

Plainfield Congregational United Church of Christ

SAFE CHURCH POLICY

A Commitment to Our Children

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Plainfield Congregational U.C.C. (PCCUCC) members are committed to protecting the safety of all our children. We take seriously our responsibility to create an environment that minimizes the risk of harm to children. An important feature of risk reduction is insuring that the staff and volunteers we have working with young people are able and willing to conduct themselves in an appropriate manner and consistent with the laws of the State of Illinois.

I. MANDATED REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

“Illinois clergy have now been added to the list of mandated reporters who are required by law to report suspected cases of child abuse or neglect to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) under a new law signed by Gov. George Ryan on Friday, August 16, 2002.”

excerpt from a U.C.C. document explaining a new Illinois State Law

Illinois clergy are now required to report suspicions that a person (including parishioner, parent, church employee, teacher, or another member of the clergy) has neglected or abused a child under their care, including sexual abuse. PCCUCC clergy will report any suspected sexual abuse of a child under the age of 18. An exemption from Illinois State law preserves the confidentiality privilege for clergy members who learn of abuse or neglect in the confessional or when acting as a spiritual advisor in cases not involving children under the age of 18.

Reports are to be filed with DCFS through report to the Hotline at 1-800-25-ABUSE. The hotline operates 24 hours per day, 365 days per year.”

How does this affect us as a church community?

All PCCUCC clergy, professional, and volunteer staff are committed to creating an environment in which children and youth feel comfortable raising concerns regarding their safety and to addressing these concerns in a thoughtful and comprehensive manner, while at the same time protecting them by utilizing the oversight of the Department of Children and Family Services.

Clergypersons in the state of Illinois, or any person working with, overseeing, teaching, or relating to youth at PCCUCC, will file a report with the Department of Children and Family Services in accordance with Illinois State law should abuse or neglect of a child under 18 be suspected. This directive applies to all of our professional staff and teachers, both paid and volunteer.

The pastor will be available at any time to assist in the reporting process. The pastor’s role will be to help with procedure and to support the person making the report. A report is best made by the person who actually hears of the abuse. Reports can be made anonymously. These issues and other concerns related to reporting may be discussed with the Pastor, keeping in mind that they, too, are now mandated by state law to report. Any person filing a report will also notify the Pastor, who will then notify the Moderator of that event.

II. SCREENING PROCEDURES

Employees of PCCUCC

All individuals seeking full or part-time paid employment at PCCUCC are subject interviewing and screening procedures as approved by the Governing Board. The screening process includes one or more in-person interviews by the individual who will serve as their immediate supervisor. If appropriate the pastor and/or a member of the Church Leadership will be included in the interviews. In addition, each applicant will be asked to provide two or more references who can speak to their qualifications and character. In all cases, the primary interviewer will talk with these references prior to offering any applicant a paid position. According to our existing personnel practices, all employees will serve for a six-month probationary period during which time their job performance and interaction with others on the staff and in the congregation is carefully monitored.

In addition, all employees who will have direct contact with youth or children must agree to have a background check conducted and to sign a disclosure statement indicating if they have ever been reported for child abuse or dismissed from a job for reasons of misconduct toward children.

Upon accepting employment at PCCUCC, all employees, regardless of their position within the church, will receive this Safe Church Policy providing general information regarding child abuse and neglect and the church's policies for addressing any allegations of mistreatment involving charges of abuse against children, as discussed below. Employees will sign a document indicating that they have read and understand the Safe Church Policy. A copy will be kept in the Human Resource file for each employee.

Volunteers Serving Children and Youth

As a church, we depend upon our members' good will and generous time commitments. This is particularly true in the staffing of the many and varied programs we offer young children and youth. While we want to maximize the opportunities for all members of the congregation to contribute their time and talents in the service of young people, our responsibility is to ensure a safe environment for children and youth. This commitment requires us to take extra care in insuring that those working with our young members conduct themselves in a respectful and appropriate manner.

