Christ United Methodist Church

Safe Gatherings Policy

(formerly Safe Sanctuary Policy)

Purpose: To ensure the physical, emotional, and spiritual safety of children, youth, vulnerable adults, and those who serve with them.

Adopted: January 2015

Last Revised: January 2026

QUICK REFERENCE: SAFE GATHERINGS AT A GLANCE

WHO THIS APPLIES TO

All staff and all volunteers who serve with children, youth, or vulnerable adults.

BEFORE YOU SERVE

- Complete Safe Gatherings online training and background check
- Be approved by the church for your ministry role
- Renew Safe Gatherings certification every 3 years

ALWAYS

- Follow the Two-Adult Rule (two unrelated, approved adults present)
- Use open, observable spaces (windows, open doors)
- Maintain appropriate physical and emotional boundaries
- Respect dignity, privacy, and consent
- Follow transportation, bathroom, and digital communication guidelines

NEVER

- Be alone one-on-one with a child or youth
- Use corporal punishment, shaming, threats, or humiliation
- Engage in secretive behavior (closed doors, private messaging, gifts without permission)
- Ignore concerns or attempt to investigate suspected abuse yourself

DIGITAL SAFETY (QUICK REMINDER)

- No private one-on-one messaging with children or youth
- Use group texts, group emails, or ministry-approved platforms
- Obtain permission before taking or sharing photos/videos

IF SOMETHING FEELS OFF — DO THIS

1. Ensure immediate safety of the child, youth, or vulnerable adult
2. Report promptly to a Pastor or the Safe Gatherings Coordinator
3. Do not investigate or promise confidentiality
4. Follow mandatory reporting laws — reporting is about protection, not accusation

If you are unsure, report anyway. You will be supported.

1. PURPOSE AND COMMITMENT

Christ United Methodist Church is committed to being a place of welcome, care, accountability, and safety. We believe safeguarding people is an expression of Christian love and responsibility.

This policy exists to:

- Protect children, youth, and vulnerable adults

- Protect staff and volunteers from false allegations

- Establish clear standards for conduct, supervision, and response

This policy applies to all church-sponsored activities, whether on-site, off-site, or online.

2. SCOPE AND APPLICABILITY

This policy applies to:

- All paid staff

- All volunteers serving with children, youth, or vulnerable adults

- Ministry leaders and coordinators

- Outside groups using church facilities when applicable

3. DEFINITIONS

- Child: Birth through Grade 5
- Youth: Grades 6–12
- Vulnerable Adult: An adult who may be unable to protect their own interests due to physical, mental, or emotional limitations
- Approved Worker: A person who has completed Safe Gatherings training and background screening

4. ROLES AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Clear roles and lines of responsibility help ensure that safety concerns are handled promptly, consistently, and with care.

Safe Gatherings Coordinator

The Safe Gatherings Coordinator is the primary staff person responsible for oversight of this policy. This role is designated by the church and may be held by a staff member or a trained lay leader.

Responsibilities include:

- Overseeing implementation of the Safe Gatherings Policy

- Maintaining records of Safe Gatherings training and certification

- Serving as a first point of contact for safety concerns or questions

- Coordinating with pastors, ministry leaders, and conference resources as needed

- Ensuring appropriate follow-up after reports or incidents

The Safe Gatherings Coordinator role may be held by a team of people with clearly defined responsibilities for each person.

Pastors

Pastors share responsibility for ensuring a safe ministry environment and play a key role when concerns arise.

Pastoral responsibilities include:

- Receiving reports of suspected abuse or safety concerns

- Ensuring immediate safety and appropriate response

- Supporting mandated reporting requirements under Minnesota law

- Notifying the District Superintendent when concerns involve clergy

- Coordinating communication with conference leadership and insurance providers

Ministry Leaders

Ministry leaders (staff or volunteers who coordinate specific programs) are responsible for day-to-day implementation of Safe Gatherings practices within their ministry areas.

