

Milford Hills United Methodist Church

Safe Sanctuary Guidelines



***“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”
– Mark 10:14***

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.” – Matthew 18:10

“When Mary and Joseph had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him!” – Luke 2:40

“To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God....” – John 11:12

The 1996 General Conference of the United Methodist Church adopted the resolution aimed to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse in the local churches. This resolution has been reaffirmed and continued by each successive General Conference.¹

Because our church is a community of faith—a safe haven and sanctuary- where our children, youth, and vulnerable adults can be strengthened and confirmed in the way that leads to life eternal, Milford Hills United Methodist Church (hereafter known as MHUMC) is implementing this plan to prevent abuse. In keeping with our Covenant of Baptism, God has called us to create a community where our children, youth and vulnerable adults grow in safety and strength, therefore we commit our resources and selves to the nurture of these persons.

We promise our children that we will provide the structure, education, and the policies that will keep them safe from abuse and harm. In that context we will screen and train volunteers and staff. We ask that each volunteer and staff abide by the policies of MHUMC. MHUMC has established this policy following a conference training session held at this church on April 16th, 2016.

****Reviewed and revised – January 2024.**

¹ Joy Thornburg Melton, *Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church for Children and Youth*. (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 11.

POLICY DEFINITIONS:

The **State of North Carolina** defines a child as anyone from birth to age eighteen. MHUMC designates a difference between children (nursery-5th grade) and youth (6th-12th grade) in our programming.

Abuse refers to an action or inaction by a parent, leader, staff, advisor or teacher that harms or threatens a child/youth/vulnerable adult's² physical or mental health and well-being. Abuse may include the following forms: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, or ritual abuse.

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS/CAREGIVERS:

The **KEY** to any relationship is communication. We encourage you to get to know your child/youth/vulnerable adult's teachers and leaders. While we will do everything possible to ensure safety, **YOU** are the best advocate for your son, daughter, or relative.

If you believe your child/youth/adult is experiencing any form of mistreatment (injury, bullying, gossip, etc.)- contact their group leader directly. We ask this, as we may not be aware of the situation. Similarly, if you have concerns about your child/youth/adult group leader, please trust your instincts and contact a staff member as soon as possible.

Any person convicted of a violent crime or abuse against a child/youth/vulnerable adult **CANNOT** serve as a volunteer or provide a service for a church-related activity.

You may feel confident that the staff and leaders hold the safety of your child/youth/adult in the highest regard. We have taken great care to develop policies, standards, and procedures to increase safety while your child/youth/adult is involved.

These guidelines are by no means exhaustive. Please feel free to contact your child/youth/adult's leader anytime with questions/concerns or contact a staff member directly at 704-636-0471. For more information, please feel free to attend one of our Safe Sanctuary Training classes held annually.

COMPONENTS OF THE PROGRAM:

Everyone desiring to work with our children/youth/vulnerable adults at MHUMC, whether paid staff or volunteers, must go through our Safe Sanctuary Program. This program has four components, which will be reviewed on the next pages:

- Screening
- Training
- Supervision
- Reporting

² A vulnerable adult is a person over the age of 18 who is unable to protect themselves from abuse, neglect, or exploitation.

SCREENING:

Protective screening includes the following: application, reference checks, personal interview, and criminal background checks.

All staff and volunteers will be screened. Our church's screening procedures should be equally applied to ALL workers (paid and volunteer, clergy and lay) who will interact with children, youth and vulnerable adults, and will be renewed every three years.

Screening reduces the risk of:

- a child abuser being recruited to work with your children
- your church being accused of negligent hiring practices
- false allegations being brought against workers³

In wanting to be compassionate to persons who have been accused or convicted of a sexual offense we are implementing a "Buddy System" in our church. A "buddy" system would assign a Trustee member or designee of the church to be with an accused or convicted sex offender at all times and places while there is a church activity in progress (worship and programming where children, youth and vulnerable adults are in attendance). This is a protective measure for all parties' safety.

TRAINING:

Our Training class will be held **annually** at MHUMC by a Compliance Officer/Pastor/or Conference Representative and training will be a requirement for all persons serving our children and youth programs.

All training classes will include a review of all our Procedures and Forms.

All participants will be asked to complete a Leadership Covenant form after the training.

Components of the Training:

- Our church policy and operational procedures
- Appropriate boundary guidelines
- Behaviors or other indicators which may signal concerns of abuse
- Disclosure by a victim and how you are to respond

³ Joy Thornburg Melton, *Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church for Children and Youth*. (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 17.

