



# Safe Church Policy

Updated August 27, 2025

## ***Table of Contents***

*Introduction and Purpose*

*Summary of Guidelines for Posting*

*Definition of Child Abuse*

*Definition of Sexual Abuse*

*Requirements for Volunteers*

*Activities Involving Children, Youth, and Vulnerable Populations*

*Volunteer and Paid Staff Screening*

*Church Conduct*

*Safe Church Team*

*Reporting Allegations of Abuse*

*Recurring and Continuing Education About Abuse*

## ***Introduction and Purpose***

At Holland United Church of Christ, we believe the church should be a safe place where everyone belongs. We are committed to the safety and well-being of each member of our community. Our commitment is especially important when it comes to the children, adolescents, and adults from vulnerable populations who have been entrusted to us. To that end, the *Safe Church Policy* outlines procedures and safeguards that ensure Holland UCC is safe, supportive, and inclusive.

Every act of physical, sexual, emotional, mental, or verbal abuse is abhorrent and unacceptable, and abuse that occurs within a community of faith is an ultimate violation of sacred trust. Knowing the reality of abuse in our world, this policy is enacted to eliminate, as much as possible, the risk of abuse occurring within any of our church activities.

## ***Guiding Principles***

### *Supervision*

A commitment to our children and youth begins with ensuring that all church activities are supervised by trustworthy adults in a manner that eliminates opportunities in which abuse could occur.

### *Accountability*

All allegations of misconduct or child abuse are taken seriously, addressed swiftly and appropriately, referred to law enforcement when necessary, and treated with respect and compassion.

### *Faithfulness*

Maintaining the trust of our community begins with carefully screening and appropriately training all adults who work with children and ensuring transparent communication with guardians.

### *Education*

Education of all members of our church about issues related to abuse and actions that keep children safe will take place throughout the year.

## ***Summary of Guidelines***

- All formal gatherings of youth and children must have a minimum of two non-related adults present with a minimum of one adult over 18 years old. Youth over the age of 12 years may assist a non-related adult in the nursery. Youth over the age of 14 years may assist a non-related adult in Kids Time.
- All volunteers will be screened before volunteering with children, youth, or vulnerable populations.
- All activities must be kept in plain view.
- If a child needs bathroom or diaper assistance, that child's parent or guardian will be asked to provide that assistance.
- Youth participants are required to submit a Guardian Release Form for any overnight youth activity.
- No one under the age of 21 years will be allowed to drive other participants to any church-sponsored activity.
- No photos of any underage child will be posted in public or online.

***Definition of Child Abuse*** (adapted from the Faith Trust Institute)

Child abuse refers to an act committed by a parent, caregiver, or person in a position of trust that is not accidental and that harms or threatens to harm a child's physical health, mental health, or welfare. This includes individuals who may not care for the child on a daily basis. The four basic types of child abuse are physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse.

*Physical abuse* occurs when an adult injures a child, and it is not an accident. It can include:

- Assault
- Shaking or slapping
- Burning or scalding
- Kicking
- Strangling

*Neglect* is any maltreatment or negligence that harms a child's health, welfare, or safety. It can include physical, emotional, or educational neglect through such actions as:

- Abandonment
- Refusal to seek treatment for illness
- Inadequate supervision
- Health hazards in the home
- Ignoring a child's need for contact, affirmation, and stimulation
- Providing inadequate emotional nurturance
- Knowingly permitting chronic truancy
- Keeping a child home from school repeatedly without cause
- Failing to enroll a child in school (or home school)

*Emotional abuse* deeply affects a child's self-esteem by submitting him/her to verbal assault or emotional cruelty. It does not always involve visible injuries. It can include:

- Close confinement, such as being shut in a closet
- Inadequate nurturance
- Extreme discipline

- Knowingly permitting such behavior as drug or alcohol abuse

*Sexual abuse* involves sexual contact between a child or teenager and an adult or significantly older, more powerful person. Children are not developmentally capable of understanding or resisting sexual contact and may be psychologically and socially dependent upon the offender.

**Definition of Sexual Abuse** (*adapted from the Faith Trust Institute*)

Sexual abuse happens when someone in a ministerial role (church staff, volunteer, or representative) engages in sexual contact or sexualized behavior with a member of the church community. Sexual abuse can include physical contact or verbal behavior (when such behavior sexualizes a relationship). Examples of sexual behavior include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Sexual touch (intentional contact of sexual areas of the body)
- Unwanted tickling or playful aggression that could make the individual uncomfortable
- Kissing, prolonged hugging, or pressing against an individual while hugging
- Sharing inappropriate gifts (such as sexually provocative items or clothes)
- Sexual intercourse of any kind
- Innuendo, sexual talk, or suggestive comments
- Sharing about sexual exploits or experiences
- Questioning intimate details of relationships
- Inappropriate verbal stimulation of a child, teenager, or vulnerable adult
- Taking or showing sexually explicit photographs of or to a child, teenager, or vulnerable adult
- Exposing a child, teenager, or vulnerable adult to pornography or adult sexual activity

Appropriate physical touch is an important part of showing love and support to children. However, safe physical contact such as hugging must be in the presence of the guardians or screened volunteers.

