

Abuse Policy Westwinds Church

As a community, Westwinds Church is committed to protecting the vulnerable, caring for survivors, and holding abusers accountable. Our commitments come from following God. These commitments are part of living out our Christian faith in a community where there is love, healing, and redemption.

Abuse is a particularly grievous sin (and often a crime), when someone in a position of power and trust violates or exploits someone who is often powerless to stop it. Abuse is sadly a common reality in this world. Jesus spoke strongly about the value and place of the vulnerable in the community of faith, and spoke stern words of warning against those who would use power to harm vulnerable people. As Christians we cannot face abuse if we are in denial about the reality of abuse. Instead, Jesus calls us to be “wise as serpents.” We all must become educated about abuse and take responsibility to uphold our policy.

Our goal is to prevent and respond appropriately to abuse by becoming a community that is educated on various forms of abuse and common dynamics, clarifying appropriate boundaries, and doing the hard work of holding each other accountable. All persons should experience an environment of safety and justice and one that is free from any form of abuse.

By its very nature, our community includes interaction with vulnerable children and adults. Sadly, many within the church have acted in predatory ways toward vulnerable people and bad actors will often seek environments with vulnerable people. Abuse in all its forms is almost always perpetrated by someone known to the victim. Abusers utilize a variety of tactics to gain trust, deceive both victims and others within a community, and keep the abuse secret. This policy only states what we all must take ownership of in our community as we together walk with God who transforms us to love justice as He does.

Definitions

Abuse: In general, abuse occurs when a person uses power and/or trust (e.g. pastor, elder, boss, mentor, supervisor, parent, adult, older child, etc.) to exploit or violate someone who is more vulnerable (e.g. a child, someone who is sick, elderly, or disabled, student, employee, intern, immigrant, etc.). That exploitation or violation can take a variety of forms such as emotional, financial, physical, sexual, spiritual, etc.

Sexual Abuse: Occurs when a person in a position of power or trust engages in sexual behavior with a child, or with an adult under their supervision, authority, mentoring, or spiritual care. Sexual abuse includes both contact and non-contact sexual acts and may occur through coercion, manipulation, or exploitation of a power imbalance. Examples of sexual abuse include, but are not limited to:

1. *Sexual Penetration:* Any actual or attempted vaginal or anal penetration, however slight, by a body part or object, or any oral-genital contact.

2. *Sexual Contact*: Any intentional sexual touching of intimate parts of another person, whether over or under clothing, including causing a person to touch the perpetrator, another person, or themselves for sexual purposes.
3. *Non-Contact Sexual Acts*: Observing or exposing nudity or sexual activity; exposing one's genitals or inducing another to do so; recording, photographing, sharing, or distributing sexual or intimate images or recordings; or communicating sexual desire or sexually explicit content toward a person within a power-dependent relationship (such as pastor-congregant, teacher-student, supervisor-employee, or adult-child).

Consent: A freely given yes; a person must have the capacity to say yes. Consent “cannot be given by individuals who are underage, intoxicated or incapacitated by drugs or alcohol, or asleep or unconscious. If someone agrees to an activity under pressure of intimidation or threat, that is not considered consent because it was not given freely. Unequal power dynamics, such as engaging in sexual activity with an employee or student, also mean that consent cannot be freely given.” (RAINN, <https://rainn.org/articles/what-is-consent>) If any staff person wishes to pursue a consensual romantic relationship with someone under their spiritual care or a power hierarchy within Westwinds Church, they must contact the Elders for the sake of transparency and to discuss any appropriate boundaries given the power dynamics or other factors.

Clergy Sexual Abuse: Sexual abuse (see above) by clergy, elder, or other leader holding formal spiritual authority with a person under their spiritual care and/or supervision, whether an adult or a child. It is an abuse of power, whether or not this is criminalized by state law.

Sexual Assault: Any sexual contact or behavior that occurs without a person's consent. Sexual assault includes acts that are criminal in nature and may occur through physical force, coercion, manipulation, or when a person is unable to give consent. Examples of sexual assault include, but are not limited to: penetration of any part of a person's body without consent (rape); attempted rape; forcing or coercing a person to perform sexual acts, including oral sex or penetration of another's body; and fondling or any other unwanted sexual touching.

Sexual Harassment: Any unwelcome sexualized behavior, advance, request, or communication that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment, or that interferes with a person's ability to participate, serve, work, or learn. Sexual harassment may occur within or outside of employment relationships and can take place in church, community, conference, or event settings. In keeping with our values, sexual harassment is not limited to what is defined under civil law and includes any unwanted sexualized behavior, particularly when a power imbalance is present. Examples include unwanted sexual attention, comments, jokes, messages, images, or touch; repeated or escalating sexualized behavior after a boundary has been expressed; and any conduct that objectifies, demeans, or degrades another person. Harassment may also include bullying or discrimination directed at individuals or groups based on personal characteristics or identity.

