

**GENERAL SYNOD OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
THIRTY-FOURTH GENERAL SYNOD
YOUTH PROTECTION POLICY AND PROCEDURES**

A. Application

This Youth Protection Policy and Procedures (“Policy”) applies to all Youth Workers/Volunteers and Youth, as defined below, who are attending the General Synod. The Policy applies from the time they begin their travel to the General Synod until they leave the care of their church setting following General Synod. The Policy applies during the times they are participating in the Youth@ Synod program and throughout the duration of the General Synod. Parts of the Policy may also apply to specific roles outside of the Youth@Synod program, as stated in the Policy. By registering for the Youth@Synod program, Youth Workers/Volunteers and Youth agree to abide by the Policy.

The Youth@Synod Program includes structured activities as described on the Youth@Synod Detailed Agenda that will occur in the convention center, designated activities that will occur in pre-selected downtown Indianapolis areas (including local parks, service sites and fun day experiences), and meals which will be organized by each youth group individually at the adult leaders’ discretion from June 30th through the completion of General Synod on July 4th, 2023.

Youth and Youth Workers/Volunteers are also encouraged to attend other events at the General Synod. Youth must be supervised as set forth in the Policy.

B. Distribution

This Policy shall be made available online to everyone on the General Synod website, and shall be distributed by email or in hardcopy to each Youth Worker/Volunteer in the Youth@Synod program. Church settings shall ensure that Youth and their parents/guardians are provided with a copy of or a link to the Policy.

C. Policy Rationale

Children are a blessing and a gift from the Lord. Psalm 127:3 CEB

Children deserve to grow up in a world where they feel valued and protected in their homes, in the communities where they live, at their schools, and when participating in programs provided by the church. However children are in fact the most victimized population in our society. Research indicates that a majority of children and youth across the United States will experience at least one type of trauma before adulthood. Some children will experience multiple types of trauma, severely impacting their ability to learn, grow, and develop to their full potential. Although such trauma is never expected, adherence to this policy is an effort to ensure the church has instituted every safeguard available to protect all children and the adults who will care for them during church sponsored activities.

D. Definitions

Youth: a person who has completed fifth grade through the summer following completion of high school.

Minor: any person 0-17 years old.

Youth Worker/Volunteer: Any person, volunteer, paid staff, or contractor who participates at any level at the Youth@Synod program. This includes Local Church members/attendees/staff, including clergy, and volunteers/chaperones (regardless whether they are church members) who accompany Youth to the General Synod for participation in the Youth@Synod program, as well as Conference and National Setting clergy, staff, volunteers, and chaperones.

Minor Abuse: Any act or failure to act that results in physical abuse, neglect, and/or sexual molestation or abuse, sexual, psychological, or emotional mistreatment, or exploitation of a Minor.

Sexual Abuse: Any offense involving sexual conduct in relation to any Minor (whether between two minors or an adult and a minor) or any person without the capacity to consent; or any person when the conduct includes force, threat, coercion, intimidation, or misuse of a ministry position. The behavior may or may not involve touching.

Sexual Exploitation: Sexual activity or conduct (not limited to sexual intercourse) in which a person takes advantage of the vulnerability of the person being served by causing that person to engage in sexual behavior.

Misuse of Technology: The use of technology that results in Minor Abuse, harassing of a Minor or Youth, or is otherwise harassing or inappropriate towards any person.

Youth@Synod Response Team: A team of at least three people, comprised of two Youth@Synod program leaders and one National Setting staff person with training on the Policy. The Response Team members will be selected by the Minister for Children and Youth Engagement at the National Setting of the UCC in consultation with the Youth@Synod program leaders. This team will be readily available to be contacted during the General Synod. Youth Workers/Volunteers and Youth will be notified of the members of the Response Team at the initial Youth@Synod event as well as during the Youth@Synod trainings.

Sexual Harassment: repeated or coercive sexual advances toward another person contrary to their wishes. It includes behavior directed at another person with the intent of intimidating, humiliating or embarrassing the other person, or subjecting the person to public discrimination. Sexual harassment also includes continuing to express sexual interest after being informed directly that the interest is unwelcome and using sexual behavior to control, influence, or affect the career, salary, work, learning or worship environment of another.

Sexual Misconduct: The umbrella term that includes Sexual Abuse, Sexual Exploitation, Sexual Harassment, Misuse of Technology.

E. Prohibited Behavior

It is a violation of this Policy for any Youth Worker/Volunteer, or Youth, to engage in Sexual Misconduct towards or abuse or harassment of any person during the General Synod.

It is a violation of this Policy to not comply with any other provisions stated herein.

Violations of the Policy must be reported as provided below.

F. Removal from the General Synod

Any Youth Worker/Volunteer or Youth who engages in **Prohibited Behavior**, as determined by a Youth@Synod program leader or the Youth@Synod Response Team, may be prohibited from attending Youth@Synod or the General Synod.

G. Reporting Abuse

Regardless of any other provision in the Policy, any person suspecting or having knowledge that a Minor has been neglected or abused **must** report the neglect or abuse to the Indiana Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline at **1-800-800-5556**. This is a state law requirement.

Any person suspecting or having knowledge that a Minor has been neglected or abused may also report the neglect or abuse to a Youth@Synod program leader. Any Youth@Synod program leader who receives such a report will report it to the Indiana Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline.

Any Youth suspecting or having knowledge of any type of Minor abuse is invited to share the knowledge with any Youth Worker/Volunteer, including Youth@Synod program leaders. The abuse will be reported to the Indiana Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline. Please share information in person for the fastest response. On-site contact information for Youth@Synod program leaders will be provided at the General Synod.

