

**Spring Woods United Methodist Church  
Houston, Texas**

POLICY OF SPRING WOODS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH FOR THE PREVENTION OF  
ABUSE OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

**Introduction:**

God calls us to make our churches safe places, protecting children and other vulnerable persons from sexual and ritual abuse. God calls us to create communities of faith where children and adults grow safe and strong. (From *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church—2000*, pp. 180-181. Copyright © 2000 by the United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.)

Thus, in covenant with all United Methodist congregations, we adopt this policy for the prevention of child abuse in our church.

Our Mission Statement:

**The mission of Spring Woods United Methodist Church is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, to build an ever-growing community of faith in which human needs and hurts can be met, to equip its members for ministry and to transform lives through a loving relationship with God.**

**Purpose:**

Our congregation's purpose for establishing this Child Abuse Prevention Policy and accompanying procedures is to demonstrate our absolute and unwavering commitment to the physical safety and spiritual growth of all our children and youth.

**Scope:**

**Scope of Policy**

This policy and its provisions shall apply to all persons in a ministerial role of leadership with children and youth and shall include all paid and unpaid Workers, whether lay or clergy who have any direct or indirect contact with children and youth who participate in any activities or events sponsored by Spring Woods United Methodist Church and the Texas Conference and/or its Districts.

**Definition of Employee/Worker(s):**

Spring Woods United Methodist Church classifies its employees as follows:

- **Clergy.** Persons under episcopal appointment by the area Bishop to the Local Church.
- **Executive Staff.** All Clergy Under Appointment, Church Business Administrator, the Director of Program Ministries, and the Director of Music.
- **Senior Staff.** Any employee hired by the Church to direct program or administrative ministries.
- **Program Staff.** Any employee hired by the Church to direct or coordinate programs.
- **Administrative Staff.** Any employee hired by the Church to perform secretarial and support functions.
- **Facility Staff.** Any employee hired by the Church to perform maintenance, housekeeping, or security tasks.
- **Weekday Staff.** Any employee hired by the Church to work with children during the week.

- **Unpaid Workers.** Include but shall not be limited to: a person in a “position of trust” with Protected Persons such as any Sunday school leader or teacher, vacation Bible school teacher/leader, Scout leaders, program director, youth counselor, hall or bathroom monitor and any other person in a leadership position, who is at least eighteen (18) years old, and involved in a Ministry. *(From Spring Woods UMC Employee Manual, approved Sept. 2001, revised February 2003)*

**Definitions:**

The following terms shall be utilized within this document:

- **Criminal History** refers to any items reported on a person’s criminal records, including arrests, charges, indictments, convictions, probations and deferred adjudications.
- **Director** shall mean the person in charge of a particular Ministry. The Director shall be responsible for coordinating applications and achieving compliance with this policy by Workers within such Director’s particular Ministry. For the following areas of Ministry the Director is identified as:

<u>Program/Department</u>	<u>Director**</u>
Children’s Ministry	Director of Children’s Ministries
Nursery Ministry	Nursery Coordinator
Youth Ministry	Director of Youth Ministries
Music Ministry	Director of Worship Arts
Church Sponsored Community Ministry	Applicable Director
Scouting Ministry	Scouting Coordinator
Weekday Children’s Ministry	Preschool Director
Directors, Other Staff or Work Areas	Clergy

\*\* Clergy shall be an acceptable substitute for a ‘Director’ who is not available.

- **Incident of Abuse & Neglect** as defined by the Texas Family Code.
- **Ministry(ies)** shall mean on-campus, or church sponsored off-campus, activities or programs, involving Protected Persons, including but not limited to those related to child care, Boy/Girl Scouts, pre-school, district and conference youth events, mission trips, Sunday school, and United Methodist Youth Fellowship.
- **Protected Person(s)** shall mean children and/or youth, under the age of eighteen (18), participating in any Ministry.
- **Position of Trust** as utilized herein shall be defined as worker(s) in charge with ministering to Protected Persons; including mentoring, teaching, supervision or in a leadership position.
- **Worker(s)** shall mean a person in a “position of trust” with Protected Persons such as any Clergy, Sunday school leader or teacher, vacation Bible school teacher/leader, Scout leader, program director, youth counselor, hall or bathroom monitor and any other person in a leadership position, who is at least eighteen (18) years old, and involved in a Ministry.

**Screening:**

**Employee Hiring Process**

When a vacancy occurs, the following approvals are obtained prior to recruitment. When approval has been obtained, the following steps should be followed:

1. Qualifications and job descriptions for the position have been approved by Staff Parish Relations (herein after referred to as SPR) and are on file.
2. Appropriate advertisements prepared.

