

Atlanta Westside Presbyterian Church
Safe Church Policy and Abuse Prevention Guidelines

Revised April 2024

I. PURPOSE OF THIS POLICY

Atlanta Westside Presbyterian Church (“AWPC”) is committed to protecting the vulnerable, caring for survivors, and holding those who abuse power accountable for sexual, physical, emotional or spiritual misconduct; to educating our leadership, staff, and members relating to such matters; and to establishing reporting and response procedures relating to these issues. This Safe Church Policy and Abuse Prevention Guideline (this “Policy”) is adopted in order to implement those purposes.

II. OUR VISION

Consistent with AWPC’s purpose to embody and preview the Kingdom of God, our church seeks to reflect Christ’s love, humility, refuge, and justice, particularly for the most vulnerable:

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn...*

Isaiah 61:1-3

We acknowledge that sin can come from within our body and that power can be abused in such a way that individuals experience sexual, physical, emotional, or spiritual abuse and misconduct. Church leaders, who by the nature of their positions hold power, are to shepherd God's people with love and humility, following the example of our Great Shepherd. However, they in particular are in danger of abusing their power. “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock...” Acts 20:28-29.

The Gospel and our call to love one another requires that we take abuse and misconduct seriously and that we bring light to areas of darkness. We are also called to be a community that seeks healing, ensures justice, pays special attention to vulnerable people, and exercises authority with care.

Our core values – outlined below – also inform our treatment of abuse and misconduct:

- A. **Prize the Heart** – “Jesus taught that our words, attitudes, and actions flow from our hearts. Lasting change, therefore, must flow from hearts that are redeemed by his grace...” Prizing the

heart compels us to expose abuse and misconduct so that we might care for the afflicted and respond to physical, emotional, or spiritual mistreatment.

- B. **Embody Grace** – *“The heart of scripture is the Gospel of free grace that unites us to God through the person and work of Jesus Christ. We experience this Gospel ... throughout the culture of the church; the shared practices and dispositions that make us instruments of God’s grace to each other.”* Every “body part” is indispensable in our common calling; therefore, we are called to protect those who hold less power and are more vulnerable.
- C. **Aim for Restoration** – *“The Gospel that reconciles us to God also makes us agents of reconciliation with each other.”* We seek reconciliation with God above protecting the institution of the church. We work to mitigate the dangers inherent in power differentials, especially along the lines of race, sex, class, and culture. Abuse and misconduct create brokenness, not only between individuals but between an individual and the church, and we desire that our response to abuse and misconduct will offer restoration between the church and the survivor even in cases where reconciliation between the individuals involved may not be possible or safe.
- D. **Cultivate Place** – *“We believe local places are not just the setting for God’s kingdom, but one of the key dimensions in which the kingdom is made manifest.”* We desire that our treatment of abuse and misconduct will shape our hearts to be more like Christ’s so that we might bring redemptive change in the social, cultural, political, and educational institutions of our area.
- E. **Embrace Limitations** – *“Every local church is only one partial manifestation of Christ’s universal, global Kingdom. We do not expect our church to meet every possible need so we celebrate God’s work through other churches and ministries...”* Acknowledging our limitations, especially in terms of our expertise regarding abuse as well as our capacity to maintain independence and objectivity in addressing such matters within the local body at AWPC, requires us to intentionally plan for the prevention and mitigation of incidents. We will utilize other ministries and organizations that can assist as we seek to prevent and address instances of abuse and misconduct.

To ensure that AWPC remains a safe place for all persons, especially those who are vulnerable, we have adopted the following Policy (which is supplemented by additional policies relating to the prevention and reporting of abuse against minors).

While all AWPC members, staff, and officers commit to our Handshake Vows (Appendix A) to resolve conflict among peers, we acknowledge that in situations where abuse or misconduct is involved, individuals may be unwilling or unable to follow Handshake Vows. Power differentials can make it dangerous for a victim to approach an abuser alone regarding abuse or misconduct. Under those circumstances, we acknowledge that members will follow the procedures set forth in this Policy rather than pursuing the Handshake Vows.

III. DEFINITIONS

A. GENERALLY; SCOPE OF POLICY

There are different categories of abuse and misconduct. This Policy ***expressly prohibits all forms of abuse***, including sexual abuse, sexual assault, sexual harassment, intimate partner violence (domestic violence), emotional abuse, financial abuse, physical abuse, spiritual abuse, and stalking (as each of those terms is defined below) by an Employee, Officer, Member or Visitor of AWPC.

The defined terms below may or may not include conduct that would constitute a violation of federal, state, or local law. This Policy does not attempt to make judgments with respect to whether any law is violated but, to the extent that an individual believes that federal, state, or local laws may have been violated by a person covered by this Policy, such individual is encouraged to notify the appropriate authorities promptly.

B. DEFINITIONS

Abuse: In general, abuse occurs when a person in a position of power and/or trust (e.g., pastor, elder, deacon, boss, mentor, supervisor, parent, adult, older child) uses that position to exploit or violate someone who is more vulnerable. That exploitation or violation can take a variety of forms, including specific categories defined below.

Sexual Abuse: When a person in a place of power and/or trust engages in sexual behavior with a child or an adult under their supervision, authority, mentoring, or spiritual care, including:

Sexual Penetration: Any act or attempted act of vaginal or anal penetration, however slight, by a person's penis, finger, other body part, or an object, and/or any oral-genital contact.

Sexual Contact: Any intentional touching of a person's breasts, buttocks, groin, genitals, or other intimate parts. Touching may be over or under clothing and may include the touching or making the person touch, or making the person touch their own body. This also includes contact with non-sexual areas of the body for the sexual gratification of the perpetrator (such as with certain paraphilic disorders).

Non-Contact Sexual Acts: Any act or attempted act of abuse that is achieved without touching the other person, such as:

- observing a person's nudity or sexual activity or allowing a person to observe sexual activity;
- recording, photographing, transmitting, showing, viewing, streaming, or distributing intimate or sexual images, audio recordings, or sexual information of persons; or
- exposing one's genitals or inducing a person to expose their own genitals within a power dynamic (boss-employee, doctor-patient, teacher-student, pastor-congregant, adult-child) communicating romantic or sexual desire, interest, or sexually stimulating content toward a person.

