



# CONGREGATIONAL ABUSE PREVENTION AND AWARENESS GUIDE

APRIL 2024



# CONTENTS

|                                                  |    |
|--------------------------------------------------|----|
| OVERVIEW                                         | 4  |
| MISCONDUCT INVOLVING A LEADER                    | 6  |
| HEALTHY BEHAVIORS AT HNW                         | 8  |
| REPORTING SUSPECTED ABUSE                        | 10 |
| WHEN ABUSE OCCURS OUTSIDE THE CHURCH ENVIRONMENT | 12 |
| WHAT IS ABUSE                                    | 13 |
| ABUSE AND THE BIBLE                              | 13 |
| COMMONS DYNAMICS OF ABUSE                        | 13 |
| DEFINITIONS OF ABUSE                             | 14 |
| HELP FOR SURVIVORS OF ABUSE                      | 18 |
| RESPONDING TO A DISCLOSURE OF                    |    |
| ABUSE BY AN ADULT                                | 19 |
| APPENDIX (RESOURCES)                             | 20 |

# OVERVIEW

*At Houston Northwest Church (HNW) we are deeply committed to honoring Jesus in every aspect of our mission. We believe HNW should be a place of safety and respect for all, free of abuse or harassment in any form. This guide is intended to help forward that goal within our church community.*

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This guide will cover several topics meant to shed light on expectations of behavior for various groups of adults within HNW. The first group is clergy (pastors and elders), staff, and volunteer leaders. A second group is adult attenders and members of HNW. This guide will outline a reporting process if someone suspects that a violation of this policy has occurred. At the end of this guide are tools and resources for those dealing with abuse in their personal lives, or for people who have others in their lives who are or have struggled with abuse.

The leadership of HNW highly regards the God given dignity of each individual and believes that we are all made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). It is our sincere desire to foster an atmosphere that provides dignity and safety for each person. We know there are those within our congregation who experience abuse currently, or who have abuse in their past. It is our desire to provide a place where people feel safe to tell their story and experiences; where the stigma of abuse is washed away and replaced with healing. It is our goal for members and attenders of HNW to understand that abuse is an all-too-common reality and it will take all of us working together to strengthen a culture of safety. Abuse, in any form, is contrary to what Jesus calls His people to do.

It is our goal to equip our congregation to prevent harassment and abuse when possible, and to advocate for those who are survivors. We know that no policy can be all inclusive and cover every situation, but it is our prayer that this will guide behavior and attitudes and foster an open and healthy dialogue within our congregation.

# MISCONDUCT INVOLVING A LEADER

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While it is always our prayer that misconduct on the part of a Pastor, Elder, staff member, or ministry leader does not happen, we cannot avoid speaking about and preparing for that possibility. Abuse can happen anywhere and at any church. HNW holds all staff, Elders and volunteer ministry leaders to an extremely high expectation of integrity in all matters, both personal and ministry related. In the event that one of these leaders at HNW is involved with inappropriate behavior towards a church member under their care, or another staff member, this section will outline the procedure that HNW will follow if such a situation comes to our attention.

The legal definition of sexual harassment by the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when:

1. Submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment;
2. Submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual;
3. Such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment.”

Beyond the legal definition, harassment, sexual or otherwise, can occur in a faith community when the people are not employees of the church. In accord with our values, sexual harassment is not restricted to what is defined as such under the law, whether civil or criminal.

The next section of this guide will address harassment between non-leader congregants at HNW. We consider any unwanted sexualized behavior or sexualized behavior within a power differential to be a serious form of harassment. This includes unwanted touch or communication, other unwanted sexual attention, or any behavior that objectifies or degrades another.

Abuse in general occurs when a person in a position of power and/or trust (pastor, elder, staff leader, boss, mentor, supervisor, etc) uses that position to exploit or violate another person. One specific form of abuse is spiritual abuse. Spiritual abuse is defined as a form of emotional abuse, meaning a pattern of coercive, domineering, or abusive behaviors using God, the Bible, religion, spirituality or spiritual authority, usually by a person who holds power and trust. An adult under the authority, care, or mentorship of a leader cannot consent to sexual activity. Even when both parties 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. Texas has instituted laws identifying clergy sexual abuse as a crime.

