

Safe Sanctuary Policy for Messiah Lutheran Church

Adopted: 2/18/2025

Purpose and Intention

The purpose and intention of this policy is to reduce the risk for abuse to a child, youth, or vulnerable person during events and activities associated with Messiah Lutheran Church. Our faith calls us to offer hospitality and protection to all vulnerable people: children, youth, differently-abled, etc. This policy is one way we seek to live out this calling as people of faith.

Definitions

Abuse: physical, sexual, or emotional harm or risk of harm to a child under the age of 18 caused by a parent or other person who acts as a caregiver for the child (NJ.gov)

- Physical abuse: any physical injury to a child that is not accidental, such as beating, shaking, burns, and biting
- Emotional abuse: emotional injury when the child is not nurtured or provided with love and security, such as an environment of constant criticism, belittling, and persistent teasing
- Sexual abuse: any sexual activity between a child and an adult or between a child and another child at least four years older than them, including but not limited to verbal or physical activities such as fondling, exhibitionism, intercourse, incest, and pornography.

Neglect: occurs when a parent or caregiver fails to provide proper supervision for a child or adequate food, clothing, shelter, education, or medical care although financially able or assisted to do so (NJ.gov).

Recognizing the Signs of Abuse

Behavioral Signs

- Sudden changes in behavior or performance at church, school, or activities
- Withdrawal from friends or activities
- Regression to earlier behaviors (ex. Bed-wetting, thumb sucking)
- Unexplained fear of certain places or people

Physical Indicators

- Difficulty walking or sitting
- Bruises or injuries, especially those not explained, dismissed, or attempted to be covered up
- Frequent urinary or yeast infections or a general change in wellness

Emotional and Psychological Symptoms

- Depression and anxiety
- Anger and hostility
- Unusual fear of phobias, especially those not explained
- Sudden loss of self-control

Risk Factors and Vulnerable Populations

- Children and Youth often lack the experience or power to resist or report abuse
- Individuals with disabilities who may have physical or communication challenges making it harder for them to report abuse
- Isolated environments such as camps or retreats where supervision may be less strict and can pose higher risks

Requirements for Volunteers and Staff

Age Requirements

All volunteers and staff members must be at least 21 years of age and at least 5 years older than the oldest child/youth they are supervising.

- Exceptions may be considered for teenagers who are volunteering provided there is adult supervision.

Membership Requirements

All volunteers working with children/youth should be a voting member of the congregation for a minimum of six months and attend worship on a regular basis to maintain active voting membership status as outlined in C8.02c of the Constitution.

- Exceptions to this may be considered on a case by case basis and must be presented for approval to the Church Council ahead of the event or activity.

References and Background Checks

Staff members working directly with children/youth should have references and background checks completed by a member of the Congregation Council and paid for by the church before beginning their employment.

Volunteers are required to have background checks in the scenario where they are taking children/youth to overnight events away from the church property. This includes but is not limited to: Cross Roads Camp and Retreat, New Jersey Synod Youth Events, and the ELCA National Youth Gathering.

Anyone with a history of sexually-oriented or sex-related crimes may not, in any capacity, work with children/youth. Those with other past criminal acts may be considered on a case by case basis which will be brought before the Congregation Council or appointed Personnel Committee as needed.

Sexual Abuse Awareness Training

Volunteers and staff members may be asked to undergo training on child protection and sexual abuse prevention based on needs and requirements for insurance and event participation purposes.

- This will be communicated to volunteers and staff and will be facilitated by the appropriate organizations or individuals as needed.

Guidelines for Events and Activities

Open-Door Policy

All events and activities must embody an Open-Door Policy, meaning any room being used for a conversation, class, or event should have at least one open door to the public for anyone to observe or walk through at any time.

- This allows adults and children/youth to feel comfortable and confident with one another. It prevents opportunities for abuse but also allows for visibility in situations where a child or adult feels disrespected or mistreated by the other.

Supervision of Children and Youth

It is advised for there to always be at minimum, a ratio of 2 to 1 with an open-door policy for ministry events and activities. There should be at least 3 people present to meet the minimum 2 to 1.

- As often as possible, there should be two non-related adult leaders and chaperones for events and activities hosted by the church.

For events that require a chaperone (overnight or off-site) the New Jersey Synod Guidelines recommends a ratio of 5 children/youth to 1 adult. As much as possible, chaperones should reflect the gender identities of the participants.

Transportation

Anyone looking to transport children or youth on behalf of the congregation must be over the age of 21 and provide a valid driver's license to be kept on file in the church office along with proof of insurance for the vehicle driven. While transporting youth and children, seat belts must be worn by everyone in the vehicle and all traffic and transportation laws must be obeyed.

Anyone with a history of driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol will not be permitted to transport vulnerable persons on behalf of the church.

Permission and Health Forms

Anyone under the age of 18 should have a signed permission and health form for transportation and/or participation in off-site events. Health forms may be required for on-site events but any pertinent health and medical concerns should always be conveyed to chaperones and leaders of the event. A copy of these forms will be kept in the church office. In the event of an incident where the medical form becomes necessary, a parent or guardian will be contacted immediately.

Social and Visual Media

Anyone under the age of 18 or who cannot give their own consent must have a photo release form signed by a parent or guardian, submitted to the church giving permission for photos to be taken and/or shared.

When sharing photos on social media or posting them for public view, vulnerable persons should never be identified with a name or tag. Special care should be taken to ensure names or identifying factors are not visible in the photo, or are removed/covered

up before sharing. This includes but is not limited to: school information, name (first or last), sports team, etc.

All photos should be appropriate and in the spirit of the ministry event. Should any parent or guardian request a photo to be removed, it must be done so immediately by the first person able to accommodate the request.

Communication

When communicating by email, phone, or text with anyone under the age of 18, a parent or guardian must be copied. For conversations, a parent, guardian, or other member of the congregation should be within earshot. In the event a private pastoral conversation is needed, the parent or guardian must give consent and as much as possible, the open-door policy should remain in effect.

If an adult leader receives a private communication, the leader should make every effort to include a parent or guardian or move the conversation from a private space into a public one.

Reporting Suspected Abuse

Messiah Lutheran Church is committed to protecting children, youth, and vulnerable persons in this ministry from any form of abuse. We have a Zero-Tolerance Policy that prohibits any act of sexual, emotional, or physical abuse and requires all volunteers and staff members to immediately report any occurrence or suspected occurrence of abuse.

What to do in the event of a suspected incident

- Support and believe the victim. First, ensure their safety. If necessary, remove the accused immediately from the situation.
- Call the pastor, event coordinator, or Congregation Council representative as appropriate.
- Call any appropriate law or safety enforcement.
- An incident report will be filed and kept on record at the church.

How to report suspected misconduct of a rostered minister (pastor or deacon)

- Call Bishop of New Jersey Synod: 609-586-5995 or 609-586-6800
- New Jersey Synod Office: 609-586-6800 and ask to speak to an Assistant to the Bishop

New Jersey Reporting:

- If child is in immediate danger, call 911 as well as 1-877-NJABUSE (1-877-652-2873)
 - You will be asked who, what, when, where, and how. Be prepared to give as much information as possible for the safety of the individual.

All volunteers fully understand and agree to these guidelines and will strive to live by them to the best of their ability.