

Keeping Children & Vulnerable Adults Safe

The conference's background-check change, what Safe Gatherings is and costs, and why we need a written policy

Briefing for the Leadership Team • October 2026 • Draft for discussion. This document lays out the facts and the choices; it does not recommend an option.

The short version

- **In September the Illinois Great Rivers Conference (IGRC) told our office it no longer processes background checks for churches.** Volunteers now apply, train and are screened online through **Safe Gatherings**, a background-check and training company the conference partners with.
- **We already have a Safe Gatherings account**, but no one has been named to manage it, and it is set to the most basic option.
- **Costs are per volunteer:** \$39 or \$47 per person depending on the package, repeated every three years. There are no church fees and no minimum number of people.
- **To our knowledge, we have no written child-protection (“Safe Sanctuaries”) policy.** The denomination and conference strongly urge one. Screening alone doesn’t tell us who must be screened, what rules volunteers follow or what to do if something happens.

1 Background

Abuse happens in churches of every size. In 1996 the United Methodist Church responded with “**Safe Sanctuaries**,” its abuse-prevention program. The *Book of Discipline* (§256.1) “strongly encourages” every church to adopt a policy protecting children, youth and vulnerable adults. A program has three parts:

- **Screening:** applications, references and a background check before someone serves. A background check only finds people who have already been caught, so it is never enough alone.
- **Training:** recognizing abuse and grooming, and knowing how to respond.
- **Everyday practices:** for example, two unrelated adults present, windows in doors and parent sign-in. These also protect volunteers from false accusations.

“Vulnerable adults” means people 18 and older with physical, mental or developmental disabilities.

2 What changed this fall

- **Sept. 22, 2026:** our office administrator, Mary Toel, sent a background check to IGRC and was told the conference no longer runs them. IGRC directed churches to igrc.org/safegatherings.
- **Same day:** Safe Gatherings confirmed our account is active but barely used. It is on the **Basic Package**, has **no administrators**, and renews every **three years**. They offered an upgrade to the **Approval Package**.

- **IGRC’s website** calls Safe Gatherings “an OPTIONAL service.” The alternative is the conference’s own Safe Sanctuaries Resource Team. The site says churches are “strongly urged” to follow Safe Sanctuaries practices, including background checks.

Our reading: the conference’s expectations haven’t changed. What changed is that the conference office no longer processes checks; each volunteer now goes through Safe Gatherings directly.

3 What is Safe Gatherings?

Yes, it is a background-check company. It also provides the abuse-prevention course and an online system that tracks who has been screened and when they expire. It is a division of Validity Screening Solutions (Overland Park, KS), was started in 2012 for a United Methodist conference, and is now used by many UMC conferences. Every IGRC church is already set up in it. Legally it is a “consumer reporting agency,” like a credit bureau, so federal law governs how its reports are used (Section 5).

What a volunteer does:

1. Registers at safegatherings.com and selects our church.
2. Completes a 5-minute application with address history, SSN and consent forms.
3. Pays by card, unless the church pays.
4. Takes a 1.5–2 hour online course, in English or Spanish, with a quiz at the end.
5. The background check runs automatically after the course, and results can arrive within a few days.

Applicants must be 16 or older (under 18 with parental permission). Fees are not refundable once an application is submitted. Our pastor is screened separately through the conference.

4 How the costs work: per church or per volunteer?

Every dollar is per volunteer. The church pays nothing just for having the account: no setup fee, no subscription, no minimum. Each person screened is one charge, and it comes around again every three years at renewal. Some *choices* apply to the whole church:

SET ONCE FOR THE WHOLE CHURCH	VARIES BY VOLUNTEER
Which package (Basic or Approval)	The per-person fee
Who pays: volunteers, church or a mix	Optional driving-record check for drivers (about \$27)
Who manages the account	Out-of-state court fees, if any (see note)

PEOPLE SCREENED	BASIC (\$39 EACH)	APPROVAL (\$47 EACH)	DIFFERENCE
5	\$195	\$235	\$40
10	\$390	\$470	\$80
15	\$585	\$705	\$120
20	\$780	\$940	\$160

Totals are per three-year cycle; divide by 3 for a yearly budget figure (20 people on Approval ≈ \$313/year). **About the prices:** Safe Gatherings does not publish prices; each conference negotiates its own. These figures come from the company’s Sept. 22, 2026 email: \$47 for Approval, “\$8.00 more per applicant than the Basic Package.” IGRC’s website

still shows an older \$37. **Court fees:** the company’s list of counties that charge extra contains no Illinois or neighboring-state counties, so most local volunteers should owe nothing more.

5 The package choice: Basic vs. Approval

	BASIC (OUR CURRENT SETTING)	APPROVAL
Price	\$39	\$47
Both include	Online training, national sex offender registry, national criminal database	
Courts searched	Current county only	Every county lived in for the past 7 years, plus federal courts
Who reads the report and decides	Our church	Safe Gatherings issues an “approved” status
Legal notices if someone is turned away	Our church (see box)	Safe Gatherings

What the church must do itself on the Basic Package

If we turn someone away *because of their background report*, the federal Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) requires us to:

1. Send them the report and a federal rights summary **before** deciding.
2. Wait a reasonable time (5 business days is common).
3. Send a separate written final notice.

Reports must also be kept confidential and secure. Whether this law covers unpaid volunteers is unsettled, but Federal Trade Commission staff have said it can, and willful violations carry penalties of \$100–\$1,000 per person plus attorney’s fees.

Points made for Basic

- \$8 less per person.
- The church sees every report and applies its own judgment.
- Similar to the check IGRC’s website describes.