**Requirements for Volunteers**

- All adult volunteers will complete a *Volunteer Information Form* before beginning their ministry with children, youth, and vulnerable adults.
- State and national criminal and sexual abuse background checks will be required for all applicants and volunteers over the age of 18.

- Youth over the age of 14 years may supervise nursery activities or assist a non-related adult.
- A Safe Church Team member will facilitate the screening process to ensure that the screening of volunteers and paid staff is adequate and complete, and that the privacy of the volunteers is protected.
- No adult who has been convicted of child abuse (that is, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, or physical abuse) will be accepted as a volunteer to work with children, youth, or vulnerable adults for any church-sponsored activity.
- Frequent and long-term volunteers will be background checked every three years to keep screening as up to date as possible.
- The screening process is to be based on criminal justice protocols and the latest research in the field of child abuse prevention.
- All volunteers will need to read the *Safe Church Policy* document.

### ***Activities Involving Children, Youth, and Vulnerable Populations***

#### *Guidelines for Interactions with Children, Youth, and Vulnerable Populations*

- All formal gatherings of youth and children must have a minimum of two non-related adults present with a minimum of one adult being over 18 years old. Youth over the age of 14 years may supervise nursery activities or assist a non-related adult with children's activities. No adult is to be alone with one child or one youth on a church-sponsored activity, on or off church premises. This includes driving alone with a single child.
- Always meet in a public place in full view of others. If meeting in a room or office, leave the door open or be in an area that can be easily observed by others passing by.
- Avoid physical affection that can be misinterpreted.
- If a child needs bathroom assistance, that child's parent or guardian will be asked to provide that assistance.
- Words have the power to heal or to wound. Inappropriate language with children includes derogatory statements about any aspects of their identity, words spoken in anger, any sexually explicit statements, and language deemed inappropriate among Christians is strictly prohibited.

#### *Guidelines for Electronic Communication*

- Adult staff and volunteers should seek to avoid one-on-one electronic communications with children and youth. Such communications could be used to build a private relationship with a child or to set up a private meeting with a child.
- Telephone calls between an adult and a child or youth may be used to make or change arrangements (time, date, place) for a church-sponsored or church-sanctioned activity but should not be used to set up a one-on-one out-of-church meeting or activity, without specific consent from a parent or legal guardian.

- Instant messaging and one-on-one text messages or e-mails from an adult to a child or youth are prohibited.
- Group emails or group texts that include an adult and a child or youth may be exchanged if a group is addressed or copied on the message, or to make arrangements permitted as above. If a child or youth initiates the exchange, the adult must copy another adult on their response.
- Adults are prohibited from communicating with children or youth on Facebook or other social media sites other than any official church site. Staff and volunteers with profiles on social networking sites may not request to be friends with children or youth from the church and may not approve friend requests from children or youth from the church.
- No photos of any underage child will be posted in public or online.

### *Guidelines for Youth Activities*

- Physical contact such as wrestling, horseplay, or other high-contact games is not an appropriate recreational activity. No adult leader, staff, or volunteer will engage in or encourage inappropriate physical contact with children or youth.
- All participants are expected to remain with the group throughout the duration of the activity as communicated by adult leaders. No pairing or otherwise separating off from the group to other parts of the building or grounds is permitted, other than as part of an activity for which the leaders have set out appropriate parameters.
- The use of any drugs, tobacco, or alcohol products, by anyone of any age, is not permitted at church-sponsored activities for children or youth.
- Written consent of a parent or legal guardian of a minor will be required for all child and youth activities off the church property, and any overnight activities. Parents or legal guardians will be required to complete and sign the Guardian Release Form prior to the off-site activity.
- During any off-site activities, all children and youth will be supervised at all times by responsible adults or youth volunteers.

### *Youth and Child Overnights and Field Trips*

- Youth participants are required to submit a Guardian Release Form for any overnight youth activity. A ratio of one adult to every five kids is recommended.
- During any overnight activities or retreats, youth and/or their guardians will be asked where the child will feel safest sleeping. When it is necessary for adults to share sleeping accommodations with the children or youth, guardians will be asked to approve a minimum of two adults who shall sleep in each area.
- Lights must be kept on except during specified sleeping hours or movie-watching.
- Overnights must have a designated lock time.

### *Affirmation and Pastoral Care*

- All one-to-one meetings between affirmand and mentor will occur at church and will be visible and subject to supervision.
- When a child or youth receives pastoral care, another HUCC adult must be present in the building.

### *Rides for Children and Youth*

- No one under the age of 21 years will be allowed to drive other participants to and from any church-sponsored activity.
- Screening is required of all drivers for authorized youth outings.
- When traveling as a group, all the authorized and approved cars in the caravan must follow a planned route and must arrange a plan of communication for the time of travel.
- Two screened non-related adults must be present at the church until all youth have been picked up.

