

Abuse Awareness, Prevention, and Response Policy

Alto Christian Reformed Church

Alto, WI

Adopted by Council December 2018

I. Introduction

Alto Christian Reformed Church (Alto CRC) is committed to providing a safe, nurturing, and secure environment in which adults and children may worship and grow in love and service to God. Unfortunately, even in a church setting, some individuals may be at risk of being physically or sexually mistreated or abused. (See the Report of the Committee to Study Physical, Emotional and Sexual Abuse, Agenda for Synod 1992.)

To assure that Alto CRC remains a safe place for all persons, the Council of Alto CRC adopted the following Abuse Awareness, Prevention, and Response Policy ("Policy"). The Policy shall govern all church-sponsored programs or activities. For purposes of the Policy, the terms "child abuse", "sexual misconduct", and "physical misconduct" are defined as follows:

Child Abuse means harm or threatened harm to a child's health or welfare that occurs through non-accidental physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, or maltreatment, by a parent, a legal guardian, or any other person responsible for the child's health or welfare or by a teacher, a teacher's aide, or a member of the clergy. Child abuse as defined here does not include traditional corporal punishment administered carefully and out of love.

Sexual Misconduct is behavior that is offensive to the person upon whom it is inflicted or actionable in a church setting and may not reach the legal standard for the definition of abuse. Sexual misconduct includes exploiting or grooming (preparing) a person whether minor or an adult— regardless of consent or circumstances—for the purpose of sexual touch, sexual activity, or emotional intimacy with the result of either sexual gratification or power and control over the minor or adult. Sexual misconduct also includes unwelcome touch, sexual activity, or emotional intimacy between co-workers or co-volunteers where "unwelcome" means behavior that is clearly unwanted or unacceptable in the broader church community; or sexual suggestion, sexual touch, sexual activity, or emotional intimacy between a supervisor and a subordinate who serve together in a church program or church ministry where there is a power dynamic in the relationship.

Physical Misconduct means threatened harm or non-accidental injury inflicted on a minor or legally protected adult or offensive or harmful contact to any adult where "offensive" means behavior that is clearly socially unacceptable in the broader church community. Physical misconduct is sometimes a single event, but more often a chronic pattern of interacting with a minor or an adult.

II. The Policy

Alto CRC is committed to the following:

- A. Allegations of misconduct or abuse will be taken seriously.
- B. Sexual or physical misconduct or abuse against a child or adult in a church building, in a church-sponsored program, or by church volunteers and church leaders will not be tolerated.

C. Any applicant for a church volunteer or staff position with a previous history of sexual misconduct or physical assault, or misdemeanor or felony conviction of child abuse, or pleading of no contest to any misdemeanor or felony charge will not be allowed to serve in any positions that put others at risk.

D. Various means to prevent misconduct or abuse will be utilized to reduce the risk of sexual and physical misconduct or abuse in a church building, in a church-sponsored program, or by church volunteers and church leaders.

E. Allegations by a minor of sexual or physical misconduct by a church volunteer or church leader, in a church facility, or in a church-sponsored program will be reported to child protection authorities if there is reasonable cause to suspect that child abuse has occurred. ALTO CRC will cooperate with the civil authorities responsible for handling reported incidents of abuse.

F. An accused person has the right to due process, both civilly and in the church.

G. A victim is not to be held responsible for misconduct or abuse that occurs.

H. A volunteer or church leader who is accused of misconduct will be removed from serving in that particular capacity until the allegations are resolved.

I. A volunteer or church leader who confesses or is found guilty of sexual or physical misconduct against a minor or adult parishioner will be removed or dismissed from position or office.

J. A volunteer or church leader removed or dismissed from position or office will not be considered for re-entry or reinstatement to any position that puts others at risk.

K. All persons directly or indirectly involved with incidents of misconduct or abuse are to act with honesty, charity, and confidence in God's power to forgive and heal.

III. Abuse Awareness and Prevention

A. Screening of Employees: All prospective employees shall agree to:

1. Complete an employment application, including answering questions about any past criminal charges, arrests, or convictions.
2. Authorize ALTO CRC to obtain background information and opinions from former employers, personal references, educational institutions, credit agencies, reporting services, and governmental agencies.
3. Allow ALTO CRC to verify background information and credentials.
4. Allow ALTO CRC to obtain criminal and credit history, motor vehicle records, and to check the sex offender registry. (Different levels of background checks may be conducted depending on the responsibilities of the relevant employee position.)
6. Undergoing a routine criminal background check that will be re-administered every three years on continuing employees.

B. Screening of Volunteers: All potential volunteers who will be working with vulnerable people in "at-risk situations"* shall agree to:

1. Complete a volunteer information form.
2. Authorize ALTO CRC to do a criminal record search, a statewide sexual offender search, and for any volunteers who are likely to be driving a church vehicle in their volunteer capacity, to obtain driving or motor vehicle records.

*Definition: "At-risk situations" means situations anticipated to include private one-on-one contact in non-public settings with children, youth under age 18, or developmentally disabled adults. At-risk situations do not include, for example, Sunday School classes, group activities, or volunteers in the nursery during worship.

C. Screening Responsibilities and Confidentiality: Staff members are responsible for having the volunteers and employees in their area of supervision complete a volunteer information form or employment application and a background check release form. All information received will be confidential; background check information will be available only to the Senior Pastor, the church council, and to those who are directly responsible for making the selection of an employee or volunteer.