NOTE: A child cannot consent to any sexual behavior with an adult or older child. An adult under the authority, care, or mentorship of a leader cannot consent to sexual activity. Even when both people are adults and the contact is not forcible, any crossing

of sexual boundaries within a power structure is not an “affair” or a “relationship” but an egregious abuse of power. Adult sexual abusers often develop an emotional and spiritual connection and then exploit it. While not always recognized as a crime, this is a serious violation and AWPC will treat it as such. If any staff person wishes to pursue a consensual relationship with someone under their spiritual care or a power hierarchy within AWPC, they must contact the Session for the sake of transparency and discuss any appropriate boundaries given the power dynamics and related factors.

Sexual Assault: Sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the consent of the victim. Sexual harassment generally violates civil laws—all have a right to work or learn without being harassed—but may not be a criminal act. Sexual assault usually refers to acts that are criminal. Some forms of sexual assault include:

- Penetration of the victim’s body, also known as rape;
- Attempted rape;
- Forcing a victim to perform sexual acts, such as oral sex or penetration of the perpetrator’s body; and
- Fondling or unwanted sexual touching.

Consent: Words or overt actions indicating a freely given agreement to the sexual act or contact. Silence or the absence of an explicit “no” does not constitute consent. Physical submission by the victim, such as “freezing” or “fawning,” does not equal consent. Consent also implies the ability to say “no” in a mutual relationship. Children, adults with certain developmental disabilities, certain vulnerable adults (e.g., elderly or ill), or those within a power differential (e.g., with a religious leader, mentor, teacher, or supervisor) are unable to consent to sexual activity. Other circumstances such as intoxication or unconsciousness also render a person unable to give consent to sexual activity. Deception or manipulation of a person also render that person unable to consent.

Sexual Harassment: Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual’s employment, interferes with an individual’s work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work or church environment.

Note: Harassment, sexual or otherwise, can also occur in a community, conference, or event when the people involved are not employees of the church. In accordance with our values, sexual harassment is not restricted to what is defined as sexual harassment under the law. AWPC considers any unwanted sexualized behavior or sexualized behavior to be a serious form of harassment (including unwanted touch or communication, other unwanted sexual attention, or any behavior that objectifies or degrades). Other common forms of harassment include bullying and acts of discrimination.

Intimate Partner Violence (Domestic Violence): A pattern of behavior where a person in, or who has been in, an intimate relationship uses tactics of control, belittling, isolation, fear, stalking, and/or intimidation to dominate, harm, degrade, or otherwise undermine the worth and agency of the other person in the relationship. Intimate partner violence can be physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, social, or financial.

Emotional Abuse: A pattern of controlling behaviors such as shaming, insulting, degrading, intimidating, threatening, humiliating, and/or domineering. Bullying is a common term for acts that typically constitute emotional abuse.

Financial Abuse: The illegal or improper use of a vulnerable person or his/her financial resources for another's profit or advantage. Examples of financial abuse include the taking of money or property; forging a signature; getting a person to sign a deed, will or power of attorney through deception, coercion, or undue influence; or illegally or improperly adding names to bank accounts or safety deposit boxes. The elderly in particular are often targeted for financial abuse.

Physical Abuse: Non-accidental physical injury (ranging from bruises to severe fractures or death) by way of bodily contact (such as slapping, punching, pushing, beating, kicking, shaking or striking with an object) or non-injurious contact with the goal or effect of intimidating, threatening, or controlling.

Spiritual Abuse: A form of emotional abuse using religion. Many acts of abuse in a religious environment will have a spiritual dimension. Examples include:

- Use of religious ideology, precepts, tradition, or sacred texts to harm.
- Compelling a person to engage in religious acts against his or her will.
- Abuse that occurs in a religious context or by a religious leader.
- Invoking of divine authority to manipulate a person into meeting the needs of the abuser.
- Using spirituality or spiritual authority to dismiss a person's perspective, agency, or value.
- Attempts to use sacred texts, sacred tradition, theology, or spirituality to put their leadership or decisions beyond questioning or accountability.
- Attempts to spiritualize or justify harm using sacred texts, sacred tradition, theology, or spirituality.

Stalking: A pattern of unwanted, fixated and obsessive behavior that is intrusive and causes fear of violence, alarm, or distress. Stalking is now recognized as a crime in all fifty states; examples include:

- Unwanted phone calls, texts, messages or emails
- Following or spying on the victim
- Showing up or waiting at places without a legitimate reason
- Sending unwanted items, presents, or flowers
- Posting information or spreading false or confidential information about a person or victim on the internet, in a public place, or by word of mouth.

Employee: Any compensated member of AWPC pastoral or administrative staff.

Member: Any person who has publicly and formally agreed to AWPC's membership criteria and who has been voted into membership by the Session.

Officer: Any elder or deacon of AWPC.

Safe Church Team ("SCT"): A standing group of Members appointed in accordance with Section VI(C) of this Policy.

Session: The body of elected elders of AWPC.

Visitor: Any person who attends an AWPC church service or other church event who is not a Member.

Volunteer: Any Officer, Member or Visitor who is serving in a non-paid position for purposes of supporting AWPC, such as parking team, coffee team, welcome team, Sunday School teachers, Communion servers, or any other leader, convenor, teacher, host or facilitator of any AWPC program or event.