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.¹

Emotional Abuse: When a person holding power or trust engages in patterns of controlling, coercive, or domineering behavior that harms another's emotional well-being. This may include shaming, insulting, degrading, intimidating, threatening, humiliating, or bullying, and can involve behaviors such as violating confidentiality; using private or pastoral information to control or shame; manipulating through guilt or fear; gaslighting or minimizing a person's experiences; public belittling or intimidation; threatening loss of role, relationships, or community; isolating someone from support; withholding communication or inclusion as punishment; retaliating against those who raise concerns; and exerting excessive control over personal decisions, boundaries, time, or involvement.

Financial Abuse: The illegal or improper use of a vulnerable person or his/her financial resources for another's profit or advantage. Some examples of financial abuse may 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: Any non-accidental physical injury—ranging from bruises to severe injury or death—inflicted through bodily contact (including slapping, punching, pushing, beating, kicking, shaking, or striking with an object), or through non-injurious physical acts used to intimidate, threaten, or control another person.

Spiritual Abuse: A form of emotional abuse involving a pattern of coercive or controlling behaviors that use religion or spiritual authority, typically by a person holding power or trust. Because of this, abuse in religious settings often has a spiritual dimension. Examples of spiritual abuse include, but are not limited to: using religious beliefs, teachings, traditions, or sacred texts to harm, control, or shame; pressuring or compelling someone to participate in religious practices against their will; invoking divine authority to manipulate or meet the needs of the abuser; dismissing, silencing, or devaluing a person's perspective or agency through spiritual language; placing leaders or decisions beyond question or accountability by spiritualizing authority; and justifying or minimizing harm by framing it as God's will, spiritual discipline, or faithfulness.

Stalking: A pattern of unwanted, fixated, or obsessive behavior that is intrusive and causes fear, alarm, or emotional distress. Stalking may occur in person or through digital or other means and is recognized as a crime in all fifty states. Examples of stalking include, but are not limited to: making repeated unwanted phone calls, texts, messages, or emails; following, monitoring, or spying on a person; showing up at or waiting near a person's home, workplace, church, or other locations without a legitimate reason; leaving unwanted items, gifts, or notes; and posting, sharing, or spreading false, private, or harmful information about a person in person, publicly, or online.

¹ For more information and examples an excellent resource is The Duluth Model at <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheels/>

Administrative Policy

Safeguarding Team

Our Safeguarding Team is responsible for equipping the community of Westwinds Church for effective prevention and response. All individuals who serve on this team complete the highest level of screening as described below. The Safeguarding Team includes individuals with skillsets and experience in at least one of the following: law enforcement, policy development, history of Westwinds, trauma counseling, social work, or another field of advocacy. The Team includes one Elder and at least one staff member.

Currently, our Safeguarding Team is comprised of 4-6 members and is at least 50% women. Our current team is [insert team here]. They can be reached at safety@westwinds.org.

Duties of the Safeguarding Team:

1. Implement and oversee compliance with the Westwinds Church Abuse Policy
2. Maintain rigorous familiarity with the Westwinds Church Abuse Policy
3. Brief all staff, volunteers, and members on the application of the policy on a regular basis
4. Receive, document, and respond to any policy violations or concerning behavior
5. Lead in responding to any allegations of abuse (see below)
6. Conduct or coordinate screening of pastors, officers, staff, and volunteers
7. Complete continuing education from a qualified organization on an annual basis and help leaders with an ongoing education plan for the whole church

Screening of Pastors, Officers, Staff, and Volunteers

Westwinds Church shall utilize the following screening tools for all pastors, officers, staff, and volunteers:

- ❖ The completion of a written application including questions related to abuse and protecting the vulnerable
- ❖ An iChat background check[^]
- ❖ A Protect My Ministry background check[^]
- ❖ A sex offender registry check[^]
- ❖ An internet and social media search
- ❖ An interview that explores a candidate's written application and includes questions related to abuse, protecting the vulnerable, and the Westwinds Church Abuse Policy[^]

[^]Only needs to be completed if the individual is working in the areas of kid's ministry, finance, safeguarding team or security team.

Discovery of Abuse History

If the screening process yields information that an individual abused a child or others in any way, or has been convicted of a violent and/or sexual crime, that individual may not work with children or vulnerable adults in any capacity. If any potentially concerning information comes to

light, or if the screening process shows that a candidate has ever been accused or convicted of any type of crime, Westwinds Church may consult with an expert to help assess the situation.

