

Recommended Policies and Procedures for a Safe Community for All of God's Children

including Children, Youth, Families and Vulnerable Adults



Greater Milwaukee Synod

Adopted by the Synod Council, May 14, 2026

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A Commitment to Sacred Safety

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth;
we have beheld the Word’s glory, glory as of the only Child from God.”

- John 1:14 (*An Inclusive Language Lectionary*)

God expressed the heart of humanity through Jesus, the Word made flesh. We believe that to be human is to live in relationship with God and creation, balancing radical freedom with the call to responsibility. Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection perfectly model this balance. In baptism, we are claimed by Christ and joined to a community focused on God’s final purpose: justice, peace, and flourishing for the whole world. As a community of faith, we serve as an instrument of God’s healing and reconciliation. This mission belongs to everyone. Ministry is the work of the whole Church - lay and ordained alike - representing Christ in our daily lives.

This commitment to respecting the dignity of every human being is central to our faith. However, we recognize that leadership roles - held by clergy, deacons, adult volunteers, and youth leaders - create a natural power imbalance. This is amplified by the symbolic trust placed in those who lead. While leadership should offer guidance and grace, the abuse of power is unequivocally wrong.

Effective ministry lives in the tension between **Gospel-based integrity** (boundaries) and **Gospel-based intimacy** (connection). Rules alone can become legalistic, but intimacy without a healthy framework can lead to harm. These policies serve as a guide for practicing ministry with the attention, safety, and care that Christ requires of us.

A Response to the Call

This handbook is a direct response to the ELCA Social Message on Child Protection, adopted by the ELCA Church Council on November 12, 2025. With this national call to action, the Greater Milwaukee Synod has refined and expanded our protection program to safeguard not only children and youth but all vulnerable members of our community. In this document, you will see child, but it can pertain to a vulnerable adult, as well.

Purpose and Implementation

The intent of this plan is to protect our children, youth, and vulnerable adults; to support the staff and volunteers who work with them; and to provide security for our congregations.

For Congregations: This plan serves as a robust template. Congregations may adopt this policy exactly as written or use it as a foundational guide to develop their own site-specific safety plans. Congregations can change the words “should” and “recommended” to “must” and “required.” Congregations are also encouraged to adopt this to their specific context. On top of this, congregations are encouraged to reach out to their specific insurance companies to make sure that their policy is in line with what is required of them.

For the Synod: This plan constitutes the official policy for all synod-sponsored events, gatherings, and related ministries.

By adopting these standards, we fulfill our call to provide a holy sanctuary where all people can gather for worship, study, and service, confident that they are safe and secure within the community of faith.

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Abuse Information from the State of Wisconsin

Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Act (1977)

The intent of the act:

- To protect the health and welfare of children by encouraging the reporting of suspected child abuse and neglect.
- To protect abused and neglected children from further harm.
- To provide support, counseling, and other services to abused and neglected children and their families in order to interrupt the pattern of maltreatment.
- To promote the well-being of children in their homes whenever possible.

Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect

Child abuse and neglect encompass a range of behaviors that jeopardize a child's safety and well-being. These generally fall into five categories: **physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and abandonment.**

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse refers to non-accidental injuries inflicted upon a child. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Lacerations, fractured bones, and burns.
- Internal injuries or severe/frequent bruising.
- Injuries that create a substantial risk of death.
- Injuries causing permanent disfigurement or the protracted loss of function in any organ or limb.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is categorized into two forms: contact and non-contact.

- **Contact Abuse:** Includes sexual intercourse, inappropriate touching, sexual exploitation, or the involvement of a child in prostitution or illicit sexual activities.
- **Non-Contact Abuse:** Includes exposing a child to pornography, engaging in obscene discussions, or violating a child's right to privacy (e.g., during bathing or dressing).

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is the impairment of a child's psychological or intellectual health. Indicators often include severe anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or outward aggression that is inconsistent with the child's age and developmental stage.

Note on Reporting: *In many jurisdictions, emotional damage becomes a reportable offense when a guardian fails or refuses to seek necessary treatment for the child's symptoms, provided the failure is not due to poverty.*

Neglect and Abandonment

Neglect occurs when a caregiver fails or is unable to provide essential care - such as food,

clothing, shelter, or medical and dental treatment - to the point that it endangers the child's health.

- **Educational Neglect:** Failure to ensure a child receives a basic education.
- **Medical Neglect:** Refusal to provide necessary healthcare.
- **Supervision:** Leaving a child without adequate care or oversight.
- **Abandonment:** The desertion of a child without provision for their continued care.

The Lifelong Impact of Abuse and Neglect

The consequences of child abuse and neglect often extend far beyond childhood. Victims frequently face long-term challenges that can impact their physical, emotional, and social well-being throughout adulthood.

Research indicates that individuals who have experienced maltreatment are at a higher risk for:

- **Mental Health Struggles:** Including chronic depression, severe anxiety, and low self-esteem.
- **Behavioral Risks:** Increased susceptibility to substance use disorders, running away, or early pregnancy.
- **Cycles of Vulnerability:** A higher likelihood of involvement in exploitation, such as prostitution or pornography.
- **Intergenerational Trauma:** Without intervention, victims may face a higher risk of repeating abusive patterns with their own children.

Recognizing the Signs of Abuse and Neglect

Identifying child maltreatment is complex. While one or two signs may not definitively indicate abuse - as they can sometimes stem from other medical or situational issues - a pattern of multiple or recurring signs is a significant cause for concern.

Physical Abuse

Physical indicators often involve injuries that lack a plausible explanation or follow a specific pattern:

- **Unexplained Injuries:** Bruises or welts on the face, neck, chest, or back; fractures that do not align with the reported cause of injury.
- **Patterned Marks:** Burns or bruises in the shape of an object (e.g., a belt, cord, or cigarette).
- **Behavioral Red Flags:** A child who is overtly fearful of parents or other adults, expresses a fear of going home, or exhibits extreme behavioral shifts (from aggression to intense withdrawal).
- **Medical Neglect:** Frequent delays in seeking professional treatment for visible injuries.

Sexual Abuse

Signs of sexual abuse can be physical, behavioral, or developmental:

- **Physical Symptoms:** Pain, itching, or swelling in genital areas; stained or bloody underclothing; or the presence of a sexually transmitted infection.
- **Physical Avoidance:** A sudden fear of being touched or a refusal to participate in sports or physical activities.
- **Sexualized Behavior:** An interest in or knowledge of sexual matters that is inappropriate for the child's developmental age.
- **Emotional Regression:** A sudden change in eating or sleeping habits, or reverting to behaviors from a younger age (regression).

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse often manifests as a decline in a child's mental health and social functioning:

- **Sense of Self:** Pervasive low self-esteem, self-denigration, or extreme "people-pleasing" behaviors.
- **Emotional States:** Severe depression, intense anxiety, or persistent withdrawal.
- **Developmental Stagnation:** A noticeable failure to learn or meet cognitive milestones despite having the ability to do so.

Neglect

Neglect is often identified by a persistent failure to meet a child's basic needs:

- **Physical Appearance:** Poor hygiene, persistent body odor, or clothing that is inappropriate for the current weather.
- **Health & Nutrition:** Constant hunger (begging or stealing food), signs of malnutrition, or "failure to thrive."
- **Environment:** Being left unsupervised or alone for extended periods.
- **Educational/Social Signs:** Frequent school absences; conversely, a child may arrive early and refuse to leave school or public areas to avoid going home.

Supporting a Child: How to Respond

If a child discloses abuse or neglect, your reaction is a critical first step in their healing process.

The goal is to provide a safe, non-judgmental environment.

- **Validate Their Experience:** Ensure the child feels heard and believed. Avoid questioning their motives or the details of the event.
- **Reassure Them:** Clearly state that what happened was not their fault and that they were brave and right to tell you.
- **Be Sensitive and Patient:** Listen actively to their feelings, concerns, and questions without interrupting or showing shock.
- **Offer a Safe Space:** Let them know you are always willing to listen whenever they are ready to talk.
- **Maintain Appropriate Privacy:** Assure the child that you will only share what they have told you with professionals who need to know in order to help them.

Note: Avoid promising "total" secrecy, as you may have a legal or ethical obligation to report the information to authorities. See page 14 for information on reporting procedures.

Child Welfare in Wisconsin: 2024 Data

The following statistics reflect reports made to Child Protective Services (CPS) across the state of Wisconsin during the 2024 calendar year, as reported by the KIDS COUNT Data Center.

Category	2024 Statistics
Total Reported Cases	31,157 (A rate of 24.9 per 1,000 children)
Substantiated Victims	3,429 children (2.7 per 1,000 children)
Milwaukee County (DMCPS)	15,076 unique CPS reports

Understanding the Data

- **Reported Cases:** These figures represent all calls and referrals made to authorities regarding potential maltreatment.
- **Substantiated Victims:** These are cases where an investigation confirmed that child maltreatment or neglect occurred.
- **Regional Impact:** Milwaukee County continues to represent a significant portion of the state's total CPS reports, highlighting the need for localized resources and support.

