

# 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 teaches the importance of creating a peaceable kingdom for all people, including our most precious gifts: children and youth (Matthew 5:9; Luke 18:15–17). The peaceable kingdom begins with sanctuary. Scripture also provides examples of sanctuary as a place of protective nurture, refuge, and harmony (Psalm 20:1–2; Psalm 27:4–5).

As Christians, we are called to create protective environments within our churches. We strive to make our congregations holy, safe, and nurturing communities for all God’s children, regardless of age or ability.

The purpose of this policy is to address our shared responsibility for protecting children, youth, and vulnerable persons in local churches and at all District and Annual Conference-sponsored events.

The goals of this policy are:

1. To take reasonable steps to prevent opportunities for the abuse of children, youth, and vulnerable persons at District and Conference events;
2. To provide safeguards for workers against false accusations or suspicions; and
3. To support all who minister in the name of Jesus Christ.

These policies and procedures are not based on a lack of trust in workers. Rather, they are intended to support and protect preschoolers, children, youth, vulnerable persons, employees, volunteers, and the entire church body.

## Scope of Annual Conference Policy

This policy applies to all persons, whether paid or unpaid, lay or clergy, who have direct contact with children, youth, or vulnerable adults (“Protected Persons”) participating in activities or events sponsored by the Arkansas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church or its Districts. This policy also applies to adults who accompany children, youth, or vulnerable adults to Conference or District events.

In the case of adult participants from another conference, proof of certification through a process comparable to Safe Gatherings may be accepted.

Local congregations sponsoring the participation of Protected Persons at District or Conference events must maintain and provide a Safe Gatherings policy that includes provisions substantially comparable to those contained in this policy. A copy of the local church policy shall be provided to the Safe Gatherings Coordinator prior to participation in District or Conference events.

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## Safe Gatherings Certification

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

- Be a regular attendee 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 to 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.
- Renew certification every three years. The Conference reserves the right to re-run background checks at any time during the three-year certification period.

## Screening Process

Persons having a criminal history of any of the following 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 convictions (misdemeanor or felony) within the five (5) years immediately preceding application
- DUI or DWI convictions within the five (5) years immediately preceding application; individuals with such convictions shall not be permitted to act as drivers

If there are questions regarding an individual's background check or screening due to special circumstances, including but not limited to acquittals, discharges, exonerations, or pardons, notify the District Superintendent or the Conference Safe Gatherings Coordinator for additional information and guidance.

If a background check reveals activity that calls into question an applicant's eligibility, the Safe Gatherings Conference Coordinator will review the report and notify the appropriate District Superintendent, local pastor, and Chairperson of the local church Board of Trustees. The decision

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regarding 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 concerns involving clergy, lay supply, CLMs, and lay servants covered by Safe Gatherings Certification and will report its recommendation to the Bishop and Cabinet.

## Supervision for Nursery and 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.
- All Arkansas state-licensed daycares and schools must follow the [State of Arkansas Child Care Minimum Standards \(2020\)](#).

## Supervision of Children and Youth at Conference and District Events

- Conference and District events shall observe the "Two-Adult Rule," meaning there must be two (2) unrelated adults per classroom or two (2) unrelated adults within line of sight in large spaces and during one-to-one mentoring or consulting situations.
- Recognizing that there is safety in numbers, one adult may be in contact with multiple youth (grades 6–12), provided they remain within line of sight of other adults.
- No adult subject to this policy shall be alone in a vehicle with any Protected Person in connection with a Conference or District event.
- Local congregations participating in Conference or District events must provide at least two (2) unrelated adults for every ten (10) youth attending 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.")
- Individuals 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 permit separate sleeping quarters for adults, then adults must sleep in separate beds or areas from Protected Persons and may not be alone in a room with just one Protected Person.

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## Reporting of Incidents

1. Anyone may report abuse. However, mandated reporters are required by law to immediately report suspected or observed abuse, neglect, or exploitation of children, youth, endangered adults, or impaired adults, as well as situations in which a child is subjected to conditions or circumstances that could reasonably result in maltreatment. See Ark. Code Ann. § 12-18-402 et seq. Mandated reporters include, but are not limited to, child care workers and clergy.
2. Address any immediate needs of the Protected Person, medical or otherwise. Notify the parent(s) and/or legal guardian(s), unless the suspected abuser is a parent or guardian.
3. When an adult subject to this policy reasonably suspects that maltreatment has occurred or is occurring, that individual shall immediately report the matter to the Arkansas Child Abuse Hotline (800-482-5964). If there is immediate danger, call 911.

The reporter shall immediately notify the administrator or event leader and cooperate fully with any investigation conducted by law enforcement officials or child protective services. No adult is required to seek consultation or permission before making a report to the Child Abuse Hotline.