All volunteers (like employees) working with children and youth will be given a brief written document providing general information about what constitutes child abuse and neglect and a copy of the Safe Church Policy. They are expected to sign the same document as staff, indicating that they have read and understand the Safe Church Policy. A copy will be kept in the church office files.

III. GUIDELINES FOR INTERACTING WITH CHILDREN

For the purposes of this policy, a child is defined as anyone fifth grade or younger.

Volunteer Expectations

- All volunteers working with children or youth will be expected to provide information regarding their prior experiences in working with young people and disclose if they have been the subject of a prior report involving any form of child abuse or neglect.
- All volunteers working with children will be expected to attend a training regarding our Safe Church Policies and expectations for interacting with children and youth. This training also will include an overview of child abuse and procedures for volunteers to follow if they suspect that a child has been or is a victim of any form of child abuse.

Conduct Guidelines

All volunteers, professional and support staff will observe the "rule of three." **No adult is to be alone with one child or one youth on a church sponsored activity, on or off church premises.**

If the three are two adults and one child, one of the “two adults” must be over the age of 21, while the other can be a student youth leader (high school age), college youth leader (college-aged) or another adult (over 21 years of age). The “rule of three” can be one adult with two or more children. However, it is strongly encouraged that the three be two adults with the children.

This rule includes driving alone with a single child. Staff or volunteers who need to have private conversations occur with youth will hold those conversations in a public place (restaurant, coffee shop, etc.) or in an office within PCCUCC during normal business hours if the office has a clear glass panel allowing viewing from the hallway when the door is closed; or any other room with the door open or with easy viewing from the outside.

Appropriate physical touch is an important part of showing love and support to children. Nothing in the Safe Church policy should be construed as stopping an adult from hugging a child to show affection or approval for something well done or to comfort a child who has faced a disappointment or injury.

Inappropriate touch will not be tolerated. Inappropriate touching between the child’s shoulders and knees, kissing, any type of hitting, or any touch uncomfortable to a child is strictly prohibited.

Words have power to heal or to wound. Inappropriate language with children includes derogatory statements about any aspects of their identity, words spoken in anger, or any sexually explicit statements and language deemed inappropriate.

IV. GUIDELINES FOR INTERACTING WITH YOUTH

A youth is anyone under college age (~ 13-18 years of age) or in Middle School or in High School. Youth in our Ministry programs should be considered “youth” until they have entered college, left the church membership, or until the start of fall programming following high school graduation.

Volunteer Expectations

- All volunteers working with youth will be expected to provide information regarding their prior experiences in working with young people and disclose if they have been the subject of a prior report involving any form of child abuse or neglect.
- All volunteers working with youth will be expected to attend a training regarding our Safe Church policies and expectations for interacting with children and youth. This training will also include an overview of child abuse and procedures for volunteers to follow if they suspect that a child has been or is a victim of any form of child abuse, as outline in section VI.

Classifications of Youth Volunteers and Volunteers with Youth

- ***Student Youth Leaders*** (i.e. high school youth or graduated seniors) should be considered “youth” in regard to our Safe Church Policy. These high school-aged Student Youth Leaders, although they are “leaders,” should still be regarded as youth. They will work cooperatively, in a mentored relationship with other staff and Adult Leaders.
- ***College Youth Leaders*** (i.e. college-aged students between 18-21) are young adults who have entered into college or individuals who are of consistent age after the start of our Fall Programming. These college-aged College Youth Leaders may be given supervised responsibilities. They will work cooperatively, in a mentored relationship with other staff and Adult Leaders.
- ***Adult Leaders*** – anyone over the age of 21 is considered an adult leader when entering a volunteer role with children or youth.

Conduct Guidelines

Purpose for Adult Leaders:

Adult leaders are vital to the positive spiritual growth of our youth. Youth want, and need positive adult role models in their lives. Adult leaders provide needed supervision, important guidance and profound spiritual wisdom.

Accountability:

Accountability simply means telling staff or another adult leader, or otherwise being accountable for, your relationship, your actions, interactions, and communication with youth.