Training

The educational plan developed by the Safeguarding Team and implemented in cooperation with our staff, will prioritize annual continuing education on abuse—required for volunteers and staff, and open to the whole church community. The educational plan will also prioritize independent expertise as well as regular internal briefings on our policy. We will conduct regular safety talks for children and students.

Healthy Boundaries

At all times our community upholds the following standards of respect and safety.

1. Show respect in physical touch, space, and visibility:

- ❖ Appropriate touch, whether an adult or child, is always welcomed by the person (If you are not sure, just ask - e.g. Can I give you a hug?).
- ❖ Touch within a significant power difference should be observable to others (e.g. between an adult and a child).
- ❖ Children who need assistance in the restroom outside of the children's ministry must be helped by their own parent or grown up. Within the children's ministry, all diapering must be done by the parent or grown up.
- ❖ Be considerate of others and give them appropriate space: Notice the body language of others and be aware of your impact on others.
- ❖ Stay in visible and accountable spaces: No one should be alone with a child who is not their own child (including giving rides).
- ❖ One-on-one communication between adults and minors (including texting or messaging) should be limited and used only when necessary. Group communication should be the norm to ensure transparency. Staff may engage in limited one-on-one communication with an added layer of accountability (e.g., documenting or sharing with another staff member), while volunteers should not maintain ongoing one-on-one messaging with minors. Expectations will be communicated to students and parents, who are encouraged to review and share any private communication if concerns arise.

2. Show respect in your words:

- ❖ Determine to use words that convey the respect always due to others.
- ❖ Avoid any language that belittles, threatens, or objectifies (e.g. commenting on a person's body or sexual attractiveness)
- ❖ Avoid sexualized comments including jokes, stories, experiences, or sharing sexualized content (such as images, video or other media) or engaging in any other sexualized communication.

3. Show respect in agency and personal boundaries:

- ❖ Healthy people do not seek to control others, but rather encourage and empower others to take healthy agency in their own life (e.g. making decisions

for someone or taking control of an aspect of their life such as directing their finances or career or social life)

- ❖ 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
- ❖ Give agency to others (e.g. “Where would you be comfortable meeting up?”)
- ❖ Always respect the “no” of others in setting personal boundaries
- ❖ Maintain appropriate boundaries in staff relationships, including disclosing romantic relationships as required and avoiding situations where power differences could influence, pressure, or compromise personal agency

It is always the responsibility of the person in the position of greater power to maintain appropriate boundaries with others. The following behaviors are unacceptable by any Pastors, Elders, or Staff at Westwinds Church:

- ❖ Any abuse of power as defined by this policy
- ❖ Sexual harassment of any kind, including unwanted sexual attention, comments, or unwanted physical touch
- ❖ Behavior or words that discriminate against anyone based on age, race, sex, ethnicity, national origin, religion, language, disability, health conditions, socioeconomic status, marital status, domestic status, or parental status
- ❖ Any words that belittle or threaten

Responsible leaders on any ministry trip shall consult with the Safeguarding Team and make a specific safety plan to make clear how the policy of Westwinds Church will apply within the specifics of the trip. This shall be made known to all participants (including parents and grown ups of participants if applicable).

Responding to Boundary Violations

Westwinds Church takes seriously all policy violations and all concerns related to respect and safety. Any person—staff, volunteer, parent, or church member—who witnesses a violation of this policy is expected to intervene if they feel safe to do so or seek assistance from someone who can, and then alert the Safeguarding Team as soon as possible. Any concerns involving vulnerable persons should be reported promptly.

The Safeguarding Team will document all concerns and policy violations in a timely and consistent manner, maintaining accurate and confidential records. Documentation will be stored securely and access will be limited to members of the Safeguarding Team and, when appropriate, the Elders or other designated leaders involved in response and accountability. Information will be shared only on a need-to-know basis and in accordance with legal and ethical responsibilities.

The Safeguarding Team will review each report and collaborate on an appropriate response, including care for those affected and any necessary accountability measures. Any concerns regarding the Safeguarding Team may be brought to the Elders.

Responding to Abuse and Harassment

Westwinds Church is committed to providing a timely and effective response to any allegations or findings of abuse or harassment within our church. We will work to create an environment where anyone feels comfortable raising questions and concerns, coming forward with reports of any misconduct, and being proactive about preventing and responding to abuse. In responding to abuse, Westwinds Church will always prioritize the safety and needs of the victim(s) and other vulnerable persons. It is hard for victims to come forward in most circumstances. Westwinds Church will do its best never to blame victims for struggling to come forward, delaying disclosure, or other common disclosure behavior.