Responsibilities include:

- Ensuring appropriate supervision and adherence to the two-adult rule

- Maintaining current rosters of approved workers

- Confirming Safe Gatherings certification before service begins

- Reporting concerns promptly to a pastor or the Safe Gatherings Coordinator

Staff and Volunteers

All staff and volunteers are expected to:

- Know and follow this policy

- Complete required training and certification

- Maintain appropriate boundaries and supervision

- Report concerns promptly and in good faith

Leadership Board / SPRC

The Leadership Board and Staff-Parish Relations Committee (SPRC) provide governance oversight for this policy.

Responsibilities include:

- Adopting and periodically reviewing the Safe Gatherings Policy

- Supporting enforcement of the policy when violations occur

- Assisting with response and accountability when concerns involve staff or volunteers

5. SCREENING AND TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

Congregational Participation Requirement

As a general best practice, adults serving in ministries with children, youth, or vulnerable adults should have been active participants in the congregation for at least six (6) months prior to beginning their ministry assignment.

In limited circumstances, exceptions may be approved by a pastor in consultation with the Safe Gatherings Coordinator, provided all screening, training, and supervision requirements are fully met.

Safe Gatherings Certification

All staff and volunteers serving with children, youth, or vulnerable adults must:

- Complete Safe Gatherings online training

- Complete background and reference checks

- Be approved for service by the church

- Renew Safe Gatherings certification every three (3) years

Additional ministry-specific training may be required.

6. SUPERVISION AND CONDUCT STANDARDS

Two-Adult Rule

- Two unrelated adults must be present at all times
- Applies to classrooms, transportation, and activities
- If unavoidable, doors must remain open and activities observable

Visibility

- Use rooms with windows or open doors
- No closed-door one-on-one situations

Physical Contact

- Must be appropriate, non-demanding, and initiated by the participant
- Never for the pleasure, control, or comfort of the adult
- No inappropriate touch (genitals, buttocks, chest)

Discipline

- No corporal punishment
- Use redirection, encouragement, and age-appropriate consequences
- Never shame, threaten, or demean

7. CHILDREN'S MINISTRY GUIDELINES

- Leader name tags and check-in procedures required
- Bathroom assistance must follow age-appropriate guidelines
- Diapering and clothing changes handled by parents/guardians when possible
- Two adults present at all times

BEST PRACTICES FOR CHILDREN'S MINISTRY (Children, Age 0 – Grade 5)
During all children's programming and events caregivers should wear the appropriate nametag.

Remember guidelines also apply to your own child while you are in your church leadership or volunteer role.

Security Guidelines:

- Minimum of two unrelated care providers at all times. Care providers should not be alone with a child.
- Care providers should always have supervision or a witness present when with a child of same or opposite sex for a sustained period of time.
- Release only (birth-2nd grade) to a person with a proper pick-up form. In cases of lost pickup form or any problems, the child may be released by a staff member. For those in 3rd to 5th grade, if parent designates, perhaps an older sibling can be allowed to pick up child.

Discipline Guidelines:

- Establish and post expectations and guidelines, and provide to care providers and parents.

- Praising specific behaviors you want to see in your group (i.e., “good listening”, “thank you for waiting”).
- Corporal punishment of any kind is never appropriate.
- A firm gentle voice addressing and redirecting the behavior (i.e., “you are running; walk, please”). Any words or tone that would cause a child to think he/she is a “problem”, rather than a specific behavior being addressed (i.e., screaming at a child).
- Any words that could cause feelings of condemnation or shame about any aspect of their person including degrading references to anything physical, emotional, mental, or position (or station) in life, such as saying, “Are you a strong boy? Strong boys don’t cry.” Or “Shame on you.”
- Confidential parental discussion, when necessary, involve church staff as appropriate.
- Age appropriate “time outs” or withdrawal from activity. Help child rejoin the group when he/she is ready using encouraging language and methods.
- Communicate through verbal and nonverbal messages that you have faith in the child’s ability to practice self-control and (after they’ve calmed) encourage him/her to explore possible solutions to the situation.

