

Safe Place—Child Abuse Prevention Policy

Saint Luke Lutheran Church
109 Oak Avenue
Ithaca, NY 14850

Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes [a] child welcomes me.” (Matthew 18.5). Children and youth are our present and our future, our hope, our teachers, our inspiration. They are full participants in the life of Jesus and the realm of God, and full members of this church family.

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). Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to the little ones, the children and the youth.

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children and youth. Sexual abuse and exploitation occur in churches large and small, urban and rural. The problem cuts across all economic, cultural, and racial lines. Every congregation has among its participants adult survivors of early sexual trauma. Because churches are welcoming places, predators look at churches as an easy “field,” hoping to operate undetected.

Such incidents are devastating to all who are involved: the child or youth, the family, the local congregation and its leaders. Increasingly, congregations are torn apart by the legal, emotional, and financial consequences of litigation following allegations of abuse.

God calls us to make our churches safe places, protecting children, youth, and other vulnerable persons from sexual abuse. God calls us to create communities of faith where children and adults grow safe and strong, thriving in the promises of baptism.

Thus, St. Luke Lutheran Church, Ithaca, NY adopts this policy for the prevention of child abuse in this congregation.

I. PURPOSE AND COVENANT STATEMENT

A. Purpose

Our purpose for establishing this Child Abuse Prevention Policy and accompanying procedures is to demonstrate our total and unwavering commitment to the physical, emotional, and spiritual safety of all our children and youth.

B. Covenant Statement

St. Luke Lutheran Church hereby pledges to conduct the ministry of Jesus Christ in ways that assure the physical and emotional safety and spiritual growth of all participating children and youth, as well as all of those who work with children and youth. We will follow reasonable safety measures when selecting and recruiting workers; we will implement appropriate operational procedures in all areas of programming and care; we will train those who work with children and youth on the procedures and policies herein; and we will have a clearly defined procedure for reporting a suspected incident of abuse consistent with New York State law.

II. STAFF RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

A. Primary Leaders

Primary Leaders are volunteers and paid staff (especially clergy) who have primary leadership responsibilities for ministry with children and youth.

B. Secondary Leaders

Secondary Leaders are volunteers and paid staff who exercise their gifts by working with children and youth on an occasional basis.

C. Age

Volunteers and paid staff who work with children and youth as *Primary Leaders* must be at least 21 years of age and at least 5 years older than the age of the persons they are working to serve. *Secondary Leaders* may be of any age, generally but not necessarily older than the persons they are working to serve, and directly supervised by a *Primary Leader*.

D. Membership

Primary Leaders must be active members of St. Luke, as defined in the congregational constitution. *Secondary Leaders* may be student members, associate members, or full members as defined in the congregational constitution, or active participants in the life of the congregation. In all cases, the pastoral staff and members of the Parish Education Committee reserve the right to recommend and interview potential leaders, as well as check reference and background information for any person wishing to serve as a leader with children and youth.

E. Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

St. Luke Lutheran Church is a Reconciling in Christ congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. As such, we encourage God's children of all sexual orientations and gender identities to share their gifts of leadership in ministry with children and youth. Throughout this document, references to the gender of children, youth, and leaders denote a person's self-identification.

F. Application

All *Primary Leaders* are required to complete an application and related waivers giving permission to check references and background information. *Secondary Leaders* will be interviewed by members of the Parish Education committee to assess appropriate leadership positions for each individual. At the discretion of the Parish Education Committee, *Secondary Leaders* over the age of 16 may also be requested to sign waivers giving permission to check references and background information. Volunteers under the age of 16 will be assessed based primarily on recommendations coming from within the church family.

G. Reference Checks

Church leaders will check three references for each Primary Leader. The references will be done by phone, mail, or in person.

The "Children and Youth Worker's Reference" form will be filled out by the person conducting the reference check.

