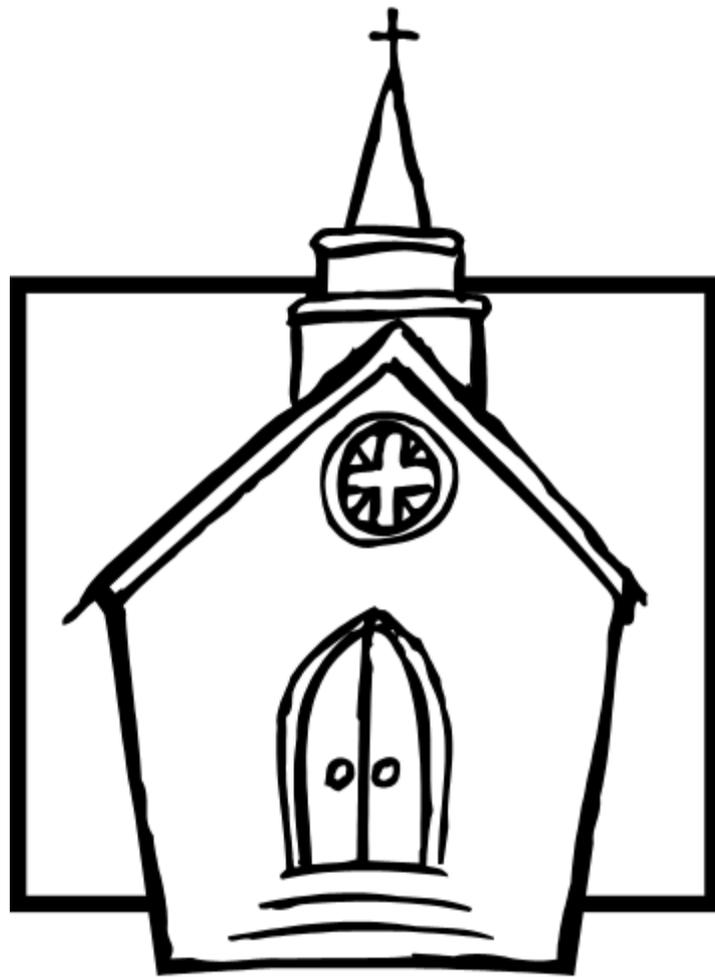


SAFE CHURCH POLICY



Union Church, UCC
April 2017

The Union Church of Hinsdale

SAFE CHURCH POLICY

A Commitment to Our Children

May 2017

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Union Church members are committed to protecting the safety of all our children. We take seriously our responsibility to create an environment that minimizes the risk of harm to children. An important feature of risk reduction is insuring that the staff and volunteers we have working with young people are able and willing to conduct themselves in an appropriate manner and consistent with the laws of the State of Illinois.

I. MANDATED REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

This revision to our existing policy (June, 2002), is made necessary by a change in Illinois law as concerns mandatory reporting status for clergypersons. Following is the explanation which came from our Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ:

“Illinois clergy have now been added to the list of mandated reporters who are required by law to report suspected cases of child abuse or neglect to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) under a new law signed by Gov. George Ryan on Friday, August 16, 2002.”

Illinois clergy are now required to report suspicions that a person (including parishioner, a parent, a church employee, teacher, or another member of the clergy) has neglected or abused a child under their care, including sexual abuse. Union Church clergy will report any suspected sexual abuse of a child under the age of 18. An exemption from Illinois State law preserves the confidentiality privilege for clergy members who learn of abuse or neglect in the confessional or when acting as a spiritual advisor in cases not involving children under the age of 18.

Reports are to be filed with DCFS through report to the Hotline at 1-800-25-ABUSE. The hotline operates 24 hours per day, 365 days per year.”

How does this change our approach as a church community?

All Union Church clergy and professional staff are committed to creating an environment in which children and youth feel comfortable raising concerns regarding their safety and to addressing these concerns in a thoughtful and comprehensive manner, while at the same time protecting them by utilizing the oversight of the Department of Children and Family Services.

Clergypersons in the state of Illinois, or any person working with, overseeing, teaching, or relating to youth at Union Church, will file a report with the Department of Children and Family Services in accordance with Illinois State law should abuse or neglect of a child under 18 be suspected. This directive applies to all of our professional staff and teachers, both paid and volunteer.