# HEALTHY BEHAVIORS AT HNW

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The following boundaries are simply how we will live out Jesus' words to love our neighbor as ourself and love one another as Jesus loves us (Mark 12:31; John 13:34). At all times our church upholds the following standards of respect and safety for all in our fellowship. This includes any interaction whether in-person or online. Pastors, Elders, staff, and volunteer leaders are especially responsible to uphold these boundaries and set an example for all. These expectations are for all adults within our congregation as well as any staff members. (For appropriate behavior towards minors, please see our Child Protection Policy.)

## PHYSICAL CONDUCT

- In order to be healthy, touch must always be welcomed by the other person. Do not assume it is welcomed.
- Touch within a significant peer differential should be observable to others.
- Be considerate of others and give them appropriate space; be aware of body language.
- Stay in visible and accountable spaces.

## VERBAL CONDUCT

- Determine to use words that convey respect that is always due to others.
- Avoid language that belittles, threatens, or objectifies.
- Avoid sexual comments, stories, and jokes.
- Avoid repeated and unwanted social invitations for dates or physical intimacy.
- Avoid condescending remarks.
- Avoid volunteering inappropriately intimate information or asking someone to reveal intimate details or personal information when the person is uncomfortable doing so.

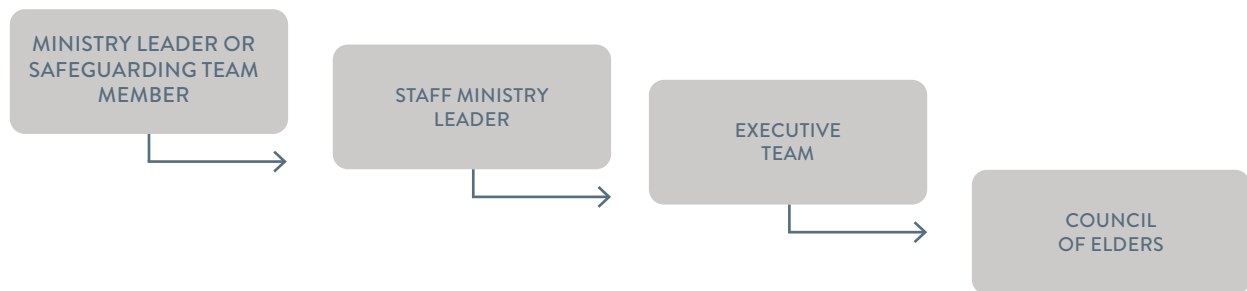
## NON-VERBAL CONDUCT

- Do not display sexually explicit or suggestive material.
- Avoid sexually suggestive gestures.
- Avoid leering.

# REPORTING SUSPECTED ABUSE

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While it can be a difficult thing to do, we encourage congregants at HNW to report suspected inappropriate behavior. If that misconduct involves a person to whom the report is to be given, the reporter should report to the next higher level. If it involves someone on the Executive Team, please report directly to the Council of Elders. The current list of Elders can be found on the HNW website under “Meet the Team”. The following is a flow-chart to reference when determining to whom you should report:



IF ANYONE HAS KNOWLEDGE OF ANY POTENTIAL ABUSE OR HARASSMENT BY SOMEONE ON STAFF OR IN A VOLUNTEER ROLE, PLEASE REPORT THAT SITUATION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. THE INFORMATION WILL BE TREATED WITH GREAT DISCRETION, BUT THIS INFORMATION MAY IMPACT HNW'S ABILITY TO PROTECT OTHERS IN OUR COMMUNITY.

