

# **SAFE SANCTUARIES POLICY**

Richmond Hill United Methodist Church  
(RHUMC)

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Throughout the Scriptures, we are taught to provide special care for the most vulnerable people among us. In our society, this group includes our children and youth, people who are especially vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse. The church may be the only place where some people find the unconditional love and care they so desperately need to grow and thrive, but it can also be the place where predators can hide unsuspected. As Christians, we must take our responsibilities to these precious children very seriously. We fail in our responsibilities if we neglect to take adequate precautions against potential abuse in our churches. It is unlikely that we can completely prevent abuse in every situation, but it is possible for us to greatly reduce the risk by following a thorough practical policy of prevention. This policy attempts to do just that for Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in its ministries to children and youth.

The purpose of this policy is to protect the children and youth that come to us, to protect our church staff and volunteers from potential allegations of abuse, and to help limit the extent of legal liability of Richmond Hill United Methodist Church.

In covenant with all United Methodist congregations, we adopt this policy for the protection of children and youth for the prevention of abuse in our church. As a Christian community of faith and a United Methodist congregation, we pledge to conduct the ministry of the gospel in ways that assure the safety and spiritual growth of all children and youth participating in our ministries, as well as all church workers and volunteers.

We will follow reasonable safety measures in the selection and recruitment of workers and volunteers; we will implement prudent operational procedures in all programs and events; we will educate all of our workers and volunteers with children and youth regarding the use of all appropriate policies and methods; we will establish a clearly defined procedure for reporting a suspected incident of abuse that conforms to State law, and we will be prepared to respond to media inquiries if an incident of allegation occurs.

This Safe Sanctuaries Policy is a document that will need to be revised and changed as the needs of Richmond Hill United Methodist Church are revised and changed. The safe sanctuaries committee, created and described in this policy, is charged with the annual review of this policy and accompanying procedures. Suggestions for any revision can be presented to this committee for approval. Periodic changes made at the Conference level pertaining to Safe Sanctuaries will also be adapted to this document. This policy may be modified by Richmond Hill United Methodist Church at any time.

This policy applies to all programs that are considered a ministry of Richmond Hill United Methodist Church. In all of our ministries with children and youth, this congregation is committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each person will be "...surrounded by steadfast love, established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to eternal life." (Baptismal Covenant II, UMH p. 44)

## **DEFINITIONS:**

1. "Volunteer" means any person eighteen (18) years of age or older who assists in the conduct of activities for children and youth under the supervision of a Staff person and who will have regular and direct contact with or control over children and/or youth. A person is deemed to have regular and direct contact with children or youth if the individual is in any leadership or supervisory role such as a teacher, chaperone, driver, counselor, coach, nursery worker, music leader, or worship leader.
2. "Worker" means any Church Staff Member or Volunteer.
3. "Helper" means anyone who assists a Volunteer or Staff member in the conduct of any church activity. Helpers are exempt from the screening provisions of this policy but are required to be directly supervised by a qualified Volunteer or Church Staff member.
4. The "Safe Sanctuaries Administrator" is a church staff member designated to maintain all records related to the safe sanctuaries policy and complete various other duties assigned in this policy.
5. The "Safe Sanctuaries Review Team" is a group of three (3) staff members (Senior Pastor and/or Associate Pastor, Safe Sanctuaries Administrator and one (1) At-Large member of RHUMC) that will be responsible for reviewing volunteer applications and background checks.
6. Child (children)/youth any person under the age of eighteen (18) involved in youth or children's programs and ministries at RHUMC.

## **SELECTION AND SCREENING OF STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS:**

1. Volunteer Screening Procedures-
  - a. Prior to consideration for a position, any volunteer candidate who may be assigned to work with children or youth shall complete and return a volunteer application which includes an authorization and request for criminal records check.
  - b. A background check will be conducted by an RHUMC-selected contact agency and will include at least a nationwide sex offender records check, a nationwide criminal database check, and a residency history check. Criminal records from other states will also be checked if the person has lived outside of Georgia during the last five (5) years.
  - c. The volunteer application and results of the background check shall be carefully reviewed by the Safe Sanctuaries Review Team.
  - d. If the applicant appears to be appropriate for the ministry work, references may be checked to confirm the information provided on the application.
  - e. Should the Safe Sanctuaries Review Team have sufficient reason to believe that an applicant poses a threat to our children or youth, and/or the applicant has any prior history of physical and/or sexual abuse directed against another person, then such

applicant shall be immediately removed from consideration for assignment as a RHUMC volunteer.