Our Faith in Action: Protecting Vulnerable Adults

Protecting vulnerable adults, as well as children, is not just a civic duty - it is a sacred vocation. By advocating for those at risk, we live out our baptismal covenant to "strive for justice and peace in all the earth" as we work with organizations such as Adult Protective Services (APS).

What is Adult Protective Services (APS)?

APS is a social services program that promotes the safety, independence, and quality of life of adults with disabilities (ages 18-59), older adults (ages 60 or older) and community members (those living at home in a care facility). In Wisconsin, every county has an APS unit dedicated to investigating reports of harm and linking individuals to supportive services. You do not need "proof" to act. If you have a feeling something is wrong, call your county APS helpline. APS professionals are trained to assess each situation with care and offer support.

Our Shared Values:

- **Self-Determination:** All adults have the right to personal freedom. APS ensures this right is maintained while providing a safety net for those unable to make decisions due to impairment.
- **Dignity in Community:** APS works to keep adults safe in their preferred community - whether at home or in a care facility - for as long as possible.

Understanding the Risks

As followers of Christ, we should be wise in recognizing the forms that harm can take:

- **Abuse (Physical, Emotional, & Sexual):** Intentional acts causing pain, verbal threats that belittle a person's spirit, or non-consensual contact.
- **Neglect & Self-Neglect:** The failure to provide life necessities (food, medicine, hygiene) or an individual's inability to care for their own basic needs.
- **Financial Exploitation:** The illegal or improper use of a person's assets, including theft, coercion, or forging signatures.
- **Unreasonable Restraint:** Restricting someone's movement or freedom without a legitimate medical or safety reason.

Warning Signs: Being a Watchful Neighbor

We can all do our part by noticing symptoms or changes in our neighbors, congregants, and family members:

Physical & Social "Red Flags":

- Unexplained bruises, cuts, or burns.
- Lack of basic hygiene, clean clothing, or adequate food.
- Missing medical aids (glasses, hearing aids, walkers).
- Sudden isolation from family, friends, or the church community.
- Unexplained fear, suspiciousness, or withdrawal.

Financial "Red Flags":

- Unpaid bills despite having sufficient funds.
- Large or unusual bank withdrawals and ATM activity.

Resources and Next Steps

Visit dhs.wisconsin.gov/aps for more information on resources and reporting in your specific county.

Greater Milwaukee Synod Protection Program

Recommended Policies and Procedures for a Safe Community for All of God's Children - A Theological Foundation

As members of the **Greater Milwaukee Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)**, we affirm our commitment to the safety and sanctity of all people. Our work is guided by these core values:

- **A Call to Protect:** We are called to love, care for, and safeguard all individuals, with a specific focus on children and the most vulnerable among us.
 - **A Call to Hospitality:** We strive to provide safe spaces of justice and hospitality, where all of God's children can gather in community and be known by God.
 - **A Call to Healing:** we celebrate the presence of children and pledge to proactively protect and support the healing of those who have been harmed.
 - **A Call to Sanctuary:** Our churches are holy places. We ensure that all who gather for worship, study, and service can do so with the assurance of safety and security.
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Core Goals

Our primary focus is the safety and protection of children, teenagers, and vulnerable adults within our community. To achieve this, we commit to:

1. **Educating** our community on the necessity of comprehensive protection for children and youth.
 2. **Maintaining** a positive, proactive approach to safety and prevention.
 3. **Supporting** congregations in the recruitment, hiring, and supervision of staff and volunteers to minimize the risk of abuse.
 4. **Providing** ongoing, specialized training for all workers regarding abuse prevention and response.
-

Screening of Lay and Professional Workers

To maintain the integrity of our ministries, every church worker - **whether paid staff or volunteer** – should complete a standardized screening process to be overseen by the congregation.

Who Should Be Screened? This policy applies to all roles, including but not limited to:

- Rostered Ministers and Administrative Staff.
- Directors of Christian Education and Youth Workers.
- Sunday School, VBS, and Confirmation Teachers.
- Preschool and Nursery Directors, Staff, and Volunteers.
- Custodial and Maintenance Workers.
- Drivers and other Chaperones/Adult Leaders.

The Screening Process Should Include:

- A comprehensive criminal background check.
- A formal application and interview.
- Reference checks to verify past experience and character.
- A signed **Statement of Understanding**, completed after training and before service begins.

Zero Tolerance Policy

No individual with a history of criminal sexual, physical, or emotional abuse should be permitted to work with children or youth.

Continuing Education for Leaders

In addition to the Synod's expectation for **Boundaries Workshop** participation every three years, all ELCA Rostered Ministers are expected to participate in their specific parish's protection plan training program annually.

History of Misconduct

In compliance with state safety standards, any person convicted of crimes as outlined in **the Wisconsin Statutes - Wis. Stat. § 48.686(1)(c), and § 948.13** should be strictly prohibited from participating in any capacity in programs designed for minors.

Recommended Standards of Behavior for Staff and Volunteers

As a representative of the church, your role is to model the Gospel through mentorship and leadership. To ensure a safe and holy environment for all, the following standards are required for everyone working with children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

Open-Door Policy & Supervision

- **Visibility:** All ministry with minors should occur in "open" spaces where others are welcome. Doors should remain unlocked and, ideally, have a window.
- **At Least Two-Deep Leadership:** A minimum of two screened adults should be present for all activities involving children or youth. **Three** screened adults if the leaders are a married couple or in a relationship.
- **One-on-One Interaction:** If a private consultation is necessary, it should happen in a visible area (e.g., a room with a window) while another adult is nearby in the building.
- **Off-Site Contact:** Any individual meetings between an adult and a minor outside of church should occur in public, with prior written or verbal consent from a parent/guardian.

Transportation & Travel

- **Family Responsibility:** Families are primarily responsible for transport to and from events.
- **During Events:** Drivers should avoid being alone in a vehicle with a minor. If an emergency requires a 1:1 drive, prior parental approval should be documented.
- **Overnight Accommodations:** Minors and adults (except for legal guardians) may never share a bed or a private sleeping room.
 - A minimum of two adults (three if the adults are married) should be present for overnight events.
 - Please refer to the **Inclusive Youth Housing & Boundary Policy** for more information on how to create an environment that is welcoming to all.

Language that Honors Others

- **Inclusive Language:** Use names and pronouns as requested by each individual. Avoid jokes or comments that target a person's race, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, or background.
- **Zero Tolerance for Bullying:** Slurs, hate speech, and derogatory language - even when intended as "just a joke" - have no place in our community.
- **Respectful Disagreement:** We encourage big questions and diverse opinions, but we insist that all dialogue be conducted with kindness and a focus on understanding rather than "winning" an argument.
- **Age-Appropriateness:** Adult leaders must ensure that topics of conversation remain appropriate for the developmental stage of the youth present.
- **No "Secret" Keeping:** Leaders should never ask a youth to keep a secret. While we value privacy and trust, safety-related information must be shared with the appropriate staff or guardians.
- **Sharing with Purpose:** While sharing personal stories can build community, leaders and

youth should practice "purposeful sharing" - ensuring that the details shared are helpful to the group and not over-sharing intimate or traumatic details that might overwhelm others.

Respect for Privacy

- **Physical Boundaries:** Adult leaders should respect the privacy of minors and other adults in restrooms and changing areas.
- **Assistance:** If a small child requires help in a restroom, the outer door should remain propped open. If an adult should enter a stall to assist, a second adult should be present.
- **Attire:** Adults should wear appropriate modest attire (e.g., pajamas when sleeping in group settings, modest swimwear for water activities).

Safe Environments & Programs

- **No Secret Activities:** All church programs should be transparent. Secret organizations, "private" traditions, or requests for secrecy should be strictly prohibited.
- **Positive Guidance:** Discipline should be constructive and reflect Christian values. Physical, emotional, or sexual punishment - as well as the denial of basic necessities like food or medical care - should never be permitted.
- **Anti-Hazing:** Any form of harassment, hazing, "initiations," or excessive teasing should be prohibited.
- **Appropriate Recreation:** High-contact games (e.g., wrestling, "sardines," or horseplay) are inappropriate. Adult leaders should not initiate or encourage intimate physical contact.

Health and Safety

- **Nursery/Sunday School Standards:** Nurseries and/or Sunday School classes should maintain an identification system (e.g., matching tags) to ensure children are only released to authorized guardians. Two adults should be on duty at all times.
- **Substance-Free Policy:** The use of tobacco, alcohol (except for Sacramental wine), or illicit/misused drugs should be strictly prohibited during youth events. Violations should result in the youth and/or adults being sent home immediately.
- **The "Five-Year" Rule:** When using young adults or high school students as helpers, a minimum five-year age gap between the leader and the participants is strongly recommended.
- **No Gambling:** In keeping with our commitment to creating a safe and healthy environment for all, we ask that these events remain free of gambling or wagering of any kind. Our focus is on building community through shared experiences that prioritize mutual respect and inclusive fun.

