

## COMMITTEE MEMBERS

**REV. DR. TIM LECROY** [Chairman] is a teaching elder in Missouri Presbytery. He is a visiting instructor of historical theology at Covenant Theological Seminary and has served the General Assembly on various committees.

**REV. CAL BOROUGHS** is a retired teaching elder from St. Elmo Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga, TN. He has served as moderator for his presbytery and was part of the working group that brought to the Assembly the overture for a study committee on domestic abuse and sexual assault.

**DR. KELLY DEHNERT** [Secretary] is a ruling elder and Assistant to the Pastor at Covenant Presbytery Church in Lander, WY. He researches and teaches on abusive leadership in Christian organizations and is on the national board of Refuge Ministries.

**BOB GOUDZWAARD** is a ruling elder and helped develop a domestic abuse online training video for the Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship. He serves as director of Care Ministries at Christ Covenant Church in Charlotte, NC.

**DR. DAVID HABURCHAK**, PCA ruling elder, is a doctor of internal medicine and was a professor of medicine at the Medical College of Georgia at Augusta University. He recently authored “Kingdom Work: Redeeming Child Sexual Abuse.”

**REV. DR. LLOYD PIERSON** works with abuse survivors and perpetrators through Refuge Ministries, a national domestic abuse ministry founded in Kalispell, MT. He is a teaching elder at Faith Covenant PCA in Kalispell.

**REV. SHANE WALDRON** is lead pastor of Rocky Mountain Presbyterian Church in Denver, CO. He is also the founder of Refuge Ministries, which helps families impacted by domestic abuse find healing in Christ. He teaches on the subject of domestic violence at churches and parachurch organizations.

## ADVISORS

**RACHAEL DENHOLLANDER** became known internationally in 2016 as the first woman to pursue criminal charges and speak publicly against USA Gymnastics’ team doctor Larry Nassar, one of the most prolific sexual abusers in recorded history. She is an attorney, author, advocate, and educator.

**ANN MAREE GOUDZWAARD** is the Executive Director of Help[H]er. In addition, she trains counselors at RTS Charlotte, Eternity Bible College, and PeaceWorks University. She is a biblical counselor with an M.Div. / counseling emphasis and a D.Min. candidate.

**DR. DIANE LANGBERG** attends Calvary PCA in Willow Grove, PA and is a psychologist of over 50 years. She is a well-known speaker and author of multiple books about abuse and trauma.

**DR. BARBARA SHAFFER** is a psychologist with nearly 40 years of experience, much of which involved working with survivors of sexual and domestic abuse. She attends Faith PCA in Wilmington, DE.

**DARBY STRICKLAND** teaches Counseling Abusive Marriages at WTS Philadelphia. She is the author of the book “Is It Abuse?” and two booklets for churches and survivors of abuse. She attends Cornerstone PCA in Center Valley, PA.



## RESOURCE PAMPHLETS

The Ad Interim Study Committee on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault report includes chapters on Biblical and Confessional Foundations for Understanding Abuse, Domestic Abuse, Women Who Abuse, Adult Sexual Abuse, Child Abuse, The Misuse of Spiritual Authority, an extensive Appendix, and an Annotated Bibliography.

It is the committee’s desire to help the PCA respond well in cases where abuse is reported within the church.

Each of these pamphlets include summary statements included in the report to give the reader a general idea of each section of the report. For help in understanding and responding to the different types of abuse, readers should refer to the Report document.

Read the Report:  
<https://pcga.org/aic-report-abuse>

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Ad Interim Study Committee on  
**Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault**

# Theology of Abuse

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**PCA**<sup>®</sup>

Established by the  
General Assembly of the  
Presbyterian Church in  
America in 2019



## I. FOUNDATIONS

Elders in the Presbyterian Church in America take the vow to “sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures,” (BCO 21-5, 24-6). The report grounds its understanding of abuse in the ethical teachings of the *WLC* found in its exposition of the Ten Commandments.

The *WLC* lays out the sins of misuse of authority very clearly: aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others, failure of superiors in their duty towards inferiors, and sins of superiors against inferiors. These serve as the theological basis for our understanding of abuse.

**HEINOUS SINS — WLC 151:** Because heinous sins cause significant damage, they are to be punished more severely, and victims are to be shown greater care. Aggravating factors such as power differentials, the presence of covenant relationships, multiform sins, and repeated sins greatly magnify the damage to a victim’s soul.

The power differential is especially true of anyone who is weaker, but especially those who are substantially helpless, such as children, those with mental or physical disabilities, or those otherwise vulnerable due to their condition.

**THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT:** Authority, according to the catechism, is the power a “superior” receives from God. God gifts that power to benefit those under authority. This includes (but is not limited to) loving, blessing, praying for, instructing, counseling, and admonishing.

As this relates to abuse, it is the duty of the elders to instruct and counsel their congregations according to God’s word (Deut. 6:6-7), the confessional standards, and common grace informed resources. Superiors thereby provide members with the tools necessary to care for one another. Learning what the Bible teaches regarding abuse and those who abuse, helps

# THEOLOGY OF ABUSE

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create a culture in the church that quickly identifies and thereby prevents sinful abusive behaviors.

It is also the duty of elders to protect and provide. Churches protect their members with policies that take into consideration the most vulnerable in the congregation.

The final duty of superiors is to bless inferiors. As it relates to abuse, lack of properly responding to evil when it happens is a failure to bless the vulnerable. Lack of response, and/or a poor response, may lead to spiritual disillusionment and perhaps the inferior departing from the church.

**THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT:** The locus of many sinful behaviors falling under the heading of abuse is found in this commandment. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expands the scope of the commandment from the unjust taking of life, to the inner working of our hearts and to the realm of speech.

Scripture is clear that preserving life includes defending victims of abuse. The first duty is to preserve our own lives. This speaks to the obligation victims have to protect themselves from an abuser.

The second duty falls under preserving the life of others. This type of preservation removes the victim, and any other potential victims, from the immediate vicinity of the abuser.

**THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT:** The Westminster Standards clearly prohibit sexual activity outside of marriage and participating in and viewing pornography. Illicit sexual behavior is a tactic abusers use. Coercion, or forcing victims to

participate in sexual activities, can also fall under the category of sexual assault. These sins are not simply sexual immorality but may be considered forms of abuse.

**DIVORCE:** the *Westminster Confession* (24:6) allows for divorce in the case of willful desertion, and the 20th General Assembly study committee report on divorce and remarriage allowed divorce in certain circumstances of abuse when a spouse is living under intolerable conditions.

**THE NINTH COMMANDMENT:** The positive duty under the ninth commandment is to preserve and promote truth. While false reports of abuse are rare, the best way to protect against them is to undertake an investigation to discover the truth. The duty of a church court is to perform thorough, competent, and unbiased investigations.

Abusers thrive on silence. Evil loves darkness. Thus, leaders should speak generally about the issue of abuse and specifically when abuse occurs in the community. *The church or institution’s reputation is secondary to reproof and discountenancing evil.*

One who is truly repentant will offer a free and full confession without hedging, hiding, or blaming others. They will confess fully, not simply confessing to those sins for which they have been caught.

This study grounds our understanding of abuse in the Holy Scriptures and God’s heart for victims. His desire is that we discountenance evil by bringing it into the light of day.