H. Background Checks

Criminal background checks shall be made of all clergy, paid staff, and volunteer Primary Leaders, as well as all other church employees, to the extent permitted by law, prior to employment, to determine current or historic child abuse or sexual misconduct, criminal records, violent or pedophilic behavior.

I. Prior Convictions

Individuals who have been convicted of physical or sexual abuse or neglect may not work in any church-sponsored activity or program involving children or youth.

J. Interview

All applicants must be interviewed for suitability for the work they desire to do. Interviews will be conducted by a pastor or Parish Education Committee member). A team of interviewers may be involved. Church policy and guidelines will be discussed during the interview.

K. Child Abuse Survivor Applicants

Adult survivors of childhood physical or sexual abuse need the love and acceptance of this church family. A person's experience with abuse and their recovery process may be pertinent to their suitability as workers in youth and children's ministry. Applicants who are survivors of abuse should discuss this in confidence with the person who conducts the application interview. If an applicant is uncomfortable doing so, s/he may have the interview conducted by another pastor or member of the Parish Education Committee.

L. Confidentiality of Information

The church will keep confidential all information received in the applicant selection process. Selection information will be marked as such and stored in a locked location with limited access afforded only to church staff and others with need to know. The pastor responsible for Children, Youth and Family Ministry is responsible for the implementation of these policies as well as the maintenance of confidential records.

M. Required Forms and Signatures

In addition to *Primary Leader* application and reference forms, all applicants for *Primary Leader* will sign "Authorization and Request for Criminal Background Check" and "Participation Covenant Statement" forms as part of the application process.

III. STAFF SUPERVISION

All meetings of children and/or youth affiliated with St. Luke Lutheran Church will be governed by the following:

A. Two Adult Rule

At least two approved adults must be present at all times. This applies to classroom activities, activities away from the church facility and when transporting children and youth. The safety of children increases exponentially with the number of adults present. In the case of Church School classes, two adults, or one adult over 21 and one older teen/young adult will be recruited to team teach in each room. Other groups of children and/or youth will have at least two adult leaders present. When feasible, both male and female leaders will be present. If a group stays overnight at the church, or if a church sponsored group leaves the premises, two or more adults over 21, one of whom must be a primary leader, must be present and must include at least one male and female if the group is of mixed gender.

B. Open Door Policy

Further protection for children requires that an open door policy be followed. This policy states that the parents of children served, the clergy, council members, and members of the Parish Education Committee have the right to visit and observe the children's/youth activity, classroom, or church-sponsored program at any time, unannounced.

C. Outside Access

Doors to the building will be locked as appropriate for any gathering of children and/or youth to prevent access by those who are not part of the gathering. There must be access to a telephone, cell phone, or pager when groups are at or away from the church facility. The church office or authorized church representative will be given this number prior to the group's departure from church property.

D. Doors and Windows

All classroom and office doors will have a window or visibility from hallway or remain open while occupied. All classroom and office doors will remain unlocked when in use. Ground floor windows will be kept free from adornment and kept locked at all times. Blinds on the nursery and office windows will remain open except when children or youth are present when it is dark outside.

E. Individual Counseling

One-on-one interactions are sometimes necessary and appropriate but care must be taken that they be conducted in an environment that provides visibility by other adults. If at all possible, another adult is to have knowledge of staff members' whereabouts and with whom they are meeting. Children and youth receiving individual counseling should be told they are free to discuss any aspects of the counseling process with a parent or other adult, especially if they are uncomfortable about anything that occurs in counseling. All incidents of suspected abuse and neglect revealed during the session will be reported in accordance with section IV of this policy.