Boundaries & Relationships

- **Dating:** Adult staff and volunteers should be strictly prohibited from dating or pursuing romantic/sexual involvement with any minor in the congregation.
- **Sexual Misconduct:** Any sexual contact, jokes, exposure to sexual materials, or sexually abusive behaviors should be strictly prohibited and subject to immediate legal and synodical reporting.

Facilities and Conclusion of Events

- **Safe Exit:** To ensure no adult is left alone with a minor, the last three people (including the person locking the building) should leave together.
- **Pick-Up:** Parents are asked to respect event end times so that two adults are not required to wait indefinitely with a single child.
- **Visitors:** Staff and volunteers should remain aware of all visitors on-site. Visitors to youth areas should be accompanied by an authorized church representative.

Youth Peer-to-Peer/Helper Policy Recommendations

Creating a policy for youth-serving-youth (often called "Peer-to-Peer" or "Youth Helper" policies) requires a balance between providing leadership opportunities and maintaining the rigorous safety standards of the **Greater Milwaukee Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)**.

Below is a framework for writing this recommended policy, followed by specific guidance on background checks for minors.

Core Framework for a Youth Peer-to-Peer/Helper Policy

Your policy should be clear, readable, and focused on the "Two-Adult Rule," which is the gold standard for ELCA congregations.

Definition of Roles

- **Adult Leader:** A screened person aged 21+ (or at least 5 years older than the oldest youth in the group).
- **Young Adult Leaders:** A screened person between the ages of 18 and 21. (This should still be someone who is at least two years older than your oldest youth)
- **Youth Helper/Staff:** An individual under age 18 (or a high school student) assisting with younger children.

The "Supervision Tier" Rule

Youth helpers should **never** be considered one of the "two adults" required for a room.

- **Requirement:** Any space with minors should have two screened adults. Youth helpers are "extra" hands and do not count toward the adult-to-child ratio.
- **Proximity:** Youth helpers should always be in the line-of-sight of an adult leader.

Age-Gap Guidelines

To prevent boundary blurring, many ELCA congregations follow the **"Five-Year Rule"**:

- A youth helper should ideally be at least **5 years older** than the children they are assisting (e.g., a 15-year-old helping with 5-year-olds is appropriate; a 15-year-old "staffing" a middle school retreat for 13-year-olds is not).

Code of Conduct for Youth Staff

Include specific boundaries for youth helpers:

- **Physicality:** No "roughhousing" or inappropriate touch.
 - **Social Media:** No private messaging or "friending" younger children they supervise.
 - **Discipline:** Youth helpers should never administer discipline; they should defer to an adult leader immediately if a conflict arises.
-

Background Checks for Youth (Under 18)

The question of background checks for minors is a common one. Here is the standard practice in Wisconsin and the ELCA:

Do you run them? Generally, No: In the state of Wisconsin, criminal background checks and driving records for minors are often unavailable or provide no data because juvenile records are sealed.

- The Alternative: Instead of a formal background check, you should implement a Youth Application and Interview Process.

What to include in the "Minor Screening" process:

- **Written Application:** Ask about their experience and why they want to serve.
- **Parental Consent:** A form signed by the parent acknowledging the youth's role and the church's safety policies.
- **Reference Checks:** Ask for a teacher, coach, or another adult in the congregation (who is not their parent) to vouch for their character.
- **The "Six-Month Rule":** Most synod-recommended policies suggest a youth be a member or active participant for at least 6 months before being allowed to serve as a helper.

Note on 18-year-olds: Once a youth turns 18, they are legally an adult. Even if they are still in high school, they should undergo a full criminal background check (including a National Sex Offender Registry search) before continuing their work with minors.

Implementation Steps

- **Training:** Require youth helpers to attend the same "Safe Church" training as adults, but in a modified, age-appropriate format. This teaches them how to recognize "grooming" behaviors and how to report concerns.
- **The "Rule of Three":** If a youth helper needs to take a child to the restroom, an adult should be standing in the hallway, or two youth helpers should go together (always maintaining the "open door" or "line of sight" principle).

Inclusive Youth Housing & Boundary Policy Recommendations

Creating a gender-inclusive policy for an ELCA youth event aligns with the Greater Milwaukee Synod's commitment to being "Reconciling in Christ."

The goal is to shift from a **binary-enforced** model to a **safety-and-comfort** model.

Here is a template and guide for a progressive Youth Gender Boundaries & Housing Policy.

Core Philosophy

Our church believes that every person is a beloved child of God. We aim to provide a "brave space" where all participants - regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation - feel safe, respected, and physically secure.

Housing & Sleeping Arrangements

Rather than assigning rooms strictly by "legal sex," you may utilize a **Home-Base Model** or **Affinity Model**.

- **Gender-Inclusive Rooms:** Offer "Gender-Inclusive" or "All-Gender" rooms. These are available to any youth or adult (trans, non-binary, or cisgender ally) who feels most comfortable in a space where gender is not the primary sorting factor.
- **Self-Selection:** Youth and adults should be allowed to self-select the housing option that best aligns with their gender identity or comfort level.
- **The "Three-Person" Minimum:** To ensure safety and accountability, no fewer than three people should be assigned to a room or sleeping area.
- **Privacy Screening:** In communal spaces (like gyms or cabins), you can use pop-up changing tents or designated bathroom stalls to ensure every youth and adult - regardless of identity - has a private place to change clothes.

Bathroom and Shower Use

- **Privacy First:** If facilities are communal, we establish a rotating schedule or designate specific stalls for private use.
- **Respect:** Youth and adults are encouraged to use the restroom that corresponds to their gender identity. If a youth or adult desires more privacy, work to identify a single-use or gender-neutral restroom.

Supervision and Adult Boundaries

- **Two-Deep Leadership:** At least two background-checked adults should be present at all times.
- **Adult Housing:** Adults should never share a bed with a youth. If sleeping in the same room (e.g., a large cabin), adults should have a designated "leader area" physically separated from the youth sleeping area.
- **Gender of Chaperones:** In gender-inclusive rooms, we strive to have diverse adult

leadership that reflects the inclusivity of the room.

Logistics & Communication

- **Pre-Trip Registration:** Registration forms may include a section for "Preferred Name," "Pronouns," and a private question: "Which housing option makes you feel most comfortable/safe (e.g., *Male-identifying*, *Female-identifying*, or *Gender-Inclusive*)?"
- **Confidentiality:** A youth or adults trans or non-binary status is their own information to share. Staff will not "out" a student to peers or other parents without the student's explicit consent, unless there is a direct safety concern.

Practical Examples for Mission Trips

Scenario	Traditional Approach	Inclusive Approach
Hotel Rooms	Boys in 201, Girls in 202.	Room A (Boys), Room B (Girls), Room C (Gender-Inclusive/Non-binary).
Changing Clothes	"Everyone change in the room."	"The bathroom and the corner curtain are available for anyone who needs privacy to change."
Nightly Devos	"Split into 'Guys' and 'Girls' circles."	"Split into your small groups" or "Split into 'Red' and 'Blue' groups."
Showers	Group showers in a locker room.	Create a sign-up sheet for 10-minute private blocks or use swimwear in communal showers.

Key "Golden Rules" for Leaders

1. **Safety over Tradition:** If a non-binary youth feels unsafe in a "Boys" room, forcing them there creates a liability and emotional harm. Always prioritize the youth's sense of safety.
2. **Focus on Behavior, Not Identity:** Policies should prohibit "romantic or sexual activity" for all youth, rather than targeting LGBTQIA+ youth. The boundary is the action, regardless of who it is between.
3. **The "No-Surprises" Rule:** Inform all parents that the trip uses gender-inclusive housing options. You don't need to name specific kids; simply state that the church provides spaces where all identities are welcomed and supervised.

Notes:

You may want to check with the rules of your congregation's insurance company, or rules of the

camp or place that you will be staying, and work with them in the case of providing hospitality to a LGBTQIA+ youth might differ from the rules.

For ELCA-specific resources, you may want to consult the *Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries (ELM)* or *Reconciling Works* toolkits, which provide deeper theological framing for these policies.

Reconciling Works' "Guide to Welcoming LGBTQIA+ Youth & their Families" is a great beginning resource.

Print and Digital Ministry and Social Media Safety

The digital age offers transformative tools for deepening our relationships and expanding our mission. Social media, instant messaging, and email allow us to share faith, organize for service, and provide pastoral care in real time.

We offer these recommendations not as a "legislative impulse," but as a guide for Christian praxis. Our standard is higher than mere legal compliance; it is rooted in the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself."

Privacy and Publication Guidelines

To protect the safety and privacy of our youth, churches should adhere to the following standards regarding printed and digital publications (including newsletters, bulletins, websites, and social media):

Personal Contact Information

- **Strict Confidentiality:** Under no circumstances should a minor's personal contact information - including home address, personal phone number, or personal email - be listed in any public or semi-public church publication.
- **Internal Directories:** Youth contact information is only for the use of authorized staff and background-checked volunteers and will not be shared with the general congregation without explicit parental consent.