f. Prior to beginning work as a volunteer, the applicant must complete an appropriate Safe Sanctuaries review as designated by the appropriate Church Staff member or designee. Upon completing this review, the applicant will be required to sign a Covenant Statement.

g. All completed forms and background check materials are considered "Confidential Materials" and will be maintained in a locked, secure area. A copy of the results will be furnished to the applicant upon request.

h. Drivers who volunteer to drive for scheduled church activities involving children or youth will be designated by the appropriate Church Staff leader. Persons who volunteer to drive vehicles for such activities must complete an Auto Safety Form prior to departure. This form will be maintained by the safe sanctuaries administrator as described above. Drivers must be twenty-one (21) years of age, be insured, have the appropriate number of seat belts, and have a valid driver's license.

## 2. Employee Screening Procedures-

a. All persons applying for an employee position with children or youth will submit a RHUMC Employee Application which includes an authorization and request for criminal records check regardless of position being considered.

b. The application shall be carefully reviewed by the Staff-Parish Relations Committee and/or appropriate church staff members to determine the applicant's qualifications.

c. If the applicant appears to be qualified and appropriate for further consideration, references may be checked to confirm the information provided on the application.

d. If the applicant appears to be qualified and appropriate for further consideration, a background check will be conducted by an RHUMC-selected contact agency and will include at least a nationwide sex offender records check, a nationwide criminal database check, a Bryan county criminal database check, and a residency history checks. Criminal records from other counties will be checked if the person has lived outside of Bryan County during the last five (5) years. The results of the background check shall be carefully reviewed by the Staff-Parish Relations Committee and/or appropriate church staff members.

e. Should the Staff-Parish Relations Committee and/or appropriate church staff members have sufficient reason to believe that an applicant poses a threat to children or youth and/or the applicant has any prior history of physical or sexual abuse directed against another person, then such applicant shall be immediately removed from consideration for employment.

f. Prior to beginning employment, the new employee must complete an appropriate Safe Sanctuaries review as directed by the Senior Pastor or designee. Upon completing this review, the new employee must sign a Covenant Statement.

g. All completed forms and background check materials are considered "Confidential Materials" and will be maintained in a locked file cabinet by the Safe Sanctuaries Administrator. Access to these materials will be granted by said Administrator. A copy of the results will be furnished to the applicant upon request.

### 3. Updates of Employee & Volunteer Screenings

a. Church employees and volunteers working in any capacity with children or youth at RHUMC shall update their initial application information every five (5) years. All employees and volunteers shall also submit to a new criminal background check every five (5) years, unless it becomes necessary to conduct one sooner. The Safe Sanctuaries Administrator is charged with the responsibility of ensuring this task is accomplished during the first month of each year.

## **PROCEDURES FOR SAFE MINISTRY WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH AT RHUMC:**

1. There should always be at least two (2) unrelated workers present at all times for any church sponsored program, event, or ministry involving children or youth. When the "two adult rule" is not feasible, a "roamer" will periodically check into rooms and situations where only one (1) supervising adult is present. An example of such a situation would be a Sunday morning when a second teacher is unavailable; also the day school will be exempt from these procedures except where specified.

2. All events for children or youth will be open door whenever possible. This means that workers, parents, and church members have a right to observe any activity if they are able to do so without disrupting the activity. Each room or space set aside for use by children or youth shall either have an observation window in the door or wall or the door shall be left open at all times.

3. During any counseling session with children or youth the door of the room used should remain open for the entire session unless there is visibility from the outside through an observation window. Ideally, the session will be conducted at a time when others are nearby, even if they are not in listening distance.

4. Corporal punishment or the threat of corporal punishment (hitting, spanking, or any form of punishment involving pain) is prohibited at Richmond Hill United Methodist Church. Workers should consult their supervisors regarding behavior problems.

5. When entering the church, a parent, guardian, or other person (at least sixteen (16) years of age) designated by the parent or guardian should accompany children below the fourth grade level to the designated children's activity area. No child should be left in any church area that is unattended or without proper adult supervision. Any child below the fourth grade level will not be sent to find his/her parents or guardians, or released to await transportation. Workers are to release these children only to parents, guardians, or persons specifically authorized by the parent or guardian to pick up the child. Such authorized persons must be at least sixteen (16) years of age.