SUPERVISION:

Our goal is to ensure that the interactions taking place by the leaders, volunteers, staff and advisors are appropriate and above reproach. Supervision takes place for the protection of the children/youth/vulnerable adults as well as our leaders.

You must be actively participating at MHUMC for at least 6 months to be eligible to work with our children/youth/vulnerable adults.

Persons will be EXCLUDED from leading a church related function if they have ever been convicted of abuse. All others will be reviewed on a case by case basis.

- At least 2 UNRELATED adults (unrelated by blood or marriage) or 1 adult and 1 youth helper (in certain settings) should be present for any church sponsored event involving children/youth.
 - Youth helpers must have Staff approval, and be trained in the Safe Sanctuary policies of our congregation. All teachers who supervise must be 18 years of age—no youth shall make supervisory decisions.
 - If it is impossible to provide 2 adults in each area, the door to the classrooms MUST remain open at all times, or have a glass panel in the doors of the classroom and a floater must be used.
 - ALL persons working with our children/youth must be at LEAST 5 years older than the oldest child or youth in the group.
 - Chaperones must be of the same sex as the children/youth in overnight trips as a group. One to seven ratios are appropriate for church events.
- Adequate personnel must be provided and maintained before and after an event until ALL children/youth are in the custody of their parents or guardians.
 - No child/youth should be alone at any time in the church building or during an off-campus event. Each child/youth must be with a buddy at all times.
- MHUMC rooms will have all doors equipped with WINDOWS. The glass panel cannot be covered and should allow for monitoring of all spaces within a classroom or area. If glass panels are not in place, the door to the classroom must remain open at all times.
 - During large group events including children/youth, one person is designated as a Floater and should make unscheduled visits to check on all classrooms and areas.
 - The Pastor's study should have window in the door as well as in any other room used for Pastoral Counseling or Consultation. An open door policy may also be used in the Pastor's study when necessary, but confidentiality is to be upheld. A second staff member or an officer of the church should be in the office building when the counseling is taking place. In emergency situations, the pastor will use discretion to make decisions about counseling.

TRANSPORTATION PROCEDURES:

- Any activity that requires travel from the church MUST have a written permission form and medical insurance information from the parent/guardian of the child/youth. The permission/ medical forms must stay with the staff member/coordinator for the entire trip.
- All medical forms and copies of insurance MUST be submitted by ALL adult chaperones and staff members—anyone that is participating in all events that include travel or overnight stays.
- We will always give advance notice and information regarding any activity in which your child/youth will be participating which deviates from the traditional classroom instruction offered at MHUMC (i.e.- VBS, camps, etc.).
- Participation Covenants will be signed by child/youth that outline the expectations of behavior and consequences of breaking covenants. Parents will be expected to pay for TRAVEL HOME if the child/youth breaks these covenant agreements.
- Youth who are of appropriate age may drive to and from events on church property with parental permission. Youth may also drive to events that are within Rowan County with parental permission. Youth driving to a destination within the county will meet at the destination. Youth are excepted to travel as part of the group on any trip that is outside of Rowan County.
- If an arrangement is previously made with the parents that one youth needed to ride with another parent to a destination it must be affirmed by BOTH sets of guardians.
- Any person driving the church van or driving a personal vehicle on behalf of the church must consent to a motor vehicle record check and provide proof of current insurance coverage.

OVERNIGHT RETREATS OR MISSION TRIPS:

- When there are both male and female youth going on a trip there must be both male and female counselors (one to seven ratio).
- Separate sleeping quarters should be provided for each gender. Beds should not be shared.
- Visitation between males and females in bedrooms is prohibited unless directly supervised in a group setting with the counselors for devotional or group discussion times.
- If the option is available – a hotel shall be chosen where the rooms open to the interior of the building, rather than the outside. This reduces the danger of strangers from the street.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION REGARDING YOUNGER CHILDREN:

- A sign-in/sign-out procedure will be utilized in the nursery when bringing children in and picking them up. Parent(s) must provide a list of adults who are granted permission to pick the child up from the nursery. This list must be signed by the parent to authorize the listed persons.
- All Diapers/Supplies needed when baby/toddler is in the church nursery must be provided by the parent(s). It is also the responsibility of the parent(s) to provide any directions of care, let us know of any special needs the child may have, and a list of known allergies/medications.
- Diapers shall be changed in an area visible to others
- If a teacher must assist a small child in the restroom, the door to the restroom shall remain open. Older children who do not require assistance in the restroom, should be given the privacy of being alone with the door closed.

