

St. Matthew's is a Safe Sanctuary Church. A small sentence on the front of every bulletin that St. Matthew's creates. What does it mean and why is it even there?

I want to begin this blog post with a trigger warning. Just like before a rather upsetting video is shown on the news or an upsetting topic is discussed in an online forum, this blog post will contain discussion of child abuse. This topic is uncomfortable, upsetting, and an unfortunate reality that we all have a role to play in its prevention. If this is a topic that is too difficult for you to read about, I see you and please feel free to skip this post. Note that for the majority of this conversation church with a small 'c' refers to the church universal. When discussing St. Matthew's specifically I will state as such.

"Do all the good you can, By all the means you can, In all the ways you can, In all the places you can, At all the times you can, To all the people you can, As long as ever you can." Maybe you have heard this quote before. Maybe you have heard it attributed to the founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley. While the actual authorship for the quote is disputed online, it is nonetheless reminiscent of Wesley's 3 Simple Rules.

1. Do No Harm
2. Do Good
3. Stay in Love with God

It is reported by The U.S. Department of Children & Families that over 600,000 children each year are victims of abuse in the United States.¹ 600,000 lives forever changed and impacted by abuse and or neglect. That works out to roughly 1 in every 1,000 children are abused annually in the United States. To bring that number to a local level, there were 178,656 children² under the age of 18 in Montgomery County in 2020 and approximately 6,941 students in the T&E School District. By using the national numbers one could surmise that 7 persons under the age of 18 were abused or neglected in T&E. The actuals for the sum of Montgomery County in 2020 was 89 cases of substantiated cases or 0.5 children per 1,000. While this hypothesis is flawed inherently due to several factors (such as population density and reporting concerns), the fact remains the same—child abuse and neglect is happening in our backyard.

Our Christian faith calls us to offer both hospitality and protection to children. The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church state that "...children must be protected from economic, physical and sexual exploitation, and abuse."³ We are called to make our ministry safe by ensuring the safety of all children, youth, and vulnerable adults from abuse and exploitation.

¹ National annual child abuse statistics cited from U.S. Administration for Children & Families, Child Maltreatment 2021. This data, released annually, is the most current federal data available.

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/cm2021.pdf>

² Montgomery County annual child abuse statistics cited from PA Department of Human Services, 2020 Child Protective Services Final Report.

https://www.dhs.pa.gov/docs/Publications/Documents/Child%20Abuse%20Reports/2020%20Child%20Protective%20Services%20Report_FINAL.pdf

³ The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016 (Nashville, Tenn.: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶162.

Tragically, churches have not always been safe places for children. Child sexual abuse, exploitation and ritual abuse (*ritual abuse refers to abusive acts committed as part of ceremonies or rites: ritual abusers are often related to cults, or pretend to be*) occur in churches, large and small, urban and rural. The problem cuts across all economic, cultural, and racial lines. It is real and if not addressed with systemic change and ardent awareness, we risk perpetrating more harm by our apathy.

Even years removed from the situation, the emotional and mental ramifications of abuse are present in those who were involved. Virtually every congregation has among its members adult survivors of childhood abuse and harassment. Such incidents are devastating to all who are involved: the child, the family, the local church and its leaders. Increasingly, churches are torn apart by the legal, emotional, and monetary consequences of litigation following allegations of abuse.

The solution seems simple—right? Don't allow anyone who has perpetrated abuse or neglect against a child within the body of the church. Create a bubble of safety where no one deemed unsafe or unworthy cannot get in. One major flaw in that mindset is found in our Social Principles—the innate and inherent divine sanctity of life.⁴ Churches are also a place of community and renewal, inasmuch, the church will also minister to those who have been charged as a sex offender and will continue to treat them as children of God—while maintaining safety for all.

