Avery Street Christian Reformed Church

**Safe Church and Abuse Prevention Policies**

2024 Revision

04/26/2024

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**Section One: Purpose and Goals**

1. Avery Street Christian Reformed Church (ASCRC) is committed to maintaining our church as a safe place for all people. For the purposes of this document, that commitment focuses on safety from any abuse related to the physical, sexual or emotional mistreatment of children, youth, and vulnerable adults.
2. ASCRC recognizes abuse as a terrible sin against both God and our neighbor.
3. ASCRC recognizes the importance of treating both the alleged and actual victims and perpetrators of abuse in a distinctively Christian and compassionate way.
4. ASCRC recognizes the utmost importance of confidentiality in matters related to suspected and/or actual abuse. Church officials are required to keep the details and identities related to an incident confidential (see Appendix D), except where disclosure is specifically required by law or by the provisions of this document.
5. If any church attendee observes a concerning behavior as defined by the guidelines in Section 2, it should be reported promptly and discretely to the ministry leader or a member of the Safe Church Committee.
6. ASCRC has established a Safe Church Committee comprised of four members, at least one of whom is a member of Council. One team member will be appointed to serve as the Safe Church Coordinator. Council members may, at their discretion, choose to add to the committee. The committee is responsible, under the oversight of the Elders, to implement this document and carry out the following goals:
7. To do whatever is reasonable and necessary to maintain our church and ministries as a safe environment for children and adults to grow in their relationship with God.
8. To provide our paid staff and volunteers with appropriate policies and protection so that they may carry out their ministry responsibilities.
9. To create an environment of Christ-like love, acceptance, and compassion throughout our ministries.
10. To educate and sensitize members of ASCRC regarding abuse and its consequences, and to establish procedures for reporting suspected abuse.
11. To deal with accusations of abuse in a biblical and orderly way, assist in the restoration of those who are the victims of abuse, and deal firmly and lovingly with those who have committed abuse.

**Section Two: Definitions**

1. Personnel are defined according to the following descriptions:
	1. *Adults*: Individuals 18 years of age or older.
	2. *Minors*: Individuals under 18 years of age, or in DCF care and under 21 years of age.
	3. *Volunteers*: Adults who serve without compensation in a child or youth program and provide care for or supervision of minors.
	4. *Staff*: Adults who are employed by the church and on church payroll.
	5. *Helpers*: Minors who serve in a child or youth program without compensation. While helpers may serve in child/youth programs, they do not provide care or supervision without an adult present.
	6. *Governing body*: Members of the ASCRC Council, who are granted oversight of the organization by its articles of incorporation, bylaws, election, or appointment.
2. Conduct
	1. Appropriate behavior includes such actions as verbal reminders of appropriate behavior and behavioral boundaries, offering verbal praise, encouragement, or compliments; verbal sharing of emotional or spiritual concerns with another person in an appropriate setting. Appropriate forms of physical affection for the purpose of encouraging or comforting include a handshake, fist bump, high five, pat on the back or forearm, or (with permission) a side-by-side (“buddy”) or brief hug. Physical affection should not occur in private settings or isolated contexts. Volunteers, staff members, and youth will respect each other’s right to refuse a display of affection. A volunteer or staff member should not single out any child or teen for affection. Volunteers and staff should not encourage displays of affection in a group context that may intimidate, manipulate, or frighten a youth.
	2. Inappropriate behavior includes such actions as corporal punishment by spanking, hitting, or pushing, abusive verbal discipline by yelling, insults, or threats, suggestive actions, innuendo or double entendre, massaging, any other physical touching beyond what is described above, or any form of unwanted physical contact.
3. Child Abuse and Neglect
	1. For the purposes of this document, child abuse is defined as *“any child or youth in danger of or being abused who has a non-accidental physical injury, or injuries which are at variance with the history given such injuries, or is in a condition which is the result of maltreatment such as, but not limited to, malnutrition, sexual molestation, deprivation of necessities, emotional maltreatment, or cruel punishment.”*
	2. For the purposes of this document, child neglect is defined as “*any child or youth who has been abandoned or is being denied proper care and attention, physically, educationally, emotionally, or morally or is being permitted to live under conditions, circumstances, or associations injurious to his/her well-being.”*
	3. Child abuse and neglect can include: educational neglect, emotional maltreatment/abuse, emotional neglect, medical neglect, moral neglect, physical abuse, physical neglect, sexual abuse/exploitation

