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**Child, Youth and Vulnerable Adult Safety Policy**

**Covenant United Methodist Church**

**Approved 10/14/2018**

Reducing the Risk of Abuse in the Church

*“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Mark 9:37 NRSV).*

*“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 NRSV).

**Call**

In response to God’s call to care for the vulnerable, Covenant United Methodist Church (Covenant UMC) is committed to the well-being of every person entrusted to its care. This commitment is in harmony with the Book of Resolutions (¶162 Social Principles) and the baptismal covenant (United Methodist Hymnal).

**Purpose**

As part of the Rio Texas Conference, Covenant UMC is determined to provide an environment in which Participants (as defined herein) are safe from Neglect or Abuse. The scope of this policy and its provisions shall apply to all staff, volunteers, clergy, or lay persons at Covenant UMC who have direct or indirect contact with Participants (Children, Youth, or Vulnerable Adults). This policy sets forth minimum mandatory requirements for screening and training of clergy, lay, staff, or volunteers. Implementation of mandatory ministry procedures and accountability action is required for all ministry leaders within Covenant UMC and the Rio Texas Conference.

**Commitment**

In accordance with the Rio Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church Policy on Child, Youth, and Adult Safety, June 2017, Covenant UMC has adopted the following set of Safety Procedures to be implemented no later than the close of Annual Conference 2018. Copies of both documents can be obtained through the church office.

This safety policy meets or exceeds the requirements of the Rio Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church Policy on Child, Youth, and Vulnerable Adult Safety, June 2017 and has been reviewed and approved by the Church Council and additionally the Trustees of each church. Any future revisions shall as a minimum meet or exceed the requirements of the Rio Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church Policy on Child, Youth, and Vulnerable Adult Safety, June 2017, and be reviewed and approved by the Church Council and Trustees Committee before implementation.

Covenant UMC is fortunate to have persons with exceptional talent for teaching and supporting the spiritual nurture of our children and youth. We wish to encourage them to use their spiritual gifts. These safety procedures are for the well-being of our children, youth, and vulnerable adults participating in the ministries of Covenant UMC. We recognize that safety is an issue that involves the whole church family, not just those who work directly in ministry with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. Therefore, we are asking all of our church family to be informed and help us provide a safe environment for ministry.

**Definitions**

A. **Abuse**: is any deliberate act that inflicts bodily or emotional harm to a Participant. Abuse includes: (a) the infliction of physical or emotional injury by other than accidental means; (b) the creation of a risk, or allowing the creation of risk, to a Participant by other than accidental means; (c) committing or allowing to be committed an act of Sexual Abuse, Sexual Exploitation, or prostitution upon the Participant.

B. **Adult Leader**: is any person including any paid employee, volunteer, clergy, or lay person in the conference, district, or local church who has the responsibility for the care and Supervision of a Participant at an event. Adult Leaders shall no longer be in High School.

C. **Applicant**: is any person 18 years of age or older seeking to become an Adult Leader in a local church or for a district or conference event.

D. **Assistant Leader**: is any person 16 years of age or older who has been through the application and safety certification process, but does not qualify for a background check. These are still considered to be Participants and cannot fill the role of a mandatory Adult Leader.

E. **Day Ministry Event**: is an activity, or occasion sponsored by Covenant UMC that involves a gathering and care of Participants during the hours of 7:00am-10:00pm, and does not occur for more than four hours per day in duration of four or more consecutive days.

F. **Exploitation**: is obtaining or using another person's income, assets, or possessions with the intent to deprive the person of those resources.

G. **Helper:** is any person who is at least 5 years older than the oldest participant, but does not qualify for a background check, and has not been through the application process. These are still considered participants and do not fill the role of a mandatory Adult Leader.

H. **Neglect**: is failure to provide nutrition, medical, surgical, or any other care necessary for the well-being of the Participants.

I. **Overnight/Extended Hour Ministry Event**: a local church, conference, or district sponsored activity, or occasion that involves a gathering and care of Participants for more than four hours per day in duration of four consecutive days or involves an overnight stay.

J. **Participant**: is a Child, Youth, or Vulnerable Adult that is registered, enrolled, attending, or otherwise participating in an event or activity sponsored by Covenant UMC.

1. **Child**: is any person 11 years of age or younger.

2. **Youth**: is a person 12-17 years of age.

