

Petition #18

Western North Carolina Annual Conference Policy **“Safe Sanctuary”: A Protection Policy for Children and Youth**

Whereas, The 1996 General Conference of The United Methodist Church adopted a resolution aimed at reducing the risk of any type of abuse of children and youth in the church, including neglect and physical, emotional, sexual, or ritual abuse; and

Whereas, Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes a child welcomes me ... If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones ... it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:5-6); and

Whereas, Children are our present and our future, our hope, our teachers, and our inspiration, full participants in the life of the church and the realm of God; and

Whereas, Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to the little ones, the children; and

Whereas, The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church affirm that “children must be protected from economic, physical, emotional, and sexual exploitation and abuse” (§ 162C); and

Whereas, Churches have tragically not always been safe places for children, inasmuch as child sexual abuse, exploitation, and ritual abuse (abusive acts committed as part of ceremonies or rites) occur in churches, both large and small, urban and rural; and

Whereas, The problem just described cuts across all economic, cultural, and racial lines, is real, and appears to be increasing; and

Whereas, Most United Methodist annual conferences can cite incidents of child sexual abuse and exploitation within churches, and virtually every congregation has among its members adult survivors of early sexual trauma; and

Whereas, Such incidents are devastating to all who are involved — the child, the family, and the local church and its leaders — and, Increasingly, churches are being torn apart by the legal, emotional, and monetary consequences of litigation following allegations of abuse; and

Whereas, God calls us to make our churches safe places where children and other vulnerable persons are protected from sexual and ritual abuse and where children and adults grow safe and strong (cf. *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church (2000)*, pages 180-81); and

Whereas, In all of its ministries with children and youth, the Western North Carolina Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church is committed to demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ, so that each child and youth will be “surrounded by steadfast love, established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal” (Congregational Pledge 2 in Baptismal Covenant II, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 44); and

Whereas, Faithful stewardship of the ministry with which the annual conference has been entrusted requires that the safety and well being of all its constituents be ensured; and

Whereas, The Western North Carolina Conference and its program agencies desire to establish a Protection Policy for Children and Youth Events, Camps, and Local Churches to demonstrate the absolute and unwavering commitment of the conference to the physical safety and spiritual growth of all its children and youth; and

Whereas, All agencies and entities in the life of the church which work with children and youth need a policy to serve as a guideline for children, youth, and the adults that work with them, in order to enable the optimum safety of all participants; therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Western North Carolina Annual Conference:

- a. Direct its conference and district program agencies which work with children and youth at events and camps, in covenant with The United Methodist Church, to adopt the following policy by December 31, 2005, in order that abuse of children and youth in all conference- and district-related settings may be prevented to the fullest extent possible:

As a Christian community of faith, we pledge to conduct the ministry of the gospel in ways that assure the safety and spiritual growth of all children and youth, as well as those who work with them. We will follow reasonable safety measures in the selection and recruitment of staff. We will implement prudent operational procedures in all programs, events, and camps. We will educate all our workers with children and youth regarding the use of all appropriate policies and methods. We will have a clearly defined procedure for reporting a suspected incident of abuse that conforms to the requirements of state law, and we will be prepared to respond to media inquiries if an incident occurs.

- b. Direct all local churches of the conference to adopt for themselves the policy just stated and direct its Office of Youth Ministries to provide training in the districts, at the expense of each district, to help local churches establish and implement "Safe Sanctuary" policies and procedures by December 31, 2005.

Endorsed by: The WNCC Office of Youth Ministries and the Conference Council on Youth Ministries
The WNCC Office of Christian Education and the Conference Children's Council
The Western North Carolina Conference Cabinet (1/5/04)

Adapted from Youth Abuse Prevention Policy, Safe Sanctuaries for Youth: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in Youth Ministries by Joy Thornburg Melton, Discipleship Resources 2003.