

Safe Church Covenant
Policies Concerning Child Safety and Sexual Misconduct
Takoma Park Presbyterian Church

July 1997; revised September 2004; revised 2016; revised December 2018

As the one who calls you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct. 1 Peter 1:15

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believes in me, 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 18:5-6

Purpose

The Christian church is called to express and give witness to the love of God through Word and action. Expressions of God's love are revealed to us through worship, study, prayer, and fellowship. Through this type of ministry together, the Christian community connects us to the most intimate, vulnerable, and sacred dimensions of our lives. The work of building God's new creation is done by church members (both adult and children), clergy, and church staff.

Jesus affirmed the uniqueness and value of each child. He took time to play with children. He also affirmed the responsibility of adults to care for children. The Session, pastor, employees and members of the Takoma Park Presbyterian Church (TPPC) recognize and believe that the Church is a community of trust, and that the Church is a place where children and adults experience security, love, and acceptance of the Christian Community.

Takoma Park Presbyterian Church is an LGBTQ affirming congregation and a member of More Light Presbyterians. We believe that all people were created by God. God values all human life equally, and we respect the worth and dignity of all human beings—children, women, and men.

Central to the Reformed faith is the concept of Covenant. God entered into a covenant with the Church. We covenant with one another, and the promises we make are sacred. In the covenant of baptism, individuals and the congregation take responsibility for the spiritual health and well-being of children entrusted to the believing community. In the covenant that takes place during communion, the cup and bread represent our commitment to remembering the new covenant Jesus created with his friends and disciples.

Because of the nature of relationships between church members, staff, and clergy, and the vulnerability that arises from sharing our faith and lives together, the church can potentially be a place where individuals engage in abusive, inappropriate, and illegal behaviors and actions with other members of the TPPC community.

The purpose of this Safe Church Covenant is to address the presence of abuse, sexual exploitation, and harassment in our social and ecclesiastical culture in a proactive manner. Survivors and victims of sexual misconduct experience a rupture in their sense of belonging and identity within a community of faith. To protect potential victims and accused persons, and to assure that Jesus' affirmation of children and the promises the congregation makes in baptism are honored, the Covenant will be in force in all areas of the Takoma Park Presbyterian Church ministry.

This Covenant applies to all employees, members, and participants in the life of Takoma Park Presbyterian Church. It covers all interactions on the church premises and among church members and friends while away from the premises on activities related to the church.

Takoma Park Presbyterian Church Pastors, Parish Associates/Assistants, and Certified Christian Educators are also subject to the terms of the Clergy and Certified Christian Educators Sexual Misconduct Policy of the National Capital Presbytery.

Definition

In this Covenant, children and youth refer to all persons who are under the age of 18.

This Covenant also covers:

- a) anyone over the age of 18 years who is unable to consent; or
- b) any person when the conduct includes force, threat, coercion, intimidation, or misuse of ordered ministry or position.

Sexual misconduct is the comprehensive term used in this Covenant to include:

- Sexual abuse or exploitation of children or adults
- Rape or sexual assault
- Sexual harassment

Sexual misconduct is an abuse of authority and power, breaching Christian ethical practices by misusing a trust relationship to gain advantage over another for personal gratification. Such behavior is not limited to physical contact, but may also include gestures, spoken words, or written contact.

Sexual abuse includes unsolicited and unwelcome contact that has sexual overtones and is done for the purposes of sexual stimulation. This behavior is always considered forced when the interaction involves a child and an adult, even if the child has expressed consent. This is also true in the case of any adult who is incapable of appraising the nature of the conduct or communicating unwillingness to be subject to unwelcome sexual interaction.

- Types of abuse that involve touching include: intentional touching; pinching; fondling; oral, genital, and anal penetration; intercourse; rape.
- Types of abuse that do not involve touching include: verbal comments, such as sexually suggestive or obscene comments, threats, slurs, epithets, jokes about gender-specific traits, sexual propositions; pornographic videos; obscene phone calls; allowing children to witness sexual activity; obscene or sexually suggestive letters, notes, emails, or invitations; leering or staring at another's body; displaying sexually suggestive objects or images.

