

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 Peace Works 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://pcaga.org/aic-report-abuse>

Ad Interim Study Committee on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault

Misuse of Spiritual Authority



PCA[®]

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



I. SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

Spiritual abuse aims to solidify the power, prestige, and gratification of the abuser. The means are a misuse of Scripture and of the victim's desire to please God and their leader. Victims suffer shame, confusion, and spiritual doubt, having a negative impact on the victim's perception of God's character. Congregations and the Body of Christ suffer morally and existentially beyond the purely secular and legal definitions of abuse.

2. EXPRESSING GOD'S HEART

Paul calls leadership a "noble task." Each character trait proceeds from a heart transformed by the gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit. The picture Paul paints for Timothy is of a leader motivated by the servanthood of Jesus Christ. Leaders are temperate, self-controlled, respectable, gentle, and self-aware of their own failing.

Historically, however, many leaders have been self-serving, motivated by power, authority, and material gain. When confronted, they shift blame. Oppressive leaders wield power and are averse to sacrifice. They are unwilling to relinquish the control that power brings and instead use it to build their own kingdom. God casts the most severe judgment on this abusive type of shepherd.

3. RECOGNITION

Abusive leaders fail to apply the gospel to how they lead. There is a difference between lording over and serving the flock. Godly leaders see authority as God-given for His glory. Harsh, authoritarian, and abusive leadership is roundly denounced by God and the Westminster divines. It must likewise be denounced by the modern church.

MISUSE OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

Spiritual abuse is an attempt to exert power and control over someone using religion, faith, or beliefs.

The primary leader of an abusive organization may be charismatic, charming, and/or particularly gifted at preaching. Followers may be driven by the vision of the leader and will protect his position for the church and/or organization and for their own sense of power in the system.

4. RESPONDING

The unfortunate response of many churches has been to ignore or cover up abuse. For a victim, this feels as if they have been betrayed twice. It results in shame and ostracism, with further emotional, spiritual, and physical harm. Those who suffer under abusive leadership may struggle in their relationship with both the church and with God. When abuse occurs, churches must have established processes for comforting and restoring victims. Remember that abuse by a "man of God" is confusing, which creates significant difficulty for reporting.

5. REPORTING

Those who have experienced any form of abuse and/or assault should have an easily accessible, empathetic, reliable, and formal means of reporting. Appointed and highly visible advocates in the local church might include a small group of well-trained members.

Reportable complaints should be given to police. Non-reportable complaints should be written in sufficient detail and presented to the Session. It is wise to shield a victim's identity unless given permission to disclose. It is important that PCA churches avail themselves of the formal system for accountability if a Teaching Elder is exhibiting signs of abuse and refusing to repent.

6. REDEMPTIVE SHEPHERDING

The consequences of abusive leadership are significant for a congregation and will require intensive grace and repair by the Holy Spirit. Ministering to the victim of abusive leadership is intended to provide opportunity for healing physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

This shepherding care should be assigned to well-trained elders and counselors. These caregivers should be capable of demonstrating God's grace in order to improve and heal the traumas specific to the victim(s). Victims have different needs, and to effectively minister, elders and counselors must understand these complexities.

7. PREVENTION OF ABUSIVE LEADERS

A minister of the gospel in the PCA is expected to strive for purity of doctrine and the unity and peace of his congregation. He is to "adorn the profession of the gospel" in his relationships and teaching. Leaders who neglect to recognize that their authority is *from* Jesus Christ and *under* His ultimate authority fail to lead in Christ-honoring ways.

Candidates for the gospel ministry and others employed for spiritual oversight (Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, etc.) should be examined carefully to determine their godly character. Background checks, social media checks, and careful reference checks should be used to screen for abusive leadership.