

Brookfield Unitarian Universalist Church

9 Upper River Street Brookfield, MA 01506

www.buuc.org

SAFE CONGREGATION POLICY



Safe Congregation Policy

I. Outline of Guiding Principles

At Brookfield Unitarian Universalist Church (BUUC) we covenant to provide a spiritual home for ourselves and our children and treat each other with respect, trust and compassion. To make this real it is essential that we maintain a safe environment that protects children and adults from harm while fostering their spiritual growth. There are many facets of operating a congregation in which prevention, education and response need to be established and refined over time in order to assure such an environment. These include building safety, operation of the RE program, transportation and supervision of children during off site trips, confronting disruptive behavior, and both preventing and promptly responding to incidents of verbal abuse and physical or sexual harassment.

The policies that are described in this manual are designed to make sure that all feel safe and free to follow their own spiritual paths in an atmosphere of respect and mutual support. These policies will naturally evolve over time as we respond to incidents and learn to better refine our safety procedures. All should consider this to be a living document and are encouraged to contact the various committees with primary responsibility for specific areas as well as the Executive Committee from time to time with suggestions about how it may be improved.

II. Relationship of Ministers to the Congregation

We place great trust in our minister to use his/her position only for the best interest of all congregants. We expect our minister to understand thoroughly and always abide faithfully by the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association (UUMA) Code of Professional Practice. The complete text of the Code is published in the UUMA Guidelines and can be found at the UUMA website or by contacting the UUA at 25 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108. (See Appendix A)

In the event the Safe Congregation Response Team receives allegations of clergy sexual misconduct it will immediately notify the Executive Committee, and will contact the District Executive and the Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the UUA, which will be charged with the investigation. The Response Team will thereafter act as liaison between the Executive Committee and the Clara Barton District Executive and Ministerial Fellowship Committee, and will work with the Executive Committee to support, counsel and communicate with the congregation and those members who are most directly affected by the misconduct.

III. Relationship between Congregation and the Director of Religious Education

Like the Minister, the Director of Religious Education (DRE) has a special trust relationship with the congregation. We expect the DRE to fully understand and faithfully abide by the Liberal Religious Educators Association's Code of Professional Practices (LREDA Code, see Appendix B) pursuant to which religious educators acknowledge that they are recipients of special trust and covenant not to exploit the powers inherent in their roles.

IV. Preventing Sexual and Physical Abuse and Harassment

Preventing sexual misconduct, physical abuse, and harassment in our religious community requires multiple approaches on several fronts. We must focus on prevention, education, training, careful hiring, and safety procedures in order to create a safer environment for all concerned.

1) Definitions The terms used in this document will have the following meanings:

Abuse includes non-accidental conduct that involves bodily injury or impairment; offensive physical or sexual contact, including physical or sexual abuse; physical or sexual harassment; physical or sexual molestation; or physical or sexual exploitation.

Physical abuse includes offensive physical contact or activity that causes bodily injury.

Sexual abuse means any sexual touching of a child or any activity that causes a person to engage in any sexual act or conduct without that person's consent, or in circumstances where that person is unable to refrain from consenting due to age or mental capacity or unusual vulnerability derived from the person's mental health or from the existence of a relationship of significant dependency or trust.

Physical harassment or molestation or exploitation means activity that places a person in fear of bodily injury by such acts as threatening or tormenting behavior, compelling a person by force or threat of force to engage in conduct from which the person has a right to abstain, knowingly restricting substantially the movements of another person without that other person's consent, communicating to a person a threat to commit an act against that person or another person or entity where the natural consequence of the threat is to place that person in fear or cause that person to engage in conduct in which that person otherwise would not engage, or similar repeated offensive physical or verbal conduct.

Sexual molestation and sexual exploitation means activity that places another person in a situation where that person feels compelled to engage in sexual conduct to which that person would not otherwise voluntarily consent, or in circumstances where that person

is unable to refrain from consenting due to age or mental capacity or unusual vulnerability derived from the person's mental health or from the existence of a relationship of significant dependency or trust.