Sexual Harassment includes unwanted attention or unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a condition or circumstance of instruction, employment, personnel-related decisions, or participation in any church activity, or when such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's performance or participation in church activities or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work or church environment.

Child abuse is defined by the legal codes of the State of Maryland as “physical or mental injury of a child by a parent or other person who has permanent or temporary care or custody or supervision of the child, under circumstances that indicate the child’s health or welfare is harmed or at substantial risk of being harmed.” MD Fam.Law Code Ann. § 5-701 (2015)

Supervision and Accountability

Volunteers

All volunteers who work with children and youth (such as Sunday School teachers, youth group volunteers, confirmation mentors, etc.) shall review and sign the Covenant prior to working with youth or children. All volunteers working with children and youth on a regular basis will have a full criminal background check. Signed Covenants (for all the categories listed in this document) and background checks for those who work regularly with children and youth will be housed in the TPPC Personnel files.

All elders and deacons will review and sign the Covenant at their annual retreat. The clerk of session may present this document for review at the retreat and may request support from the pastor and the Personnel Committee if further training is deemed necessary.

The Chair of the Christian Education Ministry will work with the Director of Youth Ministry to ensure Sunday School teachers and other volunteers have reviewed and signed the Safe Church Covenant. In the event that both of those positions are unfilled, the Personnel Committee, in consultation with the Pastor, will oversee these responsibilities.

Staff

New TPPC staff will receive orientation on the Covenant; they will review it and sign it.

The Pastor, Parish Associates/Assistants, and Director of Youth Ministry shall attend, at least once every three years, a seminar offered by National Capital Presbytery, or another source satisfactory to the NCP Response Coordinating Team, on issues of sexual misconduct and healthy boundaries. The Director of Youth Ministry shall be required to attend a denominational sexual misconduct training within the first six months of employment if s/he cannot provide documentation of training in the last three years.

The PC-USA requires that all candidates for ordained pastoral positions include a criminal background check. All other TPPC staff working with children and youth, and TPPC staff who are regularly on-site during the hours the child care center is open, will be subject to a child care criminal history background check administered through the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services of Maryland.

The TPPC Pastor, as head of staff, will ensure that staff and Parish Associates/Assistants receive Safe Church Covenant orientation and the required trainings. National Capital Presbytery (NCP) also ensures compliance of all minister members of NCP through the NCP Response Coordinating Team.

TPPC recognizes that loving consensual relationships between TPPC non-pastoral staff and adult congregants may occasionally occur. Because of the potential for abuse of power in such relationships, a staff member shall report to the Pastor and the Chair of Personnel Ministry if s/he becomes involved in a romantic or sexual relationship with another TPPC staff member or member of the congregation.

Communication

The Covenant will be distributed to the congregation in a variety of ways, to include the following:

- Provided to staff and volunteers during orientation and training
- Included in the Annual Report
- Posted in the back of the church on the bulletin board
- Posted on the TPPC website

A brochure summarizing key points of the Covenant will be:

- Provided to parents and guardians when they enroll children in Sunday School or youth group
- Included in new member packets

Limited Access Agreements

Recognizing that church can be a place of restoration of healing, we welcome all who wish to worship at TPPC. To ensure that church remains a safe place for all, any adult or youth who has been convicted of either child abuse or sexual abuse and who wishes to attend worship services and/or otherwise participate in church activities, will be subject to a Limited Access Agreement such as the one appended to this policy.

Standards of Conduct for Ministry with Children and Youth

All persons who work in any way with children and youth at TPPC shall demonstrate respect and integrity for each individual child and will maintain behavior that supports children's growth in faith and emotional stability.

Who May Work with Children

An adult or youth who has been convicted of child abuse or sexual misconduct will be subject to a Limited Access Agreement and therefore may not serve as a volunteer in any church sponsored activity for youth and children.

Volunteers in all church programming with children and youth shall be members or friends of the church and shall have worshipped and participated in church activities for not less than six months prior to beginning volunteer service.