3. Resumes and inquiries reviewed by hiring director.
4. Qualified applicants invited to church for interviews. Some applicants may be interviewed by phone to determine invite status.
5. All applicants interviewed at the church property shall complete an application for employment form. (Appendix A)
6. Notes regarding the interview are NOT to be written on the application. All documentation, including hand written notes, shall be considered confidential and maintained in confidential file.
7. The church office shall maintain a log of employees interviewed. Prior to receiving an offer, the applicant must complete the following documents:
  - a. Authorization for release of information (Appendix B)
  - b. Provide copy of driver license and social security card
8. Approval should be received by Senior pastor and SPR approval should be obtained prior to formal offer.
9. A written offer of employment should be given to the applicant detailing the conditions of employment.
10. Copies of benefit plans and other policy related information should be provided at the time of the offer.
11. Upon written acceptance of the employment offer, the church shall commence background checks, driver license check, and criminal history from the appropriate authorities. (Appendix B, C)
12. In the event an unacceptable response is received during the background investigation, the director shall rescind the offer, giving the reason for the withdrawal.
13. All documentation, including hand written notes, shall be considered confidential and maintained in confidential files.
14. On the first day of employment, the employee shall sign all appropriate documents relating to payroll and benefits.
15. The new employee shall be scheduled for any appropriate training. (Appendix D)

### **Volunteer Worker Process**

When a vacancy occurs, appropriate approvals are obtained prior to interviewing and selection. When approval has been obtained, the following steps should be followed:

1. Qualifications for the position are determined.
2. All inquiries are reviewed by hiring Director.
3. All applicants interviewed shall complete a Volunteer Application (Appendix E)
4. Notes regarding the interview are NOT to be written on the application
5. Prior to the volunteer beginning their assignment, they must complete The following documents:
  - Authorization for release of information (Appendix B)
  - Provide copy of driver license and social security card
6. Upon acceptance of the volunteer position, the church shall commence background checks, driver license check and criminal history from the appropriate authorities. (Appendix B, C)
7. In the event an unacceptable response is received during the background investigation, the director shall notify the applicant that their application for volunteer work has not been approved.
8. All documentation, including hand written notes, shall be considered confidential and maintained in confidential files.
9. When the new volunteer has been accepted for the assignment, appropriate training will be scheduled. (Appendix D)

## **General Policies:**

### ***Staff and Volunteer Requirements***

All persons seeking to work with Protected Persons shall fulfill these requirements:

1. Church membership
  - a. Must be a member for at least 6 months to teach Sunday school
  - b. Exceptions may be made for Vacation Bible School (VBS), community/cooperative events, etc. or with letters of recommendation from 1) previous pastor/church staff person or 2) two current local congregation members of six months or longer.
  - c. Any non-member worker/volunteer will be partnered with a member worker/volunteer.
2. Complete all forms, statements, or applications provided by the church.

### ***Governing Agencies***

Those ministries governed by other agencies, i.e. Weekday Ministries, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (*change approved by Church Council 2006*) and Scouting Ministries, Boy Scouts of America, will follow the guidelines set forth in their licensing policies.

### ***Training***

Training will be provided on a regular basis. Training shall include but not limited to,

- Physical safety
- Fire and building safety (Appendix F)
- Texas Family Code
- Other operational guidelines (Appendix G, H, I, J)

### ***Two-Adult Rule***

The Safe Sanctuaries Book, which was authorized by the United Methodist Church in 1996, strongly recommends a minimum of two unrelated adults be present at all times during any church-sponsored program or event for Protected Persons. Among the factors that should be considered are the ratios of adults to Protected Persons, the physical structure of the facilities, the duration of the event, etc. It may be that more than two adults would be required for an event to be conducted safely. When family members work together, i.e. husband, wife, parent, child, siblings etc., an additional Worker shall be present. An exception will be allowed only in cases where both family members have actively served in the Church for at least two (2) years and then only after Senior Pastor and applicable Director approval. (Appendix C)

### ***The Five-Years Older Rule***

It is required a five-year difference between the ages of the primary on-site Worker and the Protected Person. The five-year difference in ages shall apply between the on-site Worker in charge and the oldest Protected Person. Workers being closer in age to Protected Persons may be acceptable in assisting the primary on-site Worker(s). (Appendix C)

### ***Workers Eighteen or Older***

In accordance with state minimum standards, primary Workers with full responsibility for children must be eighteen or older.

### ***Clear Sight Lines***

There should be unobstructed visibility to all activities where Protected Persons are present. Classroom doors should have windows in them or remain open. Changing a diaper and assisting a Protected Person with the bathroom as needed should take place where the Worker and the Protected Person are in sight, with the Protected Person's privacy protected.

### ***Discipline***

The applicable Director shall advise Workers on the best age-appropriate discipline methods.

### ***Open-Door Counseling***

At any counseling sessions with Protected Persons, the door of the room used should remain open for the entire session. Ideally, the session will be conducted at a time when others are nearby, even if they are not within listening distance. When possible, another Worker and/or the Protected Person's parents should be made aware of the meeting.

### ***Advance Notice to Parents***

Parents must be given advance notice and full information regarding the event(s) in which their Protected Persons are participating. Before the event, parents must give written permission for their Protected Person's participation.

### ***Transporting Children and Youth***

Two adults, both of whom are 21 years or older, are required on all trips or outings, no one on one contact (*approved by Church Council 2006*).