Immediate Response Protocols

1. When there is a reasonable belief that any person is in immediate danger (e.g. an act of violence is actively happening or has just occurred), call 911. After the call, contact a member of the Safeguarding Team.
2. If there is a disclosure of abuse, any evidence or knowledge of abuse, or any reasonable belief of abuse against a minor (age 17 or younger or a student still in high school) or against a vulnerable adult (e.g. elder abuse, or abuse against an adult with intellectual disabilities), all adults within Westwinds Church must immediately report to law enforcement. Then report the incident to Child/Adult Protective Services at 1-855-444-3911.²

DO NOT try to investigate the matter. Any delay in reporting could result in a loss of critical evidence, potentially be a violation of the law,³ and worst of all, enable the continued abuse of vulnerable children or adults. After the report, contact a member of the Safeguarding Team. If the alleged perpetrator is unknown or within the household, follow all recommendations from investigating law enforcement personnel. Keep the child in a safe place, away from the potential perpetrator.

If the victim is now an adult, but the abuse was against them as a minor, we will support them and respect their agency in reporting. The only exceptions are if the abuse occurred within our church community and/or the name of the perpetrator is known. If it did occur in the church, law enforcement should be contacted.

3. If there is a disclosure, any evidence or knowledge, or any reasonable belief of abuse against an adult, all persons within Westwinds Church are encouraged to report as soon as possible to the Safeguarding Team. Adults may not be ready to have this information go to the church leaders. If so, they may seek support from the resources below.

² Within 72 hours after making an oral report by telephone, the reporting person shall file a written report (DHS-3200). If the immediate report has been made using the online reporting system, no additional written report is required. Reporting the suspected allegations of child abuse and/or neglect to the head of the organization does not fulfill the requirement to report directly to DHHS. For more information, visit

<https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/adult-child-serv/abuse-neglect/childrens/report-process> and

<https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/adult-child-serv/abuse-neglect/adult-ps>

³ Some adults in Michigan are legally mandated to report child abuse. For more information, visit

<https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/adult-child-serv/abuse-neglect/childrens/mandated-reporters/mandated-reporters-list>

4. After receiving any information from any above steps, a Safeguarding Team member shall inform the entire team (except a person or family member of a person who is involved in any allegation) and document the information. If there are concerns or allegations involving a member or members of the Safeguarding Team, the report may go to any Pastor or Elder.
5. The Safeguarding Team and the Elders shall ensure reports have been made to proper authorities (law enforcement and social services when applicable) in situations of potential abuse, as explained above, including child abuse and neglect, elder abuse, abuse against an adult with intellectual disabilities. In other cases involving an adult victim, the Safeguarding Team and the Elders will respect the agency of any adult victim(s) with regard to whether the adult victim(s) reports personally to the appropriate authorities. The decision of a survivor to personally report adult abuse and/or cooperate with authorities is ultimately their choice. However, the Safeguarding Team should work to encourage and support the victim(s) in every possible way. There may be situations where the Safeguarding Team will report information pertaining to a potential crime against an adult or child even when the victim is not ready to do so. When reporting is required or is in the judgment of the Safeguarding Team in the best interest of the safety of others, the Safeguarding Team may coordinate with the Elders as well as consult with national or local experts and the victim to make a safety plan when there is any potential reason to believe the victim or others may still be in danger (e.g. in cases involving domestic violence, stalking, assault, or threats). The Safeguarding Team will also seek to communicate as sensitively as possible the reason for reporting to the victim.
6. After receiving any information from the above steps, the Safeguarding Team will coordinate with the Elders on critical response issues and ensure appropriate pastoral involvement for care and guidance. This includes:
 - Assessing safety
 - Assessing accountability and boundaries for alleged perpetrators
 - Implementing care for any victims and families, with involvement from a Pastor as appropriate
 - Connecting individuals to specialized resources

The Safeguarding Team will keep the Elders informed of all credible concerns and involve them in decision-making as needed.

When the alleged perpetrator is within the church, the Safeguarding Team shall make recommendations to the Elders regarding administrative leave, suspension, other restrictions, or discipline. These measures will be reevaluated as necessary as the situation develops. When there are credible or substantive allegations of abuse or misconduct, it is strongly recommended that any individual—especially a Pastor or Staff member—be placed on leave with restricted access to vulnerable persons. This is a temporary step pending the completion of any investigations and/or until the Elders

have sufficient information to determine next steps regarding personnel decisions, credential status, or other accountability measures.

Any person facing an allegation of abuse, as well as any family member or close mentor of that person, must recuse themselves from these response processes, whether serving on the Safeguarding Team, as a Pastor, or as an Elder.