Points made for Approval

- Wider search, including federal crimes such as online enticement of a minor.
- The company makes the call and handles the legal notices, sparing our office and keeping members from reading each other’s records.

Either way, Safe Gatherings says it “does not set or enforce policies for churches.” The church still decides who serves.

6 Who pays: the options

OPTION	CONSIDERATIONS
A. Volunteers pay (by card)	No budget impact, but may discourage some volunteers.
B. Church pays all (monthly invoice)	Removes a barrier for volunteers and needs a budget line (see Section 4).
C. Mixed	Volunteers pay by default, and the church gives single-use coupon codes to those it chooses to cover. Flexible, with a little more administration.

7 What Illinois law requires (separate from Safe Gatherings)

- **Mandated-reporter training.** IGRC instructs that **all** paid and volunteer workers with children must take the free DCFS online course (mandatedreporter.dcf.illinois.gov) within 3 months of starting and every 3 years after. It is a different course from Safe Gatherings, and **both are needed**.
- **Reporting.** The person who suspects abuse calls the DCFS hotline directly at **1-800-25-ABUSE (1-800-252-2873)**, or 911 in an emergency. No one may stop or change someone's report.
- **Background checks:** we found no Illinois law requiring them for church volunteers. They are a denominational expectation and standard best practice.

8 Why we need a written policy

Signing volunteers up with Safe Gatherings checks *people*. Only a policy says which roles must be screened, what rules everyone follows, what we do if abuse is suspected, and who decides whether someone may serve. The UMC's *Book of Discipline* strongly encourages a policy, its *Book of Resolutions* says churches "should" adopt screening and supervision practices, and IGRC states that its own conference policy "does not supersede the responsibility of local churches to develop and implement their own policies." The policy should be reviewed every year.

Starting point: Discipleship Ministries' free 9-page fill-in template, *Safe Sanctuaries Policies & Guidelines for Smaller Membership Congregations* (link in Sources). The outline below follows that template.

9 Policy outline (template)

Based on the Discipleship Ministries template, with Illinois and IGRC items added. **DECIDE** marks a choice our church must make.

1. **Purpose:** our baptismal promise to nurture and protect children, youth and vulnerable adults.
2. **Scope:** which ministries are covered (nursery, Sunday school, youth, VBS, visitation and so on). **DECIDE**
3. **Who may serve:** age 21+ (approved youth helpers excepted), at least **5 years older** than the oldest child supervised, and a regular attendee for **6 months**.
4. **Screening:** application, references, interview and background check; no one convicted of abuse or neglect may serve. Rescreen **every 3 years**; drivers also get a driving-record check. **DECIDE** package, who pays, and how a concerning report is handled.

5. **Training:** abuse-prevention course before serving, plus DCFS mandated-reporter training every 3 years, with the church keeping copies of certificates.
6. **Supervision:** two unrelated adults present (at least one screened), or a roaming monitor. Windows in doors or doors left open. Parent sign-in and sign-out. Two or more screened adults for overnights and trips.
7. **Transportation:** no youth drivers, and an adult is never alone in a vehicle with one child.
8. **Online contact:** adults don't initiate social-media connections with minors, two adults are present in virtual meetings, and photos require written permission.
9. **Youth helpers:** the template screens helpers over age 14, but Safe Gatherings approves only 16+. **DECIDE** how to handle 14–15-year-olds.
10. **If abuse is suspected:** make sure the person is safe, call DCFS, notify the pastor, and document what happened.
11. **Records & review:** name the account administrators, keep reports confidential, and review the policy annually. **DECIDE**
12. **Adoption:** approved by the Leadership Team and signed by the pastor, the Staff-Parish Relations chair and the Leadership Team chair.

10 Decisions before the Leadership Team

1. **Policy:** adopt a written policy? Who drafts it, and by when?
2. **Provider:** Safe Gatherings, or IGRC's Safe Sanctuaries Resource Team?
3. **Package:** Basic or Approval?
4. **Payment:** volunteers, church or mixed? If the church pays, what budget amount?
5. **Administrators:** who manages the account? Safe Gatherings recommends at least two, with the pastor as primary contact.
6. **Scope & timeline:** which roles must be screened, by when, and is there a transition period for current volunteers?

Still to confirm with Safe Gatherings: renewal pricing; whether packages can vary by person; and, for Approval, what leads to “not approved,” whether we see the report, and whether we can still decline someone they approve.

Contacts

Safe Gatherings	888-241-8258 (Mon–Fri, 8–5 Central) · info@safegatherings.com
IGRC: Rev. Beth Fender	bfender@igrc.org · 217-529-2611 · igrc.org/safesanctuaries
DCFS Abuse Hotline	1-800-25-ABUSE (1-800-252-2873)
Church office: Mary Toel	office@nwunitedmethodist.org · 309-692-0421

Sources

1. Safe Gatherings email to Mary Toel, Sept. 22, 2026, plus attached flyers and court fee list.
2. IGRC: igrc.org/safegatherings · igrc.org/mandated-reporters · igrc.org/safesanctuaries (accessed Oct. 12, 2026).
3. Discipleship Ministries, *Safe Sanctuaries Policies & Guidelines for Smaller Membership Congregations* (2020): umcdiscipleship.org/articles/safe-sanctuaries-policies-and-guidelines-for-smaller-congregations
4. UMC *Book of Discipline* ¶1256.1; *Book of Resolutions*, “Reducing the Risk of Child Sexual Abuse in the Church.”
5. Illinois Abused and Neglected Child Reporting Act, 325 ILCS 5/4; FTC, “Using Consumer Reports: What Employers Need to Know.”

This briefing summarizes publicly available information for discussion. It is not legal advice.