

# ARKANSAS CONFERENCE SAFE GATHERINGS POLICY

(for Children, Youth and Vulnerable Adults)

## Introduction to Annual Conference Policy

OUR CALLING AS GOD'S PEOPLE IS TO PROMOTE A SAFE HAVEN FOR ALL OF GOD'S PEOPLE.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus provides teachings on providing a peaceable kingdom for all of God's people, including our most precious gifts, our children and youth. (Matthew 5:9, Luke 18:15-17) The peaceable kingdom begins with sanctuary. Scriptures provide examples of how sanctuary is to be a community of protective nurture and harmony. (Psalms 20:1-2, 27:4-5)

As Christians, we are called to create a protective environment in our churches. We will strive to make them holy, safe and protective communities for all of God's children, regardless of age or ability. The purpose of this policy is to address the communal responsibility for our children, youth, and vulnerable persons at all local churches, and at all District or Annual Conference sponsored events. The goal of this policy is (1) to take reasonable steps to prevent the opportunity for the occurrence of abuse of children, youth, and vulnerable persons at district and conference events, (2) to provide safeguards for workers from false accusations and/or suspicions and (3) to support all those who minister in the name of Jesus Christ. These policies and procedures are not based on a lack of trust in workers, but are intended to support and protect our preschoolers, children, youth, vulnerable persons, workers, employees, volunteers and the entire church body.

## Scope of Annual Conference Policy

This policy and its provisions shall apply to persons, including all paid and unpaid persons, whether lay or clergy, who have direct contact with children, youth, and vulnerable adults ("Protected Persons") participating in any activities or events sponsored by the Arkansas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church and/or its Districts, including those who accompany children, youth or vulnerable adults at events. (In the case of adult attendees from another conference, proof of certification by a comparable process to Safe Gatherings can be accepted.) This Annual Conference policy is effective as of October 1, 2022. Local congregations who sponsor the attendance of Protected Persons at District and Conference events are required to provide copies of their church's similar policy to the Safe Gatherings Coordinator before Protected Persons from the local church may attend District and Conference events.

## Safe Gatherings Certification

Any adult who is subject to this policy must do the following:

- Individuals must be regular attendees of a local congregation or a member of the Arkansas Annual Conference for a minimum of one year before serving directly with children, youth and

vulnerable persons

- Submit a background check. The Arkansas Conference has contracted with Safe Gatherings, Inc. to conduct these background checks. Safe Gatherings will conduct the following background checks:
  - National Sex Offenders
  - County Court Records
  - Criminal Background Check
  - Child Maltreatment
  - Adult Maltreatment
  - Motor Vehicle Check
  - Fair Credit Report (Board of Ordained Ministry only)
- Complete the online training provided by Safe Gatherings
- Agree to abide by the requirements of this policy
- Certification must be renewed every three years. The Conference reserves the right to re-run the background checks any time during the three year certification time frame.

## Screening Process

Persons having a criminal history of any of the following types of offenses shall not be allowed to serve in any ministry involving direct contact with children, youth or vulnerable adults:

- Child maltreatment, whether physical, emotional, sexual, or neglectful
- Violent offenses, including murder, rape, assault, domestic violence, and similar offenses ● Drug related conviction (misdemeanor or felony) within the five (5) years immediately prior to application
- Persons having a criminal history of DUI or DWI conviction within the five (5) years immediately prior to application shall not be allowed to act as a driver
- If there are questions regarding an individual's background check or screening, due to special circumstances (including but not limited to: acquittals, discharges, exonerations, pardons, etc.), please notify the District Superintendent or the Conference Safe Gatherings Coordinator for additional information and resources. In the event that a background check reveals activity that calls into question the eligibility of an applicant, the Safe Gatherings Conference Coordinator will be notified. The Safe Gatherings Conference Coordinator will review the reports and will notify the appropriate District Superintendent, local pastor, and Chairperson of the local church's Board of Trustees of the concern raised. The decision on how to proceed with a volunteer's certification shall remain the responsibility of the local Board of Trustees.
- If there are questions regarding a clergy person's background check or screening, the Executive Committee of the Board of Ordained Ministry will investigate any red flags concerning any clergy, lay supply, CLM and lay servant covered by Safe Gatherings Certification and report with a recommendation to the Bishop and Cabinet.

