

CLERGY AND THE REPORTING OF SUSPECTED ABUSE OR NEGLECT

Approved, Virginia Annual Conference – June, 2005

Revised and approved, Virginia Annual Conference – June 2009

Each year in the Commonwealth of Virginia, over 48,000 children are reported for suspected abuse or neglect.* Since 1996 the Council of Bishops' Initiative for Children and Poverty has urged all United Methodist churches to work toward a more just world for children, bearing responsibility for their spiritual and physical welfare. Our social principles state, "We recognize that family violence and abuse in all its forms - verbal, psychological, physical, sexual - is detrimental to the covenant of the human community. . ."ⁱ

One aspect of fulfilling our baptismal promise to care for children means to "surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness,..."ⁱⁱ Our social principles on the rights of children remind us that "in particular, children must be protected from economic, physical, emotional, and sexual exploitation and abuse."ⁱⁱⁱ Surrounding our children means to provide safe sanctuaries where they can be loved and nurtured in the faith.

Parishioners often confide in clergy and religious professionals. While clergy are expected to maintain such confidences, their responsibility goes beyond the pastor-penitent relationship to that of the broader community, especially to those whose voice is compromised by age and/or abuse or neglect. The 2004 General Conference initially took note of this responsibility when they adopted the statement reaffirmed by the 2008 General Conference:

"All clergy of The United Methodist Church are charged to maintain all confidences inviolate, including confessional confidences, except in the cases of suspected child abuse or neglect or in cases where mandatory reporting is required by civil law. (2008 Book of Discipline ¶341.5 page 253)"

The Virginia Annual Conference expects that when United Methodist clergy and religious professionals of the Virginia Conference become aware of suspected child abuse or neglect, they will insure that a report to Child Protective Services will be made. When a Virginia United Methodist Conference clergyperson or religious professional has completed a conference workshop on "*Clergy and the Reporting of Suspected Abuse or Neglect*" they become mandated reporters of suspected child abuse in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Clergy can make reports themselves, anonymously if desired. Such a report need not prove that abuse or neglect has taken place -- that is the responsibility of local Child Protective Services. Reports may be made to Virginia's Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline at 800-522-7096.

Clergy and religious professionals are expected to participate in training provided regarding the implementation of this policy through the oversight of the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry. Further, clergy will ensure training of volunteers, church staff and adjunct ministry staff relating to children and youth programs in his or her place of ministry. Clergy may need

ⁱ ¶161.II.G Family Violence and Abuse, 2008 Book of Discipline

ⁱⁱ The Baptismal Covenant II, United Methodist Hymnal

ⁱⁱⁱ ¶162.III.C Rights of Children, 2008 Book of Discipline

also to maintain an active role in advocacy for the child and their family who are the concern for the reporting.

IMPLEMENTATION:

Training for the implementation shall be through the Board of Ordained Ministry in partnership with Children's Council of Life Span Ministries and UM Family Services.

*The Code of Virginia defines an abused or neglected child as any child under 18 whose parent, or other person responsible for the care of the child:

- Causes or threatens to cause a non-accidental physical or mental injury;
- Neglects or refuses to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, emotional nurturing, or health care;
- Abandons the child;
- Fails to provide adequate supervision in relation to the child's age and level of development; and
- Commits or allows to be committed any illegal sexual act upon a child, including incest, rape, fondling, indecent exposure, prostitution, or allows a child to be used in any sexually explicit visual material. (Section 63.1-248.2 Code of Virginia)

rev. 2/3/2005
Approved 6/2005
Revised and approved 6/2009