

# **A Place of Safety**

## **Child Protection Policy of the Falls Church Presbyterian Church**

225 East Broad Street, Falls Church VA 22046

Adopted by the Session: November 12, 2019

### **Theological Framework**

The Christian church is called to express and give witness to the love of God through Word and action. This is how the Church reveals God's vision and Kingdom of justice to the world. Expressions of God's love are revealed to us, and our community, through worship, study, prayer and fellowship. The work of building God's new creation is done through congregants (both adults and children), clergy and church staff.

Central to our faith is the concept of covenant. God entered into a covenant with the people of God to assure survival and liberation. God's people made promises to God in order to live out the covenant in their lives. As the body of Christ, we covenant with one another to create a community where all people experience the security, love, and acceptance of Christ. The promises we make to each other are sacred.

In the covenant of baptism, individuals and the congregation pledge to uphold that person in the household of God. We take responsibility for the spiritual well-being and growth of individuals entrusted to our congregation.

Children growing up in the community of faith often come to see clergy, church staff, volunteers or fellow members of the congregation as trusted mentors, advisors, friends or confidants. In this relationship of trust, a troubled child, or youth, who is struggling with the burden of neglect or physical, sexual or emotional abuse, may approach congregants. Likewise, because of the vulnerability of this trusting relationship, the church can potentially be a place where individuals can engage in abusive, inappropriate and illegal behaviors and actions with other community members.

### **Purpose of this Policy**

Falls Church Presbyterian Church is committed to promoting the safety and welfare of all children and youth in our community. This is particularly our responsibility when children and youth are participating in activities and programs sponsored by the church, but our responsibility does not end there. Congregants may be sentinels to identify, and a refuge and lifeline for, children who are subjected to abuse or neglect by others outside the church. To fulfill this covenant, the Session hereby adopts reasonable policies and procedures to:

- facilitate timely, objective, professional and effective evaluation and intervention on behalf of children or youth who may be in trouble and in need of assistance;

- guide church employees, volunteers and members in the appropriate fulfillment of their covenant with children in the case of observed or suspected abuse or neglect of a child or youth; and
- minimize the possibility that any child or youth will be subjected to physical or emotional abuse or neglect by church clergy, staff, volunteers or congregants.

### **Procedures for Suspected, Alleged or Witnessed Abuse**

As part of our covenant with children to reflect the security, love and acceptance of Christ, it is essential that any adult in the church who reasonably suspects, has been told about, or who has witnessed neglect or abuse of a child or youth, report it immediately to the appropriate child protection authorities. This is the only way that the report can be appropriately and confidentially investigated in a manner that best protects the child or youth, the alleged perpetrator (in the case of a misunderstanding or false accusation), and the person making the report.

If you witness an incident, or are told something by a child that makes you reasonably suspect child abuse or neglect, it is not your responsibility to investigate, validate, gather evidence or otherwise verify what happened. That is the job of trained professionals. It is the policy of Falls Church Presbyterian Church that you must report the information to the child protection authorities. This should be done as quickly as possible, by calling either:

The Virginia state child abuse hotline (1-800-552-7096), or  
The Fairfax County child abuse hotline (1-703-324-7400).

After placing the call, proceed as directed. If you are told to initiate FCPC's internal process, please do the following:

If the incident or allegation involves a member of the clergy, church staff, volunteer or congregant who is in a position to have continued interaction with child and youth members of our congregation, or if other children are in immediate danger and need to be removed from the presence of a potential predator, report the concerns to one of the following so that appropriate steps to protect children may be taken:

1. Pastor (Head of Staff)
2. Pastor for Spiritual Growth
3. the Clerk of Session
4. an Elder

In a situation where a pastor is suspected, the National Capital Presbytery Sexual Misconduct Response Coordinating Team should be contacted:

- Leslianne Braunstein, Convener, 202-329-7800
- Stephen Smith-Cobbs, 703-437-5500, ext. 303

If there is no imminent danger to other children, you must refrain from discussing the allegations of neglect or abuse with others outside the child protective services officials and

church leaders indicated above. This is to protect the identity of the potential victim as well as the identity of the accused in the event that the suspicions prove to be false. As long as the procedures above are followed, appropriate and timely steps will be taken to protect children and youth and fulfill our covenant with them.

If a member of the church clergy, staff, or Session is informed of suspected, alleged or witnessed neglect or abuse of a child or youth, s/he shall:

- confirm that a report has been made to child protective services and contact them immediately if it has not;
- make arrangements to remove the suspected individual from further contact with children in church settings while the suspicions are investigated and clarified; and
- ensure that appropriate leaders in the congregation are notified, potentially including the Head of Staff, Clerk of Session, Chair of the Personnel Committee, Chair of the Christian Education Committee, and/or leaders of the Presbytery, as appropriate.

