

**YOUTH AND VULNERABLE ADULT PROTECTION POLICY
FOR NEBRASKA SYNOD-SPONSORED YOUTH EVENTS
Adopted by Synod Council November, 2024**

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Youth are a gift from God and the church is called to provide for their safety and nurturing. In Matthew 19:14, Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me.” The church is to be, at all levels and in all entities, a place of safety and nurture, reflective of the arms of Christ. The Nebraska Synod seeks to provide a safe and secure environment in which youth and vulnerable adults can develop spiritually and are protected from inappropriate treatment of any kind.

This policy is intended to encourage as safe an environment as possible for all participants in synod-sponsored youth events. At these events, youth are valued, celebrated, and provided with opportunities for faith formation, leadership development, discipleship training and service learning. While the primary concern is to protect youth and vulnerable adults during all synod events, the policy also establishes guidelines that protect adult staff and volunteers from unwarranted accusations and protects the synod itself from false allegations of abuse and maltreatment.

DEFINITIONS

For purposes of this policy, the following definitions apply:

- **Youth:** Any person under age 19, and any person who is still enrolled in high school at the time of registration for a synod-sponsored youth event (even if that person is age 19 or older at the event).
- **Adult:** Any person who is not a youth.
- **Adult Youth Leader(s)/Participants:** The adult participant(s) designated by their congregation to have congregational responsibility for a youth at synod-sponsored youth event.
- **Primary Adult Youth Leader:** The adult designated by their congregation who has the primary responsibility for the welfare of their church youth group at a synod-sponsored youth event.
- **Nebraska Synod Staff:** Anyone who is paid to work for the synod as their full or part time job.
- **Adult Event Volunteer:** An adult who is not member of synod staff or a youth leader affiliated with a specific congregation. Volunteers may be paid or unpaid. Examples of volunteers include musicians, cooks, or speakers.
- **Vulnerable Adult:** Any person 19 years of age or older without the developmental or cognitive ability to consent.
- **Synod-sponsored Youth Event:** An event planned and implemented by Nebraska Synod staff and volunteers with youth as the primary audience, including but not limited to: The Journey, Middle School Gathering, Lutheran Youth of Nebraska (LYON) events, Synod Youth Leadership Summit, and Fall Kick-Off. Events at Synod Assembly may be included if specifically designed for youth as the primary audience. This policy also includes virtual events.
 - The following are NOT Synod-sponsored Youth events:
 - Youth retreats or camps offered by Nebraska Lutheran Outdoor Ministries or Nebraska Lutheran Campus Ministries. These are not planned or implemented by the synod and participants should follow the policies of the hosting facility.

- Meetings sponsored by the synod that include youth participants (e.g. synod council retreats or youth event planning meetings). These are not considered “events”, but participants should follow the general principles in this policy as appropriate for the circumstances.
- Participation in the ELCA Youth Gathering or other ELCA regional or national youth events. These events are considered the primary responsibility of the congregation under this policy and thus are not “planned and implemented” by the synod. In these cases, congregations should follow their own congregation’s youth protection policies or policies set forward by the Youth Gathering or other ELCA sponsors.
- **Sexual Misconduct:** Includes (1) sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and other similar types of conduct prohibited under federal or state law and (2) any contact, communication, or other activity of a sexual nature that occurs between an adult and youth.
- **Physical Abuse:** Any physical injury to a youth that is not accidental. This can include hitting, beating, shaking, burns or biting.
- **Emotional Abuse:** Emotional abuse takes place when a youth is not nurtured or provided with love and security. This can include threatening, yelling, constant criticism, belittling, bullying or constant teasing.
- **Neglect:** Depriving a youth of their essential needs. This can include lack of provision of food, water, shelter, or medical care.
- **Safe Gatherings:** The training, background check, and reference program used for all synod-sponsored youth events.

DISTRIBUTION OF POLICY

A copy of this policy will be on the [Nebraska Synod website](#) and hard copies are also available upon request from the synod office. All synod staff will receive a copy of the policy. Anyone serving on a youth event planning team will receive a copy of the policy. The policy will be shared within synod youth work networks and will be available on synod-sponsored youth event registration pages.

COVERAGE

This policy covers all youth and adults at a synod-sponsored youth event. For congregation participants, the event begins when the congregation checks in on site or online at the start of the event and ends with the closing dismissal and check out. Transportation is only covered as a part of this policy if it is a part of the event and is provided by the synod. (Example: The Journey or travel to service-learning sites as a part of Middle School Gathering). This policy for synod-sponsored events shall take precedence over individual congregational youth protection policies.

