

September 21, 2022

Dear brothers in Christ:

This communication petitions the Great Lakes-Gulf Presbytery (GLGP) to update the GLGP Child Protection Policy (CPP), replacing the current version with the version attached. This proposed update seeks to edit the existing policy to address the difficulties that we discovered when we attempted to implement the current policy.

I served on the original CPP committee and then as Youth Director for Covfamikoï. I witnessed firsthand some of the practical challenges that arose as the Covfamikoï leadership team sought to implement the CPP. In conversation with others who have been involved in presbytery youth ministry (or who have considered becoming involved but have declined because of uneasiness about the CPP in its current form), I have observed a growing consensus about some of the unintended consequences the policy currently in effect.

When the CPP committee undertook its work, it was with full awareness that experience would likely reveal areas for improvement. This petition is offered in that spirit. It seeks to build on the work that has been done, strengthen the policy's efficacy, while also mitigating some of the accidental impediments to ministry.

The updated version proposed here offers a variety of superficial changes, simplifying and streamlining, and making language more consistent. For example, I have attempted to clean up the definitions section and then to use those terms consistently through the document. I have also eliminated some section headings (e.g., III.B, III.C, IV)—not by changing the substance, but by incorporating all essential points elsewhere.

More substantively, this proposed revision addresses two major issues:

- 1) *It distinguishes between staff and volunteers.* The proposed revision maintains the higher bar for staff (e.g., background check and session endorsement), but would give more flexibility to event leadership to recruit extra help for more limited roles at an event. For example, at Covfamikoï, it has been the longstanding norm to solicit volunteers during the conference—e.g., an extra person to help for a couple hours one day with one of the children's classes. In my proposed revision, when working with a group of children, at least one staff member would have to be present at all times, but event leadership would be able to supplement with volunteers to meet the target adult-to-student ratio.
- 2) *It distinguishes between initial response and full investigation.* In a case of suspected abuse, the current policy requires that communication *precede* the safeguarding of children. Step 1 directs event leadership to contact local authorities, the parents and guardians of anyone involved, and the moderator(s) of their session(s). "Step 2" then reads: "After reporting the matter to the proper persons, event leadership shall attempt to ascertain basic facts and take reasonable steps to safeguard potential victims." While the desire for transparency is laudable, this ordering of steps risks delaying event leadership's initial response to rumors of abuse—a response that should include not only some basic finding of fact but the immediate implementation of prudential safeguards to minimize the likelihood of harm to potential victims. The present ordering of steps also risks making reporting less effective in cases where event leadership lacks the basic knowledge needed for the report to carry its full weight. The proposed alternative would allow event leadership to respond immediately to rumored abuse, try to get some basic handle on what may have happened, and then to communicate accordingly. See Section IV in the revised version.

I have recommended several more minor changes as well:

- 1) *Ratios*. I have suggested a target adult-to-youth ratio of 1:8 for younger children five and younger and 1:12 for youth, ages 6+ (vs. 1:10 for youth of all ages in the current policy). See III.C.1 in the proposed revision.
- 2) *Session endorsement*. One of the issues we ran into with Covfamikoi was needing a letter of recommendation for staff members (see III.A.2.c in the current CPP). However, we found ourselves recruiting almost up to the start of the conference, leaving little time to gather a full-fledged recommendation. It would preserve the essential intent and be far more workable in practice for event leadership to ask a pastor whether they are aware of any reason a person should not serve.
- 3) *Overnights*. The current CPP forbids any staff from sharing “the same sleeping space with that child or youth” unless they are a parent or guardian of the youth. (See III.D.2.c.) However, for overnight events, such as Fall Ministry Project or Winter Conference, the avoidance of one risk creates a greater one: unsupervised youth. The alternative is to cease ministry on the established model.
- 4) *Movies and humor*. Movies and humor do call for discernment on the part of event leadership and staff. However, as a matter of policy, this section is particularly difficult to enforce and open to differences in interpretation, which is why provisions of this sort are not typically found in child protection policies. See III.D.8-9 in the current CPP.
- 5) *Transportation*. The proposed revision clarifies that transportation to and from an event is the parent’s responsibility. See the current CPP III.D.13.