4. Any person reasonably suspected of abuse shall, for the safety and well-being of Protected Persons, be removed with dignity from further contact with Protected Persons until an appropriate investigation has been completed.

If the adult event leader is the person suspected of abuse, the report shall be made to that person's supervisor.

5. The circumstances surrounding the suspicion shall be documented, including the following:
  - a. The name of the person reporting the suspected maltreatment, including the date, time, and location of the suspected incident.
  - b. The alleged victim's name, age, and date of birth.
  - c. Documentation of conversations with the victim, if any. Only law enforcement personnel and Department of Human Services personnel should interview the victim or accused person in order to avoid interference with the investigation.
  - d. The name of the person suspected of maltreatment, including the date, time, and location of any statements or conversations involving that person, if applicable. Do not attempt to interview the suspected person.
  - e. Any action taken, including removal of the suspected person from contact with Protected Persons.
  - f. The date and time of the call to the Arkansas Child Maltreatment Hotline, the name of the individual receiving the report, the content of the conversation, and the assigned case number.
  - g. The date and time of any contact with law enforcement and/or medical care providers, including the name of the officer or caregiver contacted and the substance of the conversation.

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- h. The date and time of any other contacts made regarding the suspected incident.
6. Notify Conference or District leadership if the incident occurred in connection with a Conference or District event.
7. It shall be the goal of the Conference and its ministries to provide supportive care to both the victim and the accused and, whenever possible, to restore such persons to wholeness. Supportive care may include:
  - assistance through the criminal justice process,
  - provisions under the Book of Discipline,
  - counseling referrals,
  - and continued pastoral care and visitation.
8. Information collected regarding background checks, including whether a person was accepted or rejected for Safe Gatherings Certification, shall be retained by Safe Gatherings.

## Media Response

The Conference office shall be informed of all known investigations or allegations of abuse involving any church, District, Conference event, or member.

To avoid interference with ongoing investigations and to protect potential victims, all media inquiries shall be directed to the Arkansas Annual Conference Center for Communications at (501) 324-8030.

No information regarding the matter shall be released by any other individual. All inquiries should be referred to the Center for Communications.

## Implementation of this Policy

The Arkansas Annual Conference has contracted with Safe Gatherings, Inc. ([safegatherings.com](https://safegatherings.com)) to conduct background checks, reference checks, training, and documentation management for the Conference and local churches.

All clergy and lay persons working with Protected Persons at District or Conference events must maintain current Safe Gatherings Certification.

The Conference Board of Ordained Ministry shall maintain the Safe Gatherings Dashboard for all appointed clergy and laity assigned to pastor churches.

Safe Gatherings Certification, including background checks and required training, must be renewed every three years. The Conference reserves the right to conduct additional background checks when deemed necessary.

Local congregations participating in District or Conference events must maintain and upload a current Safe Gatherings policy to the Safe Gatherings Dashboard. The policy must:

- be approved by the local church Board of Trustees, and
- include provisions substantially comparable to those contained in this policy.

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Local congregations are responsible for maintaining an active Safe Gatherings Dashboard and ensuring that all clergy, staff, and volunteers working with Protected Persons maintain current certification requirements.

The Arkansas Annual Conference shall bear the cost of Safe Gatherings background checks for lay volunteers serving in local congregations.

The cost of Safe Gatherings background checks for paid employees of local congregations shall be the responsibility of the local congregation.

Background checks conducted for employment or non-church volunteer service shall not satisfy Safe Gatherings Certification requirements.

## Minimum Standards for Local Church Policies

Each local congregation is strongly encouraged to implement a Safe Gatherings policy.

At a minimum, local church policies should include:

- Additional Safe Gatherings requirements as deemed appropriate by the local congregation
- Appropriate supervision standards for children, youth, and adults
- Procedures for reporting 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 with the name and contact information of the local coordinator.
- Guidelines regarding youth volunteers within the local church setting
- Policy approval by the local church Board of Trustees, including an annual review and renewal date

## Oversight and Amendments to this Policy

The Office of Connectional Ministries shall have oversight responsibility for this policy on behalf of the Arkansas Conference of The United Methodist Church.

Responsibilities include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Appointing and training a Conference Safe Gatherings Coordinator
- Maintaining a task force composed of clergy and laity to review the policy annually and recommend substantive changes to the Annual Conference
- Making editorial changes that do not alter the intent of the policy without requiring approval of the Annual Conference
- Submitting an annual proposed budget for background checks to the Conference Finance and Administration Committee

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## Digital Safety Policies

### Digital Safe Gatherings

Digital gatherings involving Protected Persons shall follow the same guidelines and principles as in-person gatherings.