Further Response Protocols

Whenever possible, the Safeguarding Team should refer the victim(s) to local expert help (where available) and/or national organizations such as The National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE), The Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network Hotline (RAINN - 1-800-656-4673), or SAMHSA's National Helpline (1-800-662-HELP). Families experiencing online exploitation of children may reach out to the Cyber Tipline at 800-843-5678 or online at www.CyberTipline.org.

Our local abuse resources include:

- ❖ Child Advocacy Centers of South Central Michigan: (517) 768-1907 - <https://catholiccharitiesjhc.org/child-advocacy-centers/> - 3425 Francis Street, Jackson, MI 49203
- ❖ Aware - Domestic Violence Shelter/Sexual Assault Resource Center: (517) 783-1638 (24-hour Crisis Line: 517-783-2861) - <https://www.awareshelter.org/>
- ❖ Michigan Advocacy Program - <https://miadvocacy.org/>
- ❖ Statewide Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-866-VOICEDV 864-2338 (Text: 877-861-0222)
- ❖ Statewide Sexual Assault Hotline: 855-VOICES4 855-864-2374 (Text: 866-238-1454)

Any victim has a right for their privacy to be respected as much as possible. At times, it may be necessary for Westwinds Church to share certain information in order to safeguard other vulnerable persons and allow for any other potential victims to come forward.

The Safeguarding Team shall coordinate further appropriate response including but not limited to:

- ❖ Ensuring all potential crimes against children have been reported to appropriate authorities according to the policy above
- ❖ Taking any further action for the protection of vulnerable persons
- ❖ 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
- ❖ Ongoing, appropriate care for the victim(s) including helping them connect with professional trauma informed care if desired
- ❖ When appropriate, with careful attention to protecting the privacy of any victims, offering public support and/or opposing harmful narratives toward victims
- ❖ Provide ongoing review of the situation, including regular check-ins with the victim, and maintain appropriate contact with the alleged offender during any investigation or administrative leave to ensure boundaries are upheld, prevent retaliation or narrative control, and limit access to vulnerable individuals.
- ❖ Caring for others in the church and coordinating with outside resources as needed

- ❖ Documenting relevant actions and information related to the case
- ❖ Reaching out to qualified experts with questions or when an Independent Consultation or Investigation is appropriate

Independent Consultation and Investigation

When an independent investigation does not come through law enforcement or relevant Child or Adult Protective Services, there are several scenarios when it is strongly advisable that Westwinds Church pursue independent consultation or investigation in response to allegations of abuse or harassment, such as:

- ❖ Authorities decline to investigate a report of abuse even though there is evidence of wrongdoing
- ❖ An adult victim is not ready to report allegations of a criminal nature to the authorities
- ❖ The alleged offender is not charged with criminal wrongdoing by the authorities after an investigation, but sufficient concerns remain whether the alleged offender engaged in wrongful conduct that may disqualify him/her from continued participation in the organization
- ❖ There is a serious pattern of misconduct denied by the alleged perpetrator
- ❖ The alleged offender is a member of executive leadership or the Safeguarding Team
- ❖ The alleged victim(s) requests an investigation or there is a strong belief that there may be other victims
- ❖ The organization wants to investigate and assess how it responded to the allegations of abuse in order to better understand how it could have responded more effectively and to improve for the future

The Safeguarding Team will make a recommendation to the Elders regarding the wisdom of independent consultation or investigation. When the Elders decline to engage an independent consultation or investigation, they, along with the Safeguarding Team, shall document all related information along with an account of their decision.

When the Elders decide to engage an independent investigation, it must be conducted by an organization or persons completely independent of Westwinds Church and experienced in investigating cases of the specific form(s) of abuse or misconduct in view. The organization or persons should utilize a multidisciplinary team of trained investigators (examples can include current or past law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and/or mental health experts) who are trained in best practice investigative standards, have significant experience investigating a wide range of misconduct and/or abuse cases, and utilize trauma-informed practices in their investigations.

Upon completion of an investigation, the independent investigating body will deliver to the Elders a report that will consist of its investigative findings, analysis, and recommendations. Any personnel decisions will be made in view of the recommendations of the report, by the Elders, according to the values and employment practices of our organization and in communication with the Safeguarding Team.

Those who use any position of power to abuse as defined by this policy shall never again serve in any formal role within Westwinds Church.