Any of the clergy will be available at any time to assist in the reporting process. Their role will be to help with procedure and to support the person making the report. A report is best made by the person who actually hears of the abuse. Reports can be made anonymously. These issues and other concerns related to reporting may be discussed with the professional staff, keeping in mind that they, too, are now mandated by state law to report. The person filing the report will also notify the Senior Minister and the Board of Trustees Legal Committee Chairperson of that event.

Following are guidelines previously accepted by the Executive Council which outline preventative and cautionary measures which will continue to be observed regarding:

- Volunteer and Staff Screening
- Volunteer and Staff Training

II. SCREENING PROCEDURES

Union Church Employees

All individuals seeking full or part-time paid employment at Union Church are subject to the interviewing and screening procedures outlined in the Union Church Unified Personnel Policies manual. These procedures include one or more in-person interviews by the individual who will serve as their immediate supervisor, the Executive Manager, and, if appropriate one or more members of the Clergy and a member of the Human Resources Committee. In addition, each applicant will be asked to provide two or more references who can speak to their qualifications and character. In all cases, the Executive Manager will talk with these references prior to offering any applicant a paid position. According to our existing personnel policies, all employees will serve for a six-month probationary period during which time their job performance and interaction with others on the staff and in the Congregation is carefully monitored.

In addition, ***all employees who will have direct contact with youth or children must*** agree to have a background check conducted and to sign a disclosure statement indicating if they have ever been reported for child abuse or dismissed from a job for reasons of misconduct toward children.

Upon accepting employment at Union Church, the Executive Manager will give all employees, regardless of their position within the Church, this Safe Church policy providing general information regarding child abuse and neglect and the Church's policies for addressing any allegations of mistreatment involving charges of abuse against children, as discussed below. Employees will sign a document indicating that they have read and understand the Safe Church Policy. A copy will be kept in the Human Resource file for each employee.

Volunteers Serving Children and Youth

As a lay-led church, we depend upon our members' good will and generous time commitments. This is particularly true in the staffing of the many and varied programs we offer young children and youth. While we want to maximize the opportunities for all members of the Congregation to contribute their time and talents in the service of young people, our responsibility is to ensure a safe environment for children and youth. This commitment requires us to take extra care in insuring that those working with our young members conduct themselves in a respectful and appropriate manner.

To accomplish this objective, all volunteers working with children and youth will be asked to complete a brief screening tool regarding their prior experience in working with young people and to confirm that they have not been charged or convicted of any form of child abuse involving their own or other children. They also will be asked to read and confirm their agreement with a "Memorandum of Understanding Regarding Conduct with Children and Youth" outlining the Congregation's expectations about how volunteers should conduct themselves when interacting with young people. (This memorandum will remain consistent with the Safe Church document, and will be updated and developed further by the Youth Committee and the Children's Committee.)

All volunteers (like employees) working with children and youth will be given a brief written document providing general information about what constitutes child abuse and neglect and the Church's policies for addressing any allegations of such charges of abuse against children.

III. GUIDELINES FOR INTERACTING WITH CHILDREN

For the purposes of this policy, a child is defined as anyone fifth grade or younger.

Volunteer Expectations

- All volunteers working with children or youth will be expected to provide information regarding their prior experiences in working with young people and disclose if they have been the subject of a prior report involving any form of child abuse or neglect.
- All volunteers working with children will be expected to attend a training regarding our Safe Church policies and expectations for interacting with children and youth. **This training also will include an overview of child abuse and procedures for volunteers to follow if they suspect that a child has been or is a victim of any form of child abuse.**

Conduct Guidelines

All volunteers, professional and support staff will observe the "two adult rule. Except in unusual circumstances, **no adult is to be alone with one child or one youth on a church sponsored activity, on or off church premises. One of the "two adults" must be over the age of 21, while the other can be a student youth leader (high school age), college youth leader**

(college-aged) or another adult (over 21 years of age). This includes driving alone with a single child unless express permission has been given by the child's parent or guardian in each particular circumstance. Staff or volunteers who need to have private conversations occur with youth will hold those conversations in a public place (restaurant, coffee shop, etc.) or in an office within Union Church during normal business hours if the office has a clear glass panel allowing viewing from the hallway when the door is closed; or any other room with the door open or with easy viewing from the outside.