D. Ministry Guidelines: ALTO CRC will maintain written guidelines designed to protect program participants from abuse. These guidelines must be reviewed periodically by the church council. These guidelines will be consolidated as the Abuse Prevention and Safety Guidelines and will be used to train church volunteers and church leaders to prevent misconduct and to create positive role models in the church. These Guidelines will also specifically include details on maintaining appropriate relationships between supervisors and their subordinates. The Guidelines will be available for review by members of ALTO CRC or anyone with children or other vulnerable individuals participating in church programs.

E. Training: Soon after the beginning of each church program year, staff, leaders, teachers, and volunteers working with minors or developmentally disabled adults, who are new or who have not been previously trained, shall be trained in abuse awareness, prevention, and response. This training will include a review of the church's Abuse Prevention and Safety Guidelines, reporting procedures, and how to recognize inappropriate behavior and signs of mistreatment or abuse.

F. Facility Guidelines: ALTO CRC will endeavor to incorporate features in its buildings and to maintain its facilities in a manner that helps prevent misconduct and abuse, that enables persons with disabilities to participate, and that reduces safety risks to all who come to the church.

G. Posting: There will be a written complaint procedure available to all members of the congregation stating how official complaints can be presented to the church council.

IV. Reporting

A. All Allegations: Staff, volunteers, or anyone in a position representing ALTO CRC are required to report any allegations of misconduct or any suspected abuse to the Senior Pastor or to a church council member who will report the allegation to the Senior Pastor and Elders. Individuals should report to a church council member if the Senior Pastor is involved in the allegation(s). It is not the responsibility of the reporting person to provide proof of the alleged misconduct or suspected abuse, but only to report the suspected abuse or incident.

B. Additional Reporting for Suspected Child Abuse: If the alleged victim is a child, the first-hand reporter may report the suspected abuse or the incident directly to Children's Protective Services. They must complete an ALTO CRC Report of Possible Child Maltreatment. This information is confidential; the identity of the reporter will also be kept confidential so far as possible. Upon receiving the report, the Senior Pastor and/or a church council member shall make an initial determination of whether there is reasonable cause to suspect that abuse has occurred. If the Senior Pastor and/or a church council member conclude that there is reasonable cause to suspect that abuse has occurred, the Senior Pastor or a member of the Council shall report the suspected abuse to Children's Protective Services.

V. Responding to Allegations

A. A small Response Team of church leaders will oversee the response to allegations. This team is comprised of at least two of the church council members.

B. The Response Team should first promptly determine:

1. Whether the alleged victim is a child or an adult
2. Whether the alleged offender is a church leader (paid staff, office bearer, or appointed volunteer)
3. Whether there is reasonable cause to suspect that misconduct or abuse has occurred.
"Reasonable cause" is defined as a suspicion founded on circumstances sufficiently strong to justify a reasonable person in the belief that the allegations are true.

C. Allegations Involving a Child

If there is reasonable cause to suspect that a person at ALTO CRC is involved in an incident of misconduct, the Response Team should determine in consultation with the church council the appropriate course of action based on the known information and the circumstances of the incident or situation. The Response Team should respond using the principles and guidelines outlined in this policy.

D. Allegations By an Adult Against A Church Leader

1. If the allegations are made by an adult against a church leader (paid staff, office bearer, or appointed volunteer) of ALTO CRC, the Response Team shall consult with the Council and determine the appropriate response and course of action using the principles and guidelines outlined in this policy. The Response Team and the Council are encouraged to contact the Classis Minnkota Safe Church Team if one of ALTO CRC's ministry staff members is accused.
2. If the allegations are made by an adult against a church leader (paid staff, office bearer, or appointed volunteer) of another Christian Reformed Church, the Response Team shall consult with the Council and notify the appropriate church authorities.
3. After receiving the Classical Safe Church Team's Report, the Response Team in consultation with the Council shall convene to discuss the allegations and the Classical Report and determine the appropriate course of action.

VI. Criminal Proceedings: For either church leaders or non-church leaders, if criminal proceedings are involved, the Response Team and the Church Council shall promptly revisit the matter at the conclusion of the criminal proceedings and take other such action as the circumstances may dictate.

VII. Press Statements: The church legal counsel will handle all press statements with the Senior Pastor or the church council member(s). Requests for press statements will be referred to the church attorney.

VIII. Compassionate Response for Families: The Elders will appoint a small group of wise and experienced pastoral persons to minister with compassion to all the individuals and families involved.

IX. Records, Confidentiality, and Disclosure.

A. Records: All information received and efforts to respond will be documented.

B. Confidentiality: Any information received and any record maintained by ALTO CRC regarding allegations of misconduct or abuse shall be kept confidential. This means that only those who need to know will have access to these records and only to the records for the case in question. Those with a need to know may include for example the attorney representing the church, the Response Team, and the church council.

C. Disclosure: ALTO CRC should disclose allegations of misconduct against a church leader only when appropriate as decided by the Council.

1. If someone in the church is convicted of criminal child abuse, the congregation will be notified in a manner the Council deems appropriate for the situation.
2. ALTO CRC should disclose information related to allegations of misconduct or abuse by a church leader as needed to protect and minister to the needs of children and families.

X. Mandatory Signatories

A. All individuals employed by Alto Christian Reformed Church are required to read, sign, and date this policy and the Abuse Prevention and Safety Guidelines. By signing below, they verify that they have read and understood this policy completely.

Signature: _____

Print Name: _____

Date: / /