Signing this Covenant is an affirmation of not having resigned from or been terminated from any volunteer or paid position for reasons relating to child abuse or sexual misconduct.

Physical Contact and Discipline

Sunday School teachers, youth advisors, nursery workers, and other volunteers and staff shall not touch or interact with children or youth in any way that is intended to be or could be construed to be sexually stimulating. Physical expressions of affection shall not be excessive or imposed upon another individual. However, common expressions of affection (hugs), affirmation (pat on the back), support (prayer), or physical care taking (diaper changing, etc.) are appropriate as long as respect for others' personal wishes about being touched are honored.

Sunday School teachers, youth advisors, nursery supervisors and helpers shall discipline with kindness and with the goal of helping children develop a sense of responsibility and self-control. Appropriate discipline establishes clear expectations, provides rewards and incentives for

acceptable behavior and uses verbal disapproval, loss of privileges and redirection to teach children acceptable behavior.

Corporal punishment shall not be used; this includes but is not limited to slapping, spanking, pinching and/or shaking. Punitive techniques that cause physical pain such as assuming an uncomfortable position are not appropriate. Derogatory remarks or comments that humiliate or frighten the child shall not be used. Physical restraint of children should be used only when someone's safety is at risk. The church encourages the use of positive discipline, focused on teaching constructive behavior, as well as open and patient discussion with students about what is acceptable in the classroom.

Supervision

At least two adults must be present with children and youth during all TPPC activities, including Sunday School classes, youth group activities, worship, and church social activities. If unforeseen situations arise preventing that, a teacher may work alone when there is visual access to the classroom (door with window or open door). This is for the safety and protection of children as well as adults. It is also a requirement of TPPC's insurance policies.

It is strongly preferable that when only two adults are present with children at a church-related activity, the adults are not members of the same family.

On those occasions when private conversation is appropriate, such as between a confirmation student and mentor, the adult should notify the child's parent in advance of where and when the meeting will take place. Such meetings should take place in public where the adult and youth are fully visible to other people. Pastoral staff and the Director of Youth Ministry may meet one-to-one with youth for counseling purposes, so long as another adult is present in the TPPC office suite, and the staff member remains visible through the window in the closed door.

All children and youth participating in church-sponsored activities, including transportation to and from such activities, shall have the written permission of the child's parents or guardian. Child safety restraints in cars as required by law shall be used for all children. When driving children and youth, it is recommended that they be transported as a group. During a church-sponsored activity, no unaccompanied adult shall transport a single child.

All overnight activities must have a minimum of two adults present; for mixed youth overnights there must be both a woman and man present. Written permission from a parent or guardian is required for all overnights.

Reporting and Consequences

The TPPC response to allegations of sexual misconduct shall be coordinated by the Safe Church Covenant Response Team. The Team will be composed of the Pastor, Chair of Personnel Ministry, Chair of Christian Education, and the Clerk of Session.

Any person witnessing or having reasonable suspicion of a violation of this Covenant shall report the information immediately to a member of the TPPC Response Team. That member will share the information with other members of the Team. The Pastor will notify the parents or legal custodian of the victim.

Any allegation of child abuse must be reported immediately to Child Protective Services. Any criminal acts must be reported to the police immediately in accordance with Maryland law. The church will cooperate to the fullest with any law enforcement entity.

Charges of non-criminal sexual misconduct against an adult will be prepared in writing and filed with the Clerk of Session. *The Book of Order*, D-10.0404 (and following), outlines the procedural and disciplinary actions that will follow. If a non-pastoral staff member or volunteer is the subject of an allegation of a violation of this Covenant, the TPPC Response Team shall conduct an investigation of the reported incident or charge. All interviews shall be conducted in a timely manner. The Response Team shall treat the allegation(s) seriously and be sensitive to the welfare of all involved.

If an investigation confirms that misconduct has occurred, the Team shall consult with the Presbytery Response Team for guidance, advise the Session, and take such actions as are necessary to investigate and resolve the matter. Those persons involved in the report or investigation should hold information received in strict confidence, subject to such disclosures as are required by law. Information will only be discussed with those on a need-to-know status.

