

## **SAFE CHURCH POLICY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

(date reviewed March 5, 2024)

First Congregational Church of Bellingham (FCCB) is committed to creating a safe and healthy environment where young people can learn about and experience God's love. These practices are designed to provide a safe and secure environment for all children, youth, and volunteers who participate in ministries and activities.

1. **Background Check.** All volunteers and teachers who work with children and youth in the church school programs, mission trips, youth groups and Journey Together will annually submit a Washington State Patrol background check. A federal background check will be required for individuals who have not lived in Washington State for the past five years.
2. **WAC 388-113-0020.** FCCB follows the standards set in WAC 388-113-0020. Criminal convictions and pending charges automatically disqualify an individual from having unsupervised access to adults and minors.
3. **Rule of Three.** All adults working with children and youth will adhere to the "Rule of Three." The rule ensures that an adult is not alone with a child or youth. Where possible, the Rule of Three will include two adults. If this is not feasible, the adult must have more than one child present with them.
4. **Five-Year Age Difference.** A volunteer or paid staff person should be at least five years older than the children/youth they are supervising. Faith Formation Board can make an exception to this requirement on a case-by-case basis.
5. **Open Door Counseling.** Doors should be kept open at all times during one-on-one counseling or while advising any children or youth in church or church settings. If privacy is a concern and the child/youth feels more comfortable with a closed door, the counseling session must be visually accessible (visual to passing observer).
6. **Communication.** Teachers are given parent/guardian names and contact information for communication purposes and in case of an emergency. This information is also available on the church school registration forms. When communicating electronically with youth younger than 18 years of age, staff or volunteers shall send copies of the messages to parents/ guardians. In the event of a young person wanting privacy from parents, copies shall be sent to a pastor.
7. **Report Suspicion of Child Abuse.** Should an adult staff or volunteer suspect that a child in their care has been abused, the adult will report this suspicion to one of the pastors. A written record of the incident and resolution will be kept on file. The lead pastor and the moderators will be notified of the incident resolution. Anyone who has reasonable cause to believe a minor has suffered abuse or neglect can, in good faith, report. If you are identified as a mandated reporter (RCW 26.44.030) you are required by law to report your concerns to Child Protective Services or law enforcement. Pastors of this congregation are also required to report suspicion of child abuse or neglect.

8. **Photo Privacy and Protection.** Guardians must indicate whether they give permission to have their child's photo displayed in public venues. Written permission is expressed through the registration paperwork associated with the church school programs. The written permission is valid for one calendar year but can be changed at any time by notifying the Pastor or designee.
9. **Posting of Safe Church Notification.** The following notice should be posted on the church website, outside each classroom, and in other prominent locations: "First Congregational Church of Bellingham is committed to creating a safe and healthy environment where young people can learn about and experience God's love." This statement shall be accompanied by posting this Safe Church Policy.
10. **Education and Refresher Training.** Education and refresher training regarding safe church practices shall occur annually for church staff and volunteers.
11. **Policy Review.** This Safe Church Policy document should be reviewed annually and be updated as necessary by the Faith Formation Board and shared with church council and trustees.