**Section Three: Avery Street CRC Safe Church Policy**

1. Scope

This document applies when any of the following conditions are present:

* 1. Alleged abuse or neglect is suspected or perpetrated involving members of ASCRC or participants in its ministries.
	2. Alleged abuse or neglect takes place in connection with church ministries or functions on or off the church property.
	3. Alleged abuse or neglect by a staff member or volunteer.
1. Screening and Training
	1. All paid staff and volunteers serving in ministry to children or youth will submit to screening, including criminal background checks and training as deemed appropriate by the Safe Church Committee. No one may not serve in ministry to children and youth until screening and training is complete. Newer members who have not previously been screened will complete a Children & Youth Ministry Application Form (Appendix B),
	2. Volunteer candidates should be regularly attending ASCRC for at least six months before they will be considered by a Children’s Ministry staff/volunteers and the Safe Church Committee for any ministry position involving contact with children or young people.
	3. The church reserves the right to deny a volunteer position for any reason.
	4. Staff and volunteers will read and sign the full “ASCRC Safe Church and Abuse Prevention Policies” Agreement (Appendix A) initially, and thereafter annually review and sign the abbreviated “Safe Church Guidelines” Agreement (Appendix C).
	5. Staff and volunteers will complete an annual training on abuse and neglect prevention, to be determined by the Safe Church Committee.
	6. Failure to comply with the provisions of this document may result in discipline, loss of position, termination of employment, and/or legal consequences.
2. Supervision Principles
	1. *Two Adult Rule*
		* At least two unrelated, screened adults must be present at every function and in each classroom, vehicle, or other enclosed area during activities involving children, youth, or vulnerable adults.
	2. *Rule of Three*
		* When there is not the capacity to abide by the *Two Adult Rule*, it may be acceptable to use the *Rule of Three*. At least three individuals must be present at every function and in each classroom, vehicle, or other enclosed area during activities involving children, youth, or vulnerable adults.
		* One of these three must be a screened adult.
	3. *Exceptional Circumstances*
		* If two related adults wish to volunteer together (e.g. a married couple for Sunday School class), then both the Safe Church Committee and church Council must approve.
		* If it is necessary or preferable (e.g. only one child in Sunday School class), one screened adult may be allowed to lead alone after review and permission of the Safe Church Committee and church Council.
	4. When circumstances do not follow the *Two Adult Rule* the ministry group:
		* must meet in a room with an unobstructed view (i.e. room with a door window)
		* an unrelated, screened volunteer (e.g. Sunday School superintendent or designee) must be available to visually monitor the group periodically.
	5. The door windows to classrooms will remain uncovered at all times, providing a clear view of all activities taking place.
	6. Parents are welcome to observe any children’s ministry activity (e.g. nursery, Sunday school) at any time.
3. Specific Supervision Guidelines
	1. Individual counseling meetings with youth
* Each meeting should take place with the knowledge of the volunteer or staff’s supervisor, and only after securing permission of the youth's parent/guardian.
* The meeting should take place in a public place where other people are visibly in the vicinity, or if in the leader’s or minor’s home with the supervision of the youth’s parent/guardian.
* The meeting should never take place in an isolated or secluded location, such as behind closed doors or in a parked vehicle.
	1. Nursery
* At least two attendants must be in the nursery. One attendant must be an adult. A third unrelated volunteer or helper should be present when married couples serve in the nursery.
* A nursery sign-in information sheet will be used each Sunday where the following will be recorded:
	1. Adult and helper names
	2. The pager number given to the parent/guardian.
	3. Parents/guardians will sign in their child, noting special care instructions (e.g. allergies, snacks, bathroom assistance).
* Diapering of children must occur in the presence of another attendant.
* Children must be released to the parent/guardian, family member, or other person authorized by their parent/guardian.
	1. Sunday School/Children’s Worship/Vacation Bible School/GEMS
		+ Through 2nd grade, children should be released to the parent/guardian, family member, or other person authorized by their parent/guardian.
		+ In VBS, children will remain in the sanctuary pews until their parent/guardian/family member picks them up.
		+ Policies for Restroom Assistance:

A volunteer/helper may assist in the restroom for children age 5 and under.