### **Supervision for Nursery/Childcare at Conference and District events:**

- There shall be a minimum of two (2) non-related adults per room and/or within line of sight.
- The State of Arkansas Childcare Minimum Standards [2020-CCC-Clean-Copy.pdf \(arkansas.gov\)](#) must be followed for all Arkansas State Licensed Daycares or schools.

### **Supervision of Children and Youth at Conference and District events:**

- Conference and District events shall observe the “2 Adult Rule” (2 non-related adults per classroom or 2 non-related adults within line of sight when in large spaces and for one-to-one mentoring or consulting. Understanding that there is safety in numbers, one adult may be in contact with multiple youth (6th -12th grades) so long as they are in line of sight of other adults.
- No adult subject to this policy will be alone in a vehicle with any Protected Person in connection with any Conference or District Event.
- Local congregations who participate in conference or district events must provide at least two non-related adults for every 10 students who attend the event.

### **Overnight Accommodations**

At events that involve overnight accommodations:

- Adults will not sleep, change clothes, or share a bathroom with children, youth, and vulnerable adults (“Protected Persons.”)
- Persons will be housed by the same gender.
- There shall never be fewer than three individuals of the same gender in the same room.
- Adults will enter the sleeping quarters or bathroom of Protected Persons only if there is another adult within line of sight.
- If the housing accommodations do not allow for separate sleeping quarters of adults, then adults must sleep in separate beds or areas from Protected Persons and may not be alone in the room with just one protected person.

### **Reporting of Incidents**

1. Anyone can report abuse, however, mandated reporters are required by law to immediately report suspected or observed abuse, neglect or exploitation of children, youth and endangered or impaired adults or who observes a child being subjected to conditions or circumstances that would reasonably result in child maltreatment. See, Ark. Code Ann. 12-18-402 et. seq.. This includes child care workers and clergy among others.

2. Address any needs the Protected Person may have, medical or otherwise. Report to the parent(s) and/or legal guardians(s) unless the suspected abuser is a parent or guardian.
3. When an adult who is subject to this policy has a reasonable suspicion that maltreatment is taking or has taken place, he or she shall immediately report the abuse to the Arkansas Child Abuse Hotline (800-482-5964). If there is immediate danger, call 911 as well. The reporter shall thereafter contact the administrator or event leader immediately, and cooperate fully with the investigation conducted by law enforcement officials or child protective services. No adult is required in any way to seek consultation or permission from anyone before making a report to the Child Abuse Hotline.
4. The person reasonably suspected of abuse shall, for the safety and well-being of the Protected Persons, be removed with dignity from further contact with the Protected Persons until an appropriate investigation has taken place. If the adult event leader is the suspected person, then the report should be made to that person's supervisor.
5. The events surrounding the suspicion should be documented, including the following:
  - a. The name of the person who reasonably suspects maltreatment is being or has taken place, including the date, time and place of the suspected event.
  - b. The alleged victim's name, age, and date of birth.
  - c. Document conversations with the victim, if any. Only law enforcement and Department of Human Services personnel are to interview the victim and accused to avoid interference with law enforcement investigations.
  - d. Name of the person suspected of maltreatment, the date, time and place of any conversation or any statement made by him or her, if applicable but do not attempt to interview the person.
  - e. Any action taken, i.e. removal of the suspected person from further contact with Protected Persons.
  - f. Date and time of call to the Arkansas Child Maltreatment Hotline, name of worker taking the report, the content of that conversation, and case number assigned.
  - g. Date and time of call to law enforcement and /or medical care providers, if applicable, and the name of officer/caregiver spoken to and content of that conversation.
  - h. Date and time of any other contacts made regarding the suspected incident.
6. Notify the Conference/District leadership if the event occurred in connection with a Conference or District event.
7. It shall be the goal to provide supportive care to both the victim and the accused and to restore such persons to wholeness whenever possible. Supportive care can include, for example, the

procedures of the criminal justice system, provisions of the *Book of Discipline*, appropriate counseling referrals, and continued pastoral visitation.