IV. HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

A. OUR STANDARDS

All of the various types of abuses, harassment, or other forms of misconduct described and defined by this Policy are unacceptable by Employees, Officers, Members, and Visitors. Further, at all times our community upholds the following standards of respect and safety:

1. **Show respect in physical touch, space, and visibility:**
 - a. Appropriate touch, whether to an adult or child, is always welcomed by the person and accountable to others (If you are not sure, just ask - e.g., “May I give you a hug?”).
 - b. Children who need assistance in the restroom outside of the children’s ministry must be helped by their own parent or guardian. Within the children’s ministry, all diapering or assistance must be observable by two screened adults.
 - c. Be considerate of others and give them appropriate space. Notice the body language of others and be aware of your impact on others.
 - d. Stay in visible and accountable spaces. No one should be alone with a child who is not their own child (including giving rides).
2. **Show respect in your words:**
 - a. Determine to use words that convey the respect always due to others.
 - b. Avoid any language that belittles or objectifies (e.g., commenting on a person’s body or sexual attractiveness).
 - c. Avoid sexualized comments including inappropriate jokes or stories.
3. **Show respect in agency and personal boundaries:**
 - a. Healthy people do not seek to control others (e.g., by making decisions for someone or taking control of an aspect of their life such as directing their finances or career or social life), but rather encourage and empower others to take healthy agency in their own life.
 - b. Avoid volunteering inappropriately intimate information or asking someone to reveal intimate details or personal information when the person is not ready or comfortable doing so.
 - c. Give agency to others (e.g., “Where would you be comfortable meeting up?”).
 - d. Always respect the “no” of others in setting personal boundaries.

NOTE:

It is always the responsibility of the person in the position of greater power to maintain appropriate boundaries with others.

B. SIGNS OF ABUSERS

Abusers often use charm or other tactics to manipulate others. Targets of abuse often report feeling flattered and then later confused, upset, guilty, and ashamed, and may feel that the abuse was their fault. Victims should know that although it is normal to feel this way, abuse is never their fault. Those in positions of power and trust are responsible and able to respect appropriate boundaries.

Abusers are often skilled at explaining away concerning behavior. Anyone who experiences or has information regarding a potential Policy violation should document it and speak up as soon as possible to the SCT. Members of the AWPC community should be attentive to the possibility of abuse in its various forms and should speak to the SCT when they observe troubling behavior, crossing boundaries, or possible Policy violations.

C. RESPONDING TO POLICY VIOLATIONS

AWPC takes seriously all Policy violations and all concerns related to respect and safety. Persons who witness or learn of a potential violation of this Policy should promptly inform a member of the SCT. The SCT will promptly respond to the report in accordance with this Policy.

V. EMPLOYEE AND VOLUNTEER SCREENING AND TRAINING

A. SCREENING

1. **Volunteers.** AWPC may request an application, conduct a personal interview, and/or ask for references for any prospective Volunteer. Volunteers working with minors must also adhere to all supplemental policies relating to the safety of minors.
2. **Officers.** All prospective Officers shall complete and submit the Background Authorization and Background Check form attached as Appendix B, authorizing AWPC to verify background information and credentials, obtain criminal history, check the sex offender registry, and run a social security number verification.
3. **Employees.** All prospective Employees shall:
 - a. Complete an employment application.
 - b. Complete and submit the Background Authorization and Background Check form attached as Appendix B, and take such additional steps as deemed necessary by AWPC (based upon the responsibilities of the relevant employee position), to verify background information and credentials, obtain criminal history, check the sex offender registry, and run a social security number verification and an internet and social media search.
 - c. Authorize AWPC to take such other steps as are deemed necessary or appropriate to obtain and verify background information and opinions from former employers, personal references, educational institutions, credit agencies, reporting services and governmental agencies.

Screening Responsibilities and Confidentiality. The lead Employee within each ministry of AWPC shall be responsible for assuring that each Employee and Volunteer within their area of ministry

complies with the requirements set forth above. All information received will be confidential, subject to review by the Executive Director, the lead Employee, and the AWPC Personnel Committee.

Screening Updates. AWPC may require periodic updates regarding any or all of the requirements set forth above from any Volunteer, Officer or Employee.

B. TRAINING

All Employees, Officers and Volunteers must be familiar with this Policy and satisfy the training and acknowledgement requirements set forth below. New employees must sign a written acknowledgment that they have read and agree to abide by the Policy within two weeks of hiring. Within sixty (60) days following the date of employment by Employees, or following the date of formal engagement by Volunteers or Officers, all such Employees and Volunteers or Officers who have not previously been trained shall participate in mandatory abuse and misconduct awareness, prevention, and response training under the Direction of the Lead Employee and with the support of the SCT as appropriate. This training will include a review of this Policy, reporting and response procedures, and how to recognize abuse and misconduct.

	<i>Training on Policy</i>	<i>Written Acknowledgement of Policy</i>	<i>Annual Refresh of Training</i>
<i>Volunteers</i>	Within sixty (60) days following first engagement ¹	Not required	Not required
<i>Officers</i>	Within sixty (60) days following first engagement	Required within 2 weeks of first engagement	Required
<i>Employees</i>	Within sixty (60) days following employment	Required within 2 weeks of employment	Required

On an annual basis, one AWPC staff meeting shall be set aside for the purpose of reviewing abuse and misconduct awareness, prevention, and response protocols as set forth in this Policy. Documentation of participation in training and review of this Policy will be maintained in the administrative offices of AWPC.

VI. REPORTING PROCESS

A. CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING PUBLICITY

AWPC shall make public the procedure for reporting any violations of this Policy by posting it on the AWPC website and maintaining printed copies in the administrative offices of AWPC.

Alleged violations of this Policy shall not be made public unless (i) a full investigation is completed and it has been determined that the facts raised in the report have been properly

¹ Note: Training by introductory video. Note also that volunteers who work with children are required to undergo separate training as required by AWPC.

substantiated and (ii) the Session determines that it is in the best interests of the individuals involved and the AWPC congregation to disclose the results of the investigation; provided, that limited public disclosures of information may be made during or after the investigation if the safety of vulnerable individuals so requires.

B. COMPLIANCE WITH LOCAL LAW

AWPC shall make all required reports to civil authorities.

In the event a reported violation of this Policy results in criminal proceedings, the investigative process described herein shall be suspended until such criminal proceedings are concluded; *provided, however*, the SCT and Session may take any action necessary or advisable to ensure the safety of the AWPC community in light of such criminal allegations. Upon conclusion of such criminal proceedings, the SCT and Session shall promptly revisit the matter and take such actions (if any) as the circumstances may dictate.