6. Volunteers or Staff working in any facet of ministries to children or must be at least eighteen years (18) of age. Any person serving as a "Helper" must work under direct adult staff or volunteer supervision at all times.

7. It is recommended that any church employee or volunteer be at least five (5) years older than the children or youth group with which he/she is scheduled to work.

Exceptions may be made at the discretion of supervisory staff and/or the Staff-Parish Relations Committee.

8. Parents will be notified in advance of any activity other than counseling in which a worker will be alone with a child or youth. Before this event, the parents must give written permission for their child's participation in this event. In addition, parents will be given advance notice and full information regarding any event(s) in which their children and/or youth will be participating.

9. A Field Trip Permission Form for each child or youth must be completed and signed before the child or youth will be allowed to participate in a day or overnight field trip. Parents/guardians may sign a yearly, "blanket" permission form for day trips only. All Field Trip Permission Forms will be kept with the worker at all times during the field trip. On any overnight field trip, at least two workers must be the same gender as the children or youth on the activity.

10. Additional guidelines for Nursery Staff/Volunteers:

a. Only assigned workers are allowed to remain in the nursery. The only exceptions to this guideline are a mother nursing her child or a parent called to the nursery to calm an upset child.

b. Parents are to sign in their child into the nursery upon arrival. Children will only be released to a parent, guardian, or person previously authorized to pick up the child.

11. Additional Guidelines for Children's Ministry Staff/Volunteers:

a. Children should request permission from workers to go to the restrooms. Children age five (5) and under must be accompanied to the restroom by a Worker. Workers should remain outside the restroom. A Worker may enter the restroom to assist the child as needed but the door shall remain open.

12. Additional Guidelines for Youth Staff/Volunteers:

a. At least two (2) adults will supervise overnight activities. When the participants are both male and female, there will be two (2) male and two (2) female chaperones present for the activity. Males and females attending events must not share the same sleeping quarters and should have separate access to bathroom facilities

b. The Church recognizes that informal contact between worker and youth occurs frequently and is usually legitimate and beneficial. Informal contact refers to phone calls, letters, e-mail, instant and text messaging or other forms of internet/electronic communication, or face-to-face contact between an adult worker and a youth that is not connected to official church activities. However, workers must advise the parent(s)/guardian of the nature of this relationship and seek permission of the parent(s)/guardian before establishing an informal contact relationship with their youth.

c. Transportation to and from meetings is not part of church or youth group activities. Parents are responsible for providing or arranging for this transportation. Parents are discouraged from asking leaders to transport youth. However, if a leader does transport a single youth at the parent's request, there must be two adults present at all times.

d. No adult worker is to date a youth or be romantically or sexually involved with a youth.

13. Additional guidelines for other groups' use of RHUMC facilities.

a. All groups using the facilities of RHUMC for outreach programs (i.e. AA, boy scouts, etc.) shall have written and adopted their own safe sanctuaries policy which will be kept on file at RHUMC.

b. If any groups using our facilities do not have their own safe sanctuaries policy, they will be required to read and sign a user agreement with RHUMC to follow our safe sanctuaries policy described herein.

#### **TRAINING FOR STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS:**

1. All Staff and Volunteer workers with children and youth are required to attend an annual orientation session in which they are informed of:

a. Policies for the prevention of abuse as established by Richmond Hill United Methodist Church

b. Procedures to be used in all ministries with children and youth.

c. Appropriate steps to report an incident of abuse

d. Details of the Georgia Child Abuse Statute

e. At this orientation, workers will be given the opportunity to renew their Covenant Statement to abide by and cooperate with the policies and procedures of RHUMC. The church will maintain an updated record of attendance. Workers who do not attend the annual orientation will be contacted and asked to renew the Covenant Statement.

2. First Aid/CPR Training will be completed on an as-needed basis by all church employees who work with children or youth. All volunteers are encouraged to attend a certified CPR session.

#### **PLAN FOR RESPONDING TO ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE:**

1. When an allegation of abuse is made against a staff member or volunteer, the person who witnesses the abuse or receives the allegation of abuse will be sure the child is safe from imminent danger. The safety of the victim is the primary concern of RHUMC.