3. **Vulnerable Adult**: persons over 18 years of age with physical, mental, and/or developmental disabilities.

K. **Prostitution**: to engage in, to offer to engage, or to force a Participant to engage in sexual contact by either soliciting or receiving a fee or other benefit.

L. **Rule of Three**: The presence of two unrelated Adult Leaders at all ministry events involving Participants. Any engagement with a Participant requires the presence of two Adult Leaders.

M. **Safety Policy Administrator**: The person at Covenant UMC charged with the maintenance, implementation, and enforcement of the Covenant UMC Safety Policy. The Safety Policy Administrator may put together a team to help with this task, but he/she retains overall responsibility. The Safety Policy Administrator reports directly to the senior pastor.

N. **Sexual Abuse**: is any sexual contact, sexually explicit language, gestures, or images directed to a Participant.

O. **Sexual Exploitation**: is any deliberate act that allows or encourages a Participant to engage in an act of obscene or pornographic photography, filming, or depiction of a Participant as prohibited under Texas law.

P. **Supervision**: is the leadership role of a person who is in charge of a group of Participants, giving direction, setting boundaries, disciplining appropriately, maintaining safety and being the leader in all situations.

**SAFE MINISTRY MANDATES**

In accordance with the Rio Texas Conference Safety policy, Covenant UMC commits to provide adequate Supervision from Adult Leaders.

A. All ministry events with Participants shall follow the Rule of Three with a minimum of one Adult Leader for every eight Participants.

B. Any one-to-one mentoring or consulting shall be conducted in sight of another Adult Leader.

C. Adult Leaders, Assistant Leaders, and Helpers working with children and youth must be at least five years older than the oldest Participants with whom they work.

D. Assistant Leaders must work under the Supervision of two Adult Leaders.

E. Overnight Ministry Events

1. Co-ed Overnight Ministry Events require co-ed Adult Leaders.

2. Sleeping accommodations shall include sleeping distance of no less than three feet between Adult Leaders, Assistant Leaders, and Participants.

3. Every Participant shall have a completed medical release and parental/legal guardian permission form before they will be permitted to participate at any Overnight Ministry Event.

F. Travel

1. Only Adult Leaders will be permitted to drive Participants to ministry events. Drivers must be:

a. 21 years or older

b. have a valid driver’s license

c. proof of insurance at the state’s minimum limits

d. not be otherwise disqualified from driving (i.e., under medication, impaired, etc.).

2. Written permission from a parent/legal guardian is required for events requiring transportation to and from the event location.

G. Phone, video, and online communication:

1. Adult Leaders must notify parents/legal guardians before requesting access, friending, texting, contacting a Participant via social media, or using any other form of online phone/video communication.

2. Using the Rule of Three, all group or social media communications must include two Adult Leaders who serve as administrators/moderators. All groups must be closed, private, and shall require the site administrator’s approval to join.

H. Adult Leaders shall not photograph Participants for use on internet or in print media without written permission of parent/legal guardian. A Social Media best practice resource will be provided by the Mission Vitality Center.

**IMPLEMENTATION: SCREENING, TRAINING, AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

A. **SCREENING**

1. Adult Leaders and Assistant Leaders shall submit an application for ministry along with three (work, volunteer, or ministry) references.

2. Applicants should be active in the local church/ministry for a minimum of six months prior to the event or provide additional references affirming their positive leadership with Participants in another ministry setting. In the case of new staff hires, references deemed adequate by the hiring supervisor will replace the six month waiting period. In the case of Adult Ministry Leaders or Assistant Leaders, previous ministry experience within the Rio Texas Conference may be transferred in lieu of the six-month waiting period pending approval of Rio Texas Conference office.

3. References shall be checked by conference, district, or local church staff responsible for Applicants.

4. Adult Leaders shall:

a. Submit a signed authorization form for a criminal background screening to be completed by the Rio Texas Conference office every two years. This will include a signed statement that they are not aware of any allegations that would prevent them from working with Participants.

b. If results of the screening raise questions about fitness of the Applicant, the Rio Texas Conference office shall disapprove the application and notify the event leader and/or local church. Results of criminal background screenings shall be kept confidential. Applicants can request that the conference office share the results of their criminal background screening with another district or local church in the Rio Texas Conference via a signed request authorization form.