Retaliation

Westwinds Church prohibits any form of retaliation against any individual or group who are involved in any activity in this policy, such as reporting concerns or potential evidence, or cooperating in a criminal or independent investigation. Retaliation can take many forms, including, but not limited to, shunning, violence, threats, or intimidation that would discourage some persons from engaging in activity required or encouraged by this policy. Actions in response to a good faith report or response under this policy are considered retaliatory if they could reasonably have an adverse effect on the wellbeing of an individual or if they impact their ability to fully participate in church activities, including compliance with this policy. Reports, concerns, or questions about retaliation should be immediately reported to the Safeguarding Team or a member of the Elders. All individuals and groups of individuals engaging in retaliation and will be held accountable under this policy.

Caring for Survivors

Survivors should have agency over sharing their story. When survivors choose to do so, they need our utmost support. The Safeguarding Team will coordinate with the Pastors and Elders to ensure there is a care plan in place for any survivors of abuse. The plan will prioritize the needs and choices of the survivor.

This support will include:

- ❖ 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
- ❖ Asking if there is anything practical the church can do

Our support will recognize our limitations and will not offer therapeutic, legal, or other professional advice, but will focus on personal support and empowerment.

We will be careful to avoid causing further harm, and under no circumstances - even when the abuse is alleged and not proven - will we:

- ❖ Place any portion of blame for the abuse on the victim
- ❖ Probe for intimate details of the abuse
- ❖ Express disbelief
- ❖ Attempt to silence the victim
- ❖ Encourage noncompliance with the law
- ❖ Express support for the perpetrator
- ❖ Urge meeting with, reconciliation with, or forgiveness of the perpetrator

Receiving an abuse disclosure is an honor, not a burden; it is a sign of trust. Survivors often choose to disclose their abuse years, even decades, after it occurred. Westwinds Church encourages anyone receiving an adult's abuse disclosure to be guided by the following responses:

DO Say

Thank you for telling me.

I believe you.

I'm so sorry this happened to you.
How can I help?

Take as much time as you need.

I am here.

The following should only be said if the victim indicates these concerns are on his/her mind.

It is okay to be angry.

It's understandable you're feeling that way.

Your reaction is not an uncommon response.

You're not going crazy. These are normal responses following abuse.

It wasn't your fault.

DON'T Say

Why are you telling me this?

Why didn't you _____
(run/scream/stop him etc.)

What do you mean when you say he abused you? What exactly did he do?

You need to forgive and move on.

It'll take some time, but you'll get over it.

It was so long ago, why are you still letting your abuser win by hanging on to it? Let it go.

Try to be strong.

Out of tragedies good things happen.

You're lucky that _____ didn't happen.

I know how you feel.

Perhaps you misunderstood...

Policy on Known Offenders

Westwinds Church is committed to the safety of all people, especially children and vulnerable individuals, while also seeking to respond with clarity, honesty, and appropriate care toward those with a history of abusive behavior. As part of our safeguarding practices, all individuals engaging with our church will be made aware of this policy and invited to voluntarily disclose any history of abuse, allegations, or related concerns. Our expectation is that such disclosure leads to a conversation about next steps, allowing the individual to understand the process and decide whether they are willing to participate.

Any known, admitted, or convicted offender who desires connection with our church must be willing to enter a structured process designed to assess their situation, evidence of repentance, and appropriate safeguards. Participation in this process requires a willingness to accept any boundaries, accountability measures, or restrictions determined by church leadership in consultation with qualified experts. Individuals who are unwilling to engage this process or who

demonstrate ongoing patterns of deception, minimization, or lack of repentance will not be permitted to participate in the life of the church.

The Safeguarding Team, in coordination with the Elders and with input from appropriate experts, will guide this process, which may include interviews with the individual and relevant parties, review of available records, and assessment of behavior patterns and repentance. If appropriate, a formal plan will be established outlining levels of participation, supervision, and accountability, both on and off church property.

The safety and well-being of victims will always take priority. No assessment process will begin if a victim of the offender is actively part of the church community, ensuring that all individuals are free to participate in church life without fear or harm.

Individuals who have abused children are not permitted to serve with minors, have access to minors in any church setting, or hold positions of power or trust. Additional restrictions may apply based on the nature of the offense and the outcome of the assessment process. In some cases, participation in church life may be limited or not permitted.

Any approved participation will require a clearly defined accountability plan, which may include supervision, restricted access, and communication with appropriate parties (such as family members, counselors, or legal authorities). These plans will be reviewed regularly and at least annually, with input from safeguarding leaders and outside experts as needed. Those responsible for providing care or oversight will receive appropriate training.

At all times, our goal is to uphold a safe environment while ensuring that any engagement is marked by transparency, accountability, and a commitment to the well-being of the entire church community.

