

Red River Unitarian Universalist Church
Denison, Texas

SAFE CONGREGATION POLICY

MAINTAINING APPROPRIATE CONDUCT
TOWARD CHILDREN and YOUTH

I. PURPOSES

- A. To insure that Red River Unitarian Universalist Church has adopted a comprehensive policy regarding appropriate behavior with the children and youth of our Congregation;
- B. To reduce the likelihood that inappropriate behavior toward children and youth will occur by defining appropriate prevention steps;
- C. To provide guidance on how to respond effectively to incidents of abuse and/or neglect that may occur, whether during a church activity or at other times;
- D. To provide guidance on how to report observed inappropriate behavior towards children which, although falling short of abuse or neglect, is of concern to the observing party;
- E. To establish a process whereby convicted and accused sex offenders can appropriately participate in the life of the Congregation.

II. DEFINITIONS

For purposes of this policy, the definitions of “abuse” and “neglect” provided in Texas Family Code Sec. 261.001 are adopted (see Attachment 1). Throughout this policy, “child” and “children” mean any person under the age of seventeen.

III. SAFE CONGREGATION PANEL

A. Composition

There will be a Safe Congregation Panel consisting of four persons. Three members of the Panel shall be the three members of the Committee on Ministry. The fourth member shall be the President of the Congregation. Any member of the Safe Congregation Panel may serve as Chair of the Panel. The term of service on the Safe Congregation Panel shall

correspond to the term of service of each Panel member's underlying office as member of the Committee on Ministry or as President.

B. Guidelines

The Safe Congregation panel shall be guided by the following:

1. Safety of the Children

The physical and psychological safety of the children will always be the first and most important consideration.

2. State Law

The Safe Congregation Panel and the Congregation shall comply with Texas law governing reporting child abuse and neglect. A copy of the Texas law shall be posted in a visible and prominent place at the church and maintained as Attachment 1 to this policy. If a reportable incident happens while in a state other than Texas, the laws of that state concerning reporting shall also be followed.

3. Response Recommendations

Appropriate response to alleged or actual child abuse and neglect is of critical importance to the entire Congregation. The role of the Safe Congregation Panel shall be:

- a. To serve as a point-of-contact for those needing to report an incident to church leaders;
- b. To make sure that the incident has been reported to law enforcement, if required (Note: Under Texas law, reporting to church leaders does not fulfill the legal obligation an individual has to report incidents to law enforcement);
- c. To develop recommended responses (see F in this section below);
- d. To deliver those recommendations to the Board of Trustees in a timely manner;
- e. To assist the Board in any way in dealing with an incident,

its investigation, its reporting and subsequent notice to the Congregation.

4. Confidentiality

A report of child abuse or neglect is the most sensitive subject that a church can face. The Safe Congregation Panel shall hold all matters in the strictest confidence and shall report its recommendations to the Board of Trustees only, who shall determine the appropriate level of Congregational notice and response. All communications on the incident, whether with the Congregation or the public, shall be issued by the President, upon the advice and consent of the Board of Trustees.

C. Panel Member Obligations

Panel members are charged with understanding this policy and being knowledgeable about available resources and reporting procedures for children, including applicable Texas state laws. They are also the body authorized by the Congregation to gather information and make recommendations concerning any alleged abusive or neglectful incident directed towards a child or youth, as described in section III.F (below).

Under this policy, Safe Congregation Panel members are neither expected nor required to directly supervise children in any church-sponsored activity.

D. Visibility

The Chair of the Safe Congregation Panel will keep an up-to-date list of the names and phone numbers of all Panel members and will insure that this list is posted at all times and available to all members and friends of the Congregation.

E. Policy Dissemination

The Safe Congregation Panel will:

1. Assist the Board of Trustees in disseminating this policy widely to all members of the Congregation, all staff, and all other persons associated with the church;
2. Arrange training on this policy for new volunteers, teachers and staff and update that training as needed;
3. Inform the Congregation annually in writing of each individual's responsibility under Texas law to report actual and suspected child abuse and neglect, and of the penalties under state law for failing to do so;

4. Review this policy periodically and report recommended changes to the Board of Trustees. A review period of every three years is suggested.