C. APPOINTMENT & DUTIES OF THE SCT

1. COMPOSITION OF SCT; TERM

The Session shall appoint Members to serve on the SCT for the purpose of administering the objectives of this Policy and equipping the AWPC community for effective abuse prevention and response. The SCT members are bound by this Policy as well as by all other rules that regulate the conduct of Members. Conduct by a SCT member that is in violation of such requirements shall be reported directly to the Session.

1. **Composition of Team.** The SCT shall be made up of at least four (4) Members designated by the Session. Not less than 50% of the members of the SCT shall be women, and not more than 50% of the members of the SCT shall be Officers or the spouse of an Officer. No Employee (or spouse of an Employee) shall be a member of the SCT.
2. **Staggered Terms.** The members of the SCT shall serve a term of three (3) years unless they earlier resign, are relieved by the Session, or discontinue their Membership with AWPC. Terms will begin and end in the Fall of the year. The members of the SCT shall be divided into three (3) classes of equal size (to the extent possible), whose replacements shall be staggered at one-year intervals so that approximately one third (1/3) of the SCT shall be replaced each year. Upon the expiration of any SCT member's term, such member may serve up to two (2) additional, consecutive three (3) year terms on the SCT if they so desire and if the Session approves such request. Any SCT's member's term may also be extended in appropriate circumstances in the Session's discretion, such as to complete an ongoing investigation.
3. **Duties of the SCT.** The duties of the SCT include the following:
 - a. Implement and oversee compliance with the Policy
 - b. Maintain rigorous familiarity with the Policy
 - c. Brief all Employees, Officers, Volunteers, and Members on the application of the Policy on a regular basis

- d. Receive, document, and respond to any Policy violations or other concerning behavior
- e. Lead in responding to any allegations of abuse or misconduct under this Policy, including by assisting with investigations in accordance with Section VII(D)
- f. Complete continuing education from a qualified organization on a regular basis

2. REPORTING TO THE SCT

Immediate Danger. When any person within the AWPC community has a reasonable belief that a person is in immediate danger (e.g., an act of violence is actively happening or has just occurred), they should call 911 immediately and then contact a member of the SCT.

Knowledge of Abuse. When any person within the AWPC community receives a disclosure of abuse, sees any evidence or obtains knowledge of abuse, or has any reasonable belief of abuse against a minor (age 17 or younger) or a vulnerable adult (e.g., an elder or adult with developmental disabilities, etc.), they should immediately report such abuse through an appropriate hotline (see representative list of hotlines on attached Appendix C) and should also notify appropriate law enforcement agencies. No attempt should be made to independently investigate such matters, as delays in reporting might result in a loss of critical evidence, violate law, or enable the continued abuse of vulnerable children or adults. After making such report through a hotline and to appropriate agencies, such adult should then contact a member of the SCT.

3. APPROPRIATE RESPONSES UPON LEARNING OF ABUSE

Upon learning of abuse or any potential violation of this Policy, an SCT member or other person in the AWPC community should abide by the following general guidelines:

- Listen closely before investigating; take the report seriously.
- Remain calm and affirm the importance of reporting suspected violations.
- Except as described above, respect the agency of the adult victim in reporting suspected violations to the appropriate authorities, acknowledging that the decision to report adult abuse is ultimately up to the adult victim.
- Acknowledge that it is not the responsibility of the person making the report to substantiate the alleged abuse or misconduct, only to report it.
- Not promise not to tell anyone.

Note that receiving an adult’s disclosure of potential abuse is an honor, not a burden; it is a sign of trust. Survivors often choose to delay disclosure of their abuse for years, even decades, after it occurred. AWPC encourages anyone receiving an adult’s abuse disclosure to be guided by the following responses:

DO Say	DON'T Say
Thank you for telling me.	Why are you telling me this?
I believe you.	Why didn't you _____ (run/scream/stop him etc.)

DO Say	DON'T Say
I'm so sorry this happened to you. How can I help?	What do you mean when you say he abused you? What exactly did he do?
Take as much time as you need.	You need to forgive and move on.
I am here.	It'll take some time, but you'll get over it.
<i>The following should only be said if the survivor indicates these concerns are on his/her mind:</i>	It was so long ago, why are you still letting your abuser win by hanging on to it? Let it go.
It is okay to be angry.	Try to be strong.
It's understandable you're feeling that way.	Out of tragedies good things happen.
Your reaction is not an uncommon response.	You're lucky that _____ didn't happen.
You're not going crazy. These are normal responses following abuse.	I know how you feel.
It wasn't your fault.	Perhaps you misunderstood...

The support of the SCT will recognize their limitations and will not offer personal therapeutic, legal, or other professional advice, but will focus on personal support and empowerment. The SCT will be careful to avoid causing further harm, and under no circumstances (even when the abuse is alleged but not proven) will the SCT:

1. Place any portion of blame for the abuse on the survivor
2. Probe for intimate details of the abuse
3. Express disbelief
4. Attempt to silence the survivor
5. Encourage noncompliance with the law
6. Express support for the perpetrator
7. Urge meeting or reconciliation with the perpetrator

VII. INVESTIGATION AND DETERMINATION

A. INITIAL ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Upon notice of a potential violation of this Policy, the SCT member should:

1. prepare an incident report in the form attached as Appendix D,
2. provide the other members of the SCT with the incident report ***within 24 hours***, and
3. convene a meeting with all available members of the SCT as soon as possible, and in any event ***within seven (7) days***.

Based on the incident report, the SCT should promptly determine whether a reasonable basis exists to suspect abuse or misconduct has occurred. If so, the SCT will prepare a written report that (i) states the grounds for which such reasonable basis exists, (ii) indicates whether a third-party should investigate the facts and circumstances of such potential violation, and (iii) makes recommendations concerning interim relief in accordance with Section VII(C) below.

The SCT must deliver its initial report to the Moderator of the Session, the Clerk of the Session and the Executive Director,² who will determine whether to submit the report or only a summary thereof to the Session (considering, among other things, the nature of the allegations, the need for temporary leave, and the fact an investigation has not occurred).³ The SCT also will notify the alleged offender that a report has been submitted pursuant to this Policy and will review with all applicable parties the steps required to be taken pursuant to this Policy.

