

Little River United Church of Christ Safe Community Policy

I. Policy Overview

Little River United Church of Christ (LRUCC) is committed to creating and maintaining a safe community where all members, friends, staff, and volunteers can worship, learn and work together in an atmosphere free from unresolved conflict, all forms of discrimination, harassment, bullying, abuse, exploitation, microaggressions or intimidation. All persons associated with LRUCC should be aware that the church is committed to maintaining a community where conflict is surfaced and addressed through restorative justice practices with the goal of conflict resolution.

All persons associated with LRUCC should also be aware that the church is opposed to sexual abuse and sexual harassment, and that such behavior is prohibited by church policy. It is the intention of LRUCC to take action in an attempt to prevent and correct behavior that is contrary to this policy and, if necessary, in cases of sexual harassment or abuse, to report and/or discipline those persons who violate this policy.

II. Code of Conduct

LRUCC formally adopted a code of conduct in January 2022 which states the behaviors we expect each of us, individually, to exhibit. We, the members and friends of Little River United Church of Christ, hold ourselves to the following code of conduct:

- To create a safe environment, I will uphold the dignity of each person in our congregation, including our church leaders and staff. Before I speak or act, I will consider the impact of my words and actions on others as I seek to make our church a safe place for all.
- My communication with others will be timely, direct, honest, open, and sensitive, even as I may disagree with another's assumptions, opinions, and decisions. I will speak my own truth and avoid attributing to others who are not present without their explicit permission.
- I will accept and honor differences. While I may have strong opinions, I acknowledge that others do as well. I will embrace the diversity of our spiritual family, imagine other perspectives, and be enriched by these differences.
- I understand that our church stays strong as each person is heard and as we seek the consensus of every member of our congregation. I will exercise personal patience and encourage healthful processes to work.
- I will engage in self-reflection and prayer, seeking ways that my presence will serve as a blessing to our church and its people. I will seek God's guidance and grace to listen attentively and remain open to visions that God holds for us. I will encourage prayer at the beginnings and endings of all church meetings and when decisions of the church and its various bodies are made.
- When I serve on a board or committee, I will refrain from making decisions that benefit only me. I will seek decisions that will benefit the entire congregation.
- I understand that conflict is a part of life, including life in the church. I will accept disagreement and conflict as inevitable and as an opportunity for personal and church growth. I will concentrate on issues and problems, rather than personalities. I will avoid gossip. I will commit not to make a conflict or difference of opinion a source of personal injury or congregational division.
- In the event of a conflict between another person or persons and me, whatever the cause, I will strive to resolve that conflict by seeking out those others and engage them in conversation. I will endeavor to

understand their point of view even as I respectfully share mine. I will pray that through this conversation the conflict will be resolved.

- If we are unable to resolve a conflict, I will seek the guidance of others to help mediate our differences, including mutually agreed upon church members, pastors, deacons, and the Safe Community Committee. Together, we will follow the process developed and approved by the congregation and its leaders.

III. Procedure for Surfacing Conflict

If a conflict between two or more persons continues, the conflict should be surfaced as soon as possible by alerting any of the Safe Community Committee via email, phone or in person, alerting the Moderator or Senior Pastor. If a complaint is surfaced first to the Pastor or Moderator, they will forward the message to the Safe Community Committee. Within 72 hours of receiving notification of a conflict, a member of the Safe Community Committee will send an acknowledgement email to those persons involved in the conflict, explaining our Conflict Resolution Process and next steps.

IV. Conflict Resolution Process

LRUCC follows the Restorative Justice process to resolve conflicts. We use the Circle Process to bring together disputing parties to resolve their differences through a consensus agreement. As soon as the Safe Community Committee is informed of a conflict, the committee will begin to take needed action. There are four stages to the Circle Process:

- A. Determine Suitability:** The Safe Community Committee determines suitability of Circle Process based on conflict specifics. To accomplish this, a committee member interviews participants one on one with the goal of identifying all who were impacted. The Safe Community Committee member asks if the individuals impacted could talk to each other in the presence of a committee member. The Safe Community Committee member, serving as a mediator, will guide the individuals to talk to each other about how the other person's actions made them feel. In many cases, this process will be sufficient to resolve conflict successfully. If more people were impacted by the conflict a circle process may be necessary.
- B. Prepare:** The Safe Community Committee, in collaboration with the clergy, take the following actions
 1. Identify possible participants, making sure to include a variety of perspectives.
 2. Decide who will facilitate (keep) the Circle.
 3. Choose a time and place for the Talking Circle, remembering the importance of warmth, hospitality and access.
 4. Invite possible participants with an explanation of the topic, the purpose of the Circle and the nature of the process.
 5. Choose a talking piece that will have meaning to the group and will encourage respectful speaking and listening.
 6. Draft questions that help participants get acquainted and engage in the topic for the dialogue
 7. Spend time meditating on your intention and the importance of entering the Circle with openness and acceptance of others.