Physical Contact Guidelines:

- Appropriate physical contact: non-demanding, gentle touch of shoulders, hands, arms, head or back; sitting child on leg (appropriate only at preschool or kindergarten age level); “high fives” or shaking hands, if gentle.
- Inappropriate physical contact: kissing; demanding hugs and kisses; touching chest, genital region, upper legs, buttocks, waist, stomach; sitting child in center of your lap; sitting child between legs; sitting child above age 6 on one or both legs; opposite sex piggyback rides; seductiveness or suggestive contact.
- Physical contact of any kind which is done for the pleasure or satisfaction of care providers is never appropriate.
- Any touching used to express power or control over a child is not permitted.

Bathroom Procedures:

At ANY age, it is inappropriate to be alone with a child, especially in the bathroom.

Infant: Diapering should be done in the Nursery by a parent/legal guardian, a ministry supervisor or paid staff person only. Diapering in a secluded area or without the presence of other care providers; bathroom doors closed is never permitted.

Toddler-Potty Training: If a toddler has an “accident” in underwear/clothing, only the parent/legal guardian may change the clothing. Volunteers and staff are not to change underwear/clothing after an “accident”.

2- to 5-year-old: Permission is granted to use bathroom unless special help is required. After the care provider has ensured that the bathroom is clear, the care provider should wait outside the bathroom door, which will remain slightly open. Child may require some assistance. Care providers should never be in a closed-door situation with a child or "Help" without a request for assistance from the child.

Kindergarten Age or Older: Permission granted to use facility; unless special help (if a child has temporary physical limitations, i.e., broken arm, crutches, etc.) is required. After the care provider has ensured that the bathroom is clear, the care provider should wait outside the bathroom door, which will remain slightly open. Care giver should never be in a closed-door situation with a child or accompany a child inside the bathroom when special help is not required.

Special Needs: Diapers or spoiled clothes should be change by a family member or an adult (preferably a staff member) with another adult as a helper.

8. YOUTH MINISTRY GUIDELINES

- Two-adult rule applies at all times
- One-on-one meetings only in public spaces with parental consent
- Transportation rules strictly followed
- Clear boundaries for physical affection

BEST PRACTICES FOR YOUTH MINISTRY (Youth, Grades 6-12)

Youth ministry has a profound moral and legal obligation to reduce the possibility of abuse from ever occurring. These best practices have been formed with that obligation in mind. Abuse causes deep and sometimes lifelong psychological damage to its victims and their families. Furthermore, when abuse occurs in the context of a Christian organization, the reputations of the organization, its staff and other volunteers are jeopardized. Thank you for your support and partnership in adhering to what is outlined in these pages so that students for years to come can grow in Christ in a safe and trustworthy environment.

Guidelines for Conduct with Students Meeting with Students

All meetings, gatherings, and events associated with Youth Ministry will adhere to a two unrelated adult minimum rule.

On the occasion when a worker needs to meet individually with a student outside of regularly scheduled programs, a parental consent must first be obtained. All meetings must occur in a public place where other people are present (restaurants, coffee shops). Students and workers will meet at the public place and depart from the public place

separately. If a meeting occurs during regularly scheduled program time, it must be in a common visible area.

When providing rides to students, youth workers should have a third person in the car. Although situations may require the driver to be alone in the car with a student of the same gender (e.g. picking up the first student) this should be the exception rather than the norm and parental consent must be obtained. Care should be taken to plan ahead to avoid finding oneself in these situations. Under no circumstances shall any worker be alone in a car with an individual student of the opposite gender.

As a rule, youth workers shall not be alone in a home or building with an individual student. If the situation becomes unavoidable (e.g. a student is the first to arrive or last to be picked up), the adult shall wait with the student outside the home or building. In bad weather, when meeting off site, the adult may leave the main entry or front door open and remain inside with the student in the front room or entryway. If this situation occurs, please report it to a staff member in charge of that program as soon as possible.