If needed, in addition to the powers of the SCT under Section VII(D), the SCT may appoint a point of contact outside the SCT for the reporter, victim and/or alleged offender to act as a point of contact between the SCT and such person during the pendency of any investigation, process, or procedure under this Policy. The point of contact for such person may also act as a support and advocate for such person.

B. THIRD-PARTY INVESTIGATION

The SCT shall state in its initial report whether it has sufficient ability to investigate and make recommendations to the Session for responsive action or whether a third-party investigation will be required before such recommendations can be made. In connection with this determination, this Policy acknowledges that in many instances the SCT may not be trained to investigate alleged abuse or misconduct under this Policy, and further acknowledges that allegations of abuse or misconduct frequently involve an alleged offender who is known to members of the SCT, potentially compromising its ability to perform an independent investigation.

The SCT is particularly encouraged to pursue independent consultation or investigation of alleged abuse or misconduct if:

- (a) authorities decline to investigate a report of abuse despite strong evidence of wrongdoing;
- (b) an adult victim declines to report allegations of a criminal nature to authorities;
- (c) an alleged offender is not charged with criminal wrongdoing after investigation, but concerns remain as to whether the alleged offender should be disqualified from ongoing participation in church ministries or programs; or
- (d) there is a pattern of misconduct that is denied by the alleged offender.

² In the absence of an Executive Director, the Session will appoint one or more Elders to perform the Executive Director functions in this Policy.

³ If the alleged offender is an Elder, the Executive Director, or a member of the SCT he/she will be recused from participating in the discussions and decisions described in this Policy pending the conclusion of the investigation.

The SCT may also decide to pursue independent consultation for the purpose of evaluating how effectively it has responded to the submission of a report or has handled any disclosure of an alleged violation under this Policy, for the purpose of enhancing its response and handling of such matters in the future.

If the SCT chooses to engage an outside individual or agency in accordance with this Policy, such person or organization must (a) be independent of AWPC and (b) have appropriate experience to investigate the form(s) of abuse or misconduct that have been reported. Depending on the nature of the allegations, the SCT can consider whether it is appropriate to retain an outside agency with a multidisciplinary team of investigators who are trained in best-practice investigative standards, have significant experience investigating a wide range of misconduct and/or abuse cases, and use trauma-informed practices in their investigations. Such agency should agree to conduct the investigation in accordance with this Policy.

During the pendency of the investigation, the Session and SCT shall take all appropriate steps to ensure the independence and accuracy of the investigation and its conclusions, e.g. by avoiding interference with any victim or alleged offender, seeking pre-mature reconciliation or forgiveness between the parties prior to formal recommendations by the SCT or Session, communicating about the ongoing investigation with members outside the SCT and Session in any way, etc.

C. IMPOSING INTERIM RESTRICTIONS

Upon the recommendation of the SCT after consideration of all facts and circumstances (including specifically the safety of the victim), the following interim restrictions may be applied to any alleged offender of this Policy during the pendency of any investigation, proceedings or process undertaken in accordance with this Policy:

1. If the alleged offender is an **Officer** or **Teaching Elder**, subject to approval of the Session (or its designees), the alleged offender may be placed on (i) a paid leave of absence and/or (ii) any other restrictions outlined in Section 6 below until the matter is resolved.
2. If the alleged offender is an **Employee** other than a Teaching Elder, subject to approval of the Executive Director, such Employee may be placed on (i) temporary leave from office and/or (ii) any other restrictions outlined in section 6 below until the matter is resolved.
3. If the alleged offender is a **Volunteer** (including members of the SCT), subject to approval of the Executive Director, the Volunteer may be placed on (i) temporary leave from their position and/or (ii) any other restrictions outlined in Section 6 below until the matter is resolved.
4. If the alleged offender is a **church leader (employee or officer) of another church** that is a member of the Presbyterian Church in America, the SCT shall document the report and notify the Session, who shall discuss the allegations and determine the appropriate course of action, which may include referral of the matter to the leadership of the other church or to the court of the Presbyterian Church in America that has responsibility for such matters.

5. If the alleged offender is a **Member** or **Visitor** but does not hold any role as an Employee, Officer, or Volunteer, subject to approval of the Executive Director, such person may be placed on any appropriate restriction as recommended by the SCT.
6. In accordance with paragraphs 1-3 above, in addition to temporary leave, an Employee, Officer or Volunteer can be placed on any other or additional restrictions (such as prohibiting the alleged offender from attending or participating in church activities, abstaining from certain public facing roles and responsibilities, ceasing all contact with the victim, etc.) as are deemed necessary to assure the safety of the church community.⁴

Depending upon the nature of the claim and the potential for further abuse or harm to the community, the SCT, working with the Session, may engage an independent consultant to determine whether further restrictions shall be placed upon the alleged offender relating to the programs, ministries and events of AWPC.

D. INVESTIGATION PROCESS

Role of Investigator. The person or agency investigating any potential violation of this Policy will:

- (a) Acknowledge and confirm to all involved that the allegations must be and will be handled in confidence with great care for the reputations of the alleged victim, the alleged offender, AWPC, and Christ Himself.
- (b) If the allegations involve a violation of criminal law, immediately notify the appropriate authorities (to the extent not already notified) and inform the Session regarding the response of those authorities.
- (c) Conduct interviews with all relevant parties who have information that may corroborate either the allegations of abuse or misconduct or the response of the alleged offender.
- (d) Prepare and submit to the SCT a detailed written statement describing the alleged abuse or misconduct, the response to such allegations from the alleged offender, and corroborating or contradicting information from all other parties that have been interviewed.
- (e) Furnish recommendations to the SCT regarding a proposed course of action in response to such allegations and findings.

Upon receipt of the investigator's report and analysis, the SCT will submit its recommendations regarding the appropriate response to the investigation and findings for the Session's consideration, along with a copy of the investigator's report.