C. Convene:

1. Identify shared values and develop guidelines.
2. Engage storytelling to build relationships and connections.
3. Share concerns and hopes.
4. Express feelings.
5. Probe underlying causes of conflict or harm.
6. Generate ideas for addressing harm or resolving conflict.
7. Determine areas of consensus for action.
8. Develop agreement and clarify responsibilities.

D. Follow-up: During the Circle Process, involved parties will agree on a realistic follow-up date, dependent on the specifics of the conflict.

1. Assess progress on agreements. Determine if all parties are fulfilling their obligations.
2. Probe for causes of failure to fulfill an obligation, clarify responsibilities, and identify next steps if the failure continues.
3. Adjust agreements as needed based on new information or developments.
4. Celebrate successes.

V. Requirements for Volunteers Working with the Children's and Youth Ministry

A. Policy Affirmation: LRUCC is committed to providing a safe and healthy environment in which young people can learn about and experience God's love.

B. LRUCC Affiliation and Self-Disclosure Documents

1. Volunteers who work with minors will be members of LRUCC or, if not members, regularly and frequently associated with LRUCC for at least six months.
2. Volunteers and paid staff who work with children or youth will undergo a background check including:
 - a. Criminal history verification by a third-party including review of sex offender registries and all available child abuse registries in Virginia and any states in which the candidate lives currently or has lived within the past five years.
 - b. Review of a self-disclosure document submitted by each volunteer or staff member.
3. Positions that will require an initial background check and a self-disclosure document every 2 years will include:
 - a. Clergy,
 - b. Christian education administrator,
 - c. Paid and volunteer childcare providers,
 - d. First Friday volunteers,
 - e. Church school teachers and guides,
 - f. Volunteer youth group advisors,
 - g. Youth travel advisors and chaperones,
 - h. Drivers for youth and children's events,
 - i. Choir directors for children and youth,
 - j. Other leaders for children and youth programs,
 - k. Welcome Center volunteers,
 - l. Any other volunteers or staff who routinely interact with children and youth.

4. Before volunteer and staff decisions are final, the self-disclosure and other background documents will be reviewed by the Senior Pastor.

C. Orientation and Training about LRUCC Safe Community Policies and Procedures

1. All volunteers and employees who work with children and youth will receive boundary training and orientation regarding the LRUCC Safe Community policy and procedures.
 - a. The content and frequency of such training will be developed by the LRUCC Safe Community Committee in consultation with the LRUCC Board of Christian Education, the Pastors and other appropriate LRUCC entities.
2. Children and youth at LRUCC will receive instruction about LRUCC Safe Community policies and procedures as part of the yearly church school curriculum.
 - a. Such instruction will be age-appropriate and appropriate to the participation of children and youth in the life of congregation.
 - b. Curriculum will be developed by the LRUCC Board of Christian Education in consultation with the Clergy and other appropriate LRUCC and United Church of Christ entities.
 - c. Training will be administered by the LRUCC Board of Christian Education, Pastors and/or other appropriate entities.

D. Supervision of Children and Youth Activities

1. Policy Affirmation: LRUCC will provide supervision and adequate safeguards for children and youth activities.
2. Two unrelated adults will be present for all activities involving children and youth.
3. Youth over the age of 13 may assist an adult in supervising children's activities; however, such assistance does not alter the requirement that at least two adults be present.
 - a. Youth assistants will receive orientation regarding safe church policy and procedures appropriate to the nature of the activity.
4. Written consent of a parent or guardian will be required for each event off church property, and any overnight activities.
5. All overnight youth activities must be supervised by both male and female adult travel advisors and/or chaperones, with the total number of adults to be determined by the size of the group.
 - a. Travel Advisors and chaperones may be required to adhere to additional guidelines and agreements as determined by the LRUCC Safe Community Committee or other appropriate LRUCC entity.
6. Church-sponsored youth events at private homes will require the host adults to adhere to the policies and requirements determined by the Safe Community Committee including the requirement for two unrelated adults to be present and any rules set forth by other appropriate LRUCC entities.

VI. Policy Regarding Members or Friends who are Registered Sex Offenders or Have a History of Abuse

- A. When a church member or friend discloses a history of abuse or sexual offense to a Pastor or church leader, the Pastor should seek a comprehensive understanding of what happened, legal disposition of the case(s) if any, and what therapeutic help has been sought and obtained. This information is not confidential and will be shared by the Pastor with anyone s/he deems necessary, including but not limited to the Moderator and the Safe Community Committee.