- We recognize that there are situations in which teachers or volunteers must be left alone with children during performance of their assigned duties. Examples include helping a small child in the restroom or changing diapers. When such situations arise, the adult should, whenever possible, inform another nearby adult of the situation.
- Appropriate physical touch is an important part of showing love and support to children. Nothing in the Safe Church policy should be construed as stopping an adult from hugging a child to show affection or approval for something well done or to comfort a child who has faced a disappointment or injury.
- Inappropriate touch will not be tolerated. Inappropriate touching between the child's shoulders and knees, kissing, any type of hitting, or any touch uncomfortable to a child is strictly prohibited.
- Words have power to heal or to wound. Inappropriate language with children includes derogatory statements about any aspects of their identity, words spoken in anger, any sexually explicit statements and language deemed inappropriate among Christians is strictly prohibited.

IV. GUIDELINES FOR INTERACTING WITH YOUTH

A youth is anyone under college age (~ 13-18 years of age) or in Middle School or in High School. Youth in our Ministry programs should be considered "youth" until they have entered college, left the church membership, or until the start of fall programming following high school graduation.

Volunteer Expectations

- All volunteers working with youth will be expected to provide information regarding their prior experiences working with young people and disclose if they have been the subject of a prior report involving any form of child abuse or child neglect.
- All volunteers working with youth will be expected to attend a training regarding our Safe Church policies and expectations for interacting with children and youth. **This training also will include an overview of child abuse and neglect, and procedures for volunteers to follow if they suspect that a child has been or is a victim of any form of child abuse or neglect, as outlined in section VI.**

Classifications of Youth Volunteers and Volunteers with Youth

- **Student Youth Leaders** (i.e. high school youth or graduated seniors) should be considered “youth” in regard to our Safe Church Policy. These high school-aged Student Youth Leaders, although they are “leaders,” should still be regarded as youth. They will work cooperatively, in a mentored relationship with other staff and Adult Leaders.
- **College Youth Leaders** (i.e. college-aged students between 18-21) are young adults who have graduated high school and entered into college or individuals who are of consistent age after the start of our Fall Programming. These College Youth Leaders may be given supervised responsibilities. They will work cooperatively, in a mentored relationship with other staff and Adult Leaders.
- **Adult Leaders** – anyone over the age of 21 is considered an adult leader when entering a volunteer role with children or youth.

Conduct Guidelines

Purpose for Adult Leaders:

Adult leaders are vital to the positive spiritual growth of our youth. Youth want, and need positive adult role models in their lives. Adult leaders provide needed supervision, important guidance and profound spiritual wisdom.

Accountability:

Accountability simply means telling staff or another adult leader, or otherwise being accountable for, your relationship, your actions, interactions, and communication with youth. General accountability and appropriate behaviors for Adult Leadership include:

- Always following the “Rule of Three.” If meeting in a location that could be construed as non-public, always make sure there are at least three people present i.e. two adults and a youth; or two youth (of the same peer age group or older), and one adult. Younger children of a parent who is considered an adult leader” SHOULD NOT be considered as part of the “Rule of Three.” Spouses or other adults who may be present in a meeting place such as a house, SHOULD NOT be considered part of the “Rule of Three” if they are not visibly present (and awake). For example, one adult, with one youth, (and one or two younger children and/or a sleeping spouse), meeting in a home IS NOT acceptable behavior.
- Be an “equal opportunity” leader. Treat all youth equally and avoid preferential treatment with one youth, or a small group of youth. This is for the leader’s safety and the youth’s safety.
- Never become sexually, romantically, or intimately involved with a child or youth. Never lead, facilitate or encourage youth or other Adult Leaders in this behavior.

When meeting with youth, in a public or non-public space, adult leaders should follow these parameters:

- Always follow the “Rule of Three: 1) two youth and one adult, 2) two adults and one child or youth, or 3) one adult and one youth and one child.
- As a leader, always give yourself “an out” when meeting with or communicating with youth. (i.e. *I have another commitment at 1PM, so I only have 30 minutes right now.*”)
- Communicate, in a timely fashion, with the appropriate church staff that a meeting or meetings are taking (or have taken) place.
- Communicate with the youth’s parent(s) so they know who you are and the extent and motive behind your interactions. (*If, based on the context of the conversation, you cannot involve the parent(s), communicate with the Director of Youth Formation.*)

Use common sense. If a youth initiates a high frequency of meetings with you, stop the meetings and alert DYF immediately. High frequency may be a judgment call. However, frequency of more than a couple of contacts per week, or communications of a more personal or dependent tone, could be a warning sign.