B. **TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION**

All Adult Leaders and Assistant Leaders must be certified for their work at conference, district, and local church events. Certification includes:

1. Evaluation of and submission of the local church policy every year.

2. Completion of Abuse prevention training every year.

3. Safety Certification every two years. Certification will include the following modules:

a. Overview of Rio Texas Conference policy.

b. Abuse prevention.

c. Creating safe spaces, best practices for ministry, sexual ethics and appropriate leader behavior.

d. Overnight/extended hour ministry training.

e. The certification process will be designed by the Rio Texas Conference and will be offered by trained persons in every district.

4. Designation of Safety Policy Administrator

a. The Safety Policy Administrator is responsible for maintaining an up-to date list of qualified Adult Leaders showing the latest date of their qualification or recertification.

b. The Safety Policy Administrator shall ensure that each Adult Leader reviews the provisions of this Safety Policy at least annually.

c. The Safety Policy Administrator shall participate in the reporting of all allegations of abuse

C. **ACCOUNTABILITY**

1. Every ministry of the Rio Texas Annual Conference, district, and local church shall have a policy that is compliant with the minimum standards of this Rio Texas Policy and must review their policy annually.

2. The Mission Vitality Center at the Rio Texas Conference office will work alongside district staff to ensure that policies are adopted and followed.

3. The Rio Texas Conference Uniting Table in consultation with the Conference Mission Vitality Center shall be responsible for reviewing and revising the Rio Texas Child, Youth and Vulnerable Adult Safety Policy.

4. Local churches shall submit their policy and a report on how they are in compliance with their policy annually to the District Superintendent at their charge or church conference.

5. Clergy shall document the date and facilitator when they complete safety certification to their District Superintendent annually via the annual inventory/clergy consultation form.

6. District staff will annually submit a report to the Mission Vitality Center and Office of Intergenerational Discipleship, identifying churches who are in compliance with this policy and/or those still in need of a policy or training.

7. The Mission Vitality Center will work with districts and local churches to keep track of and ensure all conference, district, and local church ministries are in compliance with this policy.

8. A copy of the conference procedures shall be retained in the Rio Texas Conference office.

**REPORTING ABUSE**

A. Covenant UMC procedures for reporting Abuse are as follows:

B. All reports of alleged Abuse should be documented in writing and brought immediately to the attention of the Senior Pastor and the Head of Trustees. Texas is a mandatory reporting state. Reports of Abuse, Neglect, Exploitation or Sexual Exploitation of Participants shall be made within 48 hours of suspicion to the Department of Family and Protective services through the Texas Abuse Hotline: 1-800- 252-5400 or www.txabusehotline.org. Adult Leaders shall report all abuse by anyone- No Abuse should be considered trivial and not reported.

C. Any Adult Leader or Assistant Leader accused of Abuse shall be immediately relieved of duties related to any conference, district, or local church event.

D. In the case of Abuse allegations, the senior pastor, District Superintendent, and/or Bishop shall be notified immediately. Parents or legal guardians should be notified in appropriate circumstances.

E. It shall be the goal to provide supportive care to both the victim and the accused and to restore such persons to wholeness. Covenant UMC shall provide a supportive atmosphere to all those who are affected, offering both objectivity and empathy as it seeks to create a climate in which healing can take place.

F. Statement to the Media: Local church staff shall alert the Rio Texas Conference Director of Communications and Media Support when a statement is requested or made to media. The Conference media center has guidelines available for communications with media about the incident(s) which may have been reported.

**EXEMPTIONS**

The Trustees of Covenant UMC recognize Covenant Preschool as operating under the appropriate policy of the state of Texas.

Relevant Boy Scout and Girl Scout policies are recognized as complying with the intention and practical requirements of the conference policy, and as such, are exempted from the specific certification and training requirements of the conference policy. Trustees will review any changes to Scout policies and will rescind the exemption if required in the future.

**RESPONSIBLITIES**

It is the responsibility of each ministry serving children, youth and/or vulnerable adults to ensure appropriate direct care leaders and helpers comply with all the requirements of the conference policy and report and/or dismiss violators immediately. Trustees must ensure all outside agencies requesting the use of Covenant UMC facilities comply as well. One noted implication is that our own trained childcare providers may be required to provide care during such an event.

**It is a privilege to work with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. Great responsibility is required. Those who violate this policy shall immediately be removed from contact with children and youth. Appropriate authorities shall be notified immediately.**