



Federated Community Church of Hampden, MA. Safe Sanctuary Policy

revised March 2022

Church Mission Statement

The Federated Community Church Mission is to create a safe place to know and experience God's love, to learn the stories and ways of Jesus, and to carry faith, hope, and love into the world."

Why do we have safe sanctuary policies?

-We are a community who cares about children, youth, and vulnerable individuals.

We are committed to the physical safety, emotional health, and spiritual growth of all those who enter our spaces.

- We want our church to be a safe place for individuals of all ages and intellectual capabilities.

- We believe policies such as these protect both those in our care (children, youth, and vulnerable individuals) as well as those who are providing care (paid and volunteer staff).

- To underscore that there are certain types of conduct and behavior that are expected by those in leadership, and which are not acceptable in the church.

-To limit the extent of legal liability of our church.

Definitions

The following terms are defined for the specific purpose of this document:

"Abuse" is a harmful act against any child, youth, or vulnerable individual that presents itself in the following forms or types:

Verbal Abuse – Any verbal act that humiliates, degrades, or threatens any child, youth, or vulnerable individual.

Physical Abuse – Any act or failure to act that endangers a person's physical and/or mental health. In the case of child, youth, or vulnerable individuals, this definition includes any intentional physical injury caused by the caretaker. Physical abuse may result from punishment that is overly punitive or inappropriate to the individual's age, condition, or cognitive capacity. In addition, physical abuse may result from purposeful acts that pose serious danger to the physical health of a child, youth, or vulnerable individual.

Sexual Abuse – The sexual exploitation or use of children, youth, or vulnerable individuals for satisfaction of sexual drives. This includes but is not limited to: incest, rape, prostitution, romantic involvement with any participant, any sexual intercourse, sexual conduct with or fondling of an individual enrolled as a child, youth, or vulnerable individual in church environments or church-supported activities, and sexualized behavior that communicates sexual interest and/or content. Examples of sexualized behavior include but are not limited to: displaying sexually suggestive visual materials, making sexual comments or innuendos about one's own or another person's body, touching another person's body, hair, or clothing, touching or rubbing oneself in the presence of another person, kissing, and sexual intercourse.

Ritual Abuse - Any act of physical, sexual, psychological violence, or manipulation inflicted on a child, youth, or vulnerable individual intentionally and in a stylized way, by someone or multiple people who appeal to a higher authority or power to justify the abuse.

Electronic Abuse – Any act utilizing electronic means that could be construed as verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, or ritual abuse. This would include but not be limited to telephone, e-mail, blogging, texting, direct messaging, snapchatting, etc.

"Adult" means an individual 18 years of age or older who engages in supervisory responsibility.

"Child" or "Children" means any person(s) who has not yet begun in the 6th grade.

"Safe Sanctuaries" is the name given by the United Methodist Annual Conferences and local churches to their individual efforts to make conference, district, and local church programs welcoming and safe for children, youth, and vulnerable individuals.

"Staff" means any paid employee of the church. This does not include persons who are serving as independent contractors for the church.

"Volunteer" means an individual (adult or adolescent) who assists in leading or supporting activities involving children, youth, or vulnerable individuals.

"Vulnerable individual" means any person identified by themselves, a caregiver, or a staff person as being unable to take care of themselves, or unable to protect themselves against significant harm or exploitation due to diagnosed diminished physical, mental, intellectual, or emotional capacities.

"We" or "Us" means Federated Community Church.

"Youth" means a person who is entering their 6th grade year of school but has not yet reached September 1st of the year in which they finished 12th grade. A "youth" may therefore be an individual who is 18 years old or older but still in high school. The term "youth" refers to persons who are strictly participants, holding no supervisory responsibility, in a church sponsored activity.

Processes, Approaches, and Expectations

What we insist as the standard to create safe environments

In caring for children, youth, and families, we believe it is our responsibility to seek staff and volunteers who can provide a healthy and safe environment and who seek to build Christ-centered, nurturing relationships. To create such environments and protect all participants involved, the following Safe Sanctuary Policies have been established by Federated Community Church.

Annual Training

Training is a requirement for all staff and volunteers serving with children, youth, or vulnerable individuals in church activities. Training will be conducted at least annually and, then, for any new staff or volunteer serving in any capacity throughout the year. Because safe sanctuary policies are established to protect not only children and youth but staff and volunteers as well, a staff or volunteer cannot begin serving until this training is completed.

Background Checks

A background check is required for all newly hired staff and volunteers who are entrusted with the care and supervision of children, youth, or vulnerable individuals. Background checks will be renewed every two years. Background checks will be processed by the Administrative Assistant and the Pastor, and will be renewed according to state regulations.

Five Year Separation & Six-Month Rule

No leader will supervise an age group unless they are five years older than the oldest participant in the group. Also, all leaders hoping to serve with children or youth must be a member of Federated Community Church for six months before being considered.