Appendix I - Potential Indicators of Child Abuse

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse if a child has:

- ❖ Torn, stained, or bloody underclothing
- ❖ Difficulty, pain or blood in the genital area when walking, sitting, or using the bathroom
- ❖ Discharge from the penis or vagina
- ❖ Injuries (e.g., bruises, tearing, bleeding), itching, or swelling in the genital, vaginal, or anal area
- ❖ Urinary tract infections, yeast infections, sexually transmitted diseases
- ❖ Pregnancy

It is atypical for children to engage in the following sexual behaviors:

- ❖ Placing mouth on sex part
- ❖ Asking others to engage in sexual acts
- ❖ Trying to have intercourse or imitating intercourse
- ❖ Undressing others, especially if done forcefully
- ❖ Imitating sexual positions with dolls

- ❖ Inserting an object into vagina or anus, especially if child continues to do so despite pain
- ❖ Manually stimulating or having oral or genital contact with pets
- ❖ Making sexual sounds
- ❖ Inserting tongue in mouth when kissing

Consider the possibility of physical abuse if you notice:

- ❖ Frequent injuries of any kind (e.g., bruises, cuts, fractures, burns)
- ❖ Especially if the child is unable to provide an adequate explanation of the cause of injury
- ❖ These injuries may appear in distinctive patterns such as grab marks, human bite marks, cigarette burns, or impressions of other instruments
- ❖ Pay particular attention to injuries that present on both sides of the head or body, as accidental injuries typically only affect one side of the body

Consider the possibility of neglect if a child:

- ❖ Is obviously malnourished, listless, or fatigued
- ❖ Begs, steals, or hoards food or complains frequently of hunger
- ❖ Is consistently dirty or has severe body odor
- ❖ Lacks sufficient clothing for the weather
- ❖ Untreated illness, injuries, health (e.g., unfilled cavities) or serious educational needs
- ❖ Broken or missing eyeglasses, hearing aid, or other necessary aids or equipment
- ❖ Has an untreated need for glasses, dental care, or other medical attention
- ❖ Is inappropriately left unsupervised
- ❖ Abuses alcohol or other drugs

Appendix II - Supporting a Victim of Intimate Partner Violence

These are some practical words of advice if you are in the position to provide support to someone experiencing intimate partner violence. An excellent guide to help you and give you further information is the book *Helping Her Get Free* by Susan Brewster. As with any survivor, communicating belief and support are essential. Pay attention to your words as well as your body language and validate her experience.⁴ Do your very best to avoid any form of victim-blaming or minimizing the abuse. Communicate clearly that there is no excuse for any form of abuse, ever.

Be aware the victim may be being monitored

Many abusers closely monitor their spouse when they are around others who could intervene. Pay attention to whether their husband/wife is there. Ask if this is a good time to talk. Ask what time is a good time to talk or text. You may want to come up with a code to signal it is ok to talk or text. Help them think about taking precautions like deleting texts.

Check in regularly if possible

⁴ In this section we are using she/her pronouns for a survivor. Most victims of intimate partner violence are female, but there are victims who are male.

Those who are experiencing abuse in a relationship need someone who can serve as a contrast to the demeaning treatment in the abuse. It helps a survivor realize that there are others who care deeply and can help them. You may want to ask how often it would be helpful to check in. Provide choices and respect their agency.

Ask about their safety

The first concern for someone experiencing abuse is always safety. It is important that a survivor of abuse makes a safety plan.⁵ A local domestic violence shelter will often be able to help with this or you can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline (see under Resources above). Advocates like these can also help a survivor assess the risk of violence given their circumstances. We should not take on this role without training, however, it is a good idea to ask how safe they feel at home right now. You can say, “On a scale of 1 to 3 with 1 being things aren’t great but I feel safe, and 3 being I am afraid for my life, how safe would you say you feel right now?” If they answer 2 or 3 then it is urgent to try to connect them with local domestic violence resources to address safety.

Offer to connect them with resources

Some survivors may not be aware of resources that can help them. Some may be reluctant to access resources. You can help ease the discomfort of reaching out for help. It is important to know which county or counties a local domestic violence shelter serves and what types of services they offer. You can look online or call them. If possible, go and see it for yourself. It is important when you recommend a resource that that resource is able to serve that survivor. If possible, offer to call with the person or help them get there in person. Marriage counseling is not appropriate when abuse is suspected.⁶ Individual counseling or therapy is important, and it is highly recommended that for the survivor therapy/counseling is with a licensed professional who has extensive experience or specializes in helping survivors of abuse.

Respect their agency in making decisions even if you disagree

Abusers take away the agency to make choices from a survivor. It is critical that we empower and respect the agency of a survivor. If we start to direct the life of a survivor, even though our intentions are not abusive, this is not healthy. Ignoring the problem is one extreme, but the opposite error is to think that we can be someone’s rescuer if we just take on the role of directing their life. Experts understand that survivors who leave abuse will almost always return unless it is their decision to leave and seek safety. Respecting agency also means protecting their privacy with their story. It is important to ask permission before speaking with others about their situation.