- Keep conversations, body language and touch appropriate. Always consider what is being communicated and whether you would feel comfortable having that communication, conversation or meeting witnessed by a spouse, minister, parent, or even broadcast over the internet.
- Keep meetings to reasonable hours. Meetings beyond 9PM (especially during the school year) should be discouraged unless there is an emergency. *Meetings and conversations held in the late evening, whether in person or via phone or electronically, tend to take on an air of intimacy not found at other times. Therefore, do not engage in this behavior except as defined in Section V.*
- Social gatherings beyond 9PM (especially in the summer) need strict accountability with parents of youth and DYF.

Boundaries and Termination of Adult/Youth Relationship

Do not fall into the trap of thinking you have to be this youth’s “savior.” Know your boundaries and get help from other sources so you do not put yourself or the youth at risk. Being an adult leader with youth can be seductive. Emotional attachments can and do develop. Boundaries can become blurred in the name of “doing youth ministry.” “Justifications” can be made regarding potentially inappropriate or dangerous situations without realizing it. It doesn’t matter if you are married or single, as the adult in the relationship, it must be you who recognizes these situations, and acts to stop or correct them immediately. Not doing this potentially puts the church, its’ pastoral leadership, our youth ministry, our youth, you as a leader, your family and our entire faith community at risk. If you are aware of these situations, but unsure of how to correct it, contact the DYM immediately.

If a youth meets and comes to know an adult because of their role as an Adult Leader in the church, that Adult Leader will always be an “adult leader” in the eyes of that youth (and other youth/families) regardless of whether that adult is currently in a position of leadership. Their role in “Adult Leadership” forms the context of the youth/adult relationship. Therefore, adult leaders

should maintain a “safe-church” relationship with any youth until they turn 18 and graduate from high school.

V. GUIDELINES FOR ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

Today communication routinely occurs via text, internet and other electronic media, making it neither practical nor desirable to prohibit such communication. The most important guideline is that when you are engaged in electronic communication with a child or youth, you should adhere to the same practices that cover “in person” communications. If you would not converse with the child or youth in person about the matters that are the subject of the electronic communication, then the electronic communication is inappropriate and should cease. Similarly, if you would not converse with the child or youth in person at the same time of day or in the same style as the electronic communication is occurring, then the electronic communication is likely inappropriate and should cease.

Therefore, staff, college-aged leaders and adult leaders (as well as student leaders with middle school youth) should practice these safe guidelines:

- It is recognized that the Director of Youth Ministries will have regular communication via text for purposes of scheduling and other logistical matters involving youth programs and projects. Therefore, s/he will be provided a cell phone owned and paid for by the church. The DYM should use only that phone to communicate with youth and should not provide his/her personal cell number to children or youth. It must be recognized that the Senior Minister and other Church leaders including the Associate Minister or Moderator may ask for the church-owned phone and review its content without notice.
- All other staff and volunteers should use cell phone text communication with children or youth only as necessary for scheduling and other logistical purposes.
- A church Facebook page can be established for youth, specific mission groups, or other appropriate groups. If such a Facebook page is created, all participants in the group must be invited to join the Facebook page. Permission of the Senior Minister must be given before such a special Facebook page is established. In consultation with the Senior Minister, an “owner” of the Facebook page will be established. That person will be responsible for reviewing any content on the page and reporting any inappropriate communications. Church staff, and adult or youth leaders, should not use personal Facebook pages to communicate with children or youth.
- Although it is not practical to maintain a long-standing digital record of all online conversations, it is important that no communication that is designed to be immediately and automatically erased, such as Snapchat, should ever be used with youth or children because it may encourage inappropriate conversation or photos. Should youth or children attempt to communicate with volunteers in this manner, the communications should be discontinued and appropriate church staff including the DYM and Senior Minister should be informed promptly.