Identification in Publications

- **The "First Name Only" Rule:** In public-facing materials (website, social media, community flyers), we identify youth by first name only. Last names should not be used in connection with photos or specific location details.
- **Tagged Media:** Churches should not "tag" youth in photos on social media platforms. Parents are encouraged to use their own discretion when tagging their own children on personal accounts.

Use of Photos and Videos

- **Prior Consent Required:** No images or videos of a minor should be published in any format (print or digital) without a signed Media Release Form on file from a parent or legal guardian.
- **Respecting the "Opt-Out":** If a family chooses not to have their child's image used, churches should respect that decision fully. Leaders should be notified of "no-photo" participants to ensure they are not included in group shots or recordings.

Sensitive Information

- **Dignity and Respect:** Churches should never publish information regarding a youth's specific health needs, family situation, or other sensitive personal details (such as gender identity or orientation) unless the youth and their guardian have requested it be shared for the purposes of community prayer or support.
-

Recommendations for Adult-to-Youth Digital Contact

To maintain healthy boundaries and protect both youth and adults, we recommend the following:

- **Initiating Contact:** Adults should not send "friend" or "follow" requests to minors. If a youth initiates a request, the adult should use prayerful discernment regarding the level of contact before accepting.
- **Personal Messaging:** Parents or legal guardians should be notified - and in specific instances, provide prior consent - before any direct contact occurs between an adult leader and a minor outside of regularly scheduled church activities.
- **Privacy Settings:** Adult leaders are encouraged to maintain separate "personal" and "professional" social media profiles. If using a personal account, privacy settings should be used to ensure youth do not have access to inappropriate content.
- **Communication Transparency:** All digital communication (email, DMs, posts) should be considered non-confidential. Youth and parents should be informed that digital interactions may be monitored or shared if safety concerns arise.
- **Accountability:** All digital communication must be permanent and retrievable. The use of apps or features that include disappearing messages, 'vanish mode,' or self-deleting images is strictly prohibited for church-related interactions.
- **Group Management:** Use "closed" groups (membership by approval) rather than "hidden" groups for youth ministry. These groups should have both youth and adult administrators and should be open to the parents of current members.
- **Inappropriate Content:** Material that details inappropriate behavior at a church event should be addressed immediately with parents. Any content indicating abuse should be documented and reported to the lead pastor and authorities as per mandatory reporting laws.

Recommendations for Clergy and Adult Relationships

- **Confidentiality Limits:** Clergy should inform adult members that seeking spiritual advice via email or social media can nullify legal "pastoral privilege" or confidentiality. Secure, in-person, or voice communication is preferred for sensitive matters.
 - **Boundary Management:** Clergy are encouraged to use professional accounts to interact with congregants. We acknowledge that declining a "friend" request from a member can be socially sensitive; clergy should handle these transitions with grace and clear communication.
-

Transitions and Departures

- **Ending a Call:** When a leader leaves a specific ministry setting, they should refrain from providing pastoral care via digital means after their official end date. This allows the community to bond with their new leader.
 - **Aging Out/Moving On:** When a youth "ages out" of a program or an adult leader departs, they should be promptly removed from private youth ministry groups and listservs to maintain the privacy of current members.
-

Digital Covenants for Congregations

Every congregation should establish a "Digital Covenant" that outlines expectations for online behavior. Key components include:

- **Appropriate Language:** Upholding Christian values in all posts.
 - **Photo Tagging:** A "rule of thumb" to tag yourself, but never tag others (especially minors) without permission.
 - **Conflict Resolution:** Prohibiting "cyber-bullying," harassment, or the posting of violent/sexual content.
 - **Reporting:** A reminder that mandatory reporting laws apply to digital findings.
-

Video Chats, Blogs, and Livestreaming

- **Professional Presence:** Adults should refrain from initiating one-on-one video chats with youth. During group video chats, participants should consider their surroundings and ensure they are appropriately dressed.
 - **Archiving:** Whenever possible, save transcripts of text chats or recordings of video sessions for transparency.
 - **The Voice of the Church:** Clergy and youth workers should remember that their online voice is often perceived as the voice of the Church. Posts should reflect the mission and values of the ELCA.
 - **Media Releases:** Congregations should secure signed Media Release Forms from parents before posting photos or videos of minors.
 - **Livestreaming Notices:** Because a church is not a "public square" in the legal sense, congregations should post visible signs notifying participants if a service or event is being broadcast or recorded.
 - **Minor Privacy:** Congregations and leaders should not publish the full name, address, or contact information of a minor alongside their photo or video on any church-sponsored platform.
 - **Designated "No-Film" Zones:** For families who have opted out of media coverage, churches may provide designated seating areas that are outside the camera's field of view.
 - **Contextual Filming:** Camera operators may be instructed to avoid filming youth during moments of vulnerability, prayer, or during children's sermons unless filmed from the back of the room.
 - **Reviewing Content:** Livestream recordings should be periodically reviewed to ensure that the commitment to minor privacy is being upheld by a tech team.
-

Reporting Procedures

Reporting Violations of Congregational Standards

If a volunteer or staff member is suspected of inappropriate behavior that violates the standards of this handbook - even if it does not reach the level of criminal abuse - action should be taken immediately.

Reporting and Response Procedures

I. Reporting Suspected Child or Vulnerable Adult Abuse or Neglect

In accordance with **Wisconsin State Statute 48.981**, protecting children and vulnerable adults is both a legal and moral mandate.

Mandatory Reporter Training

It is recommended that all mandated reporters take an online or in person training.

Here are two free on-line resources:

- Wisconsin Child Welfare Professional Development System - media.wcwpds.wisc.edu/mandatedreporter
- WI Council of Churches – wichurches.org/mandatory-reporting

Legal and Ethical Mandates

- **Mandated Reporters:** Professionals (teachers, healthcare workers, clergy, etc.) are legally required to report suspected abuse or neglect within 24 hours.
- **Moral Responsibility:** The Greater Milwaukee Synod views reporting as a moral and ethical responsibility for all volunteers and staff, regardless of whether they are legally designated as mandated reporters.
- **Good Faith Immunity:** Anyone reporting suspected abuse in "good faith" is immune from civil or criminal liability and protected from employment retaliation.

Immediate Response Protocol

If you witness abuse, observe physical signs of maltreatment, or receive a disclosure from a child or vulnerable adult:

- **Step 1: Ensure Immediate Safety.** If a child or vulnerable adult is in immediate danger or needs medical attention, call 911. Immediately separate the alleged perpetrator from all children and vulnerable adults.
- **Step 2: Make the Official Report.** Do not attempt to investigate or interrogate. Your role is to report facts. Contact the local county Child Protective Services (CPS) agency or law enforcement.
 - **Milwaukee County (DMCPS):** 414-220-SAFE (7233)
- **Step 3: Internal Notification.** Once authorities are notified, inform the appropriate leadership so the congregation can take protective steps (e.g., administrative suspension).
 - **Lead Pastor:** [Insert Name/Phone]
 - **Synod Office (Bishop's Office):** 414-671-1212

- **Step 4: Document the Facts.** Record objective observations immediately (e.g., "2-inch bruise on left forearm" rather than "looks like a belt hit"). Include date, time, and witnesses.
- **Step 5: Maintain Confidentiality.** Do not discuss the report with anyone other than investigators, the Lead Pastor, or the Bishop.

Guidelines for Responding to a Disclosure

If a child tells you they have been harmed, stay calm and supportive:

- **Listen Respectfully:** Allow the child to speak without interruption.
- **Affirm and Support:** Use simple, supportive phrases:
 - *"I believe you."*
 - *"I am glad you told me."*
 - *"This is not your fault."*
 - *"I am going to do my best to help keep you safe."*
- **Seek Support:** Notify another staff member immediately so you are not navigating the situation alone.

II. Reporting Violations of Congregational Standards

This section applies to "Yellow Light" behaviors or policy violations (e.g., breaking the two-adult rule, inappropriate texting) that do not necessarily constitute criminal abuse but violate the safety covenant.

The Internal Review Process

1. **Written Allegation:** Concerns regarding a staff member or volunteer should be submitted in writing to the Lead Pastor or the designated Safety Committee/Church Council.
2. **Initial Evaluation:** Leadership will evaluate the report against the standards in this handbook to determine the impact on safety and the necessary level of response.
3. **Corrective Action:**
 - **Policy Violations:** If the behavior is a breach of protocol but not a safety risk, leadership will provide coaching, corrective action, and further training.
 - **Safety Concerns:** If the behavior raises potential safety risks, the individual will be **immediately suspended** from all youth-related duties pending a full review.
4. **Notification:** Relevant parties (pastors, parents of affected children, or synod leadership) will be notified of a suspension or resolution on a "need-to-know" basis to maintain privacy.
5. **Final Resolution:** If the review confirms a recurring risk or a serious breach of safety boundaries, the individual will be permanently removed from their position.