HNW has created a Safeguarding Team which consists of the Family Minister, the Director of Counseling, and three or more congregation members. The names of the Safeguarding Team will be available on the HNW website for reference; at anytime a Safeguarding Team member can receive an initial report and then take the report to the Executive Team. Once the report reaches the Executive Team, the initial reporter will be contacted and updated on the steps that have thus far been taken and the next steps to be taken. The Executive Team, in conjunction with the Elders, will investigate and determine an outcome based on our By-Laws, specifically Article XIV, Section 1. Discipline. This section states the following:

(a) It shall be the practice of this church to emphasize to its members that every reasonable measure will be taken to assist any troubled member. The Council of Elders, church staff, and or deacons are available for counsel and guidance. Should a member dishonor the name of our Lord Jesus Christ such that it negatively affects the welfare of the church, the Council of Elders will take every reasonable measure to resolve the problem in accordance with scripture (Matthew 18:15-17 and Galatians 6:1-2). The Council of Elders will also be responsible for any decision to exclude a member from fellowship and terminate membership.

If it is determined to be necessary for an outside, independent investigation to occur, the Council of Elders along with the Safeguarding Team, will consult with GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment) to begin that process. Upon completion of an investigation, the independent investigating body will deliver to the Executive Team and Council of Elders a report that will consist of its investigative findings, analysis, and recommendations. Any personnel decision will be made in view of recommendations of the report, by the Executive Team and the Council of Elders, according to the values and employment practices of our organization. Those who use any position of power to abuse as defined by this policy shall never again serve in any formal role within our church.

HNW prohibits any form of retaliation against any individual or group who are involved in reporting concerns or providing potential evidence. 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 realization should be immediately reported to the Safeguarding Team or Executive Team. All individuals and groups engaging in retaliation will be held accountable in accordance with the bylaws stated above.

# WHEN ABUSE OCCURS OUTSIDE THE CHURCH ENVIRONMENT

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## WHAT IS ABUSE?

Abuse is a destructive sin where someone who holds power and trust exploits or violates someone who is more vulnerable in some way. The power someone holds may be in a position the person holds, or it may be some other form of power. For example, husbands and wives hold tremendous emotional power and trust in a relationship.

Children are vulnerable because they are still developing. There are adults who are vulnerable. Adults who have an intellectual disability are vulnerable. A person who is elderly and is dependent on the care of others is vulnerable. Any of us may have vulnerabilities depending on the circumstances in our lives. One does not necessarily have to be in a position of power to abuse another, just as one does not have to be “vulnerable” to be abused. Anyone can be an abuser and anyone can be abused.

When someone weaponizes power and/or trust to violate or exploit a person using that power and trust, abuse has occurred. The abuse can come in many forms: sexual, physical, emotional, financial, and spiritual are a few. We will detail more about forms of abuse below.

## ABUSE AND THE BIBLE

The Bible speaks in powerful ways about abuse. God speaks in the Bible about protecting those who are especially vulnerable to oppression and injustice - children, orphans, widows, the poor, people with disabilities, etc. Literally hundreds of times in the Bible God calls us to pay attention and protect people who are vulnerable. This reveals that protecting vulnerable people is a priority for God.

Our God hears the cry of the abused. In Psalm 9, we read that God is a strong-hold for the oppressed and never ignores the cry of someone who is oppressed. In Luke 10, when Jesus got to the heart of what it means to love our neighbor, he told a story about religious persons who ignored the cry of a man who was assaulted and abused, and a good Samaritan who stopped, bound up his wounds, and made arrangements for ongoing care.

In Matthew 18:6, Jesus promised severe judgment for anyone who would harm children. In Mark 12:38-40, Jesus condemned the pastors who prayed wonderful prayers, but used their spiritual office and authority and access to see which widows had property they could take. In our modern categories, these passages speak directly to physical abuse, child abuse, clergy abuse, financial abuse, and spiritual abuse. The Psalms and Proverbs are full of condemnations of physical violence, making it clear that Christians are called by God to reject interpersonal violence.