F. Touch

1. Physical affection should be appropriate to the age of the child or youth. For example, it is generally appropriate for a four-year-old to snuggle next to an adult, but it is not appropriate for a teenager and youth leader to behave in the same way.
2. Touching should be initiated by the child or youth. It should be a response to the child's need for comforting, encouragement, or affection. The adult should always ask for permission to touch the child. It is never appropriate for the adult to base a touch on their own emotional need.
3. Ideally, touching and affection should only be given when in the presence of other adults; it is much less likely that touches will be misconstrued as inappropriate. This is especially important when diapering a baby or helping a young child change clothes or use the restroom.
4. A child's preference to not be touched should be respected. Do not force affection upon a reluctant child.
5. *Primary Leaders* and *Secondary Leaders* are responsible to protect children under their supervision from inappropriate touching by others.
6. Leaders must promptly discuss inappropriate touching or other questionable behavior by adults or older children with leaders of the activity, a pastor, or a member of the Parish Education Committee.

G. Outings Away from Church Property

1. All children and youth participating in any event off the church property without a parent or guardian present, including in-town, out-of-town and overnight outings, must have a written consent form and a medical release form signed by a parent or legal guardian. These forms may be completed for a one-year period, renewed annually.
2. There must always be access to a phone, cell phone, or pager when groups are away from the church property.
3. If the outing involves activities such as swimming or boating, a certified lifeguard will accompany the group.
4. In no circumstance is one adult to take a child or children on an overnight outing alone.
5. On youth overnight outings, there will be a 1:7 adult:youth ratio.
6. Female adults will supervise female youth in their sleeping quarters; male staff will supervise male youth.
7. Married couples will not stay together, but observe the gender specific sleeping arrangements.

8. With the exception of a parent/child combination, an adult and youth will never occupy the same bed or sleeping bag.

Classroom Discipline

1. It is expected that all leaders will observe the following:
2. If a child is behaving inappropriately, the leader will tell the child specifically what s/he is doing that is not acceptable and state what the expected behavior is. "We do not throw blocks. We use blocks for building."
3. If this measure is not effective, the child will be guided to another activity.
4. If inappropriate behavior continues, the child may be moved to a space away from other children.
5. If disruptive behavior continues, a pastor or Parish Education Committee member is notified. That person will work with the child and his/her parents.
6. No physical punishment or verbal abuse (e.g., ridicule) are to be used at any time.
7. If isolating the child within the classroom or removal of the child from the room becomes necessary, the situation will be discussed with the child's parent(s) or guardian as soon as possible.
8. The pastors will be notified of any incident that requires isolation or removal.

Gifts

No leader of ministry with children and youth, paid or unpaid, is to give gifts to individual children or youth without the prior knowledge of parent(s) or responsible clergy. Because gift giving can be a form of buying loyalty or silence, gift giving should be done on a group basis, or for special occasions only. Gifts may not be elaborate, but should be modest and appropriate to the occasion.

Social Media and Electronic Communication

1. All leaders will keep in mind that their presence on Social Media is public and forever retrievable. The children in our care are watching, listening, and reading.
2. Post only what is edifying and reflective of our faith.
3. Do not "friend" a child without permission of their parent or guardian.
4. Never send a private message (text, e-mail, social media, or otherwise) without copying a parent or other adult.
5. If you suspect that a child or youth is engaging in dangerous activity, please notify a pastor.

Photography

Every parent is asked whether or not they give permission for photos of their children to be used on the St. Luke website and other electronic forms of communication. Leaders are to respect the wishes of parents and not post pictures of their children if so indicated.

When taking photos:

1. Group shots are best.
2. Use side shots and profiles, not face-on.
3. Before posting, make sure nobody in the picture will be embarrassed (hand in a funny place, etc.). If in doubt, ask the person in question for their permission or refusal to post.
4. Remove anyone who does not have permission to post a photo. Lists will be provided.
5. Blur any identifying features, such as nametags, before posting.
6. Make sure a post does not include any clear indication of location, by tagging the location or showing signs, etc.

Training

Prior to working with children and youth, both *Primary Leaders* and *Secondary Leaders* are required to participate in child protection safety training. Depending upon the circumstances, this may take the form of a formal boundaries awareness workshop (especially for clergy and paid staff), a video course, online course, or in-house training, or, especially in the case of teens, discussion with clergy.