Even if a child under age 5 does not need assistance, a volunteer or helper will escort him/her to the restroom and wait outside the door.

Special needs children will be assisted as arranged with parents.

Policies may be more or less restricted based on program needs (e.g. VBS staff always escorting child to bathroom for general supervision purposes).

* 1. Youth Group
* A youth group leader or counselor dating or going out with a minor is strictly forbidden, as is dating the friend of a minor attending one of our youth groups. Sexual gestures or overtures to an adult leader by a young person must be reported to the director of that ministry team or to the pastor, so that the matter can be addressed with the young person.
* Youth group leaders may not hold a youth event when only one leader is present, whether that activity is held at church or off the church campus. If a second adult is not available (e.g. out sick, away), one of the youth’s parents will be asked to remain in the vicinity of the activity.
* Each year youth group leaders should coordinate a class about healthy relationships and abuse for the group. Topics might include:
	+ biblical guidelines for dating
	+ dating violence & signs of abuse
	+ healthy use of social media
1. Guidelines for Electronic Communication
	1. Volunteers, staff, and youth are not to privately exchange phone calls, letters (with the exception of Secret Shepherd), e-mails, text messages or other communication that can in any way be perceived as intimate in nature.
	2. Consider all communications with young people as subject to parental and organizational oversight.
	3. If used, group texts or emails should be for the purposes of scheduling or reminders about activities and should include the parent/guardian.
2. Discipline
	1. Volunteers and staff should address disruptive behavior by:
* distracting the child or youth with another activity
* helping the child or youth focus on more acceptable behavior
* having another volunteer take the child or youth aside to discuss appropriate behavior
* using a timeout for young children (under age 6) with the time period not lasting longer in minutes than the child’s age
	1. Corporal punishment (spanking, hitting, pinching) is never permitted.
	2. Parent(s) are to be informed and involved whenever a child/young person misbehaves beyond minor correction (i.e. verbal re-directions), or if a pattern of misbehavior increases or continues. In the case of ongoing concern, the director of that children’s ministry should be consulted, and an aide or parent might be involved in the classroom. In extreme cases after reasonable efforts have been made, the director of children’s ministry, in consultation with group leaders, may decide to dismiss the child or youth from the program.
	3. Staff or volunteers should immediately remove a child or youth who is physically aggressive toward, harasses, or bullies another person. The child or youth at issue may be reinstated in the group when the risk to others has been adequately addressed through discussions between the group leader, parent/guardian, the director of that ministry, and the Safe church committee.
1. Transportation
2. It is recommended that children arrive no sooner than 15 minutes prior to their meeting or event, and depart no later than 10 minutes after the event ends.
3. Adults must have a valid driver’s license and proof of insurance before transporting youth.
4. Two volunteers/staff persons are present and seated in the front of the vehicle.
5. Adult volunteers/staff may not travel alone with a minor except in case of an emergency, in which case the youth must be in the back seat of the vehicle.
6. All off-site activities require adult drivers. While youth members may drive themselves or ride together to the starting location (most often the church), upon leaving the original location youth must be in a vehicle driven by an adult or only drive themselves and their family members.
7. Drivers and youth must obey state requirements for use of seat belts and car seats. Staff and volunteers will defer to Connecticut state laws regarding seat placement, car seats, etc.
8. This transportation policy (points 1-7) is in effect from the time the ministry begins until the time it ends. Transportation to and from church ministry activities by church volunteers/staff is at the discretion of the parent/guardian. Church supervision will not be enforced for adults who transport their own family members to and from church-sponsored events, or parents/guardians who request or give permission to an individual with a valid driver’s license to transport youth not related to the driver.