As with the original CPP committee, I do not think this proposed update marks the final word on the presbytery CPP. But from personal experience and conversation with others who have been involved in presbytery youth ministry, I believe that it offers an improvement over the status quo—one that will more fully reconcile the twin aims of preserving ministry and safeguarding children.

Stephen Shipp
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CHILD PROTECTION POLICY GREAT LAKES – GULF PRESBYTERY (RPCNA)

The Great Lakes-Gulf Presbytery takes the protection of her covenant children very seriously. The Covenant of Baptism, noting that children are a possession of God entrusted to the care of his or her parents, requires watchful protection of covenant children by the entire church.

*Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."
~ Matthew 19:14 ~*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction and Theological Foundation	2
A. Purpose	2
B. Biblical Mandate	2
C. Confessional Foundation	2
II. Scope and Definitions	2
A. The Scope of This Policy	2
B. Definitions of Key Terms	3
III. Policies and Procedures	3
A. Selection of Workers	3
B. Maintenance of Records	4
C. Supervision and Visibility	4
D. Restroom Guidelines	5
E. Check-in and Check-out	5
F. Discipline	5
G. Transportation of Children	5
H. Overnight Trips	6
I. Sick Children	6
J. Medications	6
K. Accidental Injury	6
L. Training	7
M. Communicating the Presbytery Child Protection Policy	7
IV. Reporting Suspected Abuse	7
V. Appendix A: State Requirements for Reporting Abuse	9
VI. Appendix B: Forms	10
A. Youth Ministry Staff Application Form	10
B. Medical Release Form	13

I. INTRODUCTION AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

A. Purpose

These procedures and policies have been developed to ensure a safe, loving environment conducive to the protection and care of children during youth ministry programs of the Great Lakes-Gulf Presbytery (GLGP) of the RPCNA.

B. Biblical Mandate

Matthew 19:14 - Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."

John 21:15 – So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Feed My lambs."

Ephesians 5:3 - But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.

C. Confessional Foundation

Confession of Faith 1.6 – . . . There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

Testimony XXIV.30 – Education of children is primarily the responsibility of parents, though they may delegate part of this responsibility to the church or other agencies . . .

Directory for Church Government I.8 – Members should willingly consecrate their talents and gifts to the service of Christ. They should prayerfully consider accepting a position in the church when called to do so.

II. SCOPE AND DEFINITIONS

A. The Scope of This Policy

This Policy applies to GLGP programs for youth under the age of 18. This Policy provides basic guidelines that are to be read and interpreted in light of the Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. Those responsible for presbytery youth programs may create additional or stricter procedures.

The policy applies as well to vulnerable adults.

B. Definitions of Key Terms

- 1) **Child Abuse** – Child neglect, child physical abuse, or child sexual abuse.
 - a) **Child Neglect** – Depriving a minor of his or her essential needs, such as adequate food, water, shelter, safety, and medical care.
 - b) **Child Physical Abuse** – Any use of violence or threats of violence toward a minor, apart from the proper and biblical sphere of a parent’s loving and corrective discipline of their child.
 - c) **Child Sexual Abuse** – Any contact or interaction (visual, verbal, or emotional) between a minor and another person in which the minor is being used for the sexual arousal, molestation, or gratification of the perpetrator or any other person.
- 2) **Event Staff (“Staff”)** – Anyone eighteen (18) years of age or older who is approved to administer a GLGP youth program under the terms of this Policy.
- 3) **Presbytery Youth Leadership (“Leadership”)** – Any GLGP-sanctioned leadership of an official GLGP youth program (e.g., Covfamikoι Director, Youth Secretary, Youth Committee).
- 4) **Volunteer.** Any adult (18 years or older) or youth, ages 13-17 year of age, approved under this policy to assist in the care of youth at a GLGP youth program.
- 5) **Vulnerable Adult** – Any person 18 years of age or older who is unable to legally consent, unable to comprehend, or is otherwise particularly susceptible to coercion or abuse (e.g., those who are mentally or physically disabled).
- 6) **Youth (a.k.a., children, minors).** Those the age of 18 years of age or younger.

III. POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

A. Selection of Workers

Only approved and Staff and Volunteers may serve in the various youth ministries of the Great Lakes-Gulf Presbytery.