The goal is to uphold our covenant with the church community, ensure the protection of children and youth, and protect the alleged perpetrator in the case of a misunderstanding. Under no circumstances shall the goal of protecting adults be placed before upholding our church covenant and protecting children and youth.

Church leaders shall take appropriate steps to coordinate with officials investigating suspected neglect or abuse, and to protect children, youth and the congregation until an official investigation is complete.

### **Safeguards for Children and Youth**

To protect children and youth from abuse during church-sponsored activities, as well as to protect innocent adults from suspicion of abuse, the following common-sense safeguards shall be maintained to the greatest extent possible during activities at the church or sponsored by the church:

- Paid staff and volunteers working with children and youth are responsible for the physical and emotional safety of those in their care, and are tasked with being aware of signs indicating neglect of the child's well-being.
- Those working with children and youth shall work in pairs. Except for brief periods of time, two non-related adults should be present with children and youth at all activities. Appropriate adult-to-child ratios will be maintained at all times for all activities to ensure safety.
- At no time should any child be left alone without adult supervision.
- Falls Church Presbyterian Church recommends that staff and volunteers transport children and youth in groups rather than alone. In ordinary circumstances, an unaccompanied adult should not drive a single child in a church sponsored activity without the permission of the child's parent or guardian.

- Church staff and volunteers shall not touch or interact with children or youth in any way that is sexually stimulating, emotionally demeaning, or exploitative. Common expressions of affection and affirmation such as hugs and pats on the back; or physical care such as diaper changes or first aid, are appropriate in this or any other community of Christians. Staff and volunteers must be careful that physical expressions of affection are not excessive or imposed on another individual.
- Background checks will be conducted for all clergy and paid church staff.
- Volunteers shall review and agree to this Child Protection Policy prior to commencing their volunteer work with children or youth. In addition, volunteers are required to complete the online video training.
- No individual will be permitted to volunteer in children's or youth programs who has not been known to a church member for at least six months.
- At the beginning of the church activities year, each child and youth shall have a consent and information form signed by a parent or guardian on file to cover activities sponsored by the church. All parents shall be provided with a copy of this Child Protection Policy. The congregation shall review its covenant and this Child Protection Policy annually.
- Church personnel and volunteers are prohibited from the use, possession, distribution, or being under the influence of alcohol, illegal drugs, or the misuse of legal drugs while participating in or assisting with programs or activities for children or youth.
- Church personnel and volunteers will respond to children and youth with respect, consideration and equal treatment. They will portray a positive role model for children and youth by maintaining an attitude of respect, patience and maturity.

### **Protection of LGBT+ Children and Youth**

- As previously stated, Church personnel and volunteers will respond to children and youth with respect, consideration and equal treatment. They will portray a positive role model for children and youth by maintaining an attitude of respect, patience and maturity.
- Children and youth within our community will be referred to with their own pronouns and name.
- Volunteers will consult with church personnel following the disclosure of trusted personal information regarding sexuality or gender identity. This helps provide a system and culture of support for children, youth, and their families. Upon disclosure please inform:
  - 1) Pastor/Head of Staff
  - 2) Pastor for Spiritual Growth
  - 3) Director of Children, Youth, and Family Ministry

### **Information for Church Volunteers**

When child protective services receives a call about suspected, alleged or witnessed child abuse or neglect, a trained staff person will ask a series of questions about the conversation or incident leading to the concern. Your name and contact information will be requested, although the law permits anonymous reports of abuse to be filed.

Based on the details of the report, child protective services staff will make a decision whether or not to investigate further. The parents or guardians of the child or youth may be contacted for additional information, and the child or youth may be interviewed. Your identity will not be revealed to the person who is suspected of child neglect or abuse, even if he or she asks the authorities who filed the report. While it is possible that you may be contacted for additional information, it is more likely that you will not hear from authorities again. It is entirely possible that you never know the outcome of the investigation.

### **Procedures for Suspected, Alleged or Witnessed Abuse**

If you witness an incident, or are told something by a child that makes you reasonably suspect child abuse or neglect, it is the policy of Falls Church Presbyterian Church that you must report the information to the child protection authorities immediately by calling child protective services at either:

**The Virginia state child abuse hotline (1-800-552-7096), or  
The Fairfax County child abuse hotline (1-703-324-7400).**

After placing the call, proceed as directed by Child Protective Services. If you are told to initiate FCPC's internal process, please do the following:

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2. Minister for Spiritual Growth
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I hereby affirm that, as a volunteer working with children and/or youth at Falls Church Presbyterian Church, I have read the policy above, understand it, and agree to fulfill my covenant with children by abiding by this policy. I affirm that I have submitted my information for a background check, and I have completed the online child abuse prevention training.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Print name here: \_\_\_\_\_