Sexual harassment means making sexual advances or requests for sexual favors to another person, or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, where the other person by words or conduct has indicated that such words or conduct are not desired, or where a reasonable person would expect that such words or conduct would not be desired.

2) Education and Training Education and training are critical to the creation of a safer congregational environment. Information, knowledge and understanding support the development of healthy relationships based on self-esteem and respect for others. Greater understanding of sexuality and abuse will make us better able to avoid situations that could lead to abuse and to move more effectively toward justice and healing for us all. To this end we believe it is important to promote self-esteem and personal responsibility among our children, members and friends. We will provide programs as follows: (a) The Director of Religious Education (DRE) and / or the Religious Education (RE) Committee are responsible for offering age appropriate information relating to the development of healthy relationships, self-esteem and respect for others. (b) The Executive Committee shall offer informational materials to the congregation pertaining to sexuality, sexual abuse prevention and domestic violence. Further, the Executive Committee shall be charged with reviewing and updating the Safe Congregation Policy on an annual basis.

3) **Hiring** Any individual seeking paid employment at BUUC who will be working directly with children (ie: DRE, Minister) shall submit to a CORI or other similar criminal background check to the satisfaction of the Safe Congregation Response Team.

V. Religious Education Safety Procedures

1) Adult Volunteers All adult volunteers working with children through BUUC RE program and / or during events or outings shall be accompanied by at least one other non-related BUUC adult volunteer at all times.

2) Religious Education Classes / Programs (Nursery to 12th Grade) All class spaces (including the nursery) must be staffed / taught by a minimum of two- person teams. This requirement applies to off-site BUUC RE activity as well as on-site classes. Teams should consist of at least one person who has been an active participant at BUUC for at least one year. Parents may serve as classroom aides and/or visit classes at any time. Teachers are subject to the approval of the DRE and/or RE Committee. One individual may be briefly alone with a group when the other must leave as dictated by common sense and necessity for such purposes as bathroom breaks and escorting

individual children away from the group. For grades 9-12, the youth group teachers must be at least 25 years of age.

3) General Supervision Guidelines (Sunday Morning Programming) (a) Each child will have a registration form on file that includes information about special needs and permission to accompany their RE class and teachers on walks around the church or neighborhood on Sunday mornings. (See Appendix C) (b) Parents are responsible for their children before the service begins and after the RE program has ended. (c) During services and classes, children must have a parent or another responsible adult on the premises. (d) Whenever possible, the DRE, or DRE designated supervisor, will do a walk through of all RE spaces to check in with teachers during classes.

4) Transportation To and From BUUC Sanctioned Events Children / Youth Participating in BUUC activities off site are required to have parental permission slips, obtained and maintained by the DRE, to travel in an adult volunteer's vehicle. (See Appendix D) All off site activities shall require at least two unrelated BUUC adult volunteers. Additional volunteers may be required at the discretion of the DRE based on the age and number of children / youth attending.

5) First Aid and Incident Reporting (a) First aid kits are located in the bathroom and are checked by the Executive Committee annually. (b) In case of serious injury, 911 will be called for emergency assistance. Parents will be notified as soon as possible and an incident report shall be completed and submitted to the DRE. (c) In case of minor injury, appropriate first aid will be applied, the parent/guardian notified, and an incident report completed and turned over to the DRE. (d) A file shall be maintained by the DRE for all incident/accident reports.

6) Bullying Dedicated to providing a supportive and nurturing environment, BUUC strives to ensure safety from violence and abuse of all kinds for our children and youth. To ensure the healthy spiritual development of all Religious Education participants, bullying, including but not limited to intimidation, coercion, sexual harassment, or verbal, sexual, or physical abuse will not be tolerated. Intimidation that may challenge the safety and well-being of Religious Education participants, whether the intimidation occurs physically at BUUC or through electronically transmitted media, shall be addressed by the DRE and / or the Minister.

VI. Responding to Complaints of Sexual or Physical Abuse or Harassment

Any member, employee, or official of BUUC who receives a report of sexual or physical abuse or who personally observes or has reasonable cause to suspect such abuse should immediately bring it to the attention of the Minister and (in the case of suspected or reported abuse of a child) the Director of Religious Education.