⁴The leave /interim restriction provisions carry the following priority: Officer/Teaching Elder; Employee; Volunteer. If the alleged offender holds more than one position, the leave/temporary restriction decision will be made by applying the provision applicable to his or her highest role. For example, if the alleged offender is an Employee and an Officer, the leave/interim restriction decision shall be determined based on the Officer provision in Section VII. C. 1.

SCT's Continuing Role. During the course of any investigation, the SCT will continue to coordinate further appropriate responses to the reported violation of this Policy, including but not limited to:

- (a) Ensuring that all potential crimes against children have been reported to appropriate authorities according to this Policy.
- (b) Taking any further action for the protection of vulnerable persons.
- (c) Facilitating cooperation with any investigations, including helping investigators assess the possibility of other victims and communicating in appropriate ways within the church or with others.
- (d) Referring the victim and alleged offender (if appropriate) to the Care team and/or other appropriate resources for ongoing, appropriate care, including helping them connect with professional trauma-informed care, if desired.
- (e) When appropriate, with careful attention to protecting the privacy of any victims, offering public support and/or opposing harmful narratives toward victims.
- (f) Together with the Session, maintaining contact with the alleged offender during any investigations or administrative leave to ensure proper boundaries and accountability, especially with regard to controlling the narrative, retaliation, and access to other vulnerable people.
- (g) Caring for others in the church and coordinating with outside resources as needed.
- (h) Documenting relevant actions and information related to the reported matter.
- (i) Reaching out to qualified experts with questions or when an independent consultation is appropriate.

E. SESSION'S RESPONSE

Based upon all available information, including the written report and recommendations furnished by the outside agency and SCT, if applicable, the Session shall then take such course of action as it shall determine is appropriate and shall share with the alleged victim and alleged offender information that determination and the grounds for any actions to be taken. The Session will be guided in this determination by the considerations in Section VIII.

F. OTHER GUIDANCE

- i. **Opportunity for Complaint/Appeal.** The alleged victim or the alleged offender may appeal to or file a complaint with the appropriate Church court concerning an act or decision by the Session.
- ii. **No Retaliation for Reporting.** No person filing a report under this Policy shall be adversely affected in terms and conditions of employment, church membership, or affiliation, or

otherwise discriminated against or discharged unless the Session determines that the person who reported the purported violation of this Policy has willfully and intentionally brought false charges and that discipline is necessary due to an intentional false allegation of abuse or misconduct. Retaliation against an individual for reporting abuse or misconduct or for participating in an investigation of such matters is a serious violation of this Policy and will be subject to rigorous investigation and potential disciplinary action. Acts of retaliation should be reported immediately and will be promptly investigated and addressed.

- iii. **Media Communications.** Subject to the advice of the outside agency or other professional advisors to AWPC, and subject to assuring fair treatment for, and the confidentiality of, all persons involved in such matters, the Executive Director or the Senior Pastor of AWPC, or both, will initiate or respond to all communications with the media regarding allegations made under this Policy.

NOTE: When disclosure of information seems to be in the best interest of the safety of the AWPC community, AWPC shall also consult with outside agencies and the alleged victim to make a safety plan when there is any reason to believe the alleged victim or others may still be in danger (e.g., in cases involving domestic violence, stalking, assault, or threats). AWPC will also seek to communicate with the alleged victim, as sensitively as possible, the reason for further reporting information regarding the alleged violation.

- iv. **Documentation and Record Keeping.** All information received in connection with reports submitted under this Policy and all written materials prepared in connection with any such proceedings under this Policy, shall be held in confidence, unless the safety of the community requires limited disclosure (in which case care shall be taken to protect the privacy of the parties) or unless and until both the alleged victim and the alleged offender request in writing that such information or materials be released or until the Session determines that releasing such information or materials is required either by civil authorities, by the Book of Church Order, or in order to effectively administer the course of action resulting from the investigation. Upon the conclusion of the investigation, AWPC shall maintain records sufficient to show its response to alleged violations of this Policy.

VIII. RESPONSE BY SESSION

A. OBJECTIVES OF DISCIPLINE

Accountability, justice, repentance, restoration, and healing are major goals of AWPC's response to abuse and misconduct, including:

1. Seeking vindication and healing for the survivor, recognizing their pain and loss.

2. Taking into account, when determining the discipline recommended to be taken with respect to the offender, the proportionality of the discipline to the seriousness of the abuse or misconduct, the need to protect the safety of the church community, as well as the ability to restore the offender to fellowship with other believers.
3. Calling the offender to repent and take responsibility for the abuse or misconduct as well as offering ways for the offender to do so.
4. Restoring, where possible, the losses suffered by the survivor.
5. Seeking to restore the peace of the community.
6. Exercising discipline in a way that promotes healing whenever possible.

B. PASTORAL CARE FOR SURVIVORS

Survivors and their families present a wide range of pastoral care needs. To meet those needs, the survivor must be taken seriously and offered compassionate support. To that end:

1. Subject to the needs and preferences of the survivor, members of the Session who were in no way implicated in the abuse or misconduct (particularly those who have previously provided shepherding oversight for the survivor) may contact the survivor and their family, expressing their grief regarding the abuse or misconduct, making themselves available to listen to any existing and ongoing issues confronting the survivor and family, and ensuring continuity of relationship with the survivor and family. In the event the survivor is female and expresses a preference for such support from exclusively female Members of AWPC, or from a mixed-gender group, every effort shall be made to provide support that aligns with the wishes of the survivor.
2. Church leaders should express sorrow that the survivor has this story to tell.
3. The survivor and their family need to be able to speak about their experiences and emotions without blame or shame. They need to know that others hear and understand their pain.
4. Support resources should be offered to the survivor and family. The survivor and their family's decisions regarding use of these resources should be respected and accepted. Support resources may include referral to counseling that is trauma-informed and faith-based, referral to an advocate, prayer, spiritual guidance, and up-to-date information regarding the response process to the abuse or misconduct. Depending upon the circumstances, AWPC may offer financial support for counseling or other needs emerging from the abuse or misconduct. A request for financial support may be submitted by the survivor or may be recommended by the SCT. All requests for financial support will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.
5. Survivors should have agency over sharing their story. When survivors choose to do so, they need our utmost support, including:
 - Listening and staying calm

- Affirming without judgment
- Validating strong emotions (such as anger, betrayal, and confusion)
- Respecting their privacy
- Encouraging and empowering their agency
- Encouraging them to seek professional medical or mental health care as appropriate

C. PASTORAL CARE FOR PERPETRATOR

The family of the perpetrator is often not pastored effectively following allegations of abuse or misconduct. The admonition to “carry each other’s burdens, and in this way... fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2) applies to the perpetrator’s family as well as to the survivor. To meet those needs, the perpetrator and his or her family must be extended appropriate engagement by AWPC leaders, including rebuke, discipline, or other call to action and repentance.