- 1) In order to be eligible to serve as Staff, a person must:
 - a) Be aged eighteen (18) years of older;
 - b) Be a communicant member in good standing of a congregation of the RPCNA for the past six months;

- c) Submit the Youth Ministry Application and Disclosure Form (see Appendix B) to event leadership; and
 - d) Complete a criminal background check through the Great Lakes Gulf Presbytery's MinistrySafe account;
 - e) Satisfy the training requirements of event leadership.
- 2) In order to be eligible to serve as a Volunteer, a person must:
- a) be at least 13 years old;
 - b) be a member in good standing of an RPCNA congregation; and
 - c) must remain under Staff supervision.

B. Maintenance of Records

Staff and Volunteer applications, disclosure statements, and up-to-date background checks are to be stored in the Presbytery's MinistrySafe Account.

C. Supervision and Visibility

- 1) Wherever possible, a ratio of 1 Staff or Volunteer to every 12 students should be maintained during any presbytery youth programming. For children five and younger, Leadership should make every reasonable effort to achieve a ratio of approximately 1 adult for every 8 children.
- 2) Regardless of group size, Leadership must assign at least one approved adult who must be present with any group of youth at all times.
- 3) Where there are only two Staff or Volunteers in a group, they must be from different households.
- 4) Some youth classes or small groups may have only one approved adult in attendance during the class session. In this case, there should be no fewer than three students with the adult teacher. In addition, designated personnel should be on call to provide supervision and assistance as needed.
- 5) Clear visibility should be maintained at all times, and doors left unlocked while rooms are in use.
- 6) Personnel should avoid being alone with a child in a room.
- 7) Two or more personnel designated by Leadership may speak with a single child when appropriate (e.g., for counseling or discipline) as long as clear visibility is maintained and any doors left open or unlocked.

8) Staff and Volunteers should engage in active supervision while youth are under their care.

D) Restroom Guidelines

1) *Children five years of age and younger* should use a classroom bathroom if one is available. If a classroom bathroom is not available, personnel should escort children in a group, never taking a child to the bathroom alone. Personnel should check the bathroom first to make sure that it is empty, and then allow the children inside. Personnel should then remain outside the bathroom door and escort the children back to the classroom.

2) If a child is taking longer than seems necessary or calls for help, Staff should assist, but leave doors open.

3) *For youth over the age of five*, when possible, at least one male Staff or Volunteer should take two or more boys to the restroom and at least one female Staff or Volunteer should take two or more girls. The worker should then remain outside the bathroom door and escort the youth back to the classroom when the youth are done.

E) Check-in and Check-out

Presbytery Youth Leadership will create a process for children fifth grade and younger to be signed in and out only by a child's parents/guardians, or individuals approved by them who are at least 13 years of age or older.

F) Discipline

1) Correction should be calm, respectful, and discrete; it should not be harsh or belittling.

2) Staff will not administer physical discipline and will only restrain a child if judged necessary to prevent physical injury.

3) Parents should be contacted for any serious or persistent discipline issues.

4) Staff may restrict participation in particular activities. Decisions about suspension or expulsion from a program will be made by Leadership.

G) Transportation of Children

1) It is the responsibility of parents, not Staff or Leadership, to secure transportation to and from events.

2) During an event, if transportation is required, before a Youth may ride in a staff member's personal vehicle, the driver must be approved by Leadership and the parents must give consent. Staff must also possess adequate liability insurance.

3) When youth are transported during events for presbytery youth activities, they shall be transported in groups of three or more youth, with at least one Approved Adult in each vehicle.

H) Overnight Trips

Boys and girls should be lodged separately, with at least two male Staff for the boys and two female Staff for the girls.

I) Sick Children

It is our desire to provide a healthy and safe environment for all involved in presbytery youth programs. To that end, parents will be encouraged to be considerate and not to have their children participate if they have common symptoms of a contagious illness (e.g., fever, vomiting, diarrhea).

Youth who are observed by Staff to be ill will be separated to the extent possible and their parent or guardian will be asked to pick the child up.

J) Medications

1) Except in a medical emergency, Staff will not administer either prescription or non-prescription medications to the children under their care absent a plan that includes prior written consent. Nor may children administer any medications to themselves or others absent a plan that includes prior written consent. In no case may one child share a medication with another child.