In group sleeping arrangements (e.g. camp cabins, ski trips, mission trips) two unrelated adults must be present with any number of students during the stated “lights out” time. Under no circumstances shall any volunteer share a bed with a student. In dorm or hotel settings, students and adults should sleep in separate rooms (connecting rooms are acceptable). Room checks will be performed at stated lights out time. There should be separate sleeping areas for males and females. Any leader who is a minor must be under direct adult supervision at all times. A leader who is a minor must be at least five years older than the students participating in the event in order to be considered a leader. When college-aged counselors are used, an adult 23 years or older must be the second adult where there are senior high youth present.

Physical Touch

Although physical affection can have an appropriate place in ministry, workers shall use discretion as to the frequency and type of physical affection they provide to students of either gender. Specifically, youth workers should refrain from giving or receiving massages of any type. Whenever possible front- to-front hugs should be avoided. Workers should never have students sit on their laps or vice-versa. Kissing of any sort is inappropriate. Touching should be in response to the need of the student and not the need of the adult. It should generally be in response to a student’s initiative. A worker shall never touch a student’s breasts, buttocks, or groin.

Corporal punishment is never permissible. Physical restraint should be used only in order to protect the health and welfare of the student, other students, volunteers or staff.

Modesty

You are an example to students in every way. For that reason strive that your dress, behavior, and body language be of the highest standard. Please be conscious of what your appearance will speak to both genders.

Disciplinary Action

If at any time your behavior towards students becomes questionable or specific expectations outlined here are violated, the steps below will be taken by the appropriate ministry leader, staff and/or SPRC team. A meeting will be scheduled with the person(s) overseeing the program in which you are volunteering. The action in question will be discussed and the guidelines in these best practices will be reviewed.

If it is determined that questionable behavior has occurred, other appropriate staff members and SPRC representatives will be contacted and will become involved. If questionable behavior continues after the meeting, a temporary or permanent removal from your volunteer position will follow. If behavior warrants immediate removal from volunteer position, the church reserves the right to enforce disciplinary action as needed. In all situations, we will communicate our purpose in discipline and keep it in confidence within the church guidelines. If you become aware of other volunteers or staff violating these guidelines, report the situation immediately to a staff member or the SPRC team.

Camping & Mission Trips with Youth

Camping & mission trips, regardless of location, are unique experiences where persons of all ages are general outside their comfort zones. Thus, persons on these trips are more vulnerable because of the new situation, away from familiar surroundings, close proximity of others and sharing experiences that are often life changing.

When a single youth is part of a group, the youth should either have a room of their own or two adults (not related to one another) in the room.

If open showers are the only facilities, separate shower times for youth and adults should be designated, Youth and adults should not shower together. There should be shower monitors, and swimsuits may be required for showers in some instances.

Adults should be sensitive to privacy concerns of children and youth, such as dressing and undressing in public spaces.

Two adults should be present at the work site at all times.

When travelling to different areas of the camp/mission site, there must always be at least three people (two counselors & 1 camper, 2 campers and 1 counselor).

When counseling or talking with a camper about a personal/private matter, you must do so in an open space where anyone can walk by and see what is happening.

No youth will be allowed to be alone with an adult from a host mission.

Mission/Camp team members are not to be alone with a youth from the host mission/ camp.

The same boundary best practices apply to youth from host teams consistent with those for mission team members.

Recommended Ratio of Adults to Youth
Retreats/rallies/meetings - One adult: ten youth

Offsite camps/mission trips - One adult: eight youth

Whenever smaller ratios are required, the stricter requirements will be communicated to all participants, parents and sponsors prior to the event.

9. VULNERABLE ADULT AND SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRY

- Respect dignity and independence
- Offer assistance only when needed
- Communicate directly and respectfully
- Follow supervision and boundary standards

BEST PRACTICES FOR VULNERABLE ADULT AND SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRY (Children, Youth, and Adults with special needs)

General Approach

For years, people with disability were segregated from the rest of society. Because of federal legislation, persons with disability are being integrated into the mainstream of education, employment, and community activities. The present generation is growing up in situations where people with disability are a natural part of school, church and community life. Below are some general principles to keep in mind when working with the special needs population.

