. Use positive words. Avoid using words that could cause feelings of shame or condemnation, including degrading references to any physical, emotional, or other attributes such as "Boys don't cry," "Good girls don't act like this," or "You are bad."

E. Open Door Policy

The parents of the children/youth served, the clergy, and the staff of the church have the right to visit and observe events, classrooms, or church-sponsored programs at any time, unannounced.

F. One-on-One Counseling or Interactions

One-on-one interactions are sometimes necessary and appropriate but care must be taken that they be conducted in an environment that provides visibility by other adults. During counseling of children, doors may be closed if there is an unobstructed window viewing the room. If there is no window, the door must remain open for the entire counseling session.

1. Youth Leaders and Youth can meet off campus in a public place where other people are present to conduct counseling sessions as well. Youth and Leader should not arrive or depart together in the same vehicle.

G. Sign-In Policy

Children, ages infants through fourth grade, must be checked into our electronic check-in system when they are away from their parents/guardians. If the electronic check-in system is down, a paper sign-in system will be used. For youth ministries, youth will be signed in and out via a staff or volunteer.

1. Children and youth should not be roaming the church buildings or premises without adult supervision. Parents are responsible for children and youth when not a part of the church's scheduled event.

2. Parents should not drop off children and youth prior to 15 minutes of an event's scheduled start time. All children and youth should be picked up by 15 minutes after the event's scheduled end time.
3. If a parent or guardian is having another person pick up their child/youth, they will contact the respective ministry leader ahead of time to let them know, preferably over text message, or email.

H. Bathroom and Diapering

1. Restroom Breaks

Whenever possible, supervising adults should not use the bathroom at the same time as children and should follow these guidelines:

- a. When supervising restroom use, supervising adults should first quickly scan the bathroom before allowing children, youth, and vulnerable adults to enter.
- b. For "Group Bathroom Breaks," whenever possible, require supervising adults to take groups of two or more children, youth or vulnerable adults to the bathroom—following the "rule of three" or more. Whenever possible, staff or volunteers will stand outside the bathroom door but remain within earshot.
- c. For single use restrooms, require children, youth, or vulnerable adults to inform supervising adults of use of the bathroom whenever possible. Require supervising adult to frequently check bathrooms.

For youth bathroom breaks, youth can be sent to the bathroom from their class or activity one at a time.

2. Procedures for Diapering

- a. Require that diapers only be changed when at least two adults are present.
- b. Inform parents/guardians if supervising adult notices anything out of the ordinary or concerning while changing the infant's diaper.

3. Procedures for toilet-use while toilet-training

- a. Require supervising adult to stand in the doorway with the bathroom door (not the stall door) ajar while children use the restrooms.
- b. If supervising adult must enter a single-use restroom or stall to assist a child, ensure that the doors remain open.
- c. When possible, send in only one child at a time.
- d. When not possible, send in only as many children as there are stalls.

I. Outings Away from Church Property

1. All children participating in off-campus, out-of-town, and overnight outings must have written consent and a medical release form to be completed annually.
2. Children, youth, and vulnerable adults will have access to a phone during church sponsored events on or off the facility premises. Group leaders will have names of all participants, the itinerary for the trip, addresses and locations, and all forms and/or documents needed.
3. Drivers must be at least 21 years old and not older than 75 years old and must have a valid driver's license and proof of insurance. They must also be listed on church vehicle insurance policy as necessary.
4. For outings that are Conference or district sponsored- all adult volunteers must be Safe Gatherings certified.
5. For overnight outings away from church property
 - a. There must be at least two (2) Safe Gatherings Certified volunteers, staff, or clergy.
 - b. Overnight trips should maintain a 1 adult to 7 children ratio. There also needs to be a chaperone of each gender if possible.
 - c. One adult may not take one child/youth/impaired adult on an overnight or off campus event alone
 - d. Males and females will be provided separate sleeping areas
 - e. Co-ed groups should have both male and female staff/adult volunteers present
 - f. When staying in a hotel, leaders will sleep in separate rooms from children. If necessary, children/youth and leaders can stay in a room, if leaders can sleep in a separate bed, and no one leader will be alone in a room with one child/youth. With the exception of parent/guardian/child relationship, an adult and child/youth are not to occupy the same bed or sleeping bag.
 - g. All persons will conduct themselves with appropriate modesty including dressing in appropriate locations and wearing suitable sleep attire and swimwear.

