

St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, Denton, Texas

Policies for the Protection of Children, Youth & At-risk Adults

Introduction

The ethical conduct of all persons who minister in the name of Jesus Christ is of vital importance to this church because through these representatives an understanding of God and the Gospels' good news is conveyed. It is the policy of this church, therefore, that all church members, church officers, pastors, teaching elders, ruling elders, deacons, employees and volunteers working in, with and for this church are to maintain the integrity of ministerial, employment, and professional relationships at all times. Abusive conduct in any form violates these relationships and is never permissible or acceptable. It is incumbent upon the church, if allegations of abuse arise, to respond promptly, but with compassion and justice toward those involved.

The guidance in this handbook seeks to minimize the risk of any form of abuse or harassment, whether physical, mental, or sexual, of children, youth, or at-risk adults by any of the staff, employees, teachers, members, parents, or volunteers of this church while on church property or while engaged in church activities or programs away from church property. It prescribes conditions for church activities and programs intended to help protect children, youth, and at-risk adults from abuse; provides procedures to follow should it become necessary to report an incidence of suspected abuse; and addresses how the church shall respond to a report of suspected abuse. The handbook is complemented by the church's *Policy and Procedures Regarding Allegations of Sexual Misconduct*, the policy governing Unlawful Harassment contained in the church's *Personnel Manual*, and the policy governing church-member behavioral offenses titled *Expectations of Members*. The four policies together constitute the church's efforts to prevent/address abuse within its ministries.

The handbook requires that all staff and volunteers who work with children, youth, or at-risk adults complete a Volunteer/Employee Information form and provide the necessary data to perform a background check each year. The intent of this policy is not to place an undue burden on the church's staff and volunteers, but to ensure that all who enter the doors of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church may feel confident that they enter a safe and nurturing environment.

Definitions

The following terms and their definitions are used in this policy manual as follows. **Child** and **children** refer to persons from the ages of birth to 11 years, and/or those before their completion of 5th grade/elementary school. The term **youth** refers to persons who are 11 years+ and who are currently enrolled in grades 6-12 and/or participating in the program or event as a student. **Persons with disabilities** refers to adults (persons who are over 18 years of age) with mental, physical, intellectual, or developmental disabilities that substantially impair their ability to provide adequately for their own care or protection. The term **at-risk adult** refers to persons with disabilities or emotionally vulnerable persons receiving pastoral care or care from church members in a church-sanctioned ministry such as Stephen Ministry or Grief Counseling.

Conditions for Programs and Activities for Children, Youth, and At-risk Adults

All church activities and programs involving children, youth and at-risk adults, regardless of location, will be subject to the following conditions:

1. At least two adults shall be assigned to supervise or lead any church-sponsored activity involving children or youth. It is preferred, but not mandatory, that the two adult supervisors be unrelated to one another. Children or youth programs or activities that do not include adequate adult support to comply with the two adult rule are subject to cancellation. Situations are to be avoided in which an individual child is isolated with an individual adult.
2. Staff, employees, teachers, parents, volunteers involved in programs or activities in which they have contact with children, youth, or at-risk adults must complete a Volunteer/Employee Information form and submit the form to the St. Andrew office manager. The office manager will process the information provided for a background check and file the information in a locked filing cabinet. All personal information voluntarily disclosed, or the refusal of any person to participate in a program or activity in lieu of such disclosure requirements, will be considered confidential.
3. Staff, employees, teachers, parents, volunteers involved in programs or activities in which they have contact with children, youth, or at-risk adults shall be fully familiar with this handbook, the church's *Policy and Procedures Regarding Allegations of Sexual Misconduct*, the policy governing Unlawful Harassment contained in the church's *Personnel Manual*, and the policy governing church-member behavioral offenses titled *Expectations of Members*; and receive training in responding to reports of abuse.
4. The church will not tolerate or accept any act or omission described in the section titled Prohibited Acts below.
5. Any alleged violation of the policies set forth in this handbook shall be reported to a **Suspected Abuse Response Person**. The primary Suspected Abuse Response persons are the **Pastor** and **Associate Pastor**, either of whom may individually receive reports of

abuse. If the church's primary Suspected Abuse Response Persons are not reasonably available at the time of a reported abuse report, the following persons, in order, are approved by this church as person authorized to receive and respond to such reports.

