**Messiah Lutheran Church**

**Safe Children and Youth Policy** (effective July 2016)

All persons who serve the church in the capacity of nurturing the faith of children and youth have a valuable calling. These persons contribute to the spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical well-being of the church’s young people by facilitating the teaching the word of God and being role models. It is important that members of the congregation and staff allowed to work with children possess personal integrity, loving temperament and moral character consistent with the mission of this church. This is to help us achieve our goal of providing a safe, loving and trusting environment. This policy is to demonstrate our commitment to that goal and to the safety and spiritual growth of our volunteers, children and youth who participate in our ministry, and to provide guidance to our members and staff who work within our children’s programs. For purposes of this policy, the terms “child”, “children” or “youth” include all persons under the age of eighteen (18) years.

**Policy Statement**

We will as a Christian community of faith and an ELCA congregation conduct our children’s and youth ministries in ways reasonably designed to assure the spiritual growth and safety of the children and the workers by: (i) creating and following reasonable safety measures in the selection and recruitment of staff and volunteers, (ii) implementing reasonable and prudent operational procedures in the conduct of all programs and events to avoid situations where abuse may arise, and (iii) advise staff and volunteers regarding the use of discipline, proper contact, and first aid.

**Selection and Recruitment Eligibility to work with Children and Youth**

1. **Six Month Policy**: To be a volunteer working with children at Messiah Lutheran Church, a person must be an active member of the congregation for at least 6 months or must have two positive references from members of the congregation who have been active members for at least 1 year.

2. **Application Policy**: The following procedures will be followed when staffing any paid or volunteer position which involves contact/supervision with children and youth in the congregation.

 a. **Child Protection Policy Awareness.** Each applicant must read and sign a copy of the Messiah Child Protection Policy. A signed copy will be kept on file at the Church office.

 b. **Written Application.** All persons seeking to work with children must complete and sign a *Volunteer Information Sheet* form. This application requests basic information from the applicant and will inquire into previous experience with children, references, and disclosure of any previous criminal convictions.

 d. **Criminal Background Check.** A national criminal background check is required for all employees or volunteers who fall into the following categories of volunteers:

i. Those involved with the Messiah pre-school, Mother’s Morning Out, or who work in the

 nursery

 ii. Those teaching children/youth Faith Building (Sunday School) classes

 iii. Those counseling minors or involved in one-on-one mentorship of minors (e.g. youth

 workers, confirmation leaders)

 iv. Those with occasional contact with minors (e.g. drivers, paid staff)

Before a background check is run, prospective volunteers will be asked to sign an authorization form allowing Messiah to run the check. If an individual declines to sign the authorization form, they will not be allowed to work with our children in any capacity. Active public school teachers are exempt from background checks.

Any person who has been convicted of an offense involving sexual misconduct, abuse or violence requiring registration with law enforcement may not participate in any children or youth activities. All other convictions shall be reviewed by the Senior Pastor and Youth Director or their appointee on a case by case basis in light of all the surrounding circumstances concerning the person’s ministry with children or youth. Generally, convictions for an offense involving children and/or for offenses involving domestic violence, or any conduct contrary to our mission will preclude someone from being permitted to work with children. Failure to disclose criminal conviction on the application form will also be a disqualifying event. The background check authorization form and results will be maintained in confidence on locked file at the church office**.**

 e. **Change of Service.** If an individual has completed the screening procedures for prior service, those screening procedures will suffice as long as there is not a break in service of over one year. If a volunteer has a break in service of over one year, the complete screening process *may* be completed for the next volunteer activity on the advice of the supervising staff member.

 f. **Confidentiality**: Information obtained through the screening, application, reference check, and background check will be kept in confidence unless otherwise required by law. All information discovered or obtained through the above-referenced means will be kept in a secure location and access to it will be restricted.

3. **Child Abuse Awareness**:

Volunteers working with children and youth at Messiah may have the opportunity to become aware of abuse or neglect of the children under our care. In the event that an individual involved in the care of children at our church becomes aware of suspected abuse or neglect of a child under his/her care, this should be reported immediately to the Senior Pastor or Youth Director.

In the event of a disclosure, Messiah LC will follow the “Guidelines for Responding to Child Abuse and/or Suicidal Disclosures” (see additional document). Should the disclosure include an allegation against a MLC volunteer or employee, the same guidelines as listed above will be followed. The volunteer/employee will be unable to continue in their current role during the investigation. In addition, the volunteer/employee will not be permitted to have contact with children at MLC until the authorities have completed the investigation. The outcome of the investigation will determine the status of the volunteer/employee.

Messiah Lutheran Church is committed to supporting law enforcement and will provide the names and contact information of other children who may have had contact with the alleged offender and will provide any other information requested for the purpose of the investigation.

4. **Training**: Messiah Lutheran Church will provide training on this child protection policy to all new childcare workers at the beginning of every school year, or on an individual basis as needed. All volunteer and staff workers are required to attend this training. A copy of this policy will be included in the Messiah LC New Member Orientation. The youth director and Christian Education Team will be responsible for ensuring that these annual training opportunities occur.

**How to Interact with Children and Youth**

1. **Counseling:**

 Individual Counseling of a minor should be done in as public a place as possible without sacrificing effectiveness. Seclusion should be avoided. It is preferable that any counseling be done in the church offices or classrooms with at least one other unrelated person present in the area with the door open or, if closed, the door must have an unobstructed window such that the volunteer or staff person and the child may be readily seen. Unscheduled or impromptu counseling should be done in view of another adult.

2. **Constructive Discipline:**

 Discipline used in church activities should be constructive and reflect Christian values. Corporal punishment of any kind is never permitted.

3. **Two Adult Guideline**:

We as a congregation shall endeavor to ensure that a minimum of two unrelated adult volunteers or staff members be in attendance at all times when children are being supervised during our programs and activities. Some child or youth classes may have only one adult teacher in attendance during the class session; in these instances, the doors to the classrooms should remain open or, if closed, the door must have an unobstructed window such that the volunteer or staff person and the child may be readily seen. Older youth serving in a mentoring position are always to be paired with an adult and never to left in full charge of other children.

4. **Adult:Student Ratio:**

In addition to the “two adult guideline”, we will endeavor to maintain a safe ratio of adult supervisors to children at all our events and programs. The guidelines are: 1:4 for infants to one year olds; 1:6 for children age two to six; 1:10 for children and youth age seven and older.

5. **Sign in/Sign out Guideline:**

All elementary children will be released only to a parent/guardian or a person previously authorized in written form by the parent/guardian. We will utilize proper sign in/sign out procedures (this includes Faith Building (Sunday School) and Vacation Bible School).

6. **Field Trips/Outings:**

1. Pertinent information should be provided to parents regarding the trip and written parental permission, including a signed medical treatment form and emergency contacts, should be obtained before taking minors on trips.
2. Adults/older youth mentors and minors will not sleep in the same bed (with the exception of a parent/child). Whenever possible two unrelated adults are to be assigned to each sleeping room. As noted above, never is an adult to be alone with a student.
3. Leaders should always bring a first aid kit on trips and should aim to have at least one person trained in first aid. The Messiah church bus has a first aid kit on board that should be maintained and replenished regularly.

7. **Bathroom**

All elementary age children should be accompanied to the restroom with the adult waiting outside the facility to escort the child back to the activity. If the adult is of the same gender as the child it is a good practice to check the room before the child enters it.

I have read and understand this Safe Child policy, and commit to maintaining it to ensure a safe and nurturing environment for our children and youth.

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