Minimum Ratio/Rule of Three

It is our goal that a minimum of two adult volunteers attend all times when children and youth are being supervised during our programs and activities. These two leaders should not be related to one another unless in a public place or in the presence of a third, unrelated leader. Additionally, no child, youth, or vulnerable should be left alone with a single adult. No leader should be alone with a child unless it is their own child. Because we are a small congregation, a second child can be the third person in the rule of three, although this is not preferable.

Actual vs. Perceived vs. Potential Interactions

There are three types of interactions most exchanged between leaders and children or youth: physical, verbal, and non-verbal. With each of those, we ask leaders to be mindful of not just the ACTUAL interaction, but also that which could be perceived by a nearby observer. Misunderstandings occur; we understand that. However, leading “above reproach” often means being mindful of preventing potential assumptions or accusations.

Open Door Policy

If a classroom door has no window, the door will remain open. The nursery room will be enclosed by a baby safe gate.

Line of Sight and Sound

All contact with children and youth we are responsible for should be within eyeshot or earshot of other adults. This is particularly important on trips. While seeing or hearing every interaction is sometimes not possible, children and youth interacting with individuals who are not a part of our ministry should have - at minimum - 1-2 other youth with them.

Physical Contact

Appropriate physical touch is an important part of showing love and support to children and youth. There are many ways in which leaders can show approval or give affirmation for something well done, or provide care or comfort when there is disappointment, hurt, or loss. Appropriate physical touch can include pats on the shoulder or back, handshakes, high-fives, side hugs, fist-bumps, or holding hands while walking with small children or during times of prayer. Since we are a church, if a child/youth approaches us in wanting a hug or another safe physical greeting, we would not deny such an expression. Be mindful that no touch should ever make a child, youth, or adult feel unsafe.

Bathroom Trips and Diaper Changes

When a child or vulnerable individual needs to use the restroom, volunteers who accompany them to the bathroom will wait outside the bathroom door unless the individual needs assistance. The bathroom door will be left open, and parents will be notified if assistance is given.

If a child or vulnerable individual needs a diaper/pant change, a parent or approved caregiver will be informed through text. FCC staff and volunteers will not change diapers.

Joking vs. Criticism

The church – and each ministry – should be a place where children, youth, and vulnerable individuals feel safe to be themselves and live into the unique person God created them to be. All staff and volunteer leaders should be a part of creating an environment and culture in which all persons are loved and accepted, always. When joking with a child, youth, vulnerable individual, or peer, be sure that you are not criticizing, cutting down, or discouraging them – but lifting them up, encouraging them, and letting them know they are welcome here.

Discipline

The root of “discipline” is “disciple”. We are here to teach and guide - not punish or enforce consequential behavior management that casts children or youth in a diminishing light. While physical force may only be used to stop a behavior that may cause immediate harm to the individual or to a child, youth, or others, no other form of physical discipline will be tolerated. Staff and volunteers are also prohibited from using harsh language, degrading punishment or behaviors, or mechanical restraint such as rope or tape for behavior management.

Substance Abuse

In wanting to model a life that honors Christ, leaders are prohibited from the use, possession, distribution, or being under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs, or the misuse of legal drugs, while participating in or assisting with programs or activities specifically for children, youth, or vulnerable individuals.

Digital Communication and Connections

Online or technological environments are other “places” where youth may exist, connect with others, and spend their time. While we believe it can be a tool to build relationships and strengthen community, we also recognize digital communication (i.e. texting, calling, emailing, private or direct messaging, posting, snapchatting, photo tagging, etc.) can have serious consequences if misused, abused, or perceived as inappropriate. Adults should be mindful of the time spent being in conversation with children or youth outside the regular weekly service hours. Please approach social media with children, youth, and families in mind. When a teacher, leader, (staff or volunteer) is communicating with a child or youth through social media, a second adult leader should be cc'd on the correspondence.

Public Communications and Publications

Parents / guardians who do not wish to have pictures or videos of their child, youth, or vulnerable individual on the church website, newsletter, or bulletin board will notify the Faith Formation Coordinator or the church office with written notification. Last names of the children will not be included on any social media. Our worship services are broadcasts on cable television and our website. There is no way to guarantee any specific person will not be captured if attending a worship service.

IN CASE OF... FIRE

All staff and volunteer leaders are trained in fire safety with a knowledge of where to exit and how to ensure the safe return of children, youth, and vulnerable individuals back to their parents, guardians, and caregivers.

Parents, guardians, and caregivers are instructed to meet children, youth, or vulnerable individuals under a tree near the fenced-in picnic area. Please DO NOT take them from their rooms or from lines heading outside.

Accidents and Incidents

If someone is injured, an incident report is to be filled out by the staff or volunteer in charge and given to the Pastor or Children/Youth Faith Formation Coordinator. These incidents are filed in the church office.

Trips and Overnights

Children and youth may take day trips, overnight retreats, or extended camp trips during the year that ask for further Safe Sanctuary policies. These are not to hinder any interaction with children or youth during times away from FCC property, but to enhance the experience and create a safe environment for all when off-site.