2) Families participating in a youth program will be required to complete a Medical Release Form. Leadership or Staff will work with families to have a medical action plan on file for youth with a known condition that may require treatment during an event (e.g., need for an inhaler or epi-pen).

K) Accidental Injury

In the event that a child is injured while under our care, the following steps should be followed:

a) For minor injuries, scrapes, and bruises, Volunteers will provide basic first aid (Band-Aids, etc.) as appropriate and will notify the child's parent or guardian of the injury at the time the child is picked up from our care.

b) For injuries requiring medical treatment beyond simple First Aid, the parent(s) and/or guardian will immediately be summoned by Staff in

addition to Leadership (or designee). If Staff or Leadership judge necessary, an ambulance will be called.

c) For injuries requiring treatment by a medical profession, Leadership will ensure relevant personnel complete an incident report.

L) Training

Leadership must review the child protection policy with Staff.

M) Communicating the Presbytery Child Protection Policy

This Policy is to be made available to anyone attending a GLGP youth program.

IV. REPORTING SUSPECTED ABUSE

- A) Anyone suspecting abuse or neglect must report that suspected abuse or neglect to the relevant authorities as required under applicable law.
- B) Anyone suspecting that abuse has occurred during a presbytery youth program and involving a participant should immediately notify Leadership so that the matter may be responded to in a timely manner and reasonable precautions be taken.
- C) Leadership will promptly seek to ascertain the basic facts.
- D) Unless there is clear and immediate indication that the accusation is without merit, then Leadership will relieve the suspected offender of all responsibilities involving contact with youth, pending further review. Leadership will implement measures to separate the alleged offender from the alleged victim for the duration of the presbytery event, as well as to prevent unsupervised contact by the accused with other youth.
- E) Once leadership has conducted its initial inquiry and taken initial steps to safeguard potential victims, leadership will promptly notify the parents or guardians of any youth involved, whether an alleged abuser or an alleged victim.
- F) Leadership will notify the chairman of the Ad Interim Commission (AIC) of the Great Lakes Gulf Presbytery (GLGP), which will ensure that the GLGP's insurance carrier is notified, as well as the moderators of the sessions of the parties to the allegations.
- G) Any other initial steps taken in response to an allegation of child abuse or neglect will be directed by the AIC (e.g., designating a media spokesperson), consistent with its authority and the *Constitution of the RPCNA*.
- H) All steps taken by presbytery leadership will be documented and will be taken without undue delay.

- I) All communications related to any alleged child abuse or neglect shall attempt to protect the dignity and privacy of those involved, including the alleged child victim and the person suspected of child abuse, while at the same time ensuring that those responsible for addressing the situation, including civil authorities, remain fully informed. The identities of minors will be withheld and protected.

- J) Presbytery will seek forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ between all parties involved in an investigation or trial, and the restoration of the penitent to communicant membership in the Church, in accord with the *Constitution of the RPCNA*.

V. APPENDIX A: STATE REQUIREMENTS FOR REPORTING ABUSE

Below are online resources from each state's (under the jurisdiction of the Great Lake Gulf Presbytery) government outlining mandatory reporting requirements and giving points of contact for each state for reporting at the time of this writing; links and information may be updated and should be checked for the most up-to-date information. Furthermore, www.childwelfare.gov provides a centralized library for state laws and handbooks.

Alabama

<https://dhr.alabama.gov/child-protective-services/written-report-of-suspected-child-abuse-neglect-for-mandated-reporters/>

Florida

<https://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/abuse-hotline/>

Georgia

<https://cps.dhs.ga.gov/Main/Default.aspx>

Illinois

<https://www2.illinois.gov/dcfs/safekids/reporting/Pages/index.aspx>

Indiana

<https://www.in.gov/dcs/contact-us/child-abuse-and-neglect-hotline/>

Kentucky

<https://chfs.ky.gov/agencies/dCBS/dpp/cpb/Pages/default.aspx>

Michigan

https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/0,5885,7-339-73971_7119_50648_44443-157836--,00.html

North Carolina

<https://www.ncdhhs.gov/divisions/social-services/child-welfare-services/child-protective-services/about-child-abuse-and-child-neglect>

Ohio

<https://jfs.ohio.gov/ocf/reportchildabuseandneglect.stm>

South Carolina

<https://dss.sc.gov/child-well-being/report-child-abuse-and-neglect/>

Tennessee

<https://www.tn.gov/dcs/program-areas/child-safety/reporting/faqs.html>

VI. APPENDIX B: FORMS
YOUTH MINISTRY STAFF APPLICATION FORM
GREAT LAKES – GULF PRESBYTERY (RPCNA)

All information on this application will be kept confidential. If you have any questions about the application, please call or email the Presbytery Youth Leadership overseeing the event.

