



NEWS YOU NEED!

To: Our congregations

By: Rev. Joy T. Melton

Georgia has a new Child Abuse Reporting Statute and it takes effect July 1, 2012. Every church needs to know what our new law includes and how it affects our ministries with children and youth.

The new law is found in the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, Title 19-7-5. There are three key provisions for churches to be fully aware of.

1. The new law defines “Child service organization personnel” as persons employed by or volunteering at a business or an organization, whether public, private, for profit, not for profit, or voluntary, that provides care, treatment, education, training, supervision, coaching, counseling, recreational programs, or shelter to children”. Then, the law states that Child service organization personnel, “having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been abused shall report or cause reports of that abuse to be made as provided in this Code section.” **Therefore, under the new law, our volunteers and staff members in ministries with children and youth are mandatory reporters of child abuse.**
2. The new law requires that reports of child abuse be made “no later than 24 hours from the time there is reasonable cause to believe a child has been abused, by telephone or otherwise and followed by a report in writing, if requested, to a child welfare agency providing protective services, as designated by the Department of Human Services, or, in the absence of such agency, to an appropriate police authority or district attorney.” **Our ministry leaders must know the DFACS office or the sheriff’s office contact information so that the appropriate reports can be made within the law’s time limits.**
3. The new law makes it clear that clergy must report child abuse. The only circumstance in which clergy may not report child abuse is the situation where a clergy person’s only knowledge of the abuse is a confession by the perpetrator which is “required to be kept confidential under church doctrine or practice.” The 2008 Book of Discipline, Paragraph 341.5 states, “All clergy of The United Methodist Church are charged to maintain all confidences inviolate, including confessional confidences, except in the cases of suspected child abuse or neglect or in cases where mandatory reporting is required by civil law.” The Book of Discipline makes it clear that our denomination’s doctrine does not require clergy to keep knowledge of child abuse confidential. In light of the Book of Discipline’s provisions and the Georgia statute, our clergy need to know how and when to report child abuse, just as our staff members and volunteers need to know!

You can find the complete text of the Georgia child abuse reporting statute in House Bill 1176, portions of which are quoted above, posted online at www.legis.ga.gov. For additional information on this article, contact Rev. Joy Melton by email: joy@hmatlanta.net