## COMMON DYNAMICS OF ABUSE

In Matthew 7:15, Jesus warned us to beware of one who is like a wolf in sheep's clothing. With this warning, Jesus teaches us what modern researchers of abuse teach as well. Jesus is talking about someone who is known, someone who walks in the front door of the church and everyone expects to be there. Also, this is someone who holds power and trust in the community over people who are more vulnerable, but their intention is to prey upon others and exploit others. How does such a person harm others? Is it by openly declaring their intention to hurt and exploit people? Of course not. They do this by living a double life, by hiding who they really are most of the time to most of the people in the community. This is why Jesus says they are like a wolf in sheep's clothing. This is how most abusers operate in communities, including a church. This is why Jesus calls us as Christians to not only be “innocent as doves” - in other words, do not be like a wolf in any way - but also be “wise as serpents.” (Matthew 10:16) Those who abuse often use various tactics to gain access and isolate potential victims as well as maintain secrecy. These tactics may include threatening, shaming, or some other form of manipulation or deception.

# DEFINITIONS OF ABUSE

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**ABUSE** In general, abuse occurs when a person in a position of power and/or trust (e.g. pastor, staff leader, elder, boss, mentor, supervisor, parent, adult, older child, etc.) uses that position 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** 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.

**NON-CONTACT SEXUAL ACTS** 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; 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 sexual desire or sexually stimulating content toward a person.

**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 in many cases is not a criminal act (see more on harassment below). 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.
- Fondling or unwanted sexual touch.

**INTIMATE PARTNER 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** When a person holding power and trust, uses pattern of controlling and domineering 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. 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** 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.

# DEFINITIONS OF ABUSE CONT.

# DEFINITIONS OF ABUSE

**SPIRITUAL ABUSE** a form of emotional abuse, meaning a pattern of coercive, domineering, or abusive behaviors using God, the Bible, religion, spirituality, or spiritual authority, usually by a person who holds power and trust.

**STALKING** A pattern of unwanted, fixated and obsessive behavior which is intrusive and causes fear of violence, alarm, or distress. Stalking is a terrifying reality and is now recognized as a crime in all fifty states.

- Making unwanted phone calls/texts or sending unwanted messages or emails.
- Following or spying on the victim.
- Showing up or waiting at places without a legitimate reason.
- Leaving 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.

**CONSENT** considered 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 equal consent. Physical submission by the victim - such as “freezing” or “fawning” in fear - does not equal consent. Consent also implies the ability to say no in a mutual relationship: Children, certain vulnerable adults (based on functioning related to factors such as intellectual disabilities, age, mental health, or other vulnerabilities), 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.

# HELP FOR SURVIVORS OF ABUSE

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Violence in the home is a major contributor to health and mental health issues such as depression, post-traumatic stress and other anxiety disorders, sleep difficulties, drug use, eating disorders, and suicide attempts. Women suffering intimate partner violence suffer social and economic costs of violence; isolation, inability to work, loss of wages, lack of participation in regular activities, and limited ability to care for themselves and their children. Studies show that children in a violent home suffer the same traumatic impacts even if they are not directly abused.

**RESPONDING TO A DISCLOSURE OF ABUSE BY AN ADULT** Survivors should have agency over when and with whom they share their story. When survivors choose to do so, they need our utmost support. When you are receiving a disclosure of abuse, it is critical to stay calm and focus on being present. You are not expected to “fix” the situation; that is not how abuse works. Pay attention to your body language and try to show you are listening and you are there for them in this hard conversation.

## ALL OF US CAN RESPOND WITH SIMPLE WORDS OF BELIEF AND SUPPORT

- “I am so sorry.”
- “That should not have happened to you.”
- “I believe you.”
- “This is not your fault.”

## DO NOT USE WORDS THAT BLAME, INTERROGATE, OR MAY SEEM DISMISSIVE, SUCH AS:

- “He/she doesn’t seem like a person who would do that.”
- “Why are you talking about this now?”
- “Why were you there?”
- “You need to trust God and move on.”

Remember your role in this moment. You have been chosen as a trusted person to receive this hard story. A survivor has chosen to seek validation, support, and/or help. You are not an investigator. You are not a judge or jury. Survivors know that if there is going to be formal accountability in a courtroom, there will have to be some formal process. That may or may not come later, but for now, stay present and remember your role is to respond with belief, validation, and support.