Legal Framework: Wisconsin State Statutes

The policies outlined in this handbook are rooted in the Wisconsin State Statutes. These laws establish the definitions of maltreatment and dictate the responsibilities of child protective agencies and mandated reporters. While the summaries below provide a general overview, the **Children's Code (Chapter 48)** and **Crimes Against Children (Chapter 948)** serve as the primary legal authorities.

Key Statutory References

- **s. 48.01 | Legislative Purpose:** Outlines the state's intent to provide for the care, protection, and mental/physical development of children.
- **s. 48.02 | Definitions:** Provides the legal definitions for "abuse" and "neglect" used to determine if a child is in need of protection.
- **s. 48.13 | Jurisdiction (CHIPS):** Describes the legal basis on which Child Protective Services (CPS) or the Division of Milwaukee Child Protective Services (DMCPS) may petition the court to intervene on behalf of a child.
- **s. 48.981 | Reporting Requirements:** This critical section details who is required to report suspected abuse, the 24-hour reporting window, and the legal protections (immunity) provided to those who report in good faith.
- **s. 948.01–948.11 | Crimes Against Children:** Defines specific criminal acts, including:
 - **Sexual Assault of a Child (s. 948.02)** and repeated acts of assault.
 - **Sexual Exploitation (s. 948.05)** and causing a child to view or listen to sexual activity.
 - **Exposing Intimate Parts (s. 948.10)** and other related offenses.
- **s. 940.225 | Sexual Assault:** Defines criminal sexual assault, which is cross-referenced in the Children's Code to identify child sexual abuse.
- **s. 940.285 | Abuse of Individuals at Risk:** Details protections for vulnerable adults and individuals at risk of maltreatment.
- **s. 944.30 | Prostitution:** Defines acts of prostitution, cross-referenced to address the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

Accessing the Full Statutes

Law is subject to legislative updates. To ensure you are viewing the most current versions of these statutes, please visit the **Wisconsin State Legislature** official website:

<https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes>

Appendices: Model Documents for Congregations

The following documents may be used as examples for policies and procedures at a congregational level:

Code of Conduct: Child and Youth Protection
Volunteer/Staff Statement of Understanding
Youth Helper Application & Interview Guide
Youth Helper Application Template
Youth Helper Interview Guide
Youth Peer-to-Peer/Helper Code of Conduct
Youth Registration
Media and Digital Communication Release Form
Appropriate vs Inappropriate vs Harmful/Abusive Behavior
Guidelines for Safe Touch
Integration of Behavior Examples into Documents
“Yellow Light” Behavior Response
Leadership Response Examples
Correction Memos
Ministry Covenant Check-in
Response and Reporting Protocol

Code of Conduct: Child and Youth Protection

As a volunteer or staff member, I recognize my calling to provide a safe, holy, and nurturing environment for all of God's children. By signing this document, I agree to adhere to the following standards of behavior:

Supervision and Visibility

- **Two-Deep Leadership:** I will ensure a minimum of at least two screened adults are present for all activities involving minors.
- **Open-Door Policy:** I will conduct all meetings and activities in visible, open areas. I will not be alone with a minor behind closed or locked doors.
- **One-on-One Interaction:** If a private conversation is necessary, I will stay in a visible area while ensuring another adult is nearby in the building.

Physical and Emotional Boundaries

- **Respect for Privacy:** I will respect the privacy of minors in restrooms and changing areas. I will only intervene in these spaces if health or safety is at immediate risk, and I will follow "two-adult" protocols for assistance.
- **Appropriate Touch:** I will not initiate or encourage intimate or high-contact physical activities (e.g., wrestling or horseplay).
- **Positive Guidance:** I will use respectful, constructive discipline and never use physical, emotional, or sexual punishment.
- **Harassment & Hazing:** I will maintain a zero-tolerance policy for hazing, bullying, "initiations," or derogatory teasing.

Safety and Travel

- **Transportation:** I will avoid driving alone with a minor. If an emergency arises, I will obtain and document parental consent immediately.
- **Overnight Events:** I will never share a bed or private sleeping room with a minor (unless I am their legal guardian). I will respect designated separate sleeping and restroom schedules.
- **Substance-Free Ministry:** I will not use tobacco, alcohol, or illicit drugs while supervising youth activities.

Professionalism and Integrity

- **No Secrecy:** I will not participate in or encourage secret activities. I understand that all ministry programs should be transparent to parents and church leadership.
- **Prohibited Relationships:** I will not pursue romantic or sexual relationships with any minor. I understand that any form of sexual misconduct is grounds for immediate termination and legal reporting.
- **Safe Departure:** At the conclusion of events, I will ensure that the last three people (including myself) leave the facility together to avoid 1:1 situations.

Statement of Commitment

I have read and understood the Recommended Standards of Behavior and this Code of Conduct. I agree to follow these guidelines to protect the youth, the church, and myself. I understand that failure to adhere to these standards may result in my removal from my position.

Name (Print): _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Volunteer/Staff Statement of Understanding

Purpose: This document confirms that the individual has been trained and agrees to abide by the church's safety protocols.

Statement of Intent and Compliance

I, _____, verify that I have received, read, and understood the Ministry Safety Policy & Volunteer Handbook of [Insert Church Name].

By signing this statement, I agree to the following:

- **Code of Conduct:** I will uphold the "Two-Adult Rule" and "Open Door Policy" at all times when working with minors or vulnerable adults.
- **Theological Commitment:** I will serve as a Christian role model, fostering an environment of hospitality, safety, and respect.
- **Digital Boundaries:** I will follow all social media and electronic communication guidelines, ensuring all interactions are transparent and parent accessible.
- **Reporting:** I understand my moral and legal responsibility to report any suspected abuse or neglect to the proper authorities and church leadership within 24 hours.
- **Screening:** I consent to a criminal background check and understand that any history of misconduct related to the safety of minors disqualifies me from service.

I understand that any violation of these policies may result in my immediate removal from my position, whether voluntary or paid.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Supervisor Signature: _____ Date: _____

Youth Helper Application & Interview Guide

To move beyond a simple background check and create a meaningful "vetting" process for minors, you'll want a system that feels official but also serves as a leadership development tool.

The Application Form - Keep it to one page. The goal is to gauge maturity.

Key Fields to Include:

- **Basic Info:** Name, Grade, and how long they have been active in the congregation.
- **Availability:** Which services or events are they committing to?
- **Experience:** "Have you worked with kids before? (Babysitting, VBS, sports, etc.)"
- **The "Why":** "Why do you want to serve in this role?"
- **Self-Evaluation:** "What is one strength you have when working with kids? What is one area where you might need help from an adult?"
- **References:** Names of two adults (non-family) who can vouch for their reliability.

The Interview Process

This doesn't need to be a formal "boardroom" interview. A 15-minute conversation with the Youth Director, Pastor, or a member of the Leadership Team is sufficient.

Top 3 Interview Questions for Safety & Fit:

1. **Scenario-Based:** "If two 2nd graders are arguing over a toy and it starts to get physical, what is your first step?" (Correct answer: Ensure the kids are safe and immediately call for the Adult Leader).
2. **Boundary Awareness:** "How would you handle it if a child asked you for your phone number or to follow you on Instagram?" (Correct answer: Politely say no and explain that it's a church rule for everyone's safety).
3. **Role Understanding:** "What do you think it means to be a 'representative' of the church when you're wearing your staff lanyard/t-shirt?"

The "Onboarding" Checklist

Once the application is in and the interview is done, complete these final steps to ensure your "Safe Church" records are audit ready.

Step	Action Item	Status
1. Reference Check	Send a quick email or text to the two adults listed on their app.	[]
2. Policy Review	Have the youth and their parent sign the Code of Conduct.	[]
3. Training	A 30-minute walkthrough of the facility (Exits, First Aid kits, Restroom	[]

Step	Action Item	Status
	protocols).	
4. Identification	Provide a specific t-shirt, lanyard, or name tag so parents can easily identify them as staff.	[]

Administrative Recommendation: The "Shadow" Period

For new youth staff, consider a two-event "Shadow Period" where the youth helper candidate is paired with your most experienced Adult Leader.

- The Adult Leader provides feedback at the end of the event (e.g., "You did a great job engaging the kids during the craft, but remember to keep your phone in your pocket.").
- This acts as a "live" background check, allowing you to observe their instincts and maturity in real time.

Pro-Tip for Events

Since you are reaching out to families and a younger demographic, having clearly identified youth helpers who are well-trained shows those visiting families that your congregation takes safety and professional leadership seriously.

Youth Helper Application Template

Part 1: Basic Information

Name: _____ Grade: _____ Age: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

How long have you been active in this congregation? _____

Part 2: Experience & Interest

1. List any experience you have working with younger children (babysitting, VBS, sports, etc.):

2. Why are you interested in serving as a Youth Helper?

3. What is one thing you are excited to share with the children (e.g., a hobby, a Bible story, a craft)?

Part 3: References

Please list two adults (not related to you) who can speak to your character and reliability (e.g., a teacher, coach, or neighbor).