- B. The individual will be asked to avoid all contact at church with children and youth (or the appropriate group fitting the past offense).
- C. The Pastors should meet with the Safe Community Committee and the Moderator thereby creating a review team. If additional information about the incident is needed, that should be sought. A response plan should be determined and put into action.
- D. The review team will hold a meeting with the member or friend in question in order to discuss if it is possible for this individual to safely be a part of the church's fellowship and under what conditions.
- E. In executive session, the review team shall make these determinations (and consequences if violated), put them in writing, and submit them to the individual for his/her acceptance via signature.
- F. This document (and all these proceedings) will be kept in a confidential place. As appropriate, the document may be shared with the church. Every new Pastor should be briefed about this situation.

VII. Procedures for Handling Complaints of Sexual Harassment

- A. Procedures to address incidents of alleged sexual harassment when all parties involved are 18 years of age or older:**
 1. Attempt to resolve the matter directly with the individual accused of sexual harassment.
 2. Report the incident to the Clergy, to resolve the matter.
 3. Refer the matter to the LRUCC Safe Community Committee to investigate the complaint, advise appropriate next steps, and, if deemed appropriate, report to the appropriate authorities.
- B. LRUCC Safe Community Committee**
 1. The LRUCC Safe Community Committee will be comprised of three persons. The Safe Community Committee will administer the LRUCC Safe Community Policy and will investigate complaints under this policy.
 2. The Safe Community Committee will be familiar with the terms of this policy, as well as the established procedures of the church for dealing with a complaint.
 5. The Safe Community Committee will regularly review the Safe Community Policy and recommend updates to Church Council as necessary.
 6. The Safe Community Committee will be responsible for maintaining the confidentiality of documents.

VIII. Procedures for Reporting Abuse

- A. LRUCC Senior Pastor will report all known or suspected child abuse and neglect, as well as adult or elder adult abuse. Any staff member or volunteer who suspects child or elder abuse shall report it to the appropriate hotline. After a volunteer or staff member reports abuse they should let the Senior Pastor or chair of the Safe Community Committee know that the report was made.**
 1. The phone number for the Fairfax County Office of Child Protective Services is 703-324-7400.
 2. The Virginia Department of Social Services Child Abuse Hotline currently is 800-552-7096 or 804-786-8536.
 2. The phone number for Fairfax County Adult Protective Services is 703-324-7450.

IX. Definitions

- A. **Clergy:** A person who holds ordained ministerial standing or has been commissioned or licensed by an Association of the United Church of Christ or region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).
- B. **Ministerial Relationship:** The relationship between one who carries out the ministry of the church and the one being served by that ministry.
- C. **Conflict:** An active disagreement between two or more people with opposing opinions or principles.
- D. **Microaggression:** A statement, action or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against a member or members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority.
- E. **Child Abuse:** An abused or neglected child is any child under the age of 18 whose parent, guardian, or other person responsible for the child's care:
 - 1. Causes or threatens to cause non accidental physical or mental injury (physical abuse).
 - 2. Commits or allows to be committed any illegal sexual act upon the child or use a child in any sexually explicit visual material (sexual abuse).
 - 3. Neglects to meet the child's basic needs – food, clothing, supervision, emotional nurturing, or health care (neglect).

For more information about recognizing and reporting child abuse, see this resource from Fairfax County: <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/familyservices/children-youth/report-child-abuse>.

- F. **Sexual Harassment:** Repeated or coercive sexual advances toward another person contrary to his or her wishes and with the intent of intimidating, humiliating, or embarrassing the other person, or subjecting the person to public discrimination.
 - 1. Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when:
 - a. Submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition or circumstance of instruction, employment, or participation in any church activity;
 - b. Submission to, or rejection of, such conduct by an individual is used as a basis for evaluation in making personnel or church-related decisions affecting an individual; or
 - c. Such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's performance or participation in church activities or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive church environment.
 - 2. Prohibited sexual harassment includes unsolicited and unwelcome contact that has sexual overtones, particularly:
 - a. Written contact, such as sexually suggestive or obscene letters, notes, e-mails, or invitations;
 - b. Verbal contact, such as sexually suggestive or obscene comments, threats, slurs, epithets, jokes about gender-specific traits, sexual propositions;
 - c. Physical contact, such as intentional touching, pinching, brushing against another's body, impeding or blocking movement, assault, coercing sexual intercourse; and
 - d. Visual contact, such as leering or staring at another's body, gesturing, displaying sexually suggestive objects or pictures, cartoons, posters, or magazines.

3. Sexual harassment also includes:
 - a. Continuing to express sexual interest after being informed directly that the interest is unwelcome.
 - b. Using sexual behavior to control, influence, or affect the career, salary, work, learning, or worship environment of another.
 - c. Suggestions or threats that failure to accept a request for a date or sexual intimacy will affect a person's church leadership, or comfortable participation in the life of the church.
 - d. Withholding support for an appointment and suggesting that poor reports, will be given because a person has declined a personal proposition.
 - e. Hinting that benefits will be forthcoming in exchange for sexual favors.