Requirements for digital gatherings include the following:

- Two unrelated adults shall participate in all digital gatherings involving Protected Persons.
- All digital meetings shall be recorded.
- Parents or guardians shall be notified in advance that meetings will be recorded.
- Digital meeting records shall be maintained for a minimum of three years.
- Leaders shall dress appropriately and establish expectations for children and youth to dress appropriately while participating in virtual meetings.
- Leaders shall remain aware of their surroundings during online meetings and ensure that no inappropriate backgrounds or materials are visible in the streaming environment.
- Examples of inappropriate items may include alcohol, smoking materials, or adult-themed materials.
- Parents or guardians shall be notified of any reasonably suspected inappropriate activity or other concerns related to online interactions.

### Virtual Worship and Online Media

Leaders shall not take photographs or post images or videos of online sessions involving Protected Persons without parental or guardian permission. Sample permission forms are available through the Arkansas Conference Office.

Leaders should observe the following recommendations regarding virtual worship services that include children's messages, performances, or participation by Protected Persons:

- Do not identify children by last name.
- Inform parents or guardians that videos recorded during worship services or Conference or District events that are livestreamed or shared online may be publicly accessible.

### Digital Communication

Leaders shall exercise appropriate care in all electronic communications, including group texts, emails, social media interactions, and online meetings. Inappropriate statements or attempts to initiate inappropriate conduct of any kind shall not be tolerated.

- Leaders shall not use electronic communication to post or discuss inappropriate or sensitive content, including content of a violent or sexual nature.
- Ministry staff members and volunteers working with Protected Persons shall not engage in

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private one-on-one electronic communication with a Protected Person, including text messages, online chats, or other digital communication methods.

- Parents or guardians should be included in electronic correspondence and invitations to remote activities involving children and youth.
- If an adult subject to this policy receives inappropriate communication from a Protected Person, the adult shall immediately notify the program leader and preserve the communication.
- If maltreatment, exploitation, or solicitation is reasonably suspected, the incident shall be reported to the Arkansas Child Abuse Hotline.
- In mentoring situations where one-on-one communication is appropriate, transparency should be maintained by meeting in an open setting or including another adult in the communication whenever possible.
- Organization and event leaders are encouraged to monitor and periodically participate in both in-person and virtual activities involving Protected Persons.

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## Definitions

### Abuse

Abuse includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- **Physical Abuse:** Any deliberate act that inflicts bodily harm beyond temporary or minor red marks.
- **Sexual Abuse:** Any unwanted sexual contact with another person or any sexual contact involving a minor.
- **Verbal Abuse:** The use of insulting, threatening, or hostile language intended to harm another person emotionally or psychologically.
- **Neglect:** Failure to provide necessary nutrition, medical care, supervision, or other care essential to the well-being of a Protected Person.

### Children

Persons from birth through eleven (11) years of age.

### Safe Gatherings Certification

The certification process required under this policy, including background checks, training, and compliance requirements. See page 2 for additional information.

### Conference Safe Gatherings Coordinator

The Conference staff member responsible for reviewing flagged background checks and communicating findings to the appropriate District Superintendent, local church pastor, and Chair of the Board of Trustees.

### Local Church Certification Coordinator

The individual designated by the local church to oversee implementation of the local church Safe Gatherings policy and ensure Safe Gatherings Certification compliance.

### Mandated Reporter

An individual required by state law to report reasonably suspected maltreatment. Mandated reporters include, but are not limited to, clergy, physicians, nurses, teachers, and daycare workers.

### Ministry Event

Any local church, District, or Conference-sponsored activity or gathering involving the care or supervision of Protected Persons.

### Participant

Any Protected Person who is registered for, attending, enrolled in, or otherwise participating in a ministry event or activity sponsored by the Conference, a District, or a local church.

### Protected Person

Children, youth, and adults who may be particularly vulnerable to abuse due to age, mental capacity, physical condition, or disability.

### Regular Attendee

An individual who has attended worship services at least once per month for a minimum of one year.

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## **Staff**

Any clergy person, paid employee of the Conference, District, local church, or affiliated ministry organization who has responsibility for the care or supervision of Participants.

## **Supervision**

The responsibility to guide, direct, monitor, and maintain a safe environment for Protected Persons, including taking immediate and appropriate action when policies or procedures are reasonably suspected of being violated.

## **Volunteer**

Any unpaid layperson who has responsibility for the care or supervision of Participants at a ministry event. This may include paid local church employees serving in a volunteer role at Conference or District events.

## **Youth**

Persons twelve (12) through eighteen (18) years of age.