

Safe Church Policy October 2024

Policy Statement

First Congregational Church of LaGrange (FCCLG) is committed to providing an environment which values all members and visitors. FCCLG is committed to creating and maintaining a Christian worship and work community in which members, their children, friends, staff and volunteers can worship and participate together in an atmosphere that is safe, both physically and psychologically, and is free of exploitation or intimidation.

We recognize that our congregation's health and safety is a key aspect of our culture of caring. That is especially true for the children and youth that are entrusted to our care. To that end, FCCLG has established policies and procedures to ensure that sound safety measures are established, exercised and periodically reviewed.

All ministers and employees shall follow State of Illinois mandated reporting guidelines. Illinois clergy are included on the list of mandated reporters who are required by law to report suspected cases of child abuse or neglect to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) under the amended Abused and Neglected Child Reporting Act. While volunteers are not mandated reporters, at FCCLG all persons working with children and/or youth (anyone under 18), and/or other vulnerable populations (the elderly or disabled) have a moral obligation to report any suspected abuse to staff and/or DCFS.

To that end, the senior minister or council-designated alternate will provide or arrange abuse prevention training for all church employees and lay volunteers.

FCCLG will keep on hand and accessible a copy of the "2019 Updated Manual for Mandated Reporters" (or newer as available; as of 2024, 2019's is most recent version). All staff shall become familiar with this manual and be able to recognize signs of abuse, how to report it and to whom to report it.

FCCLG assures members, staff and visitors that concerns and allegations shall be taken seriously and handled forthrightly with respect for the privacy and confidentiality of all individuals involved. Full cooperation will be given to civil authorities under the guidance of the church's legal representation as well as its insurance carrier. The reporting procedure for expressing concerns of abuse of any nature will be defined in the employee manual, be made available to the congregation and explained to all volunteers.

Code of Conduct

Relationships between staff, volunteers and young people exist for the spiritual enrichment and well-being of our young people, and as such, we adopt the following Code of Conduct guidelines. Employees and volunteers must read and follow these guidelines before any involvement with church activities. Although this Code of Conduct references children and youth, the guidelines should be observed for all persons, including our vulnerable populations.

Two-Adult Rule: No adult is to be alone with one child or one youth on a church-sponsored activity on or off church premises. This includes driving alone with a single child (unless approved by parent or a medical emergency). Staff or volunteers who need to have private conversations with youth will hold those conversations in a public place (restaurant, coffee shop, etc.) or within the church building during normal business hours *if* the room has a clear glass panel allowing viewing from the hallway when door is closed or in any other room with the door open. Should an adult meet privately with youth, a second responsible adult should be informed (e.g., pastor, staff or parent).

Physical Contact: Appropriate physical contact between children, youth and adults is a normal part of life and an important part of showing love and support to all who we minister to. Nothing in the Safe Church Policy should be construed as stopping an adult from hugging a child to show affection or approval for something well done or to comfort a person who has faced a disappointment or injury.

To ensure that physical contact is appropriate, adults should observe the following guidelines. It is the adult's responsibility to maintain tasteful and empowering physical limits that support the child's sense of ownership of their body.

1. Allow the child to initiate contact or ask the child to make contact. Be ready to see if the child hesitates and give lots of leeway so that children can say no. It is difficult for a child to refuse an authority figure's request. The adult also has boundaries and does not have to accept the physical attention of a child or youth. Conversely, never require or initiate physical contact, remembering that adults are intimidating to a child because of their authority and physical size.
2. "Be in the community" and maintain an equal level of physical contact with all the children. Avoid physical contact in private or higher levels of attention to one child over another; this transparency and non-preferential treatment will validate the importance of each child, just as it protects against favoritism or excessive intimacy.
3. Find positive ways to interact with children: handshakes, high fives, fist pounds. Actions such as lap sitting, massages and hand holding are intimate and meaningful actions of caring and even romantic attachment; as such, should be avoided because they can hold confusing double meanings for youth and be overly stimulating. They are also exclusive and young children can interpret them as preferential treatment.
4. Inappropriate touch will not be tolerated. Inappropriate touching between the child's shoulders and knees, kissing, any type of hitting, or any touch uncomfortable to the child or adult is strictly prohibited.

Speaking with Children: Words have the power to heal or wound. Appropriate language and conversation commensurate with their age and maturity builds up the young person; hate speech (such as misogynist, homophobic or racist language), sexual innuendoes and cursing serve no positive purpose. Inappropriate language with children includes derogatory statements about any aspects of their identity, words spoken in anger, any sexually explicit statements and inappropriate language is strictly prohibited. Adults should share stories from their own lives that serve a constructive purpose and not their own need to share.

Healthy relationships: Volunteers and staff are first and foremost spiritual guides and ministry leaders. Relationships and contact outside of the context of ministry are highly discouraged as these can be misconstrued or misunderstood by children and youth or by the larger community. It is not acceptable for a volunteer or staff to meet children or teens alone or outside of church-sponsored activities. This includes but is not limited to private meetings or any kind of electronic or telephone communication.

Covenant: All staff members and volunteers will be given a copy of the Employee & Volunteer Covenant that they must read and sign before any involvement with church activities. All covenants will be retained according to FCCLG's Records Retention and Destruction Policy.

Driving: Drivers of 12-to-15-passenger vans used for church activities shall be given and review documentation regarding safety precautions for such vehicles. Drivers must be 25 years of age or older and have a valid driver's license.