Name: _____ Phone: _____ Email: _____

Name: _____ Phone: _____ Email: _____

Youth Helper Interview Guide

To be completed by the Ministry Leader

Interview Questions:

1. **The Role:** "What do you think is the most important part of being a Youth Helper?"
2. **Safety Scenario:** "If a child falls and scrapes their knee, or if two children start fighting, what is the very first thing you should do?"
 - Look for: *'Ensure the child is safe and immediately get an Adult Leader.'*
3. **Boundaries:** "If a child asks to play a game on your phone, how would you respond?"
 - Look for: *'Politely say no and explain that phones stay away during church time.'*
4. **Growth:** "Is there anything you feel nervous about or want more training on?"

Leadership Checklist:

☐

Application and References reviewed.

☐

Youth Code of Conduct signed by Youth and Parent/Guardian.

☐

Facility tour completed (Restroom protocols, First Aid locations, Emergency exits).

☐

Training on the "Two-Adult Rule" and "Line of Sight" supervision.

Approval Status: [] Approved [] Shadow Period Required [] Not a fit at this time

Supervisor Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Youth Peer-to-Peer/Helper Code of Conduct

This **Youth Peer-to-Peer/Helper Code of Conduct** is designed to be clear, encouraging, and professional. It frames the role as a leadership opportunity while setting firm boundaries to protect both the younger children and the youth staff themselves.

Youth Peer-to-Peer & Staff Code of Conduct

Our Mission: To provide a safe, welcoming, and Christ-centered environment where children can grow in faith. As a Youth Helper, you are a role model and a vital part of this mission.

1. The "Power of Two" (Supervision)

- **Never Alone:** You should never be alone with a child. Always stay within the line of sight of an Adult Leader (age 21+).
- **Restroom Policy:** If a child needs the restroom, notify an Adult Leader. You may walk a child to the hallway, but an adult should oversee the transition, and you should never enter a restroom stall with a child.
- **The 5-Year Rule:** You are here to mentor those significantly younger than you. Maintain a "mentor-student" relationship rather than a "peer-friend" relationship.

2. Physical Boundaries

- **Appropriate Touch:** High-fives, "side-hugs," and handholding (for toddlers) are encouraged. Avoid piggyback rides, sitting children on your lap, or wrestling/roughhousing.
- **Respect Personal Space:** Always ask a child if it's okay before giving a high-five or hug. Respect their "no."

3. Communication & Social Media

- **Public Platforms Only:** Do not "friend" or "follow" children (under age 13) on social media.
- **No Private Messaging:** Do not text, DM, or Snapchat children you supervise. If you need to communicate regarding a church event, use a group thread that includes an Adult Leader or the child's parent.
- **Photos:** Do not take photos or videos of children on your personal phone. Use the church-designated camera/tablet if authorized.

4. Behavioral Leadership

- **Positive Language:** Use encouraging words. No profanity, "inside jokes" that exclude others, or talk of inappropriate topics (movies, parties, etc.).
- **Deferred Discipline:** If a child is misbehaving or a conflict arises, do not attempt to discipline them yourself. Immediately get the attention of an Adult Leader to handle the situation.
- **Reporting:** If a child tells you something that makes you uncomfortable, or if you see something that doesn't seem right, you have a responsibility to tell your Adult Leader or the Pastor immediately.

5. Professionalism

- **Be Present:** Put your phone away while serving. Your focus should be entirely on the children.
- **Timeliness:** Arrive 10-15 minutes early to check in with your Adult Leader and prepare for the day.

Commitment Statement

I understand that serving as a Youth Helper is a privilege. I agree to follow these guidelines to keep our children safe and to grow as a leader in this congregation. I understand that failure to follow these boundaries may result in being asked to step down from my position.

Youth Signature: _____ Date: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: _____

Implementation Tip:

When you hand this out, it is recommended doing a quick "**Scenario Walkthrough.**"

Ask the youth: "*What would you do if a 6-year-old asks you to help them in the restroom?*" or "*What do you do if a child starts hitting another child?*" This helps them move the policy from a piece of paper into real-life action.

Youth Registration Form

Event/Class Name: _____ Date(s): _____

Participant Information

We want everyone to feel seen, respected, and welcome.

Please share how you would like to be identified while participating in our community.

Legal Name: _____ Date of Birth: _____

Name You Go By (if different): _____ Pronouns: _____
(e.g., she/her, he/him, they/them, etc.)

Gender Identity/Expression: _____
(e.g., Female, Male, Non-binary, etc. We invite you to self-identify in the way that best describes you.)

Date of Birth: _____ Grade: _____

Email Address: _____ Phone Number: _____

Parent/Legal Guardian Information

Primary Contact Name: _____ Relationship to Youth: _____

Email Address: _____ Phone Number: _____

Secondary Contact Name: _____ Relationship to Youth: _____

Email Address: _____ Phone Number: _____

Health & Safety

Allergies (Food, Environmental, Medication):

Medical Conditions or Accessibility Needs:

(Please let us know how we can best support your participation)

Emergency Contact (if Parents/Guardians cannot be reached):

Name: _____ Phone: _____

Consents & Signatures

Photo/Media Release:

I grant permission for [Church Name] to use photographs or videos of the participant for church publications, website, or social media. ☐ Yes ☐ No

Inclusivity Commitment:

By signing below, we acknowledge that [Church Name] is an inclusive community. We agree to treat all participants, staff, and volunteers with dignity and respect regardless of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, or ability.

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Youth Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Media and Digital Communication Release Form

[Insert Congregation Name] |

Participant Name: _____ Program Year: _____

Photo and Video Release

I grant permission for [Insert Congregation Name] to take photographs and/or video recordings of my child during church-sponsored activities. I understand these may be used for:

- The church's official website and social media pages (Facebook, Instagram, etc.).
- Printed newsletters, brochures, or bulletin inserts.
- Congregational slideshows or livestreamed worship services.

Privacy Guarantee: The church will **never** publish a minor's full name, address, or contact information alongside their image on any public platform without additional written consent.

[] **I CONSENT** to the use of photos/videos of my child as described above.

[] **I DO NOT CONSENT** to the use of photos/videos of my child.

Digital Communication Permission

Our youth leaders use digital tools to share event updates, devotional content, and ministry reminders. Please indicate your permission for leaders to communicate with your child via the following:

- A. Group Messaging (Text/Apps like GroupMe or Slack):** [] Yes [] No
Note: All group chats will include at least two screened adult administrators.
- B. Social Media Groups (Private Facebook Groups/Discord):** [] Yes [] No
Note: Parents are always invited and encouraged to join these groups.
- C. Email:** [] Yes [] No
-

Parent/Guardian Contact Information

To ensure transparency, we will copy parents on digital communications whenever possible.

Parent/Guardian Name: _____

Parent Email: _____ Parent Cell Phone: _____

(Optional)

Youth Email: _____ Youth Cell Phone: _____

Agreement

I have read the church's **Online & Social Media Safety Recommendations**. I understand that all digital communication between adults and my child is intended for ministry purposes, is not confidential, and should adhere to the church's safety policies. I may revoke these permissions at any time by providing written notice to the church office.

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appropriate vs Inappropriate vs Harmful/Abusive Behavior

Clear boundaries can help all volunteers/staff feel confident and keep participants safe.

It helps to categorize behaviors by **intent** and **impact**. Here is a framework you can adapt for your policy.

1. Appropriate Behavior (Green Light)

These are behaviors that build trust, maintain professional boundaries, and ensure transparency.

- **Public Interaction:** Always engaging in visual or auditory range of other adults (the "Rule of Two").
- **Physical Contact:** Brief, non-intimate, and child-initiated (e.g., high-fives, side-hugs, or handholding for safety when crossing a street).
- **Communication:** Using official organizational channels (email/office phones) and keeping all conversations transparent and related to program goals.
- **Respecting Privacy:** Knocking before entering restrooms/changing areas and ensuring another adult is present if assistance is required.

2. Inappropriate Behavior (Yellow Light)

These are "boundary blurs" - behaviors that may not be abusive but are unprofessional, create favoritism, or increase risk. These usually require corrective action or coaching.

- **Favoritism:** Giving special gifts, money, or extra attention to one specific participant.
- **Private Communication:** Texting or DMing a youth or vulnerable adult from a personal account or about non-program topics.
- **Secretive Conduct:** Telling a participant, "This is our little secret," even if the topic is harmless.
- **Transporting Alone:** Driving a participant home alone in a personal vehicle without prior written authorization and emergency necessity.
- **Inappropriate Language:** Using crude jokes, swearing, or discussing the staff member's personal "adult" problems (dating, finances, etc.) with participants.

3. Harmful/Abusive Behavior (Red Light)

These are zero-tolerance violations that often require immediate suspension, termination, and/or reporting to law enforcement/protective services.