### ***Congregational Conduct***

- Safe physical contact such as hugging must be in the presence of the guardians or screened volunteers.
- Will not date or become romantically involved with youth or vulnerable adults.
- Will not use or be under the influence of alcohol or drugs in the presence of youth or vulnerable adults.
- Will not have any inappropriate sexual materials with them at any church-related activities.
- Will not engage in inappropriate electronic communication of any kind with youth or vulnerable adults.
- Will not be one-on-one with youth or vulnerable adults in a private setting.
- Will not engage in any type of bullying behavior, physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, mental abuse, or neglect with youth or vulnerable adults.
- Will verbally acknowledge Safe Church Policy and agree verbally to comply when presented at worship annually.
- Will create a safe church environment by welcoming all and creating an inclusive community.
- Will communicate to the Safe Church Team if there is something the church needs to better understand in order for the church to feel safe for some.
- Guardians of youth or vulnerable adults shall be provided with the Safe Church Policy when they begin attending HUCC and they will be informed that it is our top priority for everyone to

be safe and feel comfortable. However, if there is suspicion of abuse, the church is committed to making formal reports to help ensure everyone is safe.

### ***Safe Church Team***

- Will consist of at least one Leadership Team member and two or more members of the church.
- Along with the Leadership Team, the Safe Church Team will provide ongoing review and implementation of the policy.
- Will undergo background checks during the first year on the Team.
- Will receive training on the issue of child abuse.
- Will conduct screening of staff, teachers, and volunteers who work with children, youth, and vulnerable populations.
- Will be responsible for organizing and scheduling education and training sessions, providing educational materials, and informing members of the church about educational and training sessions and materials available.
- Has the responsibility of receiving and acting on allegations of abuse.

### ***Reporting Allegations of Abuse***

All allegations of physical, sexual, emotional, mental, or verbal abuse of children and youth are to be taken seriously and resolved fully and responsibly.

While an allegation or investigation is pending for an individual volunteer or staff member, he or she must suspend activities within child, youth, or vulnerable adult programs at Holland UCC.

Volunteers, clergy, and other paid staff members working directly with children, youth, or vulnerable adults who have knowledge of or suspicion of abuse must report within 24 hours that knowledge or suspicion to a Safe Church Team member or Leadership Team member. Mandated reporters within the congregation are also asked to inform a Safe Church Team member or Leadership Team member, as well as the appropriate authorities. If they cannot report an incident to a member of the Team for any reason, they should immediately contact the local police department.

The Safe Church Team will, within 24 hours, contact the Michigan Child Protective Services at 855-444-3911, and the Holland Police Department at 911. When an allegation of abuse is made, the recipient of the report should write down what has been alleged using the abusee's/reporter's words. The reporter is to take down the information without asking investigative or leading questions. Leading questions can hurt the investigation. This report should be made available to the investigating authorities. Detailed information regarding reporting of abuse can be found at the Michigan Child Protective Services website: <https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/adult-child-serv/abuse-neglect/childrens/mandated-reporters/mandated-reporters-list>.

If appropriate, the alleged perpetrator will be given the courtesy of being informed that contact

with authorities has been made. In the event that said perpetrator is a minor, a parent or legal guardian will be notified. In addition, the Team will consult with the Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ when deemed appropriate by law enforcement.

In consultation with Michigan Child Protective Services and local law enforcement, a decision will be made as to whether the Safe Church Team will talk with the person or persons reporting the allegations.

The Police Department/Michigan Child Protective Services will be the investigative body and deal with the alleged perpetrator concerning the accusation.

The Team will cooperate with all aspects of the investigation and will share information with the church when possible.

If the alleged perpetrator is a member of the pastoral staff, the suspected activity will be reported to UCC leaders outside of the church, in this case to the Associate Conference Ministers serving the Grand West Association of the Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ.

The Team, in consultation with the investigative authorities, will determine when and how to best communicate the situation with the church.

One Team member will be designated as the only spokesperson for communication with the media if there are media requests for comment or information. During the investigative stage of any allegation, the church spokesperson should limit statements to the fact that the church takes any allegation seriously and is fully cooperating with authorities. Under no circumstances should a spokesperson discuss any aspect of a case.

After all the necessary investigative avenues have been followed, the Safe Church Team and others asked by the pastor will work to facilitate a healing process and foster a safe and affirming environment for the victims of the abuse, any falsely accused person(s), and for the entire church.

### ***Recurring and Continuing Education about Abuse***

Important components of a Safe Church Policy are recurring and age-appropriate education about child safety/child abuse prevention and the Holland UCC Safe Church Policy. Consistent and routine education will be provided to the church including our children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

The education and training component includes the following:

- The *Safe Church Policy* will be available to the entire church.
- The *Safe Church Policy* will be presented at an annual church training.
- A review of the *Safe Church Policy* for all Sunday School teachers and volunteers for child and youth activities as part of the regular recruitment process.
- The *Safe Church Policy* will be provided to new members.
- The *Safe Church Policy* will be posted online.
- Children, Youth, and Vulnerable Adults volunteers will be educated about abuse issues prior to beginning their ministries.