All drivers and youth traveling to any off-site activity, retreat, work trip or canoe trip must wear seat belts at all times. The “Two-Adult Rule” applies to driving. One adult driving multiple youth is acceptable.

Overnight: Adult volunteers for any activity that includes overnight stays are to be at least 25 years old. Any exceptions must be presented to FCCLG Council for approval.

Minimum Requirements

- All applicants must receive approval of application before involvement.
- All applicants must read and agree to follow Code of Conduct (outlined above).
- All applicants must complete appropriate Safe Church training.
- All participants in any church-sponsored event must have completed and turned in all appropriate permission slips and medical forms.
- Anyone working directly with children, youth or other vulnerable populations shall, before the function, event or activity be 13 years of age *and* at least 5 years older than the oldest child or youth supervised.
- Any volunteer under the age of 18 shall be accompanied by an adult.
- All participants under the age of 18 shall have their applications signed by a parent or legal guardian.

Screening: FCCLG Staff Applicants and Employees

- Must complete and sign Employment Application & Disclosure Form.
- Must read and sign Employee & Volunteer Covenant every three years.
- Must complete and sign Background Check Authorization Form every three years.
- Understand their name will be checked on the National Sex Offender Public Website (NSOPW) annually.
- All documents, including written record of reference checks and NSOPW clearing, will be reviewed by Personnel Committee, held in confidence in the candidate’s file, and destroyed according to FCCLG Records Retention and Destruction Policy.
- Personnel Committee will conduct one or more in-person interviews including but not limited to the immediate supervisor, Personnel Committee Chair and, if appropriate, members of the clergy for any non-called paid position.

Screening: Volunteer Applicants

- Must sign Employee & Volunteer Covenant every three years.
- Must complete and sign application appropriate for their level of involvement (see Volunteer Application: Daily Activities *or* Volunteer Application: Children & Youth and Vulnerable Populations) every three years.
- Volunteers with vulnerable populations must complete and sign Background Check Authorization Form every three years.
- Understand their name will be checked on the National Sex Offender Public Website (NSOPW) annually.
- All documents, including written record of reference checks and NSOPW clearing, will be reviewed by FCCLG staff, held in confidence in the applicant’s file, and destroyed according to FCCLG Records Retention and Destruction Policy.
- It is the responsibility of the program, event or activity coordinator to provide all forms to volunteers.

Training

For employees: Minister or designated alternate will acquire and provide ongoing training material pertaining to safe church conduct, sexual abuse, harassment, misconduct and child abuse. Training will be conducted within first 30 days of hire and then annually in rotation as directed by the insurance carrier.

For volunteers: Minister or designated alternate will acquire and provide basic training material concerning safe church conduct, child abuse, sexual abuse and harassment as appropriate before their involvement in any church-sponsored activities. If gifting of their time on an ongoing basis, volunteers will be asked to attend training appropriate to their activity level on an annual basis in rotation as suggested by the insurance carrier (see Volunteer Chart below).

Reporting a Concern

Any FCCLG employee, volunteer, member or guest who believes they are the victim of, or have suspicion of, abuse of any kind (sexual harassment, child abuse or misconduct) should report the alleged act immediately to his/her supervisor, the coordinator of the program they are participating in, senior minister, moderator or any member of the FCCLG Council.

Resolving a Concern

Any allegation brought to the attention of the aforementioned will be promptly investigated in a confidential manner to protect the privacy of the individuals involved to the extent practical and appropriate under the circumstances. The complaint will be disclosed to the extent necessary to those individuals with a legitimate need to know in order to conduct an adequate investigation.

If the investigators, together with the appropriate review committee, find that abuse, harassment or misconduct occurred, the accused will be subject to appropriate disciplinary procedures up to and including discharge from paid position, dismissal from volunteer position and notification to appropriate agencies.

If the investigators, together with FCCLG representatives, determine that no definitive conclusion can be reached that abuse occurred, this finding will be communicated to the complainant in an appropriately sensitive manner. In the event that no resolution satisfactory to both parties can be reached based on the initial investigation, the matter may be referred to the FCCLG Council. The concerned individual should submit his or her written comments in a timely manner to the Council.

When a situation requires greater involvement for healthy resolution, the senior minister and moderator will work together to find it. They will also be responsible for disclosing information as appropriate.

FCCLG in its entirety will cooperate with all appropriate law enforcement agencies, social services and association representatives in the investigation of any reported incident.

Recordkeeping and Safe Church Polich Updates

Each year a representative from the congregation will consult with legal counsel to review the contents of this Safe Church Policy and associated documents.

FCCLG will keep a written summary of all reports and investigations of abuse, sexual harassment and misconduct brought to its attention. Records shall be kept in secure files and destroyed according to FCCLG Records Retention and Destruction Policy.

Requirements for Safe Church Policy Compliance	Application	Consent to Criminal Background Check	Covenant	Foundations Training	Vulnerable Populations Training Courses	Rotating Annual Training	Sex Offender List Check	Criminal Background Check
Employees	At hire	Every 3 years	Every 3 years	Every 3 years	Every 3 years	Yes	Annual	Every 3 years
Volunteers: Children & Youth and Vulnerable Populations	Every 3 years	No	Every 3 years	Every 3 years	Every 3 years	Yes	Annual	Every 3 years
Volunteers: Daily Activities such as Choir, AV, Properties, Missions, Money Counters, Leader/Readers, Ushers, Greeters, Coffee Hour Host	Every 3 years	No	Every 3 years	Every 3 years	No	No	Annual	No
One-time Volunteers	Per occurrence	No	Per occurrence	No	No	No	Per occurrence	No