F. Panel Role in Recommending Response to a Reported Incident

If informed by a member or other person of an abusive or neglectful incident directed toward a child on church property or at a church sponsored or supervised event, the Safe Congregation Panel shall:

1. Assure that the child is safe;
2. Assure that the incident has been reported to law authorities to the degree that such reporting is required under state law;
3. Gather information concerning the incident (please note that the Safe Congregation Panel does not have the legal authority to determine guilt or innocence. It is designed instead to help protect the children in our church community and to ensure that all involved are treated with dignity and respect);
4. Consult legal, sexual abuse counselors and other outside professionals as the Panel deems appropriate;
5. Develop and recommend in writing to the Board of Trustees a response to any reported inappropriate behavior toward children consistent with (a) our primary concern for the welfare of the children of the Congregation; (b) the ethical principles of the denomination affirming the worth and dignity of every individual; and, (c) the advice of legal and financial council;
6. Recommended responses may include, but are not limited to, such things as (1) recommending to the Board that no further action is necessary; (2) recommending the individual be educated concerning appropriate relating to children and youth; (3) recommending that the Board restrict the individual's contact with children and youth on church grounds and in all church activities; (4) recommending the Board remove the person from membership and bar him or her from church premises and programs; or, (5) recommending any other action deemed appropriate by the Safe Congregation Panel. The Panel shall also recommend to the Board what, if anything, should be disclosed to the congregation about the incident and the individuals involved;
7. The Safe Congregation Panel shall maintain strict and complete confidentiality in performing these duties and shall report only to the Board of Trustees.

G. Panel Role in Recommending Response to an Individual with a History of Sex Offense

1. The Safe Congregation Panel may occasionally learn of the presence among the members or friends of the Congregation of an individual with a history of sex offense, as evidenced by conviction in a criminal case or listing on a state or federal sex offender registry;
2. The Panel shall meet with the individual, review historical material, and discuss the situation with any other party it deems appropriate to determine if any congregational response to this individual's presence is required;
3. If in its opinion a congregational response is required, the Panel shall develop and recommend to the Board of Trustees in writing a response that is consistent with (a) the welfare of the of the Congregation; (b) the ethical principles of the denomination affirming the worth and dignity of every individual; and, (c) the advice of legal and financial council. The recommended response may include, but are not limited to, such items as listed in Section III.F.6. above;
4. The Safe Congregation Panel shall maintain strict and complete confidentiality in performing these duties and shall report only to the Board of Trustees.

H. Allegations Against Safe Congregation Panel Member

If an allegation of abuse or neglect is made against a Safe Congregation Panel member, that member shall be immediately removed from Panel membership by the President or Panel Chair, and the Board shall immediately be notified of this action. Only the President may reinstall a Panel member so removed.

If an allegation of abuse or neglect is made against the President or Panel Chair, that person must inform the other members of the Safe Congregation Panel and the Board of Trustees of the allegation. That individual, whether President or Panel Chair, must immediately cease participation in the Safe Congregation Panel. The remaining three members of the Safe Congregation Panel will make an investigation of the allegation as described in section III.F (above) and will make a recommendation to the Board of Trustees concerning the status of that individual.

IV. PREVENTION

It is the responsibility of the entire Congregation, in partnership with parents, to create and maintain a safe environment that supports the growth and welfare of

children and youth in our church programs; however, this policy is devoted primarily to situations in which children are in a supervised relationship with church members other than their parents, during church sponsored activities. The child's welfare shall be considered to be the parent's responsibility if the child is on church grounds but not actually participating in a church sponsored activity.

A. Prevention Through Code of Ethics

In an effort to protect our young people as well as our leaders, all teachers, aides or assistants, paid child care workers, staff and all other adults who work or volunteer with children and youth in the church will be required to sign the Code of Ethics for Adults Working with Children and Youth before they assume child supervision roles. Other church members and friends are also encouraged to read and sign the Code of Ethics (See Attachment 2).

B. Prevention through Video Recording

At a minimum, one adult who has been trained and screened according to this policy shall be present in each classroom on Sunday mornings and whenever any classroom is used for activities for children or youth. For purposes of this policy, two adjoining rooms in the church used for religious education shall be considered one classroom as long as the connecting door remains open. The Church will further ensure the safety of children and youth by installing a video camera that will record the activities in every religious education classroom supervised by an adult. The Safe Congregation Panel shall be responsible for maintaining a permanent video record of the activities in each classroom.