Verification of Reading of Policy Statement

Upon receipt of this policy statement, the volunteer or paid staff person will read and sign a statement that s/he has read, understands, and intends to abide by this Safe Church: Child Abuse Protection Policy of St. Luke Lutheran Church.

IV. RESPONSE OF CHURCH WORKERS TO ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE

As caring Christians, we are committed to protect and advocate for children/youth participating in the life of the church. The church is entrusted to provide an emotionally safe, spiritually grounded, healthy environment for children, youth, and adults in which they are protected from abuse. It is our legal and moral responsibility to report suspected abuse whenever it comes to our attention, regardless of where that abuse takes place. We shall report suspected abuse to stop potentially existing abuse and to prevent further abuse. To report abuse is to witness to the world of the love and justice of God.

Reporting abuse is a form of ministering to the needs of those crying out for help. If abuse occurs, it is our intention to act as an advocate for all affected persons, providing support, information, assistance, and intervention. We seek to provide a supportive atmosphere, offering both objectivity and empathy as we seek to create a climate in which healing can take place. If abuse is suspected by, observed by, or disclosed to a volunteer and/or paid staff member of the church, that person shall report the incident immediately to a pastor or designee. (If the accused is a pastor, see information below.) Be prepared to do the following:

A. Ensure the protection of and tend to the immediate needs of the child or youth, as the situation requires.

B. IMMEDIATELY contact a St. Luke pastor. In the absence of a pastor, or if the pastor is the accused abuser, contact the Council chairperson.

C. IMMEDIATELY notify the adult in charge of the event. In consultation with the pastor or Council chairperson, this person will:

1. Provide written documentation concerning the incident on the designated form and give it to the pastor or chair of Council.

2. Notify Child Protective Services at

Statewide Toll Free Telephone Number:

1-800-342-3720

If you are deaf or hard of hearing, call TDD/TTY at

1-800-638-5163

or have your Video Relay System provider call

1-800-342-3720

If you believe that a child is in **immediate danger**, call **911** or your local police department.

This is a requirement of the law. (Note: Do not attempt an investigation. This should be left to professionals who are familiar with these cases.)

D. The pastor or chair of Council will notify the parents of the victim and take whatever steps are necessary to assure the safety of the child/youth until the parent(s) arrive. It is important to emphasize that the proper authorities must be notified even if the parent(s) do not wish the incident to be reported. *(Note: If one or both of the parents is the alleged abuser, contact the proper authorities listed above. Follow their advice about notification of the parents.)*

E. After having reported the alleged abuse to the proper authorities, the incident is to be reported immediately to the church's attorney, the church's insurance company, and the Bishop of the Upstate New York Synod. **Do not try to handle this without assistance from the Bishop's office.**

F. A list of emergency numbers will be available to the staff at all times.

G. If the accused is working in a volunteer or paid position with children or youth in the church, immediately, yet with dignity and respect for the sacred worth of the person, remove the accused from further involvement with children and/or youth.

H. Once the proper authorities have been contacted and the safety of the child or youth is secured, the pastor or other designated person may tell the accused that a report has been made. If the accused is a volunteer or paid staff of the church, that person shall be relieved temporarily of his or her duties until the investigation is finished. If the accused is a paid staff person of the church, arrangements should be made to either maintain or suspend his or her income until the allegations are cleared or substantiated.

I. Any contact with the media should be handled by a pre-determined spokesperson. Care will be taken to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of all involved. The spokesperson should generally convey that the matter is under investigation and any comments made prior to the conclusion of the investigation would be premature. **Consult the Bishop's office before making any comments or posting any information!**

J. A written report (hard copy) of the basic information shall be kept to ensure on-going ministry to, and advocacy for, victims and other involved. A form for this purpose shall be available in the church office. The report shall be brief and contain only factual information relevant to the situation. It shall be filed in a secure place in order to ensure confidentiality. It shall be written in ink or typed to prevent it from being changed. The church will file a copy of the report with the office of the Bishop of the Upstate New York Synod, where it shall remain confidential.