8. Information collected regarding background checks, and whether a person was accepted or rejected as a Safe Gatherings Certified person will be retained by Safe Gatherings.

## **Media Response**

The Conference office shall be informed of all known investigations or allegations of abuse that involve any church, District, Conference event or member. In order to avoid any interference with ongoing investigations or further hurting any potential victim, media inquiries, if any, should be directed to the Arkansas Annual Conference Center for Communications (501-324-8030) who will be available to assist. Do not give out any information. Simply state that all inquiries will be answered through the Center for Communications.

## **Implementation of this Policy**

The Arkansas Annual Conference has contracted with Safe Gatherings, Inc (<https://safegatherings.com>) to be responsible for all background checks, reference checks, trainings, and maintaining documentation for the Conference, as well as for local churches.

All clergy and lay persons working with Protected Persons at District or Conference events must be Conference Safe Gatherings Certified no later than October 31, 2022.

All appointed clergy persons in the Arkansas Conference must be Safe Gatherings Certified no later than December 31, 2022. It is the responsibility of the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry to maintain the Safe Gathering Dashboard for all appointed clergy and laity assigned to pastor churches. These background checks will be conducted every three years by the anniversary date of the last background check.

In order for children, youth and vulnerable adults to participate in District and Conference events, their local congregations are required to upload a copy of their local church's Safe Gatherings policy, which must be approved by the local church Board of Trustees, and must include, at a minimum, provisions comparable to those in this policy, to the Safe Gatherings dashboard provided no later than October 31, 2022 and annually thereafter.

The local congregation dashboard for Safe Gatherings should be established and active by January 1, 2023. All lay volunteers working with Protected Persons who have not been background checked through any local church source since January 1, 2020 should be Safe Gathering Certified after January 1, 2023. To provide support for local congregations, the expense of Safe Gathering background checks for lay volunteers will be borne by the Arkansas Annual Conference. Individuals who have completed a background check since January 1, 2020, will need to be re-checked using Safe Gatherings at the three year anniversary of their last background check. Note: Volunteers who have had background checks conducted for employment or other volunteer services will not be accepted. Safe Gatherings is responsible for church related background checks.

All lay paid employees of local churches who have not had a background check since January 1, 2020

should be Safe Gathering Certified no later than January 1, 2023. The expense of the Safe Gatherings background checks for paid employees of local congregations will be paid for by the local congregation. Individuals who have completed a background check since January 1, 2020, will need to be re-checked at the three anniversary of their last background check. Note: background checks conducted for employment or other volunteer services will not be accepted. Safe Gatherings is responsible for church related background checks.

Each local congregation is encouraged in the strongest terms to implement a Safe Gatherings policy. It is recommended that all policies include at least:

- Additional Safe Gatherings requirements as deemed appropriate by the local congregation
- Appropriate supervision of children, youth and adults
- Guidelines for reporting reasonably suspected maltreatment
- Media response plan
- Selection of a Safe Gatherings Coordinator. It is strongly recommended that this individual not be a pastor. The congregation should provide the Conference Safe Gatherings Coordinator and District Office the name and contact information of the local coordinator.
- Guidelines on youth volunteers within the local church setting
- Policy approval by the local church Board of Trustees with an annual review and renewal date

### **Oversight and Amendments to this Policy**

It shall be the responsibility of the Office of Connectional Ministries to have oversight of this policy on behalf of the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church. This includes but is not limited to the following:

- Appointing and training a Conference Safe Gatherings Coordinator
- Maintaining a task force composed of a laity and clergy to review the policy annually and make recommendations as to substantive changes to the Annual Conference. Editorial changes that do not change the intent of the policy may be made without the approval of the Annual Conference.
- Submit to the Conference Finance & Administration Committee a proposed budget for background checks each year

### **Digital Safe Gatherings**

Digital gatherings of Protected Persons shall follow the same guidelines and principles as in-person gatherings. This includes having two unrelated adults participate in the digital gathering. All digital meetings are to be recorded. Parent/guardian will be notified that meetings are recorded prior to the event. All records should be made and maintained for a minimum of three years.

Leaders should be dressed appropriately and set expectations for children and youth to also dress appropriately while attending virtual meetings.