General accountability and appropriate behaviors for Adult Leadership include:

- Always following the “Rule of Three.” If meeting in a location that could be construed as non-public, always make sure there are at least three people present i.e. two adults and a youth; or two youth (of the same peer age group or older), and one adult. Younger children of a parent who is considered an adult leader” SHOULD NOT be considered as part of the “Rule of Three.” Spouses, or other adults, who may be present in a meeting place such as a house, SHOULD NOT be considered part of the “Rule of Three” if they are not visibly present (and awake). For example, one adult, with one youth, (and one or two younger children and/or a sleeping spouse), meeting in a home IS NOT acceptable behavior.
- Being an “equal opportunity” leader. Treat all youth equally and avoid preferential treatment with one youth, or a small group of youth. This is for the leader’s safety and the youth’s safety.
- Never being sexually, romantically, or intimately involved with a child or youth. Never lead, facilitate or encourage youth or other Adult Leaders in this behavior.
- When meeting with youth, in a public or non-public space, adult leaders should follow these parameters:
 1. Always follow the “Rule of Three,” two youth and adult, two adults and one child or youth, or one adult and one youth and one child.
 2. As a leader, always give yourself “an out” when meeting with or communicating with youth. (i.e. I have another commitment at 1PM, so I only have 30 minutes right now.”)
 3. Communicate, in a timely fashion, with the appropriate church staff that a meeting or meetings are taking (or have taken) place.
 4. Communicate with the youth’s parent(s) so they know who you are and the extent and motive behind your interactions. (If, based on the context of the conversation, you cannot involve the parent(s), communicate with the Church Staff).
 5. Use common sense. If there is high frequency in meeting with a particular youth, through their initiation, stop the meetings and alert Church Staff immediately. High frequency may be a judgment call. However, frequency of more than a couple times per week, including communication of a more personal or dependent tone could be a warning sign.
 6. Keep conversations, body language and touch appropriate. Always consider what is being communicated and whether you would feel comfortable having that communication, conversation or meeting witnessed by a spouse, minister, parent, or even broadcast over the Internet.
 7. Keep meetings to reasonable hours. Meetings beyond 9PM (especially during the school year) should be discouraged unless there is an emergency. Meetings and conversations held in the late evening, whether in person or via phone or electronically, tend to take on an air of intimacy not found at other times. Therefore, do not engage in this behavior except as defined in Section V.
 8. Social gatherings beyond 9PM (especially in the summer) need strict accountability with parents of youth and Church Staff.

Boundaries and Termination of Adult/Youth Relationship

Do not fall into the trap of thinking you have to be this youth's "savior." Know your boundaries and get help from other sources so you do not put yourself or the youth at risk. Being an adult leader with youth can be seductive. Emotional attachments can and do develop. Boundaries can become blurred in the name of "doing youth ministry." "Justifications" can be made regarding potentially inappropriate or dangerous situations without realizing it. It doesn't matter if you are married or single, as the adult in the relationship, it must be you who recognizes these situations, and acts to stop or correct them immediately. Not doing this potentially puts the church, its' pastoral leadership, our youth ministry, our youth, you as a leader, your family and our entire faith community at risk. If you are aware of these situations, but unsure of how to correct it, contact Church Staff immediately.

If a youth meets and comes to know an adult because of their role as an Adult Leader in the church, that Adult Leader will always be an "adult leader" in the eyes of that youth (and other youth/families) regardless of whether that adult is currently in a position of leadership. Their role as "Adult Leader" forms the context of the youth/adult relationship. Therefore, adult leaders should maintain a "safe-church" relationship with any youth until they turn 18 and graduate from high school.