**Section Four: Procedures**

1. Reporting suspected abuse or neglect
2. Mandatory reporting – Connecticut law requires “members of the clergy” as well as other professionals who work with children and who have reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or neglect to report such suspected child abuse or neglect to the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) or a law enforcement agency within 12 hours. ASCRC will comply with this statutory obligation, and will cooperate with DCF and appropriate law enforcement officials investigating alleged occurrences of abuse or neglect.
3. Church members having a reasonable suspicion of abuse or neglect have the legal right to contact the civil authorities without first reporting their concerns to church officials. However, ASCRC also desires to be part of the discussion and solution when such suspicions are present and encourages members to also share their concerns with members of the Safe Church Team.
4. Investigation of suspected abuse or neglect
	1. Any suspicion of abuse or neglect must be reported to the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) and/or local law enforcement.
	The adult who becomes aware of reportable information is encouraged to file a 136 report with DCF with the support of a Safe Church Committee member. If that person declines to file, then a Safe Church Committee member must file.
	2. The Safe Church Team should always keep in mind that they are not, nor need to become, legal investigators. The leadership of the church will seek legal counsel as soon as possible after receiving notice of possible abuse.
	3. All documents, evidence, records, or files submitted to or from the Safe Church Committee shall be strictly confidential (See Appendix D). No one in the church other than members of the Safe Church Committee shall have access to such information without the written consent of the Council of ASCRC.
	4. In the event of an abuse allegation, the Council will appoint a designated spokesperson who will be the only individual authorized to communicate with the media or anyone else outside the congregation regarding such an allegation. Media calls and requests for comment are to be referred to the designated spokesperson who will obtain deadline information, assess the reporter’s intent, and respond with a statement.
	5. Should the situation become public knowledge, the designated spokesperson will communicate with and inform the congregation that (a) a situation exists, (b) the Safe Church Team and Council are actively addressing the situation, (c) details will be kept confidential, and (d) prayers are requested for everyone involved.
5. Response Guidelines
6. If the suspicion of abuse or neglect involves a paid staff member of ASCRC, that staff member shall be suspended with pay, pending the outcome of the legal and/or ecclesiastical investigation. If the suspicion of abuse or neglect involves a volunteer of ASCRC, the volunteer shall be suspended from any further volunteer activities at the church, pending the outcome of the legal and/or ecclesiastical investigation.
7. In the case of a volunteer, the Elders may choose to follow the steps of church discipline as outlined in Articles 78-81 of the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in a sincere attempt to *“restore those who err to faithful obedience to God and full fellowship with the congregation, to maintain the holiness of the church, and thus to uphold God’s honor”* (Article 78).
8. In the case of a Pastor, Elder, or Deacon, the Elders may also choose to follow the steps of special discipline as outlined in Articles 82-84 of the Church Order of the CRC, including possible suspension and deposition from office.
9. Restoration
10. Regardless of the outcome of any investigation by the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) and/or local law enforcement, any reinstatement of a staff member or volunteer shall be at the discretion of the Council under recommendation by the Safe Church Committee, and shall be on such term(s) as both deem appropriate. Terms may include any or all of the following:
	1. compliance with CRC Order Articles 78-84 (admonition and discipline of members and office bearers)
	2. submission of a written evaluation by a licensed psychologist or other psychotherapist who has expertise, training, and experience in the area of treating an offender
	3. conditions or limitations on employment and/or service at ASCRC.
11. In all cases, the Elders will work with the offender(s) with a view toward restoration, including any or all of the following as appropriate:
	1. instructing the offender(s) to have no contact with the alleged victim or his/her family
	2. limiting access of the offender(s) to church property
	3. recommending psychiatric treatment and/or pastoral care
	4. expressing sincere repentance
	5. defining the ongoing nature of an offender’s relationship to the congregation

At their discretion, the Elders may seek the guidance of the church visitors of Classis Atlantic Northeast of the CRC, the Pastor and Church Support Office (Thrive) of the CRC, or the Safe Church Ministry of the CRC.

