

Safe Sanctuary Policy  
**Oak Grove United Methodist Church**  
Meridian, Mississippi  
Adopted: January 26, 2015

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, in April 1996, adopted a resolution aimed at eliminating any potential for child sexual abuse in the church. The adopted resolution includes the following statement:

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes a child welcomes me." (Matthew 18:5). Children are our present and our future, our hope, our teachers, our inspiration. They are full participants in the life of the church and in the realm of God.

Jesus also said, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones..., it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea." (Matthew 18:6) Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to the little ones, the children. The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church state that "...children must be protected from economic, physical and sexual exploitation and abuse." (para. 162C)

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children. Child sexual abuse, exploitation and ritual abuse (ritual abuse refers to abusive acts committed as part of ceremonies or rites; ritual abusers are often related to cults, or pretend to be) occur in churches, both large and small, urban and rural. The problem cuts across all economic, cultural and racial lines. It is real, and it appears to be increasing. Most annual conferences can cite specific incidents of child sexual abuse and exploitation in their churches. Virtually every congregation has among its members adult survivors of early sexual trauma.

Such incidents are devastating to all who are involved: the child, the family, the local church and its leaders. Increasingly, churches are torn apart by the legal, emotional, and monetary consequences of litigation following allegations of abuse.

God calls us to make our churches safe places, protecting children and other vulnerable persons from sexual and ritual abuse. God calls us to create communities of faith where children and adults grow safe and strong. (From The *Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church*. P. 384-386)

Likewise, the Mississippi Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church has required congregations to implement protection for children and other vulnerable persons. Thus, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, Oak Grove United Methodist Church adopts this policy for the prevention of child abuse in our church.

**Purpose**

Our purpose for establishing this Child Abuse Prevention Policy and accompanying procedures is to demonstrate our total and unwavering commitment to the physical, emotional and spiritual safety of all our children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

**Covenant Statement**

Oak Grove United Methodist Church hereby pledges to conduct the ministry of Jesus Christ in ways that assure the physical and emotional safety and spiritual growth of all of our children and youth as well as all of our workers with children and youth. We will follow reasonable safety measures when selecting and recruiting workers; we will implement prudent operational procedures in all areas of programming and care; we will train our workers with children and

youth on our procedures and policies; and we will have a clearly defined procedure for reporting a suspected incident of abuse that conforms to the requirements of Mississippi law.

### **Staff SELECTION Policies**

All volunteer and paid staff who work with children and youth at OGUMC will be:

- At least 3 years older than the oldest child/youth they will be supervising.
- A member or constituent of OGUMC for at least 6 months.

All volunteer and paid staff – including the pastor - who work with children and youth at OGUMC will:

- Complete and sign an application and the related waivers giving permission to check references and background information.
- Provide the names and contact information of 3 personal references.
- Undergo a criminal background check at no expense if they will have supervisory program responsibility for children/youth. Individuals who have been convicted of physical or sexual abuse or neglect may not work in any church-sponsored activity or program for preschoolers, children, youth or vulnerable adults.
- Any person who is licensed for a profession which requires a criminal background check as a condition of licensure (examples include but are not limited to: Registered Nurse, Paramedic, EMT, Teacher, etc.) shall be exempt from undergoing a background check. Such persons will still be required to sign a covenant to abide by all Safe Sanctuaries policies and procedures and must submit proof of valid licensure. If at any time said license lapses or is revoked, the person shall undergo a criminal background check before they are allowed to continue in their work involving children, youth and vulnerable adults.

### **Staff SUPERVISION Guidelines**

Whenever supervising activities involving children and youth at OGUMC,

- When possible, two non-related adults will be present at all times.
- Children and youth will be checked in to and out of a church sponsored activity by their parent or legal guardian or people authorized by parent/legal guardian.
- They will have access to a telephone, cell phone or pager when groups are at or away from the church facility
- One-on-one interactions with children and youth will be with an open door and visibility to all.

Whenever OGUMC sponsors an activity involving children or youth,

- Anyone has the right to visit and observe the children's/youth activity, classroom, or church-sponsored program at any time, unannounced.
- All classroom and office doors will have a window or visibility from hallway or remain open while occupied. Note: If current office or classroom doors are replaced, the new doors shall have a window.
- Windows will be kept free from adornment

Whenever OGUMC volunteers/paid staff provide transportation for children or youth away from the church campus,

- No youth will drive to/from events
- Adults should never transport child/youth by themselves
- Approved and covered by church's insurance company

Whenever OGUMC hosts an activity involving children or youth from another church or community organization,

- The groups using the church facility will follow OGUMC's Safe Sanctuaries policies and procedures
- Additionally, any individual or outside group utilizing OGUMC's facilities for private functions shall agree to follow OGUMC's Safe Sanctuaries policy

OGUMC volunteer and paid staff shall attend training about Safe Sanctuary policies, procedures and child abuse issues once during each quadrennial period as defined by the UMC Book of Discipline.

If a suspected incident of child abuse or neglect occurs at or is revealed to a volunteer/paid staff person at a OGUMC sponsored activity, the adult in charge of the activity will

- Insure the safety of the child or youth
- Call the church pastor or designee
- Call the Lauderdale County Sheriff's Department or Clarke County Sherriff's Department (to be determined by where the child or youth resides or where the suspected abuse is alleged to have taken place)
- After the safety of the child or youth is assured and law enforcement is contacted, the pastor shall notify the District Superintendent

### **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).