C. Prevention Through Training and Education

1. Greater understanding of the complexities of sexuality and inappropriate behavior will help us to avoid situations that could lead to abuse or to false accusations;
2. For religious education teachers and other volunteers working with children and youth, the Religious Education Committee and Safe Congregation Panel will provide annual training and written information regarding this policy and child abuse prevention.
3. For all paid staff, including those working with children and youth, the Trustees and the Safe Congregation Panel will provide training and written information regarding this policy and child abuse prevention.
4. For the entire Congregation, the Safe Congregation Panel will serve as a resource and provide educational opportunities as needed.

D. Prevention Through Screening and Supervision of Adults Working with Children and Youth

All religious education teachers and other adults working with children and youth:

1. Will have completed a screening application approved by the Board of Trustees and have been interviewed before assuming their duties;
2. Will have undergone a criminal background check, as defined by the Safe Congregation Panel. Individuals who are found to have been convicted of, are under current indictment for, or self disclose: (1) any act of sexual misconduct involving a child, (2) child abuse or neglect, or (3) activities that have resulted in the individual's being listed on the Texas Sex Offender Registry or similar registry of another state are excluded from serving as teachers, assistants, caregivers or chaperons for all children's religious education programs, church provided child care, field trips or other Congregational activities designed for children and/or youth;
3. Will have read, understood and signed the "Code of Ethics" (Attachment 2).

V. REPORTING SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE

Situations of suspected child abuse are seldom simple and straight forward. Members should be guided by a commitment to the overriding priority of protecting the child or children involved. Members should also be sensitive, however, to the harm that can be done by false or mistaken accusations, the criminal penalties for intentional false reporting and the protections for those making reports in good faith. (See Attachment 1 for a definition of child abuse and details of state reporting requirements.)

A. Reporting to State or Local Authorities

IF A CHURCH MEMBER, FRIEND OR STAFF PERSON HAS A SUSPICION THAT A CHILD HAS BEEN ABUSED, EITHER WHILE IN A CHURCH PROGRAM OR AT OTHER TIMES, THE PERSON WITH THE SUSPICION MUST REPORT THE INCIDENT TO STATE AUTHORITIES BY STATE LAW. UNDER TEXAS LAW, ALL INDIVIDUALS HAVE THE OBLIGATION TO REPORT AND ARE SUBJECT TO POSSIBLE CRIMINAL PENALTIES FOR FAILURE TO DO SO.

In Texas "a person having cause to believe that a child's physical or mental health or welfare has been adversely affected by abuse or neglect by any person shall immediately make a report." Such a report can be made to one of several agencies, including the Denison Police Department (903/465-1616) and the Texas Abuse Hotline (1-800-252-5400), which numbers shall be posted on the church bulletin board. If reportable abuse or neglect happens

while a church supported activity is taking place in another state, the incident shall be reported to those state law enforcement agencies required by the laws of that state. Out-of-state incidents shall also be reported to Texas authorities.

B. Reporting Within the Church

In addition, if the person with the concern believes the abuse occurred during a church program, it is recommended that the individual shall also inform the President or any other member of the Safe Congregation Panel.

When an allegation of child abuse occurring during a church program is reported to the President or Safe Congregation Panel member, the responsible person receiving the allegation shall take the necessary steps to:

1. Take appropriate action to assure protection of the children in the Congregation;
2. Verify that the incident has been reported as required by Texas law;
3. Convene a meeting of the Safe Congregation Panel;
4. Proceed to investigate the incident and form a recommendation for the Trustees as described in Section III.F.

Note that under Texas state law, reporting actual or suspected abuse to third parties other than the appropriate state agency or local law enforcement, such as Congregational leaders, does NOT fulfill an individual's obligation to report the incident to state or local authorities.

VI. REPORTING ALLEGED INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR TOWARD CHILDREN

- A. Anyone witnessing behavior toward a child on church premises or at a church sponsored event that the witness considers inappropriate, although falling short of abuse or neglect, should report the behavior to the Congregational President;
- B. The President shall investigate the reported situation in any manner she or he deems appropriate and shall discuss the allegation with the accused party;
- C. The President shall formulate a response to the allegation, which may include determining that no additional action is necessary, formally reporting the incident to the Safe Congregation Panel for review under Section III.F., or other response at her/his discretion;
- D. If the accused is a religious education teacher, aide or assistant, child care worker, church staff member, or a volunteer working with children or youth and the investigating leader recommends it, the President shall immediately suspend the worker from participating in the religious education program until the matter is resolved;

- E. In every case, the President shall inform the Safe Congregation Panel in writing of the circumstances of the event and the resolution, including those situations where the President judges that no further action is necessary;
- F. If the accused considers the resolution by the President to be unjust, he or she may appeal the issue to the Board of Trustees.