Any person receiving information under this paragraph shall immediately share the information with the Youth@Synod Response Team.

H. Reporting Policy Violations

Policy violations that involve abuse of a Minor must be reported under the paragraph **Reporting Abuse**. Policy violations that do not involve abuse of a Minor must be reported to a Youth@Synod program leader, who will determine whether the Youth@Synod Response Team should be notified.

I. Screening, Training, and Background Checks

1. Every Youth Worker/Volunteer must adhere to the following standards:
 - Criminal background check
 - Self-disclosure form

Every Volunteer must adhere to the standards above and the following **additional** standards:

- Complete an application to be a volunteer for Youth@Synod, including providing references
- Sign a Code of Conduct
- Have a six-month associational history with the United Church of Christ

Local Churches and Conferences are responsible for confirming the six-month associational history with the United Church of Christ and checking and the references provided on the volunteer applications for Volunteers attending on behalf of these church settings.

Screening of background checks will be done by the National Setting of the United Church of Christ Human Resources Department, which will be responsible for the cost of the background checks. The National Setting of the United Church of Christ has sole discretion in denying Youth Worker/Volunteer status to any applicant for Youth@Synod. The results of the background checks shall remain confidential.

2. Each Youth Worker/Volunteer must be at least 18 years old and four years older than the oldest Youth they are serving.

3. Each Youth Worker/Volunteer must participate in training provided by the National Setting of the United Church of Christ or its designated contractor, which covers the Policy, abuse prevention, and reporting.

J. Youth@Synod Response Team

The Youth@Synod Response Team must be trained and available throughout the duration of the event. The General Counsel will be available for consultation to the Response Team. The Team is intended to be activated under the following circumstances: allegations of abuse of a Minor; harassment allegations between adults; and serious misconduct that does not rise to the level of abuse.

The Response Team has the following duties:

1. Immediately provide for the safety of any victim(s) involved.
2. If the report alleges abuse or harassment of Minor, the Response Team will:
 - a. Immediately ensure the allegation is reported according to state law.
 - b. Immediately notify the parents or guardian of the Minor.
 - c. Notify the appropriate insurance company of the allegation and that no investigation has yet occurred.

3. Make immediate decisions concerning the removal of the individual accused from the event until a resolution of the allegations has occurred.
4. Notify the General Counsel, who may further investigate the matter by: [Note: Crimes should be investigated by the police. Violations of policy may be investigated by the organization.]
 - a. Gathering statements from those making the report and any party to the abuse;
 - b. Making written determinations and recommendations of actions appropriate to resolve the matter, including, but not limited to, recommendations for prevention as well as response.
5. Have resources readily available for victims of abuse.
6. If the report is against authorized clergy, send a written statement to the appropriate Committee on Ministry.
7. If the report is against a staff member of a Local Church, Conference, National Setting, or other setting of the United Church of Christ, notify the person responsible for the supervision of the employee.
8. Provide for pastoral counseling for the principal parties involved.
9. Provide a written summary to the General Counsel of any proceedings as the result of any report under this Policy.

K. Rules for Working with Minors

1. Youth Workers/Volunteers shall:
 - a. respond to Youth with respect and consideration and treat all of them equally, regardless of race/ethnicity, color, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, disability status, or religious affiliation;
 - b. act as positive role model for Youth by maintaining an attitude of respect, patience, and maturity;
 - c. maintain appropriate boundaries when in positions of power with Youth;
 - d. not give money or gifts to Youth.
2. Two adult rule: two non-related adults must always be present in groups of Youth, in both in-person and online gatherings. The only exception is if an emergency situation makes this not immediately possible. All Youth Workers/Volunteers must be a minimum of four years older than the age group they lead or supervise. Under no circumstances should a Youth

Worker/Volunteer be alone with a Youth, unless that Youth Worker/Volunteer is also a parent of the Youth, or be alone with a group of Youths.

3. Ratio: the adult to Youth ratio is 2:17 for both in-person and online gatherings. There shall be Youth Workers/Volunteers of at least two different genders when there is one or more Youth of different genders in a group.

4. View Windows and Open Doors: When Youth Workers/Volunteers and Youth are in a room, if the door is closed, the door must have a view window that is unobstructed. Otherwise, the door must remain open at all times.

5. Responsible use of digital devices and mobile phones is required by Youth and Youth Workers/Volunteers at all times.

6. Age-appropriate training to Youth should be provided regarding behavior that should be reported to Youth@Synod leaders.

7. Transportation: All drivers who are driving Youth must have proper licensure and insurance on file with their church setting. All vehicles used must have seat belts for the driver and each passenger. No Minor under 85 pounds may sit in the front seat of any vehicle. All drivers transporting Youth must be over the age of 25 and informed that if their vehicle is used, their insurance is primary if an accident occurs. Each vehicle must follow Rules 2 and 3.

8. Youth Workers/Volunteers shall not share sleeping quarters with Youth. The exception to this rule is if the Youth Worker/Volunteer is a parent of the Youth. Youth and Youth Workers/Volunteers are required to wear appropriate attire at all times.

9. Youth and Youth Workers/Volunteers shall abide by their respective Behavioral Covenants.

10. A Youth Worker/Volunteer must not engage in one-on-one texting, direct messaging, or telephone, or other private communications with a Youth. If a Youth texts a Youth Worker/Volunteer, the Youth Worker/Volunteer shall add another Youth Worker/Volunteer to the communication prior to responding.