### ***Overnight and Trip Rules***

The two-adult rule applies throughout the trip. The total number of Workers on each trip will be adjusted according to the requirement of the planned activities. The ratio of Workers to Protected Persons shall be approximately 1:6. If the group of Protected Persons contains both males and females, there shall be at least one (1) female Worker and one (1) male Worker on the trip.

### **Reporting of Accidents/Incidents:**

1. When a leader of a church sponsored program, event or activity suspects that abuse or any suspected violation of the Texas Penal Code is taking or has taken place, he or she shall report the abuse to the appropriate local law enforcement agency and/or the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (800-252-5400). The leader shall contact the Senior Pastor, Director or Coordinator immediately, and cooperate fully with the investigation conducted by law enforcement officials or child protective services.
2. Address any emergency needs of the Protected Persons may have, medical or otherwise. Report to the parent(s) and/or legal guardian(s). (Appendix K)
3. The person suspected of abuse (respondent) 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. *The matter shall remain confidential.* If the Senior Pastor, Director, or Coordinator is the respondent, then the report should be made to that person's supervisor. The Staff Parish Committee shall be informed of any incident that involves a staff member.

4. Following the report of an incident, the Senior Pastor, Director or Coordinator in charge shall document the report, and then speak with the alleged victim, being careful to not use leading questions. (Appendix K)
5. All such conversations shall be documented. Careful and confidential documentation is essential. The documentation should include the following:
  - a. The name of the leader observing or receiving the disclosure of abuse, including the date, time, and place and any action taken by this person.
  - b. The alleged victim's name, age, and date of birth.
  - c. Any statement made by the alleged victim.
  - d. Name of the respondent, the date, time and place of any conversation or any statement made by respondent.
  - e. Any action taken, i.e. suspension of the respondent.
  - f. Date and time of call to the appropriate agency, name of worker spoken to, content of that conversation and case number assigned.
  - g. Date and time of call to law enforcement agency, name of officer spoken to and content of that conversation.
  - h. Date and time of any other contacts made regarding this incident.
6. It shall be a goal to provide supportive care to both the victim and the respondent and to restore such persons to wholeness. Supportive care may include the procedures of the criminal justice system, provisions of the current *Book of Discipline*, appropriate counseling referrals and continued pastoral visitation.
7. All reports of incidents of abuse shall be retained in a confidential Spring Woods United Methodist Church file for future screening purposes. Confirmed reports of proven incidents of abuse shall be retained in a confidential file by the Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church.

#### Media Response:

In the event of a crisis situation involving program participants, staff, and/or church property, employees are NOT to communicate with the media regarding the occurrence. Employees are instructed to refer all inquiries to the official spokesperson of the church for any information. The official spokesperson for the church shall be in the following order:

- Senior Pastor
- Business Administrator
- Chair, Church Council
- Chair, Board of Trustees

(Taken from: *SWUMC Employee Manual, approved September 2001, revised February 2003*)

If investigations of allegations of sexual abuse should come to the attention of the media, all communication shall come **only** from the Senior Pastor or his/her designee. Spring Woods UMC will not engage in denial, minimization or blame. **Privacy and confidentiality of all involved will be guarded.** The spokesperson may acknowledge that an investigation is in process but should not make any further comment or give specific detail about the alleged incident.

The Church spokesperson shall:

1. Use text or a prepared public statement to answer questions from the media and/or inform the congregation.
2. At all times, the identity, privacy and confidentiality of those involved shall be strictly maintained.
3. Keep in mind that information given to or obtained by media may have a bearing on the church's liability, so careful judgment shall be exercised.
4. Should anticipate media questions.

Guidelines for the spokesperson are:

1. Be prepared,
2. Define strategy.
3. Be candid and honest.
4. Be clear, concise and in context.

5. Do not answer more than what is asked.
6. Do not volunteer information.
7. Do not ask for quote review.
8. Do respond to calls and questions as quickly as possible.
9. When an answer is unknown the spokesperson shall simply state, "I don't know, but I'll do my best to find out the information for you" (never say "no comment").

**Statement of Covenant:**

Therefore, as a Christian community of faith and an United Methodist congregation we pledge to conduct the ministry of the gospel in ways that assure that safety and spiritual growth of all of our children and youth as well as all of the workers with children and youth. We will follow reasonable safety measures in the selection and recruitment of workers; we will implement prudent operational procedures in all programs and events; we will educate all of our workers with children and youth regarding the use of all appropriate policies and methods (including first aid and methods of discipline); we will have a clearly defined procedure for reporting a suspected incident of abuse that conforms to the requirements of state law; and we will be prepared to respond to media inquiries if an incident occurs.

*(Safe Sanctuaries, Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church, 2003, p. 63)*

**Conclusion:**

In all of our ministries with children and youth this congregation is committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ so that each child will be "surrounded by steadfast love, ...established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal" ("Baptismal Covenant II," *United Methodist Hymnal*, 1989, p. 44).