1. **Clerk of Session**
2. **Moderator of the Personnel Committee**

The Suspected Abuse Response Persons shall be fully familiar with the policies contained in this handbook, the church's *Policy and Procedures Regarding Allegations of Sexual Misconduct*, the policy governing Unlawful Harassment contained in the church's *Personnel Manual*, and the policy governing church-member behavioral offenses titled *Expectations of Members*; and receive training in responding to reports of abuse. Such training for Suspected Abuse Response persons will include becoming familiar with the legal, administrative, secular, and ecclesiastical policies and procedures for dealing with abuse reports.

Background Checks

Background and reference checks shall be submitted to and the results reviewed by the St. Andrew office manager. After initial review, if the office manager determines that further review is advisable, the office manager shall consult with the Pastor. The office manager and/or Pastor may also consult with the relevant program staff should they deem doing so appropriate. Whether disclosed voluntarily or as a result of the background check, the following offenses will automatically disqualify a person from participating in the leadership or sponsorship of any children's or youth activity or program, or ministry to at-risk adults:

Any current indictment alleging the offense of, or any conviction for: violent crime (e.g., assault, aggravated assault, rape, aggravated sexual assault); sexual, physical, or mental abuse in any form of a child or at-risk adult; neglect in any form of a child or at-risk adult; or exploitation of a child or at-risk adult.

All other convictions or charges for crimes not listed above will be reviewed by the St. Andrew office manager. If an applicant disputes information that appears in his or her criminal history transcript, he or she may appeal through the Texas Department of Public Safety or other appropriate governmental agency.

Prohibited Acts

The following acts and omissions are prohibited under this policy and will not be tolerated or accepted during any church activity or program. An observation or personal knowledge of such violations must be immediately reported to a Suspected Abuse Response Person after the safety of the child, children, youth, or at-risk adult involved has been assured.

1. Any display or demonstration of sexual activity, abuse, insinuation of abuse, or evidence of abusive conduct toward a child, children, youth or at-risk adult.
2. Sexual advances or sexual activity of any kind between any adult and a child, children, youth, or at-risk adult.
3. Infliction of physically abusive behavior or bodily injury to a child, children, youth, or at-risk adult.
4. Physical neglect of a child, children, youth, or at-risk adult, including failure to provide adequate supervision during church activities or programs.
5. Mental or emotional injury to a child, youth, or at-risk adult.
6. Possession of obscene or pornographic materials.
7. Possession of, advocating the use of, or being under the influence of any illegal drug.
8. Consumption of or being under the influence of alcohol.

Social Media & Digital Safety

We live in a digital age, and we have the opportunity to use social media to enhance our ministry. Social media and digital communication can keep the conversation going and cultivate positive relationships. These tools can be used to reach people in ways physical space cannot. As we seek to use social media and digital communication, we must do so recognizing the possible danger it poses. When using social media in ministry we need to be intentional and careful. We approach the use of social media and digital communication with the understanding that:

- The digital world is not private and posted content can be stolen and used in ways not intended by the originating person or organization.
- The digital world is at risk for abuse.
- The digital world is rapidly evolving creating the challenge of identifying and proactively addressing areas of potential risk in the digital world.
- These policies are intended to be applied to any digital communication and social media platform.

Digital Communication and Social Media Policies

- All policies of the physical world will apply to the digital world, including the “Two Adult Rule”.
- During a video call involving adults and youth/children, if the “Two Adult Rule” cannot be followed the call must be recorded on a St. Andrew Zoom account.
- Additional Policies pertaining to social media and digital communications:
 - Digital communications, as much as possible, should include the entire group.
 - When private communication needs to take place outside of standing programming information, parents, guardians or another responsible adult need to be informed the conversation is happening. Confidentiality must be maintained unless the need to report arises.

- Platforms that automatically delete content should not be used for ministry.
- Communications and interactions should be public and not deleted.
- Policy regarding sharing photos or images will be followed. Permission to post photos must be obtained.
- Youth and children will not be identified by the adult posting. Youth may self-tag and share the post.