TECHONOLOGY & SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY:

- The best strategy for the prevention of social media misconduct in ministry is education, conversation, covenant, and accountability. Staff and those that manage technology, websites, and social media outlets for MHUMC will have a continued discussion on how to improve this policy as technology changes.
 - MHUMC's social media will not be used to post and disseminate discriminatory comments or content, harassment, threats of violence, criminal acts or behavior, abuse of any type, bullying, hate speech, or demeaning comments.
 - MHUMC's social media will not be used to share, reveal, or disseminate confidential or proprietary information, including financial information, counseling information, or information on any legal matters.
- No messaging shall take place on a platform where messages automatically disappear.
- Leaders shall not initiate a social media connection.
- Authorization from parent(s) will be required to use any photo or video of children/youth in any capacity within the church or on the internet. Consent must be obtained yearly.

PREVENTAIVE CARE, SAFETY, AND FIRST AID:

- First Aid Kits shall be maintained by the church and easily accessible in multiple locations.
- In all buildings, fire evacuation routes will be posted and fire extinguishers and smoke alarms maintained annually. Trustees will be responsible for these items. (Fire extinguishers locations will be posted on fire evacuation maps.)
- The church will provide adequate liability insurance for their facilities and church van in case of accident or injury to anyone participating in a church sponsored activity. The insurance will include coverage for sexual and other forms of abuse.
- MHUMC will provide age and activity appropriate equipment for children and youth. All equipment will be maintained, kept up-to-date, and clean.

BUILDING USAGE POLICY:

All outside groups shall adhere to the building usage guidelines set forth by the Trustees, as well as abide by our Safe Sanctuary Policy.

REPORTING:

All incidents – including accidents and suspected abuse – shall be documented in writing.

All persons, as an employee or a volunteer of children, youth, and vulnerable adults have a responsibility to report any actual or suspected abuse or neglect, past or present, anywhere in the person's life including at church, home, school, or in the community.

We radically love others, because our Lord loved us first, therefore our procedure for reporting and our plan of response is designed to promote safety for all children of God.

- When a volunteer or staff member of a MHUMC sponsored event SUSPECTS that abuse (of any form) is taking place or has taken place, he or she may report the abuse anonymously.
- Reports will be made to the North Carolina Department of Social Services of Rowan County @ 704-216-8498 and/or the appropriate law enforcement agency (Salisbury Police –704-638-5333 or use 911) if warranted.
- The leader will also EXPEDITIOUSLY notify the church Pastor, Director of Family Ministries, or church administrator IMMEDIATELY if warranted, but no later again than a 24 hour period of the suspected abuse and how this report was made.
- The Pastor, Director of Family Ministries, administrative assistant, or staff member (in charge of that event or class) will complete and file the FORM FOR REPORTING SUSPECTED ABUSE and will notify the Trustee committee so that the church INSURANCE/liability provider can be contacted.
- Notify the parents/guardians or appropriate contact for the possible victim and take any necessary steps to assure the child/youth's safety until the parents arrive. The safety of all involved parties is the church's primary concern. We want to show care and compassion for all involved.
- MHUMC will be supportive of the individuals, who in good faith make reports of actual or reasonably suspected cases of abuse. ALL reports will be taken seriously, but will NOT be judged prematurely.
- DO not confront the accused abuser with anger and hostility. Treat him or her with respect and dignity, but immediately remove him/her from contact with children/youth/vulnerable persons and all responsibilities until the investigation is completed and the allegations are clear or substantiated.
- The Senior Pastor or the Chairperson of the Staff Parish Relations Committee shall communicate the complaint to the District Superintendent within 24 hours. If the local authorities have been called, the Trustees Chairperson shall be notified of details and a written step by step report shall be submitted ASAP. The forms will be kept in the church office in a locked file.
- If any complaint comes to the attention of the media, then, only the Senior Pastor and the District Superintendent shall make the release to the media. The administrative assistant shall have a prepared statement before releasing information to the media, with the names and numbers of the 2 designated persons –the Pastor and the Superintendent.

- Under NO circumstances should the person who received the report of the alleged offense attempt to conduct any further investigation of the situation on his/her own time and initiative.
- The Senior Pastor and/ or Chairperson of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee shall prepare a brief and honest statement that can be made to the congregation WITHOUT giving unnecessary details, placing blame, interfering with the victim's privacy, or violating any confidentiality concerns.
- If any Pastor of MHUMC is implicated in a complaint, the complaint shall be communicated IMMEDIATELY to the District Superintendent and the Chairperson of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, and the Conference rules will be put into place ASAP.

MHUMC is also required to report ALL injuries that happen to anyone on church property or during church activities, and document these accidents. The Trustees should be notified of the incident within 24 hours. The accident form will include: date, time, description, follow-up and signatures of the injured person and the staff person in charge.