V. GUIDELINES FOR TECHNOLOGY AND INTERNET

As more and more communication takes place over electronic and technological media, it is important to maintain the same awareness and practices that would cover "in person" communications. Therefore, college-aged leaders and adult leaders (as well as student leaders with middle school youth) should practice these safe guidelines:

- Contact with middle school youth after 9:00 p.m. is **strongly** discouraged.
- Contact with high school youth after 10:00 p.m. is **strongly** discouraged.
- If contact is initiated by the youth after these times, the leader needs to assess the state of emergency. If it is a non-emergency contact should cease until a more appropriate time. If it is an emergency, contact can continue; but the leader should contact the appropriate church staff and/or appropriate authority, parent or church staff immediately after the contact.
- For purposes of this section contact is defined to include texting, instant messages, chat rooms, etc. (*i.e. ALL forms of electronic/technological communication*)
- Do not forward inappropriate or questionable web or other social networking information, sites or content. If you have a question, consider it inappropriate.
- Keep a digital record of your online conversations, and keep the appropriate church staff apprised of ongoing conversations. This is for the protection of both the youth and the adult leader. When the communication is via a self-deleting medium it is highly recommended that the adult leader take a screen shot of the conversation and stores it or files it.
- Communicate with the youth's parents(s) so they know who you are and the extent and motive behind your communications. (If, based on the context of the conversation, you cannot involve the parent(s), communicate with the Church Staff.)
- If there is high frequency in communication with a particular youth alert the appropriate Church Staff person immediately.

VI. STAFF AND VOLUNTEER TRAINING

Research has indicated that one of the best protections an organization can have against child abuse is to set clear conduct standards for all staff and volunteers. Then these standards can be reinforced through an introductory training program and ongoing supervision. This type of training will be regularly provided and is required for current and new PCCUCC employees. This training will be provided within the first two weeks of their employment by the Pastor or designated and trained lay leader.

With respect to volunteers working with children and youth, the pastor or designated and train lay leader will be responsible for developing and implementing this training. All volunteers are

strongly encouraged to attend this ongoing training, which will be offered on an annual basis before October 1 of each year.

VII. ADDRESSING ALLEGATIONS OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Any staff, volunteer, parent or youth who suspects that a PCCUCC staff member or volunteer is involved in the abuse or mistreatment of a child should discuss their concerns with the pastor or other appropriate Church Leader as soon as possible and then file a report with the Hotline. If the Pastor is the subject of the allegation, the person making the report should immediately inform the Church Moderator.

- All PCCUCC paid and lay leadership will cooperate fully in any investigation of such a complaint as required by state law and the denomination of the United Church of Christ. The employee or volunteer will be asked to take a leave of absence until The PCCUCC Response Team reviews the merits of the case and makes recommendations regarding the complaint. In the case of alleged abuse by an ordained person the leave of absence will be extended until the Illinois Conference Sexual Abuse Response Team has reviewed the case and made recommendations regarding the complaint. The status of that leave (paid or unpaid) will be determined on a case-by-case basis by the Church Council.
- The PCCUCC Response Team will be composed of the chair of the Church Council, an additional member of the congregation familiar with the policies relating to child maltreatment, the Pastor. *(In the event that the Pastor is the subject of the investigation, they will NOT serve on the Response Team and they will be replaced by either 1) a representative from the Association Minister, or 2) another member of the Church Council.)*
- If the allegation is determined to reflect questionable but not abusive behavior, the supervisor will establish a performance plan designed to eliminate these behaviors and promote more positive and appropriate interactions between the employee and the Congregation's children and youth. The Church Council will review this plan and monitor its implementation through the existing performance review procedures.

VIII. EDUCATING THE CONGREGATION

Clarifying our policies with respect to the hiring and training of program personnel and responding to charges of abuse are important components of insuring that PCCUCC provides a safe and secure environment for all children. Equally important, however, is educating ourselves on how to be better caretakers and role models for children and youth. To that end, it is important that we, as a Congregation, make a concerted effort to provide learning opportunities for both our adult and youth members. Specifically, relevant Ministries and committees can promote the safe church concept by:

- providing opportunities to talk about the issue of child abuse with our youngest members within the context of their educational and fellowship programs;
- providing opportunities to educate parents on the topic through our Sunday School programs; and
- educating all existing and new members of the Congregation about how they can play a role in preventing child abuse and supporting the healthy development of our children and youth.
- Training volunteers regarding updated Guidelines for Interacting with Youth