Protection of Youth

This section is intended to clearly state the policies of St. Andrew regarding the appropriate conduct for staff and volunteers who work with the youth of this congregation. For the purposes of this section, “youth” is defined as anyone of middle school or high school age who is participating in any church sponsored activity as a member of the youth program.

Adults working with youth should always treat youth with respect and fairness without regard to race, age, gender, sexual orientation, or religion.

The following behaviors are prohibited at all times:

- Private displays of affection.
- Use of profanity or telling off-color jokes.
- Discussion of personal sexual encounters.
- Dating or becoming romantically involved with youth.
- Having secrets with youth.
- Commenting on bodies specifically or body types in general.
- Unapproved electronic or social media communication.

Regarding physical interactions with youth, the following behaviors are considered appropriate:

- Side hugs or shoulder to shoulder hugs
- Pats on the back or shoulder
- Handshakes and high fives
- Arms around shoulders
- Holding hands with the group

The following behaviors are considered inappropriate:

- Full-frontal hugs lasting longer than a few seconds
- Kisses
- Sitting on laps
- Wrestling, tickling, or piggyback rides
- Massage
- Any form of physical contact that is unwanted by the youth

All verbal interactions should be respectful including but not limited to positive reinforcement, encouragement, and praise. Name calling, shaming, belittling and derogatory remarks are not appropriate.

Out of program contact:

The Youth Committee recommends that adults do not initiate out of program contact with individual youth that is not directly related to youth programming.

Reporting a Violation

Staff, employees, teachers, parents, and volunteers are responsible for reporting any questionable circumstances, observation, act, omission, or situation thought to be in violation of this policy. All questions or concerns of any suspected abusive behavior or harassment shall be directed to a Suspected Abuse Response Person, or, in extenuating circumstances, the Executive Presbyterian of Grace Presbytery.

Steps to Take if a Violation of the Policies Contained in the Handbook Occur:

Observation of a Violation

In the event a member of the staff, employee, teacher, parent, or volunteer observes abusive conduct involving a child, children, youth or at-risk adult during a church-sponsored program or activity, regardless of where the conduct occurs, the person should:

1. Personally secure the safety of the child, children, youth, or at-risk adult. Do not leave the child, children, youth, or at-risk adult alone to report the incident.
2. Report the incident immediately to a Suspected Abuse Response Person upon securing the safety of the child, children, youth, or at-risk-adult.
3. Do not personally confront the alleged violator of the policy.
4. Allow the Pastor or other Suspected Abuse Response Person to provide you with instructions concerning reporting the incident to parents or guardians.
5. Complete a Suspected Abuse Incident Report, being sure to sign and date. Maintain possession and ownership of the report pending any future investigation/proceedings.

Report of a Violation by the Victim

In the event a child, youth, or at-risk adult reports abusive conduct while engaged in a church-sponsored activity or involving the staff, employees, teachers, parents, or volunteers of the church, regardless of where the conduct occurred, the person initially contacted by the child, youth, or at-risk adult should:

1. Listen and not show panic or shock.
2. Tell the child, youth, or at-risk adult that you believe him or her.
3. Reassure the child, youth, or at-risk adult that he or she acted correctly in telling you and that the abuse is not his or her fault.
4. Determine how to keep the child, youth, or at-risk adult safe and protected.
5. After the child, youth, or at-risk adult is safe and protected, contact a Suspected Abuse Response Person and report the suspected abuse.
6. Complete a Suspected Abuse Incident Report, being sure to sign and date. Record verbatim in the report the specific words first spoken by the child, youth, or at-risk adult, and the conduct and demeanor observed as the report was made. Maintain possession and ownership of the report pending any future investigation/proceedings.