A person with a special need may be slower physically or mentally, but take time to get to know them. People with disabilities need to practice meeting the standards of the "normal" world while they are growing up so they can gain confidence and independence.

People with a disability do not need to be pitied. If you perceive a person with a disability as someone to be pitied, someone from whom little should be expected or demanded, probably little will come. If, on the other hand, you expect the person to succeed and grow, to learn to act independently, then chances are good that the person will grow to become successful and independent.

Help a person with special needs only when help is needed. A person with a special need may take longer to complete a certain task, but you may be surprised by what he or she can do. Too much help can become a hindrance if it robs the person of opportunities to learn and practice independence. Do not assume that a task cannot be done, and do not redo work that is not perfect. Ask if help is wanted before providing it. With special considerations, communicate with a special needs person like you would any other person. One impairment that some volunteers have trouble with involves speech and language. Whether the communication impairment results from a physical disability such as cerebral palsy or a speech disability such as stuttering, the listener tends to anticipate what the disabled person is trying to say and not allow that person the time he or she needs to communicate. This should be avoided. Be patient, and remember that a person with a speech impairment has had to communicate with people other than you.
Whenever possible, speak directly to persons with disability, using their name. Do not limit your conversation only to the parent or companion. Speak clearly and slowly, not necessarily loudly. A person with a speech impairment is not necessarily hearing impaired.

Remember that a warm smile and friendly greeting are very reassuring. There are special considerations for people with special disabilities. For example, keep in mind that people who have visual impairments depend upon what they hear and touch to bring them information about their surroundings. Provide opportunities for the visually impaired person to handle things that those with normal vision can simply look at. It is also helpful to describe new people, things, and events as they come into the person's environment. Allow time for the person to ask what is going on.

People with hearing impairments must depend on sight for most of their knowledge. Make sure the hearing-impaired person can see the face of whoever is speaking; many cues are picked up through lip- reading and facial expression. Arrange for seating near the teacher or leader. Do not assume that a person understands you just because you have his or her attention. Ask whether you have been understood. People with mental impairments can get along better when directions are short and clearly stated. Break down tasks into a series of steps that can be completed in sequence. Maintain a routine, teach new procedures, and give time for practice.

10. DIGITAL SAFETY

- No private one-on-one messaging
- Group communication preferred
- Photo/video permission required
- Livestreams follow visibility and consent standards

11. RESPONDING TO CONCERNS AND REPORTING

Christ United Methodist Church takes all concerns regarding safety seriously. Prompt reporting is an act of care and responsibility.

Mandatory Reporting – Minnesota

Minnesota law requires certain individuals to report suspected abuse or neglect of children and vulnerable adults. In a church setting, staff members and many volunteers may be mandated reporters based on their role and responsibilities.

You do not need proof to make a report. Reasonable suspicion is enough.

If you suspect abuse, neglect, or exploitation:

1. Ensure immediate safety. If anyone is in immediate danger, call 911.
2. Report promptly. Contact a Pastor or the Safe Gatherings Coordinator as soon as possible.
3. Do not investigate. Do not ask leading questions, conduct interviews, or attempt to determine what “really happened.”
4. Do not promise confidentiality. You may assure care and support, but reports must be shared with appropriate authorities.

Reporting timelines (Minnesota):

- Reports should be made immediately or as soon as possible.
- In some cases, a written report may be required within 24 hours.

Church leadership will assist with contacting appropriate authorities, including county agencies or law enforcement, and with following conference and insurance protocols.

Reporting is about protection, not accusation. Individuals who make reports in good faith are protected under the law and by church policy.

12. ENFORCEMENT AND VIOLATIONS

Failure to comply may result in:

- Temporary suspension from ministry

- Permanent removal from service

- Additional disciplinary action as appropriate

13. REVIEW AND REVISION

This policy will be reviewed regularly and updated as needed to reflect best practices, legal requirements, and denominational guidance.

Appendices and reporting procedures are maintained separately and incorporated by reference.