2. The person who witnesses the abuse or receives the allegation of abuse will immediately seek to contact the chain of authority in this order: First the Senior Pastor, if unable to reach this person, please leave a voice message and call the second contact person, which is the Associate Pastor, if unable to reach this person, please leave a voice message. If unable to reach the first two persons, call the chairperson of the Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC), if unable to reach this person, leave a voice message. The chairperson of SPRC will continue phone efforts until contact has been established with one of the pastors. If the witness can not reach any of the first three persons, he/she should call the chairperson of the Administrative Board Committee. The witness should not contact the police or other authorities unless the victim is in imminent danger from the alleged abuser.

3. The Senior Pastor will immediately contact the parent or guardian of the victim, unless the parent or guardian is the alleged abuser.

4. The Senior Pastor will notify the alleged abuser immediately. The alleged abuser will be treated with dignity but will be immediately removed from further involvement with children or youth. The alleged abuser will be furnished notice in writing that he/she is to have no further contact with the children or youth at RHUMC.

Any employee of RHUMC who is the subject of an investigation shall be removed from his/her position, pending completion of the investigation. Any volunteer worker who is the subject of an investigation shall be removed from his/her position pending completion of the investigation. If authorized by appropriate law enforcement authorities, the church may choose to not notify the alleged abuser and to not remove the alleged abuser from his/her position.

5. If not the initial staff person notified of the allegation, The Senior Pastor will be notified as soon as possible. The Senior Pastor will consult with an attorney and the conference crises team and will be responsible for notifying the appropriate child welfare agency or law-enforcement authorities, the appropriate authorities of the Annual Conference and RHUMC internal leadership and the church's insurance carrier within twenty-four (24) hours of learning of the abuse allegation. If allegations are made against the Senior Pastor, the chairperson of the Administrative Board Committee and the chairperson of the Staff Parish Relations Committee shall be contacted immediately and execute the responsibilities assigned to the Senior Pastor in this policy.

6. The person who receives the allegation of child abuse will complete the "Report of Suspected Incident of Child Abuse" within 24 hours of receiving the allegation. The completed form will be furnished to the Senior Pastor unless the Senior Pastor is the alleged abuser. In that case, the completed form will be furnished to the chairperson of the Administrative Board Committee. If requested, the appropriate authority will share the completed form with the appropriate child welfare agency or law-enforcement officials. The form will be marked "Confidential" and will be maintained in a locked file cabinet by the Church Administrator.

7. The Senior Pastor, in consultation with an attorney, and the conference crises team will prepare a brief statement about the allegation of abuse to share with the congregation. This statement will inform the congregation that an allegation of child abuse has been made without giving unnecessary details, placing blame, or revealing the identities of the child, the child's parents, or the alleged abuser.

8. The Senior Pastor or chair of the Administrative Board Committee, as appropriate, will maintain a written record of the steps taken by the church in response. All employees/volunteers involved in the incident will maintain written historical records documenting events and action taken.

9. The Senior Pastor or chair of the Administrative Board Committee, as appropriate, will designate a media spokesperson. The media spokesperson will make all necessary statements or responses to the news media.

10. All church employees and volunteers are to fully cooperate with any investigation conducted by law enforcement officials or child protective services. In the event of an accusation against a minister serving by appointment, the church will cooperate fully with the Crisis Response Team of the South Georgia Annual Conference.

11. The church will provide appropriate pastoral care to the alleged victim, the alleged victim's family, the alleged abuser, and the alleged abuser's family.

12. The above steps of this response plan do not have to be carried out in the order in which they are listed.

## **VII. SAFE SANCTUARIES COMMITTEE:**

1. The Safe Sanctuaries Committee will consist of the following: Senior Pastor, Administrative Board Chairperson, SPRC Chairperson, Trustees Committee Chairperson, Youth Ministry Representative, Music Ministry Representative, Children's Ministry Representative, and two (2) At-Large Members.
2. The Safe Sanctuaries Committee will review the Safe Sanctuaries Policy on at least an annual basis. Anyone may suggest revisions to the policy by contacting a member of the committee.

Safe Sanctuaries Committee:

Rev. Bill Strickland, Senior Pastor  
Mike Bush, Administrative Board Chair  
Bob Thomas, SPRC Chair  
Joe Hoke, Trustees Chair  
Yoon Nam, Music Minister  
Jared Curtis, Youth Minister  
Dawn Pape, Children's Ministries Coordinator  
Leigh-Alyson Zingaro  
Trish Bond