

**Valley Ranch Baptist Church
Coppell, Texas`
Good Shepherd Policy for Lay Leaders**

DEFINITIONS

Lay Leader - for purposes of this document, the definition of lay leader is any person who has spiritual influence over others in our congregation. Such roles include: a) church council member; b) deacon; c) adult grow group leader..

Lay Leader Sexual Abuse - occurs when a person with spiritual influence uses his/her role, position and power to sexually harass, exploit or engage in sexual activity with a person in his/her care. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Sexualizing conversations, whether those conversations be in person, written or electronic through text, email or social media messaging services;
- Asking for or transmitting sexual images or using sexual language;
- Touching or hugging people who do not want to be touched;
- Pushing for sexual involvement;
- Creating hostility when the person being targeted established boundaries;
- Using sexual language and/or jokes;
- Pressing or rubbing against a person;
- Invading personal space;
- Sexual activity may include, but is not limited to:
 - Touching sexual organs (under or over clothing);
 - Kissing;
 - Oral sex;
 - Masturbation;
 - Intercourse; or
 - Rape.

Suspension – upon receipt of a potential incident, the lay leader will be temporarily suspended from their role as lay leader pending an investigation.

Good Shepherd Response Team (or “GSRT”)- consists of a) the Chairperson of Church Council, b) the Chairperson of the HR/Finance Committee and c) an Associate Pastor that reports directly to the Senior Pastor. The gender makeup of the Good Shepherd Response Team should always have both male and female genders represented. If these four roles are occupied by the same gender, Church Council should appoint a suitable replacement for the year - presumably someone from the groups represented on the GSRT (Church Council, HR/Finance and senior church leadership). If there are any conflicts due to personal relationships between a GSRT member and a potentially abused person or the alleged perpetrator, the person(s) should recuse themselves and a suitable replacement be identified from Church Council, HR/Finance or senior leadership of the church staff.

Church Staff Response Team (or “CSRT”) - this group consists of a) an attorney engaged by the church; b) the Senior Pastor; c) an Associate Pastor and d) Business Administrator. The Church Staff Response team remains in communication with the GSRT, but more importantly focuses on a) the pastoral care aspect of the accused and the accuser by the church staff; b) provides counsel to the church on legal matters, if any, related to the situation. Communications with an attorney engaged by the church may be subject to the attorney-client privilege or other rule governing confidentiality of the attorney-client relationship or attorney work product.

Response Teams - the combination of the Good Shepherd Response Team and the Church Staff Response Team.

Lay leader abuse may involve the misuse of power by the perpetrator and the inability of the victim to provide or deny consent because of the power differential or other factors. Even if an individual nominally agrees to some form of sexual interaction, contact or relationship, that agreement does NOT constitute consent for purposes of Church policy.

CHURCH RESPONSE TO SEXUAL ABUSE

Allegations of sexual misconduct and abuse by a lay leader create a crisis for a congregation. A toxic mix of betrayal, anger, fear, power and sex can emerge as church leaders and members confront topics often considered uncomfortable or inappropriate among pastors and friends. A common reflex within some churches to relieve emotional pain and protect a beloved institution is to ignore the possibility of, or silence complaints of, sexual misconduct. When a congregation chooses not to address abuse it can become a church where abuse continues. But planning a response to allegations of abuse equips a congregation to prevent abuse and care for abused people and abusing leaders, their families and the church.

Safeguards against abuse by leaders include:

- 1) A clear policy for the prevention of sexual abuse, which includes background checks for employees and volunteers working with minors, anti-abuse training at regular intervals, guidelines to protect children and vulnerable populations in the church, and mechanisms for reporting suspected abuse;
- 2) A covenant for clergy and lay leaders that includes guidelines related to preventing inappropriate behavior;
- 3) A willingness to engage a third-party professional investigator; and
- 4) The identification of church officers who will guide the church’s response to potential abuse.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Baptist Women in Ministry (as well as other organizations) assist with congregational conversations, and provide example policies to support church learning and planning. Additionally, local sexual abuse prevention organizations and victims’ advocacy groups offer training for faith communities on the recognition and prevention of sexual abuse. Congregations who train leaders and teachers, and develop comprehensive policies and codes of behavior may be less likely to suffer an abusive lay leader and are also prepared to respond should abuse occur.

RESPONDING TO ALLEGATIONS OF SEXUAL ABUSE BY LAY LEADERS

Congregational leaders' first responsibility following an allegation of sexual abuse by a lay leader is to ensure the physical, emotional and spiritual safety of the person reporting potential abuse. After safety is confirmed, congregational leaders should quickly (within 24 hours at the latest) inform the Good Shepherd Response Team.