- Regardless of the communication method, contact with middle school youth after 9:00 p.m. is discouraged.
- Regardless of the communication method, contact with high school youth after 10:00 p.m. is discouraged.
- If contact is initiated by the youth after these times, the leader needs to assess the state of emergency. If it is a non-emergency, contact should cease until a more appropriate time. If it is an emergency, contact can continue, but the leader also must contact the parent, appropriate church staff and/or appropriate authority, immediately
- Do not forward inappropriate or questionable web or other social networking information, sites or content. If you have a question about whether it is appropriate, consider it inappropriate. Pictures, such as on Instagram, may be appropriate but only if they are of a nature that you would publically share
- Regardless of the method of communication, if there is a high frequency of communication initiated by a particular youth, alert DYF immediately.

Remember, electronic communication is only appropriate if it would be appropriate during a face-to-face encounter with a child or youth. Exclusive or private electronic communications with a child or youth should generally be regarded as inappropriate unless they are of a nature that is scheduling or logistical. Electronic communications—just like most in-person interactions—should be with the group or community, not on a one-on-one basis. In depth communications or counselling should be reserved for appropriate in-person meetings where others can observe the meeting, as described above, in a public place or in view through an open door or window.

VI. STAFF AND VOLUNTEER TRAINING

Research has indicated that one of the best protections an organization can have against child abuse is to set clear conduct standards for all staff and volunteers. Then these standards can be reinforced through an introductory training program and ongoing supervision. This type of training is regularly provided to all new and continuing ECP employees annually, and will now be required for *current and new Union Church employees*. This training will be provided within the first two weeks of their employment by the Executive Manager.

With respect to volunteers working with children and youth, the Minister of Christian Formation and Family Life or the Minister for Mission and Outreach with the Director of Youth Ministry or the Director of Christian Education will be responsible for developing and implementing this training. All volunteers are *strongly encouraged to attend this ongoing training, which will be offered on an annual basis before October 1 of each year.*

VII. ADDRESSING ALLEGATIONS OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Any staff, volunteer, parent or youth who suspects that a Union Church staff member or volunteer is involved in the abuse or neglect of a child should discuss their concerns with the professional staff or other clergy person as soon as possible and promptly file a report with the DCFS Hotline at 1-800-25-ABUSE. The hotline operates 24 hours per day, 365 days per year.

If a clergy person is alleged to be the perpetrator involved in the report, the reporter should also immediately inform the Senior Minister. If the Senior Minister is the subject of the allegation, the clergy member should immediately inform the Church Moderator.

- (a) All Union Church paid and lay leadership will cooperate fully in any investigation of such a complaint as required by state law and the denomination of the United Church of Christ. The employee or volunteer will be asked to take a leave of absence until The Union Church Response Team reviews the merits of the case and makes recommendations regarding the complaint. In the case of alleged abuse by an ordained person the leave of absence will be extended until the Illinois Conference Sexual Abuse Response Team has reviewed the case and made recommendations regarding the complaint. The status of that leave (paid or unpaid) will be determined on a case-by-case basis by the Human Resources Committee.
- (b) The Union Church Response Team will be composed of the chair of the Human Resources Committee, two additional members of the congregation familiar with the policies relating to child maltreatment, the Senior Minister and the Church Moderator.
- (c) If the allegation is determined to reflect questionable but not abusive behavior, the supervisor will establish a performance plan designed to eliminate these behaviors and promote more positive and appropriate interactions between the employee and the Congregation's children and youth. The Human Resources Committee will review this plan and monitor its implementation through the existing performance review procedures outlined in the Personnel Policies.

VIII. EDUCATING THE CONGREGATION

Clarifying our policies with respect to the hiring and training of program personnel and responding to charges of abuse are important components of insuring that Union Church provides a safe and secure environment for all children. Equally important, however, is educating ourselves on how to be better caretakers and role models for children and youth. To that end, it is important that we, as a Congregation, make a concerted effort to provide learning opportunities for both our adult and youth members. Specifically, relevant Ministries and committees can promote the safe church concept by:

- providing opportunities to talk about the issue of child abuse with our youngest members within the context of their educational and fellowship programs;
- providing opportunities to educate parents on the topic through our Sunday School programs;
- educating all existing and new members of the Congregation about how they can play a role in preventing child abuse and supporting the healthy development of our children and youth;
- training volunteers regarding updated Guidelines for Interacting with Youth.

Job titles revised in keeping with constitutional revisions effective January 25, 2009