VII. Reporting Child Abuse to Community Authorities

It is not the function of the Minister, Director of Religious Education, President of the Congregation or the Safe Congregation Response Team to conduct an investigation into accusations of child abuse. Rather it is both the law in Massachusetts and the policy of BUUC that in any situation in which the Minister or Director of Religious Education has reasonable cause to suspect that a child has been, or is likely to be abused or neglected, an immediate report must be made to the State Department of Children & Families (DCF), by phone to the hotline that the DCF maintains for such purpose at 1-800-792-5200 and in a written report form promulgated by the DCF, a copy of which shall be provided to and kept on file by the Safe Congregation Response Team.

Once a report is made to the appropriate authorities, BUUC will await the decisions of those authorities as to the validity of the complaint before taking any final actions. Pending the issuance of such a report it is also the responsibility of the Safe Congregation Response Team to consider and adopt, in consultation with the Executive Committee as time permits, such interim actions as may be prudent to temporarily restrict the privileges and access of any alleged abuser who is a member, friend or visitor to BUUC.

In all cases the Minister will also notify the President of the Congregation and the District Executive, and seek their advice and counsel. Additionally, the Minister or President of the Congregation will notify BUUC's insurance company.

VIII. The Safe Congregation Response Team

In order to ensure continuity, the Safe Congregation Response Team will be established and in place at all times, with the names and phone numbers of team members available to all members and friends of BUUC. This Team will be composed of the Minister, Director of Religious Education, and the President of the Congregation. In cases of a conflict of interest, a Team member must be excused from participation and replaced by a suitable alternate. Their function, individually and collectively, will be to offer confidential support, advice, and counsel with concern for the safety of all parties involved.

The Safe Congregation Response Team will have the following responsibilities: (a) Know about community resources for child abuse, treatment for sex offenders, and support groups for survivors. (b) Know about state laws regarding reporting. (c) Be a resource for people to share their concerns. (d) Evaluate applications for Religious Education (RE) teachers and youth group leaders that are flagged by the Minister or Director of Religious Education as needing more information or follow up. (e) Receive allegations of possible abuse and develop a process for expedient handling of such allegations which may include the creation of interim safety plans, meeting with the alleged offender, and investigating and reporting as needed. All activities of the Safe Congregation Response Team will be recorded and held by the Minister. Meetings shall be conducted in a confidential fashion to the extent consistent with a sufficient investigation to enable the Safe Congregation Response Team to ensure that adequate

measures are taken to protect the safety and dignity of all concerned, and may only be disclosed when necessary and appropriate as determined by the Safe Congregation Response Team.

IX. Guidelines Regarding Sexual Offenders

Situations involving an individual accused or convicted of sexually aggressive or violent behavior who wishes to attend BUUC will be addressed as follows:

(a) An individual who has been convicted of or pled guilty to a charge of sexual misconduct or who has been determined to have engaged in any form of child abuse in any civil, criminal, administrative or ecclesiastical forum will not have contact with children or youth or the parties involved.

(b) If an individual has been legally accused of sexual misconduct and is currently involved in civil or criminal litigation of such a charge, that individual will not have contact with children or youth or the parties involved until there is final disposition of the case (resolution) without a member of the Safe Congregation Response Team present.

(c) In the event that a person has been convicted of a sexual offense and completed a term of incarceration and seeks to attend the BUUC, the Safe Congregation Response Team will meet to make a determination as to whether or not, and the terms and conditions under which the individual may be safely involved in the life of the congregation. If it is determined that the person can participate in congregation life, a Limited Access Agreement will be developed.

(d) In all cases the Response Team, with approval of the Minister and President of the Congregation, may seek legal counsel before proceeding with either a draft or permanent Limited Access Agreement.

X. Appendices

Appendix A: UUMA Guidelines for the Conduct of Ministry

Appendix B: Liberal Religious Educators Association (UU) Code of Professional Practices (LREDA – Code)

Appendix C: Religious Education Annual Registration Form

Appendix D: Permission for Children / Youth Off Site Activities and Release Form