

Radical Hospitality Covenant

College Avenue United Church of Christ
Modesto, California

At College Avenue United Church of Christ, we know ourselves to be in covenant with a loving, compassionate God who calls us to create sanctuary, be sanctuary for one another, and offer sanctuary to all who wish to be part of our faith community.

We believe that God offers radical hospitality and abundant love to all, and that we are called to extend God's radical hospitality to all who are, or seek to be, part of our community of faith.

We believe that no one is beyond the reach of God's love and healing. God's love and forgiveness is available to all, God's healing and wholeness is available to all, and reconciliation is possible even in cases where great harm has been done. We acknowledge that each of us "has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," whether by conscious action that has harmed self, others, the wider community of God's creation, or through attitudes or actions that ignore God's claim on our lives. Often we act in ways that may be acceptable by the world's standards, but violate God's standards for faithful living.

We affirm the proclamation of the United Church of Christ: "Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." And yet, within our church, we hold different opinions and experience moments of considerable discomfort around what radical hospitality means when it brings among us people we might not choose to invite to God's table if we were in charge of the guest list. Dealing honestly with our feelings about each other and about the diversity of opinion among us is an ongoing challenge for many; yet knowing that the welcome table belongs to God and not to us enables us to keep working toward healing of our discomfort and reconciliation with those who cause it.

There is one particular situation which has in the past strained our sense of safety and sanctuary: an awareness that among us are individuals who have sexually abused children or youth. Because it is never appropriate to approach a child or a youth in a sexual way, whether by a concrete sexual act, conversation containing sexual innuendos, or touching/hugging in a way that could be received as predatory, our congregation needs to have clear policies and procedures in place in order to ensure that our children and youth are safe from possible sexual predators.

We are aware that the identity of some individuals who have sexually abused children or young people may be unknown to us because no legal action was ever taken and secrets have been kept; and some may become known to us either because they have been transparent about their history or have been identified as registered sex offenders on Megan's List. Since the safety of our children and youth is of high priority for our congregation, our Child/Youth Supervision Policy delineates the safeguards already in place to guarantee that those who work with children and youth have been properly screened in order to guarantee that children and youth are safe in their care.

This document adds to the safeguards already in place by delineating how our congregation will respond to the presence among us of registered sex offenders or others who have crossed boundaries of responsible sexual/affectional behavior toward children and young people.

Transparency:

We encourage anyone who has a history of inappropriate sexual/affectional behavior toward children or youth and wishes to be part of our congregation's life to:

- initiate a confidential session with the Minister, acknowledge his/her past offense(s) and any legal repercussions, accept full responsibility for the harm caused by his/her actions, request support for ongoing healing, and agree to be held accountable for his/her behavior on an ongoing basis.
- refrain from working with children or youth, being alone with or initiation conversation with children or youth at church activities, attending programs and activities intended primarily for children/young people, and refusing to participate in such if asked.
- work with the Minister and the other Sanctuary Committee members to develop a Personal Accountability Covenant intended to keep children safe while encouraging the individual's full participation in church events. This Personal Accountability Covenant shall be a specific written agreement concerning appropriate boundaries to be followed at all church events, and shall include:
 - allowing the SC to monitor his/her behavior at church functions at which unexpected proximity to children/youth might occur, e.g., during worship, fellowship time, informal gatherings, special events, and use of bathrooms; and who will confront him/her if/when boundary infractions occur.
 - being willing to listen to any concerns, accept respectful confrontation by anyone who is uncomfortable with any behavior, participate in dialogue about specific situations, be accountable for his/her behavior, and stop any behavior immediately when requested to do so.
 - continuing dialogue with the Minister and the other SC members regarding any need to set further boundaries or safeguards.
 - ongoing pastoral counseling with the Minister to assess progress toward healing.
 - retaining a signed copy of this covenant and the Personal Accountability Covenant for periodic review and discussion of any changes/revisions.

Lack of Transparency:

Recognizing that there may be individuals who will not initiate sharing their history of inappropriate sexual/affectional behavior toward children/young people in a confidential session with the Minister, our commitment to keeping children safe requires the following ongoing procedures when such transparency does not occur.

It will be the responsibility of the Sanctuary Committee to check Megan's List for information regarding people who are attending worship and other church functions. The SC will check the list for all church members and current participants on a monthly basis.

If the SC discovers that anyone involved in our church is listed on Megan's List, the Minister will then initiate a confidential meeting with the individual, during which time each step outlined under **Transparency** in this Covenant will be initiated, and ongoing monitoring begun.

In addition to the specific items listed under **Transparency**, the Personal Accountability Covenant shall include:

- an agreement regarding who needs to know: the entire congregation, staff only, families with children only, etc.
- a prohibition regarding holding any position of authority within the congregation or representing our church in the community for a period of three (3) years, to be lifted after that time if all requirements of the Personal Accountability Covenant have been fully met. However, the individual shall never have a position of working with children or youth.