1. In all cases, the Elders will work with the victim and his/her family with a view toward healing and restoration, including any or all of the following as appropriate:
	1. instructing the victim(s) about contact with the alleged offender(s),
	2. making sure that adequate physical, psychological, and pastoral care is provided,
	3. as well as any other counsel or guidance deemed necessary to provide the victim(s) with healing, hope and psychological safety.

**Section Five: Review and Revision of Safe Church Policy**

1. The Safe Church Coordinator of ASCRC will be responsible to review this policy at least annually with all volunteers, employees, ministry leaders, and the leadership of the congregation.
2. The Safe Church Coordinator will also secure the signatures of all volunteers and employees annually, indicating that they have reviewed and understand the policy.
3. The Safe Church Committee of ASCRC, with the assistance of legal counsel, as needed, will periodically review this policy and amend or modify it as necessary. When changes are made, the Safe Church Committee is responsible to notify employees and volunteers of those changes.

Appendix A: ASCRC Safe Church & Abuse Prevention Policies Agreement Form

Avery Street Christian Reformed Church

**Safe Church and Abuse Prevention Policies**

* I have read and understand the full ASCRC Safe Church and Abuse Prevention Policies document.
* I agree to abide by all policies and procedures of the organization and to protect the safety of the children, youth, or vulnerable adults assigned to my care or supervision at all times.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Date

Appendix B: Children & Youth Ministry Application Form

**Circle the program(s) you are willing to serve or will be serving in:**

Nursery Children’s Worship Sunday School Vacation Bible School

Youth Group GEMS Other \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**General Information:**

Full Name \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Do you regularly attend our worship services? Yes / No

If yes, when did you start attending? (Approx. date) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Personal Disclosure Information:**

1. Has your driver’s license been suspended or revoked within the last 2 years? Yes / No
2. Have you ever been arrested, convicted, or plead guilty to a crime? Yes / No

If yes, please explain \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Have you ever participated in or been accused, convicted of, or plead guilty or no contest to child or elder abuse or any sexual misconduct? Yes / No
2. Is there any fact or circumstance involving your background that would make it inappropriate for you to serve with minors or would compromise the integrity of the church? Yes / No

If yes, please explain \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

*I recognize that Avery Street Christian Reformed Church relies on the accuracy of the information I provide, and accordingly, I attest and affirm that the information I have provided is true and correct.*

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Signature Date

Appendix C: Safe Church Guidelines Annual Review Agreement Form

Avery Street Christian Reformed Church

**Safe Church Guidelines Annual Review**

* I have read and understand the ASCRC Safe Church Guidelines Annual Review document.
* I agree to abide by all policies and procedures of the organization and to protect the safety of the children, youth, or vulnerable adults assigned to my care or supervision at all times.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Date

# Appendix D: Confidentiality

In order to protect the dignity and well-being of any person who has been victimized by abuse, it is important that their identity is kept confidential. The following measures are implemented to protect the privacy of all parties and to ensure that information about any alleged act is limited to essential persons:

1. Need-to-Know: Those positions in the need-to-know category include the following: chair of Council, pastor, the pastoral care elders for the claimant and accused, and the Safe Church Committee.
2. Situations of abuse involving minors or vulnerable adults require sensitive care and full transparency with law enforcement investigations. In situations of abuse involving minors or vulnerable adults, there shall be a designated Safe Church Team member, pastor, or elder who consults the CRCNA Safe Church Ministry or a Classis Safe Church Coordinator.
3. The names and information in any abuse allegations shall be limited to the positions listed in paragraph A (Need to Know) on this page. Any request to release names of any involved party must be first cleared by the congregation’s legal counsel.
4. Discussion by Council or Committees of Council shall be conducted without the actual names of involved persons being used. Instead, descriptions such as “reporter”, “alleged offender”, and “claimant" shall be used.
5. A liaison between the legal authorities or the CT Department of Children & Families and the church staff/Council will be appointed.
6. After law enforcement has officially charged someone of a crime or after a legal decision has been made, there will be a communication outlining ways that the church and community may be able to move forward with respect and responsible ways to process the harm within the congregation and community.