Within 48 hours of notification of the disclosure of abuse, the GSRT will:

- 1) Confer with legal counsel to ensure mandatory legal reporting requirements are met;
- 2) Inform the complainant of the church response process and inquire if they desire to continue with the report, investigation, and response process. With an affirmative response, the GSRT will move to step 3. With a negative response, the allegation should be noted and stored in an appropriate file for future reference if necessary.
- 3) Being mindful of potential conflicts in relationships, the GSRT should report allegations to a group consisting of a) an attorney engaged by the church; b) the Senior Pastor; c) Associate Pastor and d) Business Administrator (defined previously as the "Church Staff Response Team" or "CSRT") in order to engage the next steps of the process. The GSRT and the CSRT will remain in communication throughout the rest of the process.
- 4) Notify the accused person of the allegation and inform them they are suspended from their role pending the investigation;
- 5) Contract with an independent third-party to investigate and determine the facts of the alleged abuse; and
- 6) Ensure the complainant and their family, along with the accused and their family, have adequate emotional and spiritual support throughout the process.

WHEN ABUSE IS DISCLOSED

To safeguard reported victims and others, reports of abuse should be considered credible unless found otherwise. Though anonymity may not be possible throughout the response process, deference should be given to the person reporting abuse regarding disclosure of identity at the time of allegation. The name of the reporting person should be disclosed on a need-to-know basis to as few people as possible to conduct the investigation and ensure the wellbeing of the reporting person and his or her family.

The initial response will be followed by prompt action in support of the person reporting abuse which is foundational for the wellbeing of the person and the church. The goal of a rapid response is to avoid further harm and demonstrate a commitment to protecting individuals.

EXPANDING ON MOBILIZING THE CHURCH RESPONSE

After the reporting person's safety is assured, the person who received the report should immediately contact the GSRT, providing a summary of events and contact information for the person alleging abuse.

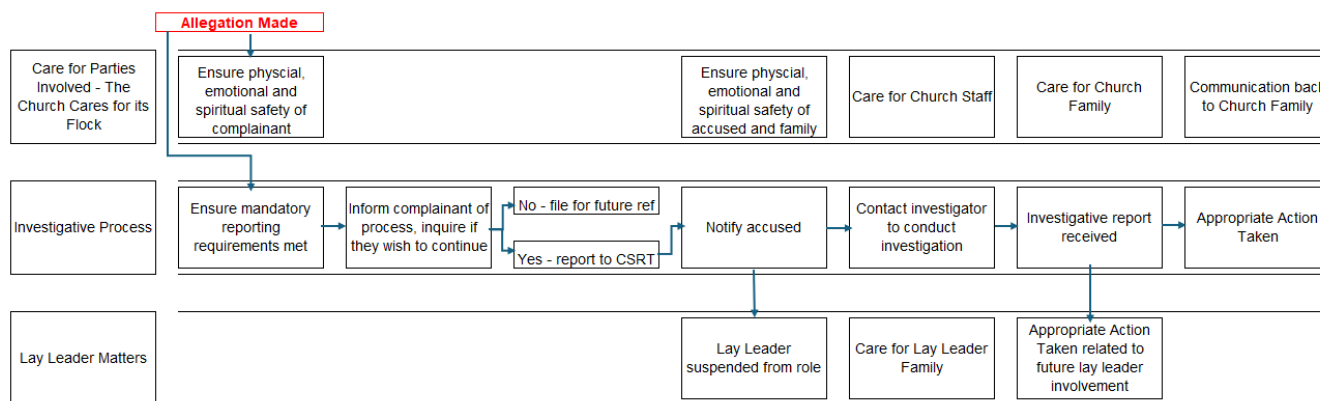
1. **Ensure mandatory reporting requirements are met** - The GSRT should consult with an attorney to ensure mandatory reporting requirements are met.
2. **Contact the person alleging abuse** - A GSRT representative should immediately contact the person alleging abuse to a) inform them that a response has begun; b) describe the process of

response; and c) determine their willingness to engage this process. With an affirmative response, the GSRT will move to step 3. With a negative response, the allegation should be noted and stored in an appropriate file for future reference if necessary.

3. **Notify Church Staff Response Team** - With the consent of the person alleging abuse, the GSRT will notify the CSRT that an allegation has been received and the response will begin. Initial notification to the CSRT does not require notification of parties involved or details of events, merely that the process has begun so church leaders can prepare to play appropriate roles in response. In some instances, the Church Council as a whole may need to be notified. Discretion should be used by the two Response Teams as they discern this communication decision.
4. **Notify accused and other relevant parties** - The accused person should be placed on appropriately limited duty by the GSRT. The GSRT should note that leave/limited duty is not an assumption of guilt but creates space for an adequate investigation into the allegation. The accused or their family should NOT communicate with the accuser or his/her family.
 - 4.1. The GSRT should contact the Church's insurance carrier and legal counsel to inform them of the abuse disclosure.
5. **Engaging a third-party investigation** - After the above steps have been initiated, an external party should be contracted to conduct the investigation into the allegations. Any outside party contracted for the investigation should be disinterested from the congregation, able to respond in a timely manner, and equipped to understand the congregation's policies, organizational structure and response plan. The GSRT should seek to ensure the investigator engaged is committed to investigating the allegations in a trauma-informed manner.
 - 5.1. After a third-party investigator is secured, the GSRT's focus may shift to caring for those affected by the alleged abuse.
 - 5.2. The report of the investigator should a) evaluate the credibility of the allegation, b) identify corroborating or contradicting evidence; and c) may make suggestions for employment and/or disciplinary actions.
 - 5.3. The GSRT should inform the CSRT, the alleged offending lay leader, the person alleging abuse, and the Church Council of the findings. Discernment should be used as to whether congregational communication is appropriate.
 - 5.3.1. Outcomes from the investigation may fall into the following four areas: 1) allegations of abuse are not corroborated or credible and no further action is warranted; 2) abuse likely occurred and corrective action is warranted; 3) there's not a consensus that abuse occurred but a plan of care for all parties is warranted; or 4) lay leader admits improper conduct abuse and corrective action is in order.
 - 5.3.2. The GSRT should also make recommendations to the Church Council regarding corrective action or discipline based on the independent investigator's report. Church Council then has responsibility to discern appropriate action to be taken in collaboration with church staff.
6. **Caring for those affected by sexual misconduct** - The GSRT should lead in providing spiritual and emotional care for a) the person alleging abuse; b) the accused; c) the families of the accuser and the accused; and d) the congregation as a whole. The course of action described in this section is separate from the investigative process.

