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## ***Children Discipleship Team – Report #2*** **North Alabama Conference** **Child Protection Policy**

### **1. Introduction**

The North Alabama Conference of The United Methodist Church seeks to create a safe environment for children and youth in which opportunities for abuse are minimized by the provision of proper enlistment and supervision of those persons working with them. This document contains theological foundations, definitions of child abuse, policies and procedures related to prevention, response, and reporting.

### **2. Theological Foundation**

“Then Jesus took a little child and put her among them; and taking her in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’” (paraphrase of Mark 9:36-37) Jesus also said, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones..., it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matthew 18:6)

The Church, above all institutions, is called to welcome and nurture the child. Our goal is to maintain a safe, secure, loving place where children may grow and where those who care for them may administer to their needs in responsible ways.

The 1996 General Conference approved a resolution that called upon local churches and annual conferences to institute policies and procedures to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse in our churches and church-related activities. We, in the North Alabama Conference, accept the nature of this call and seek to expand it to include all forms of child abuse or neglect that could be possible in these settings or that could come to our attention regarding children in our care.

We uphold the idea that to report abuse is to be a witness to the world of the love and justice of God and fully recognize that reporting abuse is a form of ministering to the needs of those crying out for help. Simply, to report abuse can help to stop existing and prevent further abuse.

As caring Christians, we are also committed to protect and advocate for children, youth, and vulnerable adults participating in the life of the church. The Church, at all levels of its organization, is entrusted with the responsibility of providing an emotionally and physically safe, spiritually grounded, healthy environment for children, youth, and adults in which they are protected from abuse. Additionally, we care for abused children and their families by offering resources that will contribute to healing. Further, we recognize the grace that God gives in upholding Christian community; and we will look for grace-filled ways of dealing with both the victim and the accused.

### 3. Definitions

**Child** - a person under 18 years of age (§ 26-16-2, Ala. Code 1975).

**Conference**-The North Alabama Conference of The United Methodist Church

**Volunteer** - a person 18 years of age or older who assists in conducting children's activities under the supervision of a staff person

**Paid staff** - any person employed by the Conference who is responsible for activities involving children

**Child abuse** - harm or threatened harm to a child's health or welfare by a person responsible for the child's health or welfare or by a person in a position of trust, which harm occurs or is threatened through non-accidental physical or mental injury or sexual abuse (§ 26-16-2, Ala. Code 1975)

**Sexual abuse** - any touching of the sexual or other intimate parts of a child or any other conduct or action done for the purpose of gratifying the sexual desire of either party either (1) through physical force that overcomes earnest resistance or a threat, express or implied, that places a child in fear of immediate death or serious physical injury to himself or another person, or (2) by a person 18 years old or older against another who is less than 16 years old, or by a person four or more years older than the victim (§ 13A-6-60, § 13A-6-66, Ala. Code 1975)

**Neglect** - Harm to a child's health or welfare by a person responsible for the child's health or welfare which occurs through negligent treatment, including the failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, or medical care (§ 26-16-2, Ala. Code 1975)

### 4. Screening and Supervisory Procedures and Policies

*Screening Procedures for Volunteer and Paid Staff working with Children*

All persons who intend to work with children at Conference-sponsored events must be properly screened and all screening documents kept on file.

- An application/personal information form shall be completed. It will include: name and address, social security number, date of birth, race, phone number, emergency contact information, gifts, skills, relevant experience/training, education, two work-related references, church membership and number of years, pastor's name and phone number and a brief statement of reason for seeking position.
- Applicant must sign agreement authorizing criminal background check and a drug/alcohol screen.
- Interviews will be conducted by the NAC Director of Children's/Youth Ministry or their representative.
- References will be checked. A background check should be provided for anyone staying overnight or longer. i.e. weekend retreats, summer camps.
- All staff persons staying overnight or longer will be required to attend an age-appropriate orientation/training session on child protection and abuse. Documentation of this training will be kept on file.