Misconduct will result in a written warning being placed in the employee's personnel file. Consequences may range from periodic reviews to an employee being terminated or a volunteer being relieved of his or her responsibilities.

If a person wishes to file a complaint against the Pastor, Parish Assistant/Associate, or Certified Christian Educator, it is to be lodged with the Stated Clerk of Presbytery. The Clerk of Session may facilitate this process, but the complaint must be written by the offended.

Mandated reporters who know or have reason to believe that a child has been subject to abuse/neglect are required by law to report that information to the Office of Child Protective Services in Montgomery County at 240-777-4417. (Any employee who works with children or their families in Maryland is a mandated reporter).

Volunteers who work with children or families and who know or have reason to believe that a child has been subject to abuse/neglect are strongly urged to contact Child Protective Services and the TPPC Response Team. (Volunteers are not mandated reporters).

The Team shall ensure that TPPC's insurance company is notified if required by the current insurance policy.

Covenant

I, _____ have read and understand the standards and guidelines set forth in this Safe Church Covenant. Out of my faith commitment and understanding that church is to provide for all people, children and adults, a place of safety and trust, a place where the meaning of the faith can be experienced within the community's life, I do covenant to abide by the provisions of this Safe Church Covenant.

Printed name _____

Address _____

Date _____

Signature _____

Bibliography

Videos: *Hear their Cries: Religious Responses to Child Abuse* and *Bless our Children: Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse*. Produced by the Center for the Prevention of Domestic and Sexual Violence, Seattle, Washington. Available at the National Capital Presbytery Office for Christian Education committees, parents, and teachers.

Policies

Safe Church Policy, Christ Congregational Church, 2011

Clergy and Certified Christian Educators Sexual Misconduct Policy, National Capital Presbytery, 2010

Safe Church Policy Concerning Abuse Prevention, Pilgrim United Church of Christ, 2007

Sample 1, A Child Protection Policy Statement, provided by NCP

Sample 2, Sexual Misconduct & Child Protection Covenant, provided by NCP

Websites

<https://www.thepresbytery.org/documents/child-protection-policies>

Sample Limited Access Agreement

Takoma Park Presbyterian Church affirms the dignity and worth of all persons. We are committed to being a religious community open to those in need of worshipping God with us, especially in times of serious personal troubles. The following stipulations are designed to reduce the risk to both you and the congregation of an incident or accusation. We welcome you to our congregation and our membership, but your participation will be limited to ensure the safety of our members and friends, and to assure that you will not be subject to future accusations.

Within the following terms, the congregation welcomes your participation only in the following venues:

Worship services

Coffee hour

Congregational social events and meetings

Adult education

Choir

Terms

You are to remain in the presence of one of a selected list of adult members at all times. One specific individual must be scheduled by you to be present with you at any given event.

You shall not have unsupervised contact with minors on congregation property or congregation-sponsored events.

You shall not be alone in any church building with any of the staff persons of Takoma Park Presbyterian Church, or those of any of our contractual partners or tenants.

You will not be permitted keys to any church building.

You will sign a release allowing the Pastor and Session to contact your treatment providers, officers of the court, and representatives of the correction system to inquire about the level of risk of re-offending that you might pose.

The Pastor and Session of Takoma Park Presbyterian Church reserve the right, if deemed necessary, to require that you go for one or more assessments with professional(s) agreed upon by the Session, at your expense.

The Pastor and Session of Takoma Park Presbyterian Church reserve the right to disclose your criminal history when and to whom the Pastor and Session deem appropriate.

Agreement

I have reviewed this covenant and agree to abide by its provisions. I understand and agree that if I violate this agreement, I will be denied access to future church functions and church property, and the Church will be entitled to such legal and equitable remedies as may be applicable.

I understand that this contract will be reviewed regularly every six months and will remain in force for an indefinite period.

I understand that this Limited Access Agreement has been submitted to the insurance provider of Takoma Park Presbyterian Church.

Signature

Date

Pastor

Date

Clerk of Session

Date