- 6.1. Care for the person who alleges abuse begins with gathering information about the allegation and beginning the response process quickly. Assuring physical, emotional and spiritual safety is paramount so the alleged abuser should have no access to his/her person reporting alleged above. The GSRT should lead the church's effort to connect the reporting person and their family with professional and/or pastoral counseling, as well as connection to local sexual trauma support services. Additionally, if financial assistance is appropriate and needed, or other forms of support are required, the GSRT should guide the process.
- 6.2. Care for the accused lay leader and their family begins with a conscientious investigation that is begun quickly by the third-party investigator and carried out with discretion. The Response Teams should strive to guard the lay leader from rumors and innuendo by maintaining confidentiality to the extent possible and communicating appropriate information at regular intervals. Support for the lay leader and their family should include the offer of professional and/or pastoral counseling and financial assistance as warranted and appropriate. ***Church staff that are close to the accused and their family should consider keeping in contact with the accused as they would otherwise, but should avoid discussing the events under investigation or employment related matters.*** The Church Staff Response Team should coordinate with church staff and ensure contact at an appropriate level of communication is maintained during the investigation.
- 6.3. Care for the congregation includes the timely release of appropriate information regarding accusations of sexual misconduct and actions taken by the GSRT and others. If appropriate, acknowledge the possibility of additional victims and provide confidential means of communication with the GSRT for access to professional and/or pastoral counselors and other support. The GSRT should provide to the congregation information regarding local counselors and sexual trauma support services because a pastor's sexual misconduct could "trigger" survivors of other trauma or abuse. The GSRT may also find it appropriate to recommend to church leadership an interim minister or church health consultants for assistance in the congregation's recovery from abuse.
- 6.4. Care for the Church Staff includes sharing appropriate information with the staff according to the overall communication plan developed by the Response Teams. Recognizing that staff members may be experiencing a broad range of emotions including confusion, anger, sadness, compassion, anxiety, and fear, the Church Staff Response Team should intentionally care for the emotional and spiritual health of the staff team during this difficult time. This will likely include an in-person gathering with the full staff team to share relevant information, support one another, and pray, as well as the opportunity for staff members to visit with members of the Church Staff Response Team individually. Counseling resources should be made available for staff members as needed.
- 6.5. Unfortunately, it should also be recognized that false or unsubstantiated reports of inappropriate conduct sometimes occur. While it is our policy to take all reports seriously amid investigate them promptly and thoroughly, this process should be fair to everyone concerned. If allegations cannot be corroborated, or if they are contradicted by credible evidence, this should be taken into account when offering pastoral care.

A visual representation of these steps in their different workstreams is presented below:



Training the Church Officer(s)

The GSRT tasked with guiding response to allegations of sexual misconduct should seek training related to understanding patterns, effects and responses to abuse. Local sexual trauma services providers, such as rape crisis centers and child advocacy centers, routinely host training sessions for faith groups related to preventing, identifying and responding to abuse. Several nationwide groups, such as GRACE, the Hope of Survivors, the Faithtrust Institute, Darkness to Light, and Keeping our Sacred Trust also provide information related to preventing and responding to abuse. Most of this training is free or very low cost, happens at regular intervals and is best attended more than once (the emotional intensity related to the subject matter makes comprehension/retention challenging).

The Response Teams should create and maintain contacts for local supportive resources to access in response to an abuse allegation. In addition to the local sexual trauma service providers, the groups should maintain a referral list for mental health and/or pastoral counselors able to assist victims of abuse. The GSRT should also be familiar with church insurance providers and legal counsel, local law enforcement and denominational affiliates for reporting and supportive relationships.

The Response Teams should understand the Church's leadership structure, bylaws and processes for staff oversight. When an allegation occurs, the congregation's response policy implemented by the GSRT should integrate with other governing documents so that victims and the accused are assured of transparent, predictable and just processes.