- **Sexual Misconduct:** Any sexualized touch, grooming, exposure to pornography, or sexually suggestive comments.
 - **Physical Abuse:** Hitting, shaking, pushing, or using corporal punishment.
 - **Emotional Maltreatment:** Shaming, belittling, or bullying a participant.
 - **Exploitation:** Taking money from a vulnerable adult or using a participant for personal labor/gain.
 - **Neglect:** Failing to provide necessary supervision, food, or medical care while the individual is under your supervision.
-

Implementation Tips for Your Policy

Step	Action
Use Scenarios	Don't just list rules; provide "What would you do?" examples in your training.
Define "The Rule of Two"	Explicitly state that a staff member should never be alone with a participant behind closed doors.
Self-Reporting	Create a "mistake policy" where staff can report if they accidentally broke a boundary (e.g., "I had to drive them home because their parent didn't show up") to maintain transparency.
Visual Aids	Create a simple "Stoplight" poster for staff breakrooms/commons spaces summarizing these behaviors.

Pro-Tip: When writing these, avoid vague terms like "behave professionally." Instead, use "active" verbs. For example, instead of "Maintain boundaries," use "Staff/Volunteers shall not engage in private social media messaging with participants."

Guidelines for Safe Touch and Consent

The following are guidelines for touch should be rooted in a "culture of consent." This approach emphasizes that physical affection is a gift to be shared, not an obligation, and it protects both the youth and the leaders.

The Foundational Principle: Affirmative Consent

In our community, we believe every person's body is a holy gift and they have full autonomy over it.

- **Ask First:** Always ask before initiating physical contact (e.g., "May I give you a hug?" or "Would you like a high-five?").
- **Respect the "No":** A youth (or adult) has the right to decline any touch for any reason at any time without explanation. A "no" should be respected immediately and without making the person feel guilty.
- **Monitor Non-Verbal Cues:** If a youth pulls away, stiffens, or looks uncomfortable, stop the contact immediately, even if they didn't say "no" out loud.

Appropriate vs. Inappropriate Touch

To maintain healthy boundaries, we focus on touch that is public, brief, and appropriate for a mentorship relationship.

- **Encouraged Touch:**
 - High-fives, fist bumps, or handshakes.
 - Brief "side hugs" (hugging side-by-side rather than chest-to-chest).
 - A pat on the back or shoulder.
 - Handholding only during specific ritual moments (like a prayer circle) where it is optional.
- **Prohibited Touch:**
 - Any touch that mimics sexual behavior or involves "private" areas (chest, buttocks, groin).
 - Front-facing, full-body hugs (especially prolonged ones).
 - Sitting on laps.
 - Massages or tickling.
 - Kissing.
 - Physical discipline or touch used in anger/aggression.

Safe Touch in Vulnerable Moments

Sometimes youth seek comfort during emotional moments. Leaders should provide support while maintaining safety.

- **Side-by-Side Presence:** If a youth is crying or upset, sit beside them rather than pulling them into a lap or a full hug.
- **The "Anchor" Technique:** Offer a hand or a pat on the shoulder to provide a grounded, steady presence.
- **Verbal Comfort:** Prioritize "verbal touch" - affirming words like, "I am here with you," or "You are safe," rather than relying solely on physical contact.

Situational Awareness (The "Rule of Three")

Touch should never happen in secret.

- **Visible and Interruptible:** All interactions, especially those involving physical comfort, must take place in plain sight of at least one other adult.
- **Avoid Seclusion:** Never be alone with a youth in a closed room. If a private conversation is needed, move to a space that is "psychologically private but physically visible" (e.g., a corner of a

large hall or a room with a windowed door).

Model the Behavior

When you ask a youth for a high-five and they decline, respond with a smile and say, "Totally fine! I'm glad you told me." This teaches them that their boundaries are powerful and respected in the church.

Integration of Behavior Examples into Documents

As Lutheran Christians, these aren't just rules; they are ways we live out our theology of caring for our neighbor and protecting the "least of these."

Here is how you can practically integrate those behavior examples into your specific synodical and congregational documents:

1. The "Code of Conduct" Section

Instead of a separate list, embed the examples directly into a **Code of Conduct** that every volunteer and staff member signs annually.

- **The "Rule of Three":** In a congregational setting, emphasize that "one-on-one" is the primary risk.
 - *Application:* "To protect both the youth and the leader, all ministry activities will follow the 'Rule of Three' - two unrelated adults with one youth, or one adult with two or more youth."
- **The "Open Door" Policy:** If a private conversation is necessary (e.g., pastoral counseling or youth mentoring), define the Appropriate behavior as: "Conversations should happen in a room with a window in the door, or with the door left physically open."

2. Digital and Social Media Safety

Since synodical youth events often involve regional connections, digital boundaries are critical.

- **Inappropriate:** Private "snaps" or disappearing messages between a leader and a youth.
- **Appropriate:** Group chats that include at least two vetted adults, or BCC'ing a parent/ministry leader on individual emails.
- **Policy Language:** "All digital communication with minors shall be transparent, observable, and related to church ministry."

3. Vulnerable Adult Protection

In many congregations, "vulnerable adults" include homebound members or those in assisted living.

- **Appropriate:** Visiting in pairs or during daylight hours and documenting the visit in a church log.
- **Harmful:** Accepting personal gifts of money, becoming a power of attorney, or managing a congregant's private finances.
- **Policy Language:** "Home communion visitors and Stephen Ministers shall not engage in financial transactions or private legal arrangements with those they serve."

4. Categorizing by "Ministry Settings"

To make the policy scannable for your congregational leaders, use a table format in your handbook:

Setting	Appropriate (Green)	Inappropriate (Yellow)	Harmful (Red)
Sunday School	Group activities in classrooms with open doors.	A teacher taking a child to the restroom alone without notifying others.	Physical discipline or shaming a child.
Youth Trips	Adults sleeping in separate quarters or designated "adult-only" areas.	Sharing a bed or a private tent with a youth.	Any sexualized contact or "initiation" rituals/hazing.
Office/Building	Public meetings in common areas.	Meeting a youth late at night in the building when no one else is present.	Accessing or sharing inappropriate content on church Wi-Fi.

5. Next Steps for Implementation

- **The "Safety Covenant":** Frame these examples as a promise the congregation makes to its families. Use language like: "Because we value the safety of God's children, we commit to..."
- **Synodical Review:** Since you are working at the Synod level, you might provide this as a "Model Policy" template. Congregations can then "Adopt/Adapt/Update" it to fit their specific building layout or staff size.
- **Reporting Link:** Ensure that every page describing "Harmful Behavior" includes a clear, bolded box on how to report concerns to both the Senior Pastor and the Synod Bishop's office.

“Yellow Light” Behavior Response

Handling "Yellow Light" behaviors is often the most challenging part of safety oversight because these actions aren't always malicious - they are usually the result of poor judgment, over-familiarity, or a "hero complex." In a church environment, where we value grace and community, it can feel awkward to correct a dedicated volunteer. However, addressing the "Yellow" prevents the "Red."

1. The "Nip it in the Bud" Conversation

The goal is **restorative correction**. You want to maintain the volunteer's heart for ministry while firmly correcting the boundary slip.

- **Be Direct and Objective:** Don't guess their intent. Focus on the action.
 - *Ineffective:* "It seems like you're being a bit too close with the high schoolers."
 - *Effective:* "I noticed you were texting Sarah privately about non-youth-group topics. Our policy requires all texts to be in the group thread for everyone's protection."
- **The "Protection" Frame:** Position the correction as a way to protect the volunteer from false accusations as much as protecting the youth.
 - *Example:* "We have the 'Rule of Three' so that no one can ever question your integrity. When you're alone in the classroom, you're putting yourself at risk."

2. Formal Documentation (The "Incident Memo")

Even if no harm was done, you should keep a simple, internal log of the conversation.

- **Why?** If a volunteer has a pattern of "Yellow" behaviors across different ministries (e.g., Sunday School and the Food Pantry), you need a paper trail to identify a grooming pattern or a general lack of suitability for leadership.
- **What to Record:** * Date/Time of the behavior.
 - The specific policy that was bypassed.
 - The date the corrective conversation happened and the volunteer's response.

3. Immediate Corrective Actions

Depending on the "Yellow Light" behavior, you might implement these steps:

- **Increased Supervision:** Assign a "shadow" partner to that volunteer for the next month.
- **Mandatory Retraining:** Require them to re-watch the Synod's safety training videos or attend a boundary workshop.
- **Role Adjustment:** If a volunteer consistently struggles with physical boundaries (e.g., too many "front hugs" despite reminders), move them to a ministry role that doesn't involve direct contact with children or vulnerable adults, such as hospitality or tech.

4. Policy-Level Response

To make this easier for your congregations, your handbook should include a **"Self-Reporting"** clause.

The Grace Clause: "If a staff member or volunteer finds themselves in a situation where a boundary was accidentally crossed (e.g., having to drive a child home alone because of an emergency), they should report the incident to the Safety Lead, Youth Team or Pastor within 24 hours. Self-reporting is a sign of integrity and will be documented as an exception, not a violation."

5. When to Escalate to the Synod/Bishop

A "Yellow Light" becomes a "Red Light" if:

- The volunteer is defensive or refuses to change the behavior after being corrected.
- The volunteer attempts to hide the behavior or asks others to keep it secret.
- There is any indication of **grooming** (the intentional process of testing boundaries to see what they can get away with).