SELECTION OF ADULT PARTICIPANTS

Congregations should exercise care in the selection of adults who work with youth and participate in synod-sponsored youth events. Adults are expected to share the good news of the gospel in word and deed, set a positive example for living, be a mentor or positive role model for youth, and organize meaningful experiences. Congregations are encouraged to have their own youth protection policies. If a congregation has a formal policy or process for screening staff who work with youth, it should adhere to that process in selecting adult participants for synod-sponsored youth events.

Congregations are strongly encouraged to use the [Safe Gatherings](#) program to do background checks, references, and provide initial training for their adults who work with youth and vulnerable adults.

Adult participants must have an established relationship with the congregation or the congregation's adult leader prior to attending a synod-sponsored youth event. All adult participants must have proof of current (within the last three years) completion of the Safe Gatherings process (background check, references, and online training through Safe Gatherings) prior to a synod-sponsored youth event. If the congregation does not participate in Safe Gatherings, the Safe Gatherings process can be completed through the synod. It is the responsibility of the primary adult youth leader to complete a Safe Gatherings information form for all adult participants from their congregation and to submit it along with registration.

The following are exceptions:

- If, due to unexpected circumstances (such as last minute substitution because of illness), there is insufficient time to complete the Safe Gatherings process and another Safe Gatherings approved adult participant cannot be found, the adult may participate if they (1) provide proof of another background check completed within the last three years for another agency or employer that meets or exceeds the synod's standard for such checks or (2) as a last resort, complete the synod's volunteer disclosure statement answering questions about past crimes or other acts involving abuse or violence against children. The voluntary disclosure statement will be provided at the event.
- An adult event volunteer will not be required to complete a background check if they participate only as a guest speaker, entertainer, cook, craft leader or in some other capacity, provided that they are not alone with youth or are not staying in shared housing with youth. This exception is subject to the discretion of the staff planning the synod-sponsored youth event.
- Host site staff for an event (example: camp staff) are not required to complete a background check as they should never be in a situation where they are alone with synod youth.

The ratio of numbers of adult participants needed per youth (and gender if this is a requirement) will be specified in the registration materials. This may vary depending on the circumstances of the event and the age group involved. A congregation must designate one adult youth leader who takes primary responsibility for the youth in that congregation.

All adult participants are expected to be familiar with this policy and agree to abide by it. Registration for the events will include a signed statement to that effect. A copy of the policy will be available on event registration pages on the Nebraska Synod website.

SAFEGUARDS DURING EVENTS

The synod prohibits any sexual misconduct at all synod-sponsored events, including synod-sponsored youth events. Such conduct, or failure to abide by other policies in this document may lead to expulsion from the event at the expense of the participant, further disciplinary action, or both.

Two adult rule: Two non-related adults should be present in groups of minors or vulnerable adults, including in vehicles, online events and virtual or in person break out rooms during synod-sponsored youth events.

Rule of three: If someone needs to leave the group for any reason, there may NEVER be a group of less than three people in any situation. This includes online chats in virtual events. The group may consist of 2 youth and 1 adult, 2 adults and 1 youth or three youth, but there must

always be three people. (For example, someone requests to leave the large group to use the restroom or a youth forgot an item in their room and needs to leave the large group, or only one youth remains for pick up at an event.)

No counseling shall take place under the auspices of the synod at synod-sponsored events, unless provided by a licensed mental health professional with parent/guardian permission.

It is important to maintain appropriate boundaries. Adult participants should ensure that any one-on-one contact between a youth and adult occurs in view of other adults and youth. If private conversation needs to occur, it should be done in proximity of the rest of the group with doors open and lights on. Private conversations should never happen online.

Appropriate expressions of affection can be a manifestation of Christ's love. A kind word of encouragement or a pat on the back can be a small but significant act. Nevertheless, adult participants must use caution and common sense when physically expressing affection toward youth. Some guidelines:

- Respect a youth's refusal of physical contact
- Never make a youth feel uncomfortable
- Be aware of appropriate hand placement
- Any type of kiss, body-to-body embrace, or touch in private areas is inappropriate. Use side-to-side hugs.

In overnight events, separate housing will be assigned by gender (male, female, and non-binary) specified on the registration form (except in the case of married couples or families). In case of large room accommodations, gender specific sleeping areas will be clearly defined. If facility or housing limitations or needs of a participant require youth and adult participants to share a room, a single adult must never be housed with a single youth.