I. Basic Information

Name: _____ Phone: _____

Date of birth: _____ SSN: _____

Email: _____

Address: _____

How many years have you been a communicant member of the RPCNA? _____

Are you currently a communicant member of the RPCNA in good standing? _____

Current Congregation: _____

II. Experience

Describe any relevant experience working with youth.

List any involvement you have had in youth programs in the last 5 years.

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Program</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Contact (email/phone)</i>
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III. Character References

Applicants must include a letter of recommendation from a member of their session.

In addition, list two individuals who can attest to your character and, if possible, have observed your interactions with children and youth. References must be 18 or older and may not be members of your household.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Relationship</i>	<i>Phone</i>	<i>Email</i>

IV. History

Have you ever been: *(circle one)*

- Arrested for any reason? Yes / No
- Convicted of, or pleaded no contest to, any crime involving minors? Yes / No
- Convicted of, or pleaded no contest to, a moving violation in the last 3 years? Yes / No

Is there any reason why you should not work with minors? Yes / No

*If the answer to any of these questions is “Yes,” please explain on a separate sheet of paper.

V. Affirmations

Place your initials on each line.

_____ I have carefully read the GLGP Child Protection Policy.

_____ I recognize that the GLGP is relying upon the accuracy of the information contained herein. Accordingly, I attest and affirm that all the information that I have provided is completely true and correct, to the best of my knowledge.

_____ I authorize GLGP to contact any person or entity listed in this application and I further authorize any such person or entity to provide GLGP with information, opinions, and impressions relating to my background or qualifications.

_____ I further authorize GLGP to conduct a criminal background investigation and/or child abuse investigation if further investigation is deemed necessary.

_____ I voluntarily release GLGP and any such organization or entity listed herein by me from liability involving the communication of information relating to my background or qualifications.

VI. Attachments

Please remember to include the following with this application form:

1. A copy of your driver's license.
2. *(If necessary)* Explanation of answers.

Applicant Signature

Date

Parent/Guardian Signature (if applicant is under 18)

Date

For Administrative Use Only

Date Submitted and Received: _____

Date Background Check Submitted: _____

Date Background Check Results Received: _____

Application Approved _____ Application Denied _____

Date of Application Approval or Denial _____

MEDICAL RELEASE FORM
GREAT LAKES – GULF PRESBYTERY (RPCNA)
THIS INFORMATION WILL BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL

Great Lakes-Gulf Presbytery Youth Program

Child's Name

Date of Birth

M F
Sex

Parent's/Guardian's Name

Parent's/Guardian's Name

Parent's/Guardian's Phone

Parent's/Guardian's Phone

Address

Alternative Emergency Contacts

Primary Emergency Contact

Secondary Emergency Contact

Primary Contact Phone Number

Secondary Contact Phone Number

Primary Contact Street Address

Secondary Contact Street Address

Primary Contact City, State, Zip

Secondary Contact City, State, Zip

Medical Information

Hospital/Clinic Preference

Physician's Name

Physician's Phone Number

Insurance Company

Policy Number

Allergies/Special Health Considerations

I authorize all medical and surgical treatment, X-ray, laboratory, anesthesia, and other medical and/or hospital procedures as may be performed or prescribed by the attending physician and/or paramedics for my child and waive my right to informed consent of treatment. This waiver applies only in the event that neither parent/guardian can be reached in the case of an emergency.

Parent's/Guardian's Signature

Date

I give permission for my child to attend the youth program of the Great Lakes-Gulf Presbytery. I release the Great Lakes-Gulf Presbytery and individuals from liability in case of accident during activities related to the youth program as long as normal safety procedures have been taken.

Parent's/Guardian's Signature

Date

For Administrative Use Only

Date Received: _____