Ask if there is anything you can do for them. Ask if you can help them access some of the resources attached to this guide in the Appendix. Ask their permission if you think it is important to talk to someone else about their story. Protect their privacy. Respect their agency in reporting criminal abuse, but offer to support them. It is important that you recognize your limits and that you do not try to take on the role that should be filled by other be it medical, legal, law enforcement, social services, or therapeutic. Ask if they feel safe and help them access resources to help establish safety if they are willing. Do not raise the issue of forgiveness. Let that process happen later and in cooperation with a counselor trained in trauma. It is often re-traumatizing for a survivor to be pushed into talking about forgiveness too soon.

It is important to note the differences involved with mandatory reporting issues in Texas. There is no mandatory reporting of a disclosure of abuse between two adults; in fact, it is never advised to take agency away from a survivor by reporting abuse without their knowledge and consent. Let them decide when that will happen. You can put the person in harm’s way if you report the abuse yourself. However, if there exists the possibility that a minor, a vulnerable person, or an elder person is being abused or neglected, a report must be made to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. You can make a report by calling [1-800-252-5400](tel:1-800-252-5400), or by going online at [www.txabusehotline.org](http://www.txabusehotline.org). If you have a reasonable belief that a child is being abused or neglected, Texas requires you to file a report or be subject to possible criminal charges. If the abuse could involve a vulnerable person, such as an elderly person or someone with intellectual disabilities the contact information is the same as reporting for a minor.

# APPENDIX A

## RESOURCES

# RESOURCES OUTSIDE THE CHURCH

## **HARRIS COUNTY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COORDINATING COUNCIL**

[www.hcdvcc.org](http://www.hcdvcc.org)

## **AID TO VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE (AVDA)**

[www.avda.org](http://www.avda.org)

(713) 715-6935

1001 Texas Ave, Suite 600 Houston, Tx 77002

## **HOUSTON AREA WOMEN'S CENTER**

[www.hawc.org](http://www.hawc.org)

1010 Waugh Dr. Houston, Texas 77019

Domestic Violence Hotline 713-528-2121

Sexual Assault Hotline 713-528-7273

National Sexual Assault Hotline 1-800-656-4673

National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-7233

## **NORTHWEST ASSISTANCE MINISTRIES (NAM)**

[www.namonline.org](http://www.namonline.org)

1555 Kuykendahl Rd. Houston, Texas 77090

281-885-4555

## **MONTGOMERY COUNTY WOMEN'S CENTER (MCWC)**

[www.mcwc.org](http://www.mcwc.org)

936-441-4044

# APPENDIX A

## RESOURCES CONT.

# COUNSELING RESOURCES

## **SHIELD BEARER (MULTIPLE SITES)**

[www.shieldbearer.org](http://www.shieldbearer.org)

281-894-7222

## **FAMILY TIME CRISIS & COUNSELING CENTER**

[www.familytimecc.org](http://www.familytimecc.org)

281-446-2615

## **CY-HOPE COUNSELING**

[www.cy-hopecounseling.org](http://www.cy-hopecounseling.org)

12715 Telge Rd. Cypress, Tx 77429

713-466-1360

## **HOUSTON NORTHWEST CHURCH**

[www.hnw.org/care-recovery](http://www.hnw.org/care-recovery)

281-720-0032

HNW Provides biblical counseling at no charge for both church members and the community at large. This option should not be used in an emergency as the phone is only manned during church operational hours Monday - Thursday. If this is an emergency situation please refer to the crisis hotlines above. For additional information or to schedule an appointment, call 281-720-0032 Monday-Thursday 8:30-4:30.

# MEDICAL ASSISTANCE & LAW ENFORCEMENT

If you, or someone else, need immediate assistance, please call 911.

If it is a non-emergency, please call the Harris County Sheriff's office at 713-221-6000.

A family doctor is always a good source to go to in a non-emergency situation.

Any local emergency room will receive you and call the authorities on your behalf as well as help you with resources after a sexual assault, or a physical assault.

# HOUSTON NORTHWEST CHURCH

HNW.org  
281.469.3389 1991

State Hwy 249 Houston, TX 77070