D. COMMUNICATIONS WITH MEMBERS

Members of the church community are deeply affected by allegations of abuse and misconduct against a church leader. For example, some Members may deny the occurrence of abuse or misconduct even after the process set forth in this Policy has established evidence that supports the allegation. Subject to the requirements for confidentiality and the limitations on disclosure of information set forth in this Policy, AWPC Officers should make every effort to reassure the church community about the thoroughness and fairness of the process as well as the propriety of the outcome. The long-term health of the congregation may depend on pastoral care that effectively promotes grace, peace, and healing. To that end:

1. **Disclosure**. Appropriate disclosure of information regarding the abuse or misconduct may be made, to the extent such disclosure is deemed wise by the Session in consultation with the SCT, in support of the healing process for individuals and the congregation, and so long as such disclosure takes into account the safety and protection of the survivor.
2. **Communication and Education**. Communication and education, whether to the congregation as a whole or in a smaller setting, may be used to address any aspects of healing. Educational presentations by knowledgeable professionals may be utilized to promote greater understanding of the issues faced by the congregation. Educational materials for individual use, such as books, pamphlets, videos, and websites, should be made easily accessible for Members. The propriety of such communication and education shall, in each instance, be weighed against the needs of the victim and shall be designed to achieve the objectives of this Policy most effectively.
3. **Support for Members**. Group prayer opportunities and small group settings may also be utilized to support the congregation as it recovers from the effects of abuse or misconduct.

IX. POLICY ON KNOWN SEX OFFENDERS

AWPC is committed to holding admitted or convicted sex offenders to a high standard of accountability and permitting their involvement in the AWPC community only under circumstances where appropriate.

A. WHEN INVOLVEMENT IS NOT APPROPRIATE

Known sex offenders who demonstrate evidence that they are *not* repentant are extremely dangerous and are not welcome at AWPC. No one who is convicted of or who has admitted to abusing a child or vulnerable person may work with, have access to, or hold any position of power or trust over, directly or indirectly, children or vulnerable persons in AWPC programs, ministries or events. Any sex offender who evidences deception, minimization, excuses, victim blaming, or other indicators that are not consistent with true repentance shall not be allowed to participate in AWPC programs, ministries or events. The safety of the church community mandates that unrepentant sex offenders be excluded from fellowship.

Any sex offender who is known or believed to be attracted to children or fantasizes about children shall not attend any AWPC programs, ministries or events, including worship, that include children, unless specifically authorized to do so by the Session, in consultation with the SCT.

B. WHERE INVOLVEMENT IS POSSIBLE

1. ASSESSMENT FOR INVOLVEMENT

Known sex offenders who demonstrate evidence that they are repentant and who wish to participate in any AWPC ministry, program or event must first be willing to submit to an assessment of their individual situation and ongoing repentance, and must accept such safeguards as are deemed necessary or appropriate by the Session, in consultation with the SCT. No assessment will begin if the survivor(s) of the sex offender are Members or Visitors, as any survivor should be free to worship without such person being present. If a convicted sex offender is repentant and seeks to participate in any AWPC program, ministry or event, the SCT (upon the request of the Session) will engage professional experts trained in such matters to assist with the assessment of the sex offender. Similarly, if an individual was credibly accused of abuse in the past, the SCT will engage such advisors for guidance regarding the appropriate response. Without limiting the generality of the foregoing, upon request of the Session, the SCT will:

- (a) Interview the known sex offender
- (b) Interview other relevant parties (e.g., family, treatment provider, counselor, parole officer, etc.)
- (c) Acquire records relating to the sex offender
- (d) Assess repentance in consultation with experts
- (e) If deemed appropriate in light of the foregoing information, establish the level of participation, forms of accountability, and all other safeguarding requirements that shall be required before any such participation in AWPC programs, ministries or events shall be permitted.

- (f) The SCT will consult with experts as needed throughout this process to ask appropriate questions and obtain independent input regarding all decisions pertaining to the sex offender.

2. PUBLIC NOTICE; ACCOUNTABILITY

Any adult who is a convicted or admitted sex offender who attends AWPC programs, ministries or events shall agree to have their name known to the congregation and shall abide by all accountability and safeguards.

The safeguards established in this Section IX shall address accountability on and off church property and will involve communication with appropriate persons such as family, friends, employers, counselors, and parole/probation officers. The safeguards shall be reviewed as needed by the Session and the SCT (if requested by the Session), who will consult with professional experts trained in such matters as necessary.

3. REVIEW BY SCT UPON REQUEST BY THE SESSION

When a known sex offender is determined by the Session, in consultation with the SCT (upon request by the Session), to be repentant and is authorized to participate in any AWPC programs, ministries or events, Members who have responsibility to minister to that individual shall receive specific training to properly equip them to come alongside such person in a manner that is both effective and supportive to that individual as well as properly attentive to the safety of the church community.

Appendix A:

Handshake Vows

1. I won't make assumptions about your motives.
2. I won't gossip about you.
3. If we ever have a problem, I will work with you to resolve it biblically.

Appendix B

ATLANTA WESTSIDE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Staff and Officer Background Information
and Background Check Authorization

Name: _____

Background Information:

Have you ever had any convictions (misdemeanors, felonies, pleading of no contest, reduced pleadings)? Yes or No (Circle). NOTE: You will have the opportunity to clarify your response with the Executive Director.