God calls us to make our churches safe places, protecting children and other vulnerable persons from sexual and ritual abuse. God calls us to create communities of faith where children and adults grow safe and strong.⁵ Following the 1996 General Conference resolution aimed to reduce the risk of abuse happening in the church, the United Methodist Church developed what is known as Safe Sanctuaries. It is a guideline of best practices for ministries to identify and address inherent risk factors in an attempt to mitigate the potential for harm or abuse to occur. I categorize it as a guideline to remind us that Safe Sanctuary is a covenant that continues to live and breath—ever growing and adapting in order to address the changing nature of ministry. One such adaptation that was recently addressed in 2020 was to develop safe and effective digital ministry practices during what was an unprecedented time in the life of the church. As of May 2023 our policies now include a separate section exploring best practices for ensuring safety for those who are physically or mentally disabled with more adaptations surely to be added following the 2024 General Conference.

This covenant seeks to address policies and procedures that work towards:

1. preventing abuse from happening in our church
2. preventing abuse from happening while ministering in a digital world
3. providing an environment where children, youth, and vulnerable adults can feel safe in disclosing abuse
4. protecting staff and volunteers who minister to our children, youth, and vulnerable adults
5. allow those who are known sex offenders who may wish to participate in worship at St. Matthew's to do so in a way that protects our children, youth, and vulnerable adults while

⁴ Ibid. If you want to read more into what it is that the UMC believes and affirms socially, I strongly encourage you to explore the UMB Book of Discipline, specifically the Social Principles. A free digital version is available at: <https://www.cokesbury.com/book-of-discipline-book-of-resolutions-free-versions>

⁵ From the book *Resolutions of The United Methodist Church*- 1996. Copyright, 1996 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission. [pp.384- 386]

at the same time protects and safely integrates those known sex offenders into our congregation in a way that honors their divine sanctity.

On April 21, 2024 following the 11am worship service, we will be hosting a Lunch & Learn: Safe Sanctuary at St. Matthew's. This will be a time to learn about the Safe Sanctuary program, share best practices, and learn more about how you can be involved in helping to provide a safe environment for all who gather within our banner of ministry at St. Matthew's.

You will hear more about Safe Sanctuary at St. Matthew's and new changes that are coming to our covenant based upon new guidelines that were developed at the national level taking into account the last 25 years of best practices and the ever changing ministry dynamics of a fast paced digital world. Safe Sanctuary is not just for and about children and youth. This is a covenant that has its roots dug into the very foundation of our belief. We can only hope to keep everyone as safe as we can by all working together. That is why in the coming weeks and months there is going to be a renewed push to revamp our volunteer lists, get more members through the Safe Sanctuary program, and offer new training opportunities. If you gather at St. Matthew's, you are influenced and affected by the efforts of Safe Sanctuary whether you are aware of it or not.

We are always looking for more support and volunteer help on Sunday mornings in our Education programs. Would you prayerfully consider offering to occasionally sit in the Nursery when needed alongside our Nursery staff, Ms. Judy? Maybe you have a heart for shepherding children who are a little older—our Sunday School and Jr Church programs would be a great place for you to consider volunteering as we share with children God's love for them. Think teenagers are pretty neat? The 2nd and 4th Sunday of every month we have Youth Group where we play games, hang out and talk about life, eat some pizza, and delve deeper into what it means to be a Christian in a crazy world.

We are blessed to have a loving and passionate community of faith at St. Matthew's. Studies have shown time and time again that when adults invest in the lives of young people, those young people are more likely to grow up as active participants in the church. That commitment begins with our Safe Sanctuary program and is affirmed everytime we utter the baptism covenant:

*"As members together with you in the body of Christ and in this congregation of The United Methodist Church, we renew our covenant faithfully to participate in the ministries of the Church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness, that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ."*⁶

If you are ready to begin working your way through the Safe Sanctuary process now, please reach out to me via email: dcm@stmatthewsvf.org or see me after worship anytime. The process is easy and requires only a few minutes of your time to get started. Better yet, make plans to join us on Sunday April 21 for our Lunch and Learn event!

⁶ "The United Methodist Hymnal : Book of United Methodist Worship." Nashville, Tenn. :United Methodist Pub. House, 1989.