⁵ From the National Domestic Violence Hotline (<https://www.thehotline.org/what-is-a-safety-plan/>): “**A safety plan is a personalized, practical plan to improve your safety while experiencing abuse, preparing to leave an abusive situation, or after you leave.** This plan includes vital information tailored to your unique situation and will help you prepare for and respond to different scenarios, including telling your friends and family about your situation, coping with emotions, and various resources suited to your individual circumstances.” You may call this hotline 24/7 to have a highly-trained advocate help you create a personalized safety plan - 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). You can also text START to 88788.

⁶ Among many other reasons, marriage counseling typically carries the assumption that any issues are mutual, but that is not the case with abuse. It also typically assumes that both individuals are coming in good faith, and this helps abusers continue to manipulate and blame others. Many survivors will not feel safe to be honest in marriage counseling, knowing they may pay a price later through retaliation.

Confront denial and minimizing firmly but gently

Some survivors have spent so many years immersed in the abuse that they have adopted the perspective of the abuser over time. It is important that you are prepared that some survivors blame themselves, minimize the abuse, or offer excuses for their partner. It is good to counter this reality, but also to show you understand that it is impossible to live and breathe this twisted reality for years without having it warp your perspective.

Educate yourself on intimate partner violence and share what you learn⁷

It is often essential for a survivor to learn more about the reality of intimate partner violence as an empowering step toward getting free from abuse. Educate yourself and share what you are learning as appropriate. It may well make the difference. Share that abuse is calculated behavior by an abuser. Share about the Wheel of Power and Control (see above). Share that abusers rarely stop without significant intervention and accountability. Share about the cycle of abuse. Share about the impacts of abuse. Share that Jesus came to set people free from abuse.

Ask how you can help

Listen carefully to what they are dealing with and what they need. Try to do what you can. Offer to show up with them to an appointment or in court or in other ways. Remember your limits and try to engage other resources as needed with their permission.

Count the cost of helping

It is also important not to underestimate the danger an abuser may pose when we help a survivor. Advocates are trained to assess risk and it is not usually advisable to try to take on that role ourselves. However, it is good for us to know a few basics. The highest risk to a survivor for homicide, statistically speaking, is when they are trying to leave their abuser. For this reason, it is not advisable to have the survivor stay at your house if there is any risk of physical violence. A shelter or hotel is usually a better option. Trained advocates are the best options for assessing risk, but it is ok to ask if their partner has ever threatened to kill them, if their abuser has access to a weapon, or if they have ever been physically violent. All of these would indicate significant risk.

Practice self care

Care for yourself so you can offer help in a sustained way. When we help someone in abuse, there is an impact in our life from that trauma. Experts call this secondary traumatic stress or vicarious trauma. Self care is essential when we are helping in a situation that leads to high levels of secondary traumatic stress.

Further resources

Here are some previously mentioned and further resources:

- ❖ *Why Does He Do That?* by Lundy Bancroft (Berkley Books, 2002)
- ❖ *Helping Her Get Free* by Susan Brewster (Seal Press, 2006)
- ❖ *Taking It Seriously: A Faith Leader's Guide to Domestic Violence* by Geneece Goertzen (Cascade Books, 2024)

⁷ See the list of recommended resources below.

- ❖ *Is It My Fault? Hope and Healing for those Suffering Domestic Violence* by Justin Holcomb & Lindsey Holcomb, with Elyse M. Fitzpatrick (Moody Publishers, 2014)
- ❖ The Duluth Model Wheel of Power and Control: <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/PowerandControl.pdf>
- ❖ *Keeping the Faith: Guidance for Christian Women Facing Abuse* by Marie M. Fortune (Harper One, 1987)
- ❖ *No Place for Abuse: Biblical and Practical Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence* by Catherine Clark Kroeger and Nancy Nason-Clark (InterVarsity Press, 2010)
- ❖ *Refuge from Abuse: Healing and Hope for Abused Christian Women* by Nancy Nason-Clark and Catherine Clark Kroeger (InterVarsity Press, 2004)
- ❖ *The Verbally Abusive Relationship: How to Recognize It and How to Respond* by Patricia Evans (Adams Media, 2010)
- ❖ *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence: Understanding Challenges and Proposing Solutions* by Nancy Nason-Clark, Barbara Fisher-Townsend, Catherine Holtmann, and Stephen McMullin (Oxford, 2018)
- ❖ *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church's Response* by Pamela Cooper-White (Fortress Press, 2012)