Consequences:

When communication is transparent, boundaries are honored and upheld, any/all necessary restrictions are respected, and growth toward healing is apparent, the individual in question is welcome to participate fully in the life and mission of our church.

If an individual is unwilling to participate in the development of a Personal Accountability Covenant, have his/her behavior monitored by the Sanctuary Committee in conjunction with such Covenant, be in dialogue about behavior others find suspicious or an invasion of boundaries, and/or is unwilling to display progress in working on healing/recovers, they will no longer be welcome to participate in the life and mission of our church. (This determination will be made by the Minister and the other Sanctuary Committee members and conveyed to the Executive Committee.) He/she will be held accountable following the specific discipline measures outlined in the church's Safe Conduct Covenant.

Responsibility for implementing/maintaining this Covenant:

The **Minister** has a responsibility to:

- offer pastoral care and support to the offender/potential offender and his/her family in an atmosphere of respect, trust and confidentiality, including respectful confrontation when needed.
- carefully document all contacts, conversations, and reported behaviors in a confidential file to be stored in a locked location on the church campus.
- refer the offender to a therapy/recovery program, if needed.
- offer pastoral care and support to anyone in the congregation who has concerns about the behavior of the offender/potential offender.
- convene the Sanctuary Committee and meet with them on an ongoing basis.
- share information with the Executive Committee if needed.
- convene the SC if an inquiry is needed as a follow-up, (see Safe Conduct Covenant).

The **Minister or Spiritual Formation Director**

- make sure that anyone working with children or youth has been screened and trained in accordance with provisions of the Child/Youth Supervision Policy.
- stay alert for possible boundary issues between adults and children/youth, confront individuals respectfully if concerns arise, document any possible infractions and report them to the Sanctuary Committee.

All **Members/Participants** in the congregation have a responsibility to:

- extend a spirit of warm welcome to both long-time members and newcomers to the congregation, balancing that welcome with watchful attention to any behavior that may indicate lack of clarity about appropriate boundaries around children and youth.
- intervene quickly on behalf of a child or youth when unsafe behavior appears to occur.
- be willing to confront respectfully when concerns arise over the safety of children/youth, using the "I feel....when you....I need...." model; and enter into respectful dialogue with the offender about questionable behavior.
- report to the Minister, Spiritual Formation Director, or any member of the Executive Committee, if any boundary invasion questions arise. It is important that accurate documentation be made, in case a request for inquiry into a complaint is needed.
- If a member/participant acquires information pointing to the presence of a registered sex offender in the congregation, the information should be shared only with the Minister, Spiritual Formation Director, or other members of the Sanctuary Committee, so that the procedural steps outlined above can be taken.
- follow the church's Respectful Communications Covenant and the steps outlined in both this Covenant and the Safe Conduct Covenant when concerns arise about boundary invasions, so that confidentiality can be honored.
- seek pastoral care from the Minister for any distress or fear this process causes.

The Sanctuary Committee is charged with ongoing monitoring of any/all safety/boundary issues currently needing attention within the congregation. Its members will be named by the Minister and Moderator, with input from the Executive Committee if needed, and will include the Minister, the Spiritual Formation Director (if there is one), and at least three (3) members of the congregation, with every gender represented (church officers are not allowed on the committee. Its charge includes:

- careful discernment concerning specific instances involving safety/boundary issues within the congregation
- holding in absolute confidence information about individuals/families/situations that come to its attention.
- meeting whenever safety/boundary concerns are raised.
- dealing with issues of accountability, including restrictions on behavior, monitoring, and impact on congregational life, in the following situations:
 - the presence of registered sex offenders in the congregation, whether transparent or not, and other individuals who have crossed boundaries of responsible sexual/affectional behavior in which no legal action ensued.
 - observance/fair handling of restraining orders involving adults in the congregation.
 - instances of sexual misconduct/harassment between adult members of the congregation.
 - disruption of worship or interference in church activities involving, for instance, alcohol or drug abuse, mental illness, custody or other domestic disputes, and family violence.
 - other issues involving safety concerns within the congregation that are referred to it by the Minister, Spiritual Formation Director or any member of the Executive Committee.
- monitoring the implementation of this Covenant and suggesting revisions as new situations raise new issues or concerns.
- reporting to the Executive Committee as needed about progress on any issues of concern.

In all situations under its responsibility, the **Sanctuary Team** shall attempt to discern God's will, affirm God's welcome to all, and attempt to find solutions that promote a communal rather than solely a personal sense of safety and well-being. The safety of children/youth shall be the first priority, but welcome/healing/reconciliation for all individuals whose past/present behavior challenges our congregation's sense of safety/sanctuary shall also be considered crucial.