Consequences of a Violation

1. Any person accused of committing a Prohibited Act, whether a staff member, employee, church member, parent, or volunteer, shall immediately be suspended from participation in all children's and youth activities and programs of the church, or church-sponsored ministries to at-risk adults. Such suspension shall continue during any investigation by the church, law enforcement agency, or child or adult protection agency.
2. Any person found to have committed a Prohibited Act shall be barred from future participation in any of the church's children's and youth activities and programs, as well as any of the church's ministries to at-risk adults. If the person is a staff member or employee, such conduct may also result in termination of employment.
3. As required by Texas law, all reports of abuse of children, elderly persons, or persons with disabilities shall be forwarded to the State of Texas Department of Family and Protective Services at www.TXAbuseHotline.org (or, **in case of an emergency only**, 1-800-252-5400), and state or local law enforcement authorities. Such reporting must be accomplished in addition to complying with the policies contained in this child, youth, and at-risk adult protection handbook.
4. Failure to report in a timely manner a Prohibited Act to a Suspected Abuse Response Person shall be considered a procedural violation of the policies in this handbook. Such failure will be grounds for termination of employment of a staff member or employee and suspension and dismissal from participation in all children's and youth activities and programs of the church and all ministries to at-risk adults of the church.

Implementing a Response to Reported Abuse

St. Andrew Presbyterian Church will respond to a reported incident of alleged or suspected abuse whether of a child, youth, or at-risk adult, in an effort to protect the victim and any individuals involved in the incident. Two or more of the following persons, as appropriate, shall constitute the response team, except that one member of the team must be the Pastor or Associate Pastor: Pastor, Associate Pastor, Youth Director, Clerk of Session, or Moderator of the Personnel Committee. The responsibilities of the response team may include any number of the following steps depending on the circumstances of the reported abuse:

1. Assure that the accused person has been removed and suspended from duties involving children or at-risk adults pending external and/or internal investigations.
2. Notify the director of the affected program or ministry immediately.
3. Inform the parents or guardians of the alleged victim and respond to their questions and concerns.
4. Retain an attorney experienced or trained in criminal law and the provisions of the Penal Code, Human Resources Code, and Family Code of the State of Texas as they relate to child abuse or the abuse of elderly persons and persons with disabilities and the reporting thereof.
5. Notify the Department of Family and Protective Services and state or local law enforcement authorities immediately if the reported abuse involves a child, elderly person, or person with disabilities.
6. Notify the permanent judicial commission of Grace Presbytery immediately if the accused is a pastor or other teaching elder.
7. Notify the church's insurance carrier of the incident and comply with its investigation, if any.
8. Prepare a written report and send a copy to the Department of Family and Protective Services if the reported abuse involves a child, elderly person, or person with disabilities; and/or to the permanent judicial commission of Grace Presbytery if the accused is a pastor or other teaching elder.
9. As needed when no external investigation takes place, charge session with creating a three-person committee composed of non-staff/non-session members of the church to investigate the matter and make a recommendation to the session as to its resolution. There shall be at least one male and one female on the committee.
10. Provide assistance to the alleged victim and his or her family in obtaining counseling or referral to mental health professionals as needed.
11. Provide assistance to the alleged abuser and his or her family in obtaining counseling or referral to mental health professionals as needed.
12. Consider and respond to the concerns of other parents as necessary when the victim is a child or youth.

13. Review the alleged incident and take any additional precautionary actions deemed appropriate.
14. Inform both session and the Executive Presbyter of Grace Presbytery that a report of abuse has occurred, and thereafter report to session and the Executive Presbyter on the status of the allegation, including any investigations, up to and including its resolution.

Confidentiality

All reports of child or at-risk adult abuse shall be held in confidence. No person shall communicate any information concerning an alleged incident to any person except as necessary to implement a response to a reported abuse, to cooperate with any official investigation, and to inform session and the Presbyter of Grace Presbytery that a report of abuse has occurred. Any breach of this confidentiality by an employee of the church shall be cause for immediate dismissal.

The Pastor, in consultation with officials conducting any external investigation, may authorize limited additional disclosure if necessary to protect other children from harm in the near future, particularly where the person responsible for the abuse cannot be identified, but in no case shall the identity of the victim or the accused person be disclosed except as required by law.

The Pastor or his or her designated person shall be solely responsible for all communication concerning incidents of reported abuse on behalf of the church.

Appendix

Handbook Approvals

Handbook approved by session August 2009

Handbook revision approved by session September 2019

Handbook addition of Appendix A approved by session September 2022

Renaming Handbook and addition of sections on “Social Media and Digital Safety” and “Protection of Youth” October 2024