Only those sleeping in a room will be allowed in that room and doors should remain open unless someone is changing, or facility requires that doors be closed.

The privacy of both youth and adults in dressing and showering should be respected. No one else should be in the room when someone is changing or showering unless it is an approved caretaker for a youth or vulnerable adult with physical needs. (In this case written permission must be provided by parent or guardian).

Adult participants must be aware of youth activities and behavior and must properly supervise the youth from their congregations at all times.

Any discipline must consider the youth's dignity and well being. Physical discipline is categorically prohibited. No one may strike or hit anyone at any time. Verbal harassment or threats are also prohibited.

ADDITIONAL POLICIES FOR SYNOD-SPONSORED EVENTS

The synod has a zero-tolerance policy for bullying.

No tobacco, vapes, alcohol or drugs (other than prescribed medication) will be brought to or used at an event.

No firearms or other weapons, fireworks or laser pointers will be brought to or used at an event.

The policy on cell phones and other electronic devices will be specified in the registration for the event.

If transportation is required during a synod event, the registration materials will specify the requirements for drivers and vehicles. This may include a minimum age for driver, a requirement to provide a copy of a valid driver's license and insurance coverage for the vehicle being driven,

and restrictions on the types of vehicles that may be driven. Seat belts must be worn by the driver and all passengers in vehicles equipped with seat belts. Each vehicle must carry the registration material (including medical information) for the driver and all passengers.

Medical information (including dietary restrictions and allergies) and releases, as well as emergency contact information, are addressed in the registration materials for a particular event. For certain events, this may include permission to receive over-the-counter medication. The synod will inform event facilities of dietary restrictions and allergies, but adult participants are responsible for monitoring this for youth and adults from their congregation.

A well-equipped and fully stocked first aid kit must be available at all events and an incident report form must be filled out any time it is used. A copy of the completed incident report will be provided to the primary adult youth leader.

For all events, synod staff will make arrangements to ensure that first aid coverage is provided by a designated synod staff member, adult participant or volunteer who holds current First Aid/ CPR certification and that there is access to emergency care.

Arriving late or leaving early must be discussed with synod staff in advance. Youth and adult participants are expected to remain throughout an event. If it is necessary for a youth or adult participant to leave an event, the primary adult leader for that congregation must advise the event coordinator before the participant leaves the site.

Signed covenants, liability releases, and permission or non-permission to photograph are required for all youth and adult participants at synod-sponsored youth events including virtual events and will be included as part of registration materials. Participants will not be allowed to check in at an event without a signed release. In the event a minor arrives without a signed release, parental permission may be given over the phone.

Other requirements or guidelines for the event may be specified in the registration materials.

Photos taken during synod-sponsored youth events will be shared on Nebraska Synod website and social media and may be shared from there. Congregations may share pictures from the synod or pictures they have taken of participants from their own congregation but may not share pictures of participants from other congregations without the permission of the primary adult youth leader from that congregation.

REPORTING OF WRONGDOING

Each synod-sponsored youth event will have a team designated by the Director for Youth Ministries which will be responsible for reviewing any allegations of misconduct at an event and making recommendations, if any, regarding appropriate response. The team may interview all the parties involved. Any wrongdoing or other inappropriate behavior at a synod-sponsored youth event that appears to violate this policy should be immediately reported to the Director for Youth Ministries or their designated person.

The Director for Youth Ministries is responsible for:

- Providing for the safety of alleged victims involved
- Convening the team, as needed.
- In the case of any criminal acts, making immediate contact with police or other law enforcement authorities.
- Notifying and consulting with the Bishop to determine what is required for reporting any apparent child abuse according to state law; ascertaining who will make the report; and making the report if requested.
- Working with the Bishop to notify parents and guardians of minors involved.

- Documenting the facts and actions taken.
- The Bishop may determine what further action may be necessary.

The Director for Youth Ministries, in consultation with the designated team, may decide on other appropriate action for that event, which could include dismissal of the individuals involved from the event.

Actions that violate the policy may result in suspension from future synod-sponsored youth events. These decisions will be made by the Director for Youth Ministries in consultation with the Bishop.

In the event there is any alleged wrongdoing by the Director for Youth Ministries, the matter should be raised with the Bishop. Any misconduct by clergy or other rostered leaders will be addressed by the synod. The synod has a sexual misconduct policy for rostered leaders.

MISCELLANEOUS

The synod may make changes to this policy as needed. This policy is not intended as legal advice and may not be appropriate in all states or all circumstances. Congregations are encouraged to contact their own legal advisors when establishing child abuse prevention procedures.