Comparison for Training

When training your leaders, you can use this simple table to help them decide how to react:

If you see...	You should...
A one-time slip (e.g., forgot to leave the door open)	Provide a gentle, immediate verbal reminder.
A repeated pattern (e.g., texting a youth privately every week)	Schedule a formal meeting; document the conversation.
Intentional bypass (e.g., disabling a security camera or hiding a meeting)	Suspend the volunteer immediately and investigate.

Leadership Response Examples

When addressing a "Yellow Light" behavior with a long-term, beloved volunteer, the tension is often between **Christian fellowship** and **professional accountability**. The goal is to be "gentle as doves and wise as serpents." Here are three scripts tailored for different scenarios, framed to preserve the relationship while being unyielding on the policy.

Scenario A: The "Friendly" Texter (Boundary Slip)

Use this when a volunteer is messaging a youth or vulnerable adult outside of official channels.

The Script: "Hey [Name], I wanted to pull you aside for a quick minute. I noticed you've been checking in with [Participant] via private text lately. I know you care deeply about them and are a great mentor, but our Synod policy requires all digital communication to stay in the group thread or include a second adult.

We do this to protect the kids, but also to protect you and your reputation so there's never a misunderstanding. Can we make sure to keep all future check-ins in the group chat? I'd hate for your great work to be overshadowed by a technical policy slip."

Scenario B: The "Loner" (Violation of the Rule of Two/Three)

Use this when a volunteer is consistently found alone in a room with a child or vulnerable adult.

The Script: "[Name], I need your help with something. I've noticed a few times lately that you've been finishing up your lesson one-on-one with [Participant] after the other kids leave.

I know it's just a few minutes, but our 'Rule of Two' is a hard line for the congregation's insurance and safety protocols. If a parent isn't there, please bring the student out to the hallway or the common area where I am. I need to know I can count on you to never be in a room alone with a participant—it's for everyone's safety, yours included."

Scenario C: The "Special Treatment" (Favoritism/Grooming Risk)

Use this when a volunteer is giving specific gifts, money, or extra attention to one person.

The Script: "[Name], you have such a heart for ministry, and it's clear you've formed a bond with [Participant]. However, I've noticed you've been [bringing them coffee/giving them small gifts] that the other students aren't getting.

In our safety training, we talk about how favoritism - even when well-intended - can create unhealthy dynamics or the appearance of grooming. To keep things healthy and fair for the whole group, I need to ask you to stop the individual gifts. Let's focus that energy on the whole group so everyone feels equally valued."

Three Keys for the Pastor/Leader

1. **Don't "Sandwich" the Feedback:** Some people suggest the "Compliment-Critique-Compliment" method, but in safety matters, this can muffle the seriousness of the message. Be clear about the behavior first.
2. **Externalize the "Bad Guy":** Use phrases like "The Synod policy requires..." or "Our insurance guidelines are very strict about..." This shifts the tension away from "I don't trust you" to "We are both accountable to this standard."
3. **The "I'll Check Back" Close:** Always end by mentioning that you'll be keeping an eye out to ensure they are successful.
 - *Example:* "Thanks for understanding. I'll check in with you in a couple of weeks to see how the new group chat is working out for you."

Handling the "But You Know Me!" Defense

If the volunteer gets defensive (e.g., *"I've been a member here for 40 years, you know I'd never hurt anyone!"*), you can respond:

"I absolutely do know your heart, which is why I'm having this conversation with you privately. This isn't about your character; it's about our collective commitment to a 'Culture of Safety.' If we make an exception for you because we love you, we lose the ability to enforce the rules for everyone else. We need you to lead by example."

Correction Memos

Having a standardized template ensures that documentation is consistent across the different congregations of the Greater Milwaukee Synod. This keeps the focus on behavior rather than personality, which is vital for maintaining a healthy ministry environment.

Below is a template designed to be professional, objective, and restorative.

Confidential Safety Policy: Behavioral Guidance Memo

Date: [Date of Conversation]

To: [Volunteer/Staff Name]

From: [Pastor/Ministry Lead Name]

Congregation: [Name of Church]

1. Purpose of Conversation

This memo serves as a record of a corrective conversation regarding a "Yellow Light" behavior (a boundary or policy concern) as outlined in the Greater Milwaukee Synod / [Church Name] Protection Policy.

2. Observation of Behavior

Provide a factual, non-judgmental description of the event(s).

- **Date of Occurrence:** [Date]
- **Location:** [e.g., Youth Room, Online/Social Media, Off-site event]
- **Description:** [Example: Volunteer was observed in the classroom alone with a minor after the other students had departed, bypassing the "Rule of Two."]

3. Policy Reference

The behavior described above is inconsistent with the following section of our Safety Handbook:

- [Example: Section 4.2 – Supervision & The Rule of Two]
- [Example: Section 7.1 – Electronic Communication and Social Media]

4. Corrective Action & Expectations

The following steps have been agreed upon to ensure future alignment with our safety standards:

- **Immediate Change:** [Example: Volunteer will ensure they are in a public space before beginning any one-on-one mentoring.]
- **Support/Training:** [Example: Volunteer will re-review the "Boundaries in Ministry" training video by next Sunday.]
- **Follow-up:** [Example: Pastor will check in with the volunteer in two weeks to discuss progress.]

5. Affirmation

[Church Name] values your ministry and your commitment to the safety of all participants. This documentation is a tool for accountability and protection for both our vulnerable members and our leaders.

Signatures:

(Leader) _____ Date: _____

(Volunteer) _____ Date: _____

How to File This Document

- **The "Two-Key" Rule:** These records should be kept in a secure, locked file (electronic or physical) accessible only by the Senior Pastor and the designated Safety Officer.
- **Retention:** Keep these records for at least the duration of the volunteer's service. If the volunteer moves to a different congregation within the Synod, these records are generally not shared unless there is a formal inquiry regarding a "Red Light" pattern.
- **Synod Reporting:** For most "Yellow Light" slips, you do not need to notify the Bishop's office. However, if the behavior is a repeated pattern or if the volunteer is defiant, it is wise to consult with Synod leadership for guidance on next steps.

Ministry Covenant Check-in

For smaller congregations - where everyone knows each other and formal paperwork can feel "too corporate" – it is best to frame this as a **Ministry Covenant Check-in**. This keeps the tone relational while still providing the necessary paper trail for insurance and safety standards.

Here is a simplified, one-page version that focuses on the conversation and the “moving forward” plan.

Ministry Safety Check-In Record

Congregation: _____

Date: _____

Participant(s): _____ & _____

1. The Conversation

We met today to discuss a specific safety boundary regarding:

(Check one)

- ☐ Supervision / Being alone with a participant
- ☐ Digital communication / Social media
- ☐ Physical boundaries / Appropriate touch
- ☐ Other: _____

2. Summary of the Situation

What happened? *(Keep it brief and factual)*

3. Our Shared Goal

To ensure the safety of our participants and the reputation of our leaders, we agree that going forward:

- The policy is: _____
- Our plan is: _____

4. Commitment

By signing below, we affirm our commitment to a "Culture of Safety" within our church family. We agree that following these steps allows our ministry to thrive without distraction or risk.

Volunteer Signature: _____

Leader Signature: _____

How to Use This in a Small Church

- **Keep it in the "Covenant" File:** Don't call it a "Disciplinary File." Call it a "Leadership Covenant

File." This includes their initial background check, their signed code of conduct, and any check-in notes like this one.

- **The "5-Minute Rule":** If a Pastor or a Youth Chair has to correct a volunteer, they should try to fill this out together immediately after the talk. This prevents the volunteer from stewing on it or feeling like they are "in trouble" later.
- **Frame it as Support:** When handing them the pen, say: *"I'm writing this down just so we're both clear on the plan we made. It stays in my private file, and it's really here to show that we handled things properly if anyone ever asks."*

When in Doubt, Shout it Out

If you accidentally find yourself in a "Yellow Light" situation (e.g., the only other adult in the room had an emergency and left), don't hide it. Immediately tell the Pastor or another leader.

Transparency is the best antidote to suspicion.

Does this simplified version look like it would be easier for your local congregational leaders to manage?

Background Check Resources

The following are a few of the resources that you can use for background checks and other information.

C4 Operations - <https://c4operations.com/>

- No set-up fees
- basic search is \$17 (not recommended)
- enhanced search \$20
- They allow individuals to submit information online.

Protect My Ministry - <https://www.protectmyministry.com/>

- “Bundle 0” - \$39 one time set-up fee and \$8.45/ background check
- “Bundle 1” - \$149 one time set up fee which includes video training for staff and volunteers
- “Bundle 2” - \$299 one time set up fee - includes video training for staff and volunteers and the ability for the individual to submit the information online.

Oxford Documents - <https://oxforddoc.com/>

- Pricing varies on what your needs are
- Can be a bit more expensive, but they are very extensive and thorough

Ministry Safe.com - <https://ministrysafe.com/>

- Offers online training
- Background checks
- Can help with creating documents