J. Drivers during church-sponsored activities:

1. Drivers should be at least 21 years of age or a member of the staff.
2. Volunteers and staff driving children, youth, and vulnerable adults must

- A. Have a valid driver's license on file with our Facilities Manager
 - B. Provide proof of current insurance coverage.
3. A volunteer driving a church vehicle must be on Church Insurance, as necessary as required by insurance.
 4. At no time should drivers be one-on-one with a child or youth. If two drivers per vehicle is not possible, the same gender as the driver will ride in the vehicle. There must be at least two children/youth in that vehicle with the individual driver. Vehicles will caravan together to the event.
 5. Personal vehicles may be used on trips if there is a need. While on trips, these vehicles become a Church van.
 - a. Personal vehicles will be driven by their owner. If in an emergency, the owner needs to identify a second adult who will be able to drive their vehicle.
 6. Any vehicles use requirements adopted by the Board of Trustees shall be followed in addition to this policy.

K. Social Media

1. Staff leadership may post pictures or comments regarding children, youth, or vulnerable adults on the church's Facebook page or website but only after obtaining permission from the child/youth/impaired adult's parent or guardian. Photos or comments will not include names or identifying information.
2. Children and Youth volunteers are asked to forward any pictures they take with our staff to share safely instead of posting on their own personal social media pages, or reach out to staff to confirm the use of the picture on a personal social media account prior to posting.
3. Text messages, emails and other communications between children/youth/vulnerable adults and staff/volunteers will be made by group communication or otherwise privately with parental consent.

III. Responding to Suspected Maltreatment

This congregation will not ignore possible child or adult abuse or maltreatment. If abuse is suspected by, observed by or disclosed to a volunteer and/or paid staff member of the church, that person shall report the incident immediately. Anyone may, in good faith, make a hotline report of reasonably suspected child or adult maltreatment reports. Permission is not required before making a child or adult

maltreatment report to authorities, nor will the congregation prohibit anyone from making a maltreatment report. This congregation will not retaliate against anyone who makes a maltreatment report.

A. Mandatory reporters:

1. are defined as any staff or volunteer working with children/youth/impaired adults
2. will treat the allegation seriously and with respect for all persons involved
3. must immediately report reasonably suspected maltreatment
4. will immediately make the report, documenting the time and date of call and the name of the person taking the report, to the appropriate hotline

B. If the report involves an allegation against staff or a volunteer, or is alleged to have occurred during any church-sponsored event or on church premises, immediately notify the Senior Pastor

C. If the suspected maltreatment involves the Senior Pastor, the reporter may instead inform the Staff-Parish Relations Committee (SPRC) chairperson.

D. Refrain from any attempt to notify or confront the accused or to conduct a personal investigation of the alleged maltreatment, recognizing the capability and authority of the civil authorities to do so.

E. Maintain the confidentiality of information. All reporters will cooperate fully with all Arkansas Department of Human Services (ADHS), Office of Long-Term Care (OLTC) and/or law enforcement investigations but will not share information with others, except the SPRC chair or pastor or their designees as may be appropriate. All inquiries should be directed to the designated church spokesperson to ensure respect for the investigation process and privacy of those involved.

F. In the event that suspected maltreatment occurs on church property, church-sponsored event, or by church employee regardless of location, and after having reported the suspected maltreatment to the proper authorities, the incident is to be reported immediately to the church's attorney, the church's insurance company, and the district superintendent. The district superintendent will report the allegation to the Bishop's office.

VI. Conclusion

In all of our ministries with children, youth, and vulnerable adults, this congregation is committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each child, youth and vulnerable adult will be “surrounded by steadfast love..., established in the faith and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.” (Baptismal Covenant II, United Methodist Book of Worship, p. 96)

V. Review

This policy will be reviewed and revised if necessary, at least annually, by the Senior Pastor and designated members of the SPRC, Board of Trustees, and any others deemed necessary.

VI. Adopted

This policy was adopted/ approved by the Church Council on this 24th day of September, 2024