Clothing & Swimsuits

Modesty is the standard policy at all church functions for leaders, children, youth, or any in attendance.

Transportation

All drivers transporting children, youth, or vulnerable individuals who are not members of their family must have a current criminal background check.

-Drivers must be between the ages of 21-75.

-The use of seatbelts and/or child car seats as appropriate for all occupants is required.

-Driver must have the following documentation up to date:
a valid driver's license
current license plates
proof of auto liability insurance.

-Parents/Guardians must know when they and the children or youth will be leaving, how they will be traveling, when they expect to arrive at their destination, and when they will return.

Showering Privacy

Children and youth should dress and shower in separate spaces or at separate times than volunteers. Occasionally, shower facilities may be in an open locker room. In such situations, schedules should be staggered to comply with this policy, but in any case, common sense and modesty should dictate our actions.

No youth or adult will be forced to shower with other youth or adults. If in an open locker situation, singular showers will be the norm.

Overnight Sleeping Accommodations

One person per sleeping space will be the standard.

Sleeping space means a cot, bed, sleeping bag, couch, or, essentially, the blanket coverage area. Multiple “sleeping spaces” can be in one room. But each individual person should not be in physical contact with another person while they sleep.

This means extra-large air mattresses that could hold 2-3 children or youth or doubling up and sharing sleeping bags will not be allowed. In the case where accommodations are in a hotel-type setting, youth will have the option of not sharing sleeping space (bed space) on a case-by-case basis. This guideline goes for relatives, too - that sleeping space will not be shared.

Males and females (both participant and adult) will sleep in separate rooms / spaces at all events.

For individuals who identify as non-binary, who are transitioning, or who are transgender, a conversation with the ministry leader to discuss what arrangements will be available is encouraged.

Student Activities

There are valid situations where youth may be permitted to be unsupervised for short time periods. These situations must be expressly approved by the on-site ministry leader. All unsupervised youth should travel in groups of no less than three youth for help and protection. In such situations, youth should notify an adult leader before leaving the larger group and reasonable check-in periods should be established throughout the day.

Early Return Policy

Should a youth be unable to live into the expectations set forth by the ministry leaders for a trip or event - specifically those that are blatantly defiant towards leadership or puts

other youth and leaders at risk or in danger - that youth may return home early. Conversations between the ministry leader and the youth’s guardian will determine the most appropriate course of action. In this unfortunate and extremely rare occurrence, the guardian is responsible for any costs needed for their youth’s return.

Suspected Abuse

If you suspect a child, youth, or vulnerable individual is being neglected or abused, it is the leader’s responsibility to report this directly to the ministry leader and the Pastor. Please do not share your suspicions with any other adults. You will work together with the Pastor and ministry leader to determine appropriate next steps to help ensure the safety of the person who may be in harm’s way. If the Pastor or leader disagrees with you that this is a case which does not need to be reported, you may call MA Department of Children and Families directly. As teacher, volunteer, or witness, you are mandated to report abuse. The Department will assist in helping you determine if the situation warrants reporting.

The phone number for the MA Department of Children and Families (DCF) is 1-800-792-5200. State law requires that any pastor, teacher/leader, or church staff (employed or volunteer) who has reason to believe that a child has been abused or neglected MUST report it immediately to the MA Department of Children and Families (DCF). Failure to do so may result in criminal persecution. The DCF is the agency which has responsibility to investigate the allegations of abuse. In no case should the Pastor or any church leader or member attempt to investigate on their own.

A swift, compassionate, and unified response to an alleged incident is expected. All allegations will be taken seriously. In every case of reported or observed abuse in an activity, all volunteers or staff involved in that activity shall make themselves available to the official investigating agencies. Under no circumstances are any church members to investigate. This is the role of DCF.

The Pastor and their designee will work with the parent(s) or guardian(s) of the victim of abuse to determine the appropriate care. The church community will be appropriately informed if an allegation of abuse is made, but confidentiality of the victim and accused will be maintained. The Pastor or designee is the only one authorized to speak to the media.

The person(s) who are the subject of any report will be removed from any activities with children or vulnerable adults until the incident is resolved.

In any case arising when children, youth, or vulnerable individuals are involved in a non-church activity, while under supervision of a church member, it is the responsibility of the person in charge of that event or activity to make an initial contact with DCF or the person who witnessed the abuse to report directly to DCF.

If there is concern or suspicion of abuse (physical, sexual, verbal, ritual, or electronic) with the FFCY Coordinator or other church leaders, it is your responsibility to go directly to the Pastor before any other adult. If the accusation of abuse involves the Pastor, the Chairs of the Board of Deacons and Board of Directors shall be informed. Leadership will follow policy and procedures which are in place. The insurance company will be informed. No interviews with the media are permitted.

Abuse of any type is not acceptable behavior in the UCC, UMC, or FCC.

The FCC Safe Sanctuary Policy and Procedures will be reviewed annually by the CYFF Ministry Team and the Board of Deacons. (Updated April 2022)