

Report of the Safe Sanctuaries Task Force

Bishop Mueller appointed a Task Force to comprehensively review and make recommendations to the 2022 Arkansas Annual Conference on all issues related to the important goal of providing for the safety of children, youth and vulnerable adults entrusted to our care. This area of concern has been historically referred to in the Arkansas Conference as our “Safe Sanctuaries” practices. The Task Force members are: Rev. Jimmy Mosby-Chairman, Rev. Ann Ferris, Michelle Moore, Holly Cothren, Scott Russell, Kim Anderson, Melinda Shunk, Rev. Natasha Murray, Kathy Conley, Rev. Bryan Diffie, Lauren Geier and Robert McCallum.

The Task Force held its organizational meeting on February 17, 2022. Thereafter, the Task Force generally met weekly by zoom on Tuesday evenings at 6:00 p.m. together with additional specially scheduled zoom meetings on certain topics. Chairman Mosby appointed subcommittees and made individual work assignments to accomplish the following tasks:

1. Research website information and documentation from United Methodist Conferences in the states surrounding Arkansas regarding their safe sanctuary practices, procedures and policies.
2. Communicate by telephone, email and zoom meetings with the responsible staff members from surrounding United Methodist Conferences regarding their practices, procedures and policies. We found these staff members to be very accommodating and we gained valuable insights from their experiences including very practical information on the day-to-day operation of their programs. Our thanks go to staff from the Great Plains, Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, North Texas, Rio Texas, and Oklahoma United Methodist Conferences that met with our Task Force members.
3. Research the feasibility of contracting with companies that assist church organizations with certain safety services such as conducting background checks, on-line training for clergy and volunteers, and providing the computer programming expertise for the general organization and record-keeping services needed to create and maintain a comprehensive safety program. Our research showed that most of the neighboring United Methodist conferences contract with companies to provide these services. These companies were initially investigated by internet research followed by email and telephone communications. After studying this information, the Task Force narrowed the choice to two companies which were asked to submit detailed information about their safety programs. The Task Force then interviewed the CEO and selected company staff in zoom meetings. Based upon the totality of this research, the Task Force recommends a company called Safe Gatherings located in the Kansas City area.
4. Research the impact of any Task Force recommendations on small and medium size churches within the Arkansas Conference.

5. Research State and Federal laws and regulations that would impact a Safe Gatherings program, including the government agencies involved with obtaining valid background checks in Arkansas. The Task Force determined that the best practice is to use one method for obtaining background checks for the Conference and the local congregations.
6. Maintain communications with the Conference Chancellor, Michelle Ator, for legal advice and to review proposed documentation.
7. Maintain communications with the Arkansas Conference insurance carrier, Church Mutual Insurance Company, regarding the risk management impact of any Task Force recommendations.
8. Research the budgetary impact of any Task Force proposals on the Arkansas Conference and the anticipated impact on local church budgets. The Task Force is proposing an initial Conference budget commitment of \$30,000.

Based on this research and analysis, and with much discussion and prayer, the Task Force is recommending a broad and comprehensive approach to the important work of striving to ensure the safety of the children, youth and vulnerable adults entrusted to our care. In many ways, all the other important gospel work being accomplished by our Conference and local congregations is dependent on first providing safety to the most vulnerable among us. They are entrusted to us and once that "trust" is broken it is rarely repaired. The Task Force has prepared the proposed ARKANSAS CONFERENCE SAFE GATHERINGS POLICY which is attached as an Addendum to this report which would provide the basis for creating and maintaining a Conference-wide Safe Gatherings system.

This policy is based upon the following general considerations that form the basis of the proposed policy:

1. The Conference needs an enforceable policy governing the requirements for children, youth and vulnerable adults attending Conference and District events.
2. The Conference needs a comprehensive and uniform program for conducting background checks, clergy and volunteer training and maintaining computer records.
3. The Safe Gatherings company would be instrumental in providing the uniformity and expertise necessary to achieve the Conference safety goals.
4. The Conference should provide financial and management assistance to small and medium size congregations so that they can fully participate in a safety program.
5. The Conference policy should provide basic standards for a safety policy strongly recommended to all Arkansas congregations. Local congregations should be able to add any additional requirements and protocols they deem necessary.

6. The Conference should create a permanent committee to maintain oversight and review of the Safe Gatherings policy.

The Task Force hereby moves for the adoption of the ARKANSAS CONFERENCE SAFE GATHERINGS POLICY by the Arkansas Conference.

The Task Force further moves that the Cabinet create a permanent committee consisting of the following members:

- (a) Conference Safe Gatherings Coordinator
- (b) Conference Children's Coordinator
- (c) Conference Youth and Young Adult Coordinator
- (d) Conference Council on Youth Ministries Coordinator
- (e) Cabinet representative
- (e) Board of Ordained Ministry representative
- (g) Board of Laity representative
- (h) Two at-large Laity
- (i) Two at-large Clergy.

The initial purpose of the Safe Gatherings Committee is to implement the newly adopted ARKANSAS CONFERENCE SAFE GATHERINGS POLICY. Thereafter, the Committee will maintain oversight and review of all programs related to the policy; monitor the effect of the policy on Conference operations and local congregations; monitor and recommend budget requests for the program; and review the performance of the Safe Gatherings company. The Committee will report to the Bishop and the Cabinet on an annual basis or more frequently if requested by the Bishop.

Respectfully submitted,

Jimmy Mosby, Chairman