Leaders should be cognizant of their surroundings when conducting online meetings to make sure there are no inappropriate backgrounds or items in the room from which they are streaming. Some

examples of inappropriate items might be alcohol, smoking materials, or adult themed materials.

Parents/Guardians will be notified of any inappropriate activity reasonably suspected to have occurred or if there are other concerns about online interactions.

### **Virtual Worship**

Leaders should not take photos or post images or videos of the online sessions without parental permission. Sample permission forms are available through the Arkansas Conference Office.

Leaders should consider the following recommendations regarding virtual services that include “children’s time” or performances by any Protected Person:

- Do not to identify any children by last name
- Inform parents/guardians that videos taken at worship services and Conference or District event performances that are part of a streamed service will be shared publicly

### **Digital Communication**

- Leaders should take care in all messaging, whether it is via group text or an online meeting. Inappropriate statements or any attempt to initiate inappropriate conduct of any sort will not be tolerated.
- Leaders should not use electronic communication to post or discuss sensitive topics, including those of a violent sexual nature.
- A ministry staff member or volunteer working with Protected Persons should not have one-on-one interaction with any Protected Person, including text messages, online chats, or via other technology means. Parents should be included in online correspondence and invitations to remote activities for children and youth.
- If an adult subject to this policy receives inappropriate communication from a Protected Person, they should tell the program leader immediately and save the correspondence. Depending on the nature of the communication, if maltreatment or an attempt to solicit is reasonably suspected, the adult should report the incident to the Arkansas Child Abuse Hotline
- In mentoring situations, where the conversations are appropriately one-on-one, this should be done in an open area or where there is a way to encourage transparency in the virtual environment, such as including another adult in the mentoring – even in digital communication – as one possible solution.
- Organization or event leaders should be encouraged to attend and drop in on in-person and virtual sessions taking place with Protected Persons.

## Definitions

### Abuse:

- **Physical Abuse** is any deliberate act that inflicts bodily harm to a person beyond transitory red marks.
- **Sexual Abuse** is any unwanted sexual contact with anyone or sexual contact of any sort with minor
- **Verbal Abuse** is when a person forcefully insults or denounces someone else characterized by underlying anger and hostility, which is intended to harm the other person.
- **Neglect** is failure to provide nutrition or medical, surgical, or any other care necessary for the well-being of the Protected Person.

**Children as used in this Policy** are persons 0-11 years of age.

**Safe Gatherings Certification** (see page 2 for complete definition)

**Conference Safe Gatherings Coordinator** is the appointed conference staff person that is trained in reviewing background check terminology and findings. This individual is responsible for reviewing any background checks that are flagged and is responsible for informing the District Superintendent, local church pastor, and Chair of Board of Trustees, of the background check findings.

**Local Church Certification Coordinator** is designated by the local church and assumes responsibility for ensuring the local church policy is followed and Safe Gatherings Certification is conducted.

**Mandated Reporter** is someone who is required by state law to report reasonably suspected maltreatment. This includes but is not limited to clergy, doctors, nurses, teachers, and daycare workers.

**Ministry Event** is defined as a local church, conference or district sponsored activity or occasion that involves a gathering and care of Protected Persons.

**Participants** are Protected Persons who are registered, enrolled, attending or otherwise participating in an event or activity sponsored by the annual conference or a district.

**Protected Person** – Children, Youth and any adult who is particularly vulnerable to abuse due to advanced age or mental or physical disability.

**Regular Attendee** – A person who has been attending worship at least once a month for a year.



**Staff** includes any clergyperson, any paid employee of the conference or a district, and any paid employee of any group, committee, team or agency of the conference or a district who has the care/supervision of a participant at an event. In the local congregation this includes anyone who is employed in any capacity.

**Supervision** is the ability of a person to supervise a group of Protected Persons, including giving direction, setting boundaries, correcting appropriately, maintaining a safe environment, and being the guiding adult in all situations. This includes the ability to take immediate and appropriate action when policies or procedures are reasonably suspected of being violated.

**Volunteer** is any unpaid non-clergy, lay worker who has any responsibility at any level for the care or supervision of a Participant at an event. This may also include paid staff members of a local church serving at a Conference or District event.

**Youth as used in this Policy** are 12-18 years of age.