Within the past 12 months have you habitually used intoxicating beverages or drugs in excess? Yes or No (Circle)

Will you give permission for a background check? Yes or No (Circle)

Have you ever been discharged or forced to resign for misconduct or unsatisfactory service from any position? If yes, please provide name of the organization along with date and brief explanation on a separate sheet of paper. You will have the opportunity to clarify and provide more information regarding your response with the Executive Director. Yes or No (Circle)

Have you ever abused power, or been accused of abusing power, as more fully described in the Safe Church Policy and Abuse Prevention Guidelines, against any other person?

Background Check Authorization

Officers and staff must complete the background check authorization.

Current Name: _____ (First, middle, last)

Dates Used: _____ (mo/yr – mo/yr)

Former Name(s): _____ (First, middle, last)

Dates Used: _____ (mo/yr – mo/yr)

Address: _____ (Street, City, State, Zip)

Dates Used: _____ (mo/yr – mo/yr)

Former Address: _____ (Street, City, State, Zip)

Dates Used: _____ (mo/yr – mo/yr)

Social Security Number: _____

Driver's License Number/State: _____

The information contained in this application is correct to the best of my knowledge. I hereby authorize Atlanta Westside Presbyterian Church (AWPC) and its designated agents and representatives to conduct a comprehensive review of my background and to cause a consumer report and/or an investigative consumer report to be generated for employment and/or volunteer purposes. I understand that the scope of the consumer report/ investigative consumer report may include but is not limited to the following areas: verification of social security number; credit reports; current and previous residences; employment history; education background; character references; drug testing; civil and criminal history records from any criminal justice agency in any or all federal, state, county jurisdictions; driving records; birth records; and any other public records.

I further authorize any individual, company, firm, corporation, or public agency (including the Social Security Administration and law enforcement agencies) to provide AWPC and its agents and representatives any and all information, verbal or written, pertaining to me. I further authorize the complete release of any records or data pertaining to me that the individual, company, firm, corporation, or public agency may have, to include information or data received from other sources.

AWPC and its designated agents and representatives shall maintain all information received from this authorization in a confidential manner in order to protect the applicant's personal information, including, but not limited to, addresses, social security numbers, and dates of birth.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C

GEORGIA HOTLINES/CALLS FOR ASSISTANCE

Domestic Violence Hotline – (800) 334-2836 (800 33 HAVEN) - The DV Hotline connects you with the nearest DV agency that may provide shelter, safety planning, counseling, legal advocacy, and community resources.

www.gcadv.org

For help in Spanish call: (770) 479- 1703.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline – (800) 799-SAFE is a 24-hour confidential service for survivors, victims and those affected by domestic violence, intimate partner violence and relationship abuse.

Georgia Network for Sexual Assault (800) 656-4673 (HOPE). You will be directed to your local Sexual Assault Center in Georgia. A chat and mobile App are available at: <https://hotline.rainn.org/online>.

Hotline to End Human Trafficking in Georgia - (866) 363-4842 (866 END HTGA). Any Georgian with information or suspicions of human trafficking should call the statewide hotline at 1-866- END HTGA (866-363-4842). Trained law enforcement agents, advocates, and first responders are available 24/7 to answer calls.

Elder Abuse Hotline - 866-552-4464. Press "3". To report abuse, neglect, or exploitation of an older adult or adult with a disability residing in a long-term care facility, contact the Department of Community Health.

Prevent Child Abuse -1-800-CHILDREN (800-244-5373) <http://preventchildabusega.org>

You can also report child abuse to the DFCS office 24/7 at 855-422-4453.

You can locate services at: <https://garc.maps.arcgis.com> listing community resources for child abuse, criminal justice, food/clothing/shelter, and healthcare.

Georgia Legal Services – (833) 457-7529 (883 GLSP LAW) To request civil legal assistance for low to moderate income Georgians in the 154 counties outside metro Atlanta. www.glsp.org

Atlanta Legal Aid - (404) 524-5811 – To request civil legal assistance for Georgians in the 5-county metro Atlanta area.

Georgia Asylum and Immigrant Network (678) 335-6040

<https://georgiaasylum.org>

GAIN provides free immigration legal services to victims of crime and persecution.

Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation – 404 521-0790 in Fulton County

Get Help with Domestic Violence, Tenant, Unpaid Wages, Probate, and Covid – 19 Relief issues.

Community Health Centers - <https://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov> to find a community health center near you that may provide primary healthcare based on a sliding scale basis or a COVID-19 test

Food/Medicaid/TANF - Apply online at www.gateway.ga.gov.

For help with SNAP/Medicaid/TANF questions you can call the DFCS Statewide Constituent Services - (404) 657-3433.

Georgia Senior Legal Hotline - (404) 657-9915

For civil legal advice for seniors in metro Atlanta outside Atlanta, call (888) 257-9519

GLSP Benefits Hotline – Outside metro Atlanta (888) 632-6332 to obtain assistance applying for or renewing benefits (Medicaid, MSP, SNAP, benefits for those on Medicare)

Georgia Cares – (866) 552-4464 (Option 4) provides help with Medicare enrollments and services for those with Medicare.

Latin American Association- (404) 638-1800 for immigration needs. Located at 2750 Buford Hwy. NE, Atlanta Georgia 30324

APPENDIX D

ATLANTA WESTSIDE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Incident Report Form

Date: _____

Safe Church Team Member Taking Report: _____

Personal Information:

Name of person making the report: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Volunteer Position: _____

Description of incident:

Parties Involved: _____

What: _____

When (include time, date): _____

Where: _____

Name(s) of witness(es): _____

Any additional contextual information: _____

Follow up:

As appropriate, when did the following occur

Safe Church Team Notified: _____

Executive Director Notified: _____

Session Notified: _____

Presbytery Notified: _____

Report filed with Georgia DCFS (minors): _____

Report filed with Georgia Adult Protective Services (disabled and elder adults):

Police notified: _____