VII. STAFF OBLIGATIONS

All staff, paid and volunteer, are to read, understand and be in compliance with this Policy. Issues related to the policy may be brought to the Safe Congregation Panel by any staff member either through a member of the Panel or by requesting to be heard at a meeting of the Panel.

VIII. THE ROLE OF THE CONGREGATION

Maintaining the safety of our youth and children is part of the Covenant members have with the church and with each other. Any member of the Congregation or staff is encouraged to contact the Safe Congregation Panel with any concerns or ideas that would make Red River Unitarian Universalist Church a safer and better place for our children or youth.

In addition, this policy requires any member or friend of the Congregation who has been convicted of or is under current indictment for (1) any act of sexual misconduct involving a child or adult, or (2) child abuse or neglect to make himself or herself known to the President or other member of the Safe Congregation Panel. **Failure of a member to make this information known to the President or other member of the Safe Congregation Panel in a timely manner may result in loss of membership or, in the case of a non-member, being barred from church premises.**

IX. THE ROLE OF PARENTS

A. During Church Events

Parents are responsible for their own children and youth when that young person is not participating in a scheduled and supervised church activity planned for them. Parents are also responsible for their own children and youth before and after such scheduled church activities. The church is NOT responsible for the safety of children and youth on church grounds at times other than during the time of scheduled church events.

B. Other Times

No children or youth should be on the church grounds at times when no church events are scheduled unless a parent or adult authorized by a parent is present with the child or youth.

C. Unaccompanied Children

Children who arrive on church grounds unaccompanied by a parent or adult guardian must have written permission on file from a parent or adult guardian in order to participate in church activities. The Safe Congregation Panel will develop an appropriate form for this purpose and will take reasonable steps to contact that parent or adult guardian to confirm that he or she has in fact given consent for the child to participate unaccompanied in church activities. Without such confirmed permission and consent from a parent or adult guardian, the Church regrettably cannot permit unaccompanied children to be on church grounds or to participate in church activities.

X. THE ROLE OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

- A. The Board of Trustees of Red River Unitarian Universalist Church will make the final determination of any consequences appropriate to the violation of this policy, including, but not limited to, terminating a staff person, removing a person from membership, denying a membership application from a person, or taking any additional action. In making its final determination, the Board shall give due consideration to any recommendations made by the Safe Congregation Panel.
- B. Violation of this policy by any staff person, including any future called Minister, shall constitute good cause for discipline or dismissal under the terms of that person's contract.
- C. Any alleged violation of this policy by a Trustee shall result in: (a) immediate suspension from the Board of Trustees; and, (b) referral of the incident to the Safe Congregations Panel for its investigation and recommendation.

REVISION ADOPTED BY THE CONGREGATION OF RED RIVER UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH ON JULY 12, 2015.

Attachment 1

The complete text of relevant statutes of the State of Texas (provided as separate document, but constituting part of this Safe Congregation Policy).

Attachment 2**Code of Ethics for Adults and Older Youth Working with Children and Youth**

Adults and older youth who are in leadership roles are in a position of stewardship and play a key role in fostering spiritual development of both individuals and the community. It is, therefore, especially important that those in leadership positions be well qualified to provide the special nurture, care, and support that will enable children and youth to develop a positive sense of self and a spirit of independence and responsibility. The relationship between young people and their leaders must be one of mutual respect if the positive potential is to be realized. Among the most important areas of growth are those of self-worth and the development of a healthy identity as a sexual being. Adults play a key role in assisting children and youth in these areas of growth. Wisdom dictates and research shows that children, youth and adults suffer damaging effects when leaders become sexually involved with young persons in their care.

Therefore, I will not engage in sexual, seductive or erotic behavior with children and youth.

I will not sexually harass or engage in behavior with youth, which constitutes verbal, emotional or physical abuse.

I will not be under the influence of illegal drugs, alcohol, or any other drug which would impair my judgment or ability to function effectively role with children or youth.

I have read and understand the above Code of Ethics for Adults and Older Youth Working with Children and Youth, and I am in agreement with its spirit and purpose.

I give consent to the President of the Congregation to do a background check on me at her or his discretion.

Signed _____ Date _____