*Guidelines for Volunteer and Paid Staff working with Children at Conference-sponsored events:*

- It is our goal by the year 2005 that persons should be at least five (5) years older than the age group with whom they are to work.
- Persons should be eighteen (18) years of age or older with the following exceptions:
  - Summer Camp Counselors should be at least 16 years of age for summer 2003;
  - Summer Camp Counselors should be at least 17 years of age for summer 2004;
  - Summer Camp Counselors should be at least 18 years of age for summer 2005 and all successive years.
- Six month rule: Any volunteer working with children must be a member of a local church for at least six months.
- Two-adult rule: Two non-related adults must always be present in groups of children except in emergency situations and where not reasonably feasible.
- When the two-adult rule is not feasible, the adult supervisor will be required to spot check or make unannounced visits as necessary.
- Doors are never to be locked and are to remain open unless equipped with windows.
- Staff will avoid being alone with a child without being visible to others in the immediate surroundings.
- All staff will be required to read and sign that they understand the guidelines for working with children/youth at conference events.

## **5. Reporting Procedures**

With the exception of child daycare programs within the church setting, the Alabama statute on mandated reporting of suspected child abuse/neglect does not specifically require a faith-based ministry to report child abuse. The law does, however, encourage voluntary reporting. In keeping with Christian beliefs that children should not be abused or neglected, the North Alabama Conference ministries will practice and advocate voluntary compliance with the Alabama statute on mandated reporting of suspected abuse/neglect of children and vulnerable adults. Allegations of suspected abuse/neglect will be reported to the Department of Human Resources and local law enforcement. The North Alabama Conference will advocate for the adoption of this policy in the local church setting except in situations where making such a report would conflict with the Discipline. Nothing in the accomplishment of this policy is intended to call upon a pastor to violate the confidentiality of confession or clergy counseling relationships.

Being mindful of the complex nature of Child Abuse Reporting, training and consultation will be available to both clergy and laypersons to prepare them for a faithful response. Dual relationships will be included in this training/consultation, e.g., clergy who are also involved in secular agencies (foster care, mental health, etc.).

## **6. Response Procedures**

A quick, compassionate and unified response to an alleged incident of child abuse is expected. All allegations will be taken seriously. Conference personnel are not to undertake an investigation of the incident. However, in all cases of reported or observed abuse in a children's activity, the entire staff of that activity shall be at the service of all official investigating agencies.

The Bishop and/or his/her designee are the only person/s authorized to make statements to representatives of the media. All requests for statements should be directed to the Director of Communication. Training in how to handle media requests should be a regular part of Conference staff training. A spirit of cooperation in helping the media find the "official

spokesperson” is often helpful.

If the allegation concerns activities or persons outside any relationship to a Conference-related event or activity, it is the responsibility of the staff person in charge of the Conference activity to make the initial contact to the appropriate authorities and/or agencies.

If the allegation is against a Conference staff person or volunteer or if it occurred in the course of a Conference children’s activity, the staff person in charge of the children’s activity and the Conference Crisis Management Team shall be contacted immediately to determine if the Conference Crisis Management Plan should be implemented. (Camp Sumatanga will continue to use the Reporting of Incidents procedures already in place as well as the Injury/Accident Response procedures when appropriate.)

***Children’s Discipleship Team – Report #3***  
**North Alabama Conference**  
**Child Protection Policy Implementation Process**

- The Child Protection Policy will be presented for adoption on the floor of the Annual Conference during the Children’s Discipleship Report on June 4, 2003.
- The 12<sup>th</sup> annual National Observance of Children’s Sabbaths will take place October 17-19, 2003. Local churches are encouraged to celebrate a Children’s Sabbath and use that time to begin working toward a local church child protection policy.
- On Saturday, October 18, 2003 a training event will be led by Joy Melton, author of *Safe Sanctuaries*. This event will train 25-30 persons who will commit to offering several training times in their areas of the North Alabama Conference.
- Each church will be responsible for sending representative(s) to attend one of these regional training sessions.
- Local churches will adopt a child protection policy specific to their local congregation by Charge Conference 2004 or no later than Charge Conference 2005.
- Local churches will give account of their progress at Charge Conference 2004.