

Sexual Harassment and the Local Church – Fact Sheet

The topic of sexual harassment is forefront in our society. The United Methodist Church strongly supports gender equality and denounces the exploitation of power through sexual abuse (UMC Social Principles ¶ 161). The church has developed a number of tools and trainings (mostly for clergy) to deal with this issue, prevalent in every sector of society. There is a spectrum of behaviors that move from mild to criminal.

Some Definitions:

Sexual misconduct is fueled by deeply rooted attitudes about power, authority, and gender, and will be prevented when these attitudes are challenged and overhauled.

SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

Sexual misconduct within ministerial relationships is a betrayal of sacred trust. It is a continuum of sexual or gender-directed behaviors by either a lay or clergy person within a ministerial relationship (paid or unpaid). It can include child abuse, adult sexual abuse, harassment, rape or sexual assault, sexualized verbal comments or visuals, unwelcome touching and advances, use of sexualized materials including pornography, stalking, sexual abuse of youth or those without capacity to consent, or misuse of the pastoral or ministerial position using sexualized conduct to take advantage of the vulnerability of another. (*Book of Resolutions 2016 pg. 776*)

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment is a form of sexual misconduct and defined in ¶161 in the Social Principles. It is unwanted sexual or gender-directed behavior within a pastoral, employment, ministerial (including volunteers), mentor, or colleague relationship that is so severe or pervasive that it alters the conditions of employment or volunteer work or unreasonably interferes with the employee or volunteer's performance by creating a hostile environment. (*Book of Resolutions 2016 pg. 776*)

PORNOGRAPHY

The United Methodist Church declares that the use of pornography in church programs, on church premises, or with church property by persons in ministerial roles (lay and clergy) is a form of sexual misconduct, a chargeable offense for laity and clergy in The United Methodist Church. (*Book of Resolutions 2016 pg. 91-92*)

Sexual harassment in the local church can occur at several levels.

Children and Youth:

Most churches have addressed the vulnerability of children and youth by creating policies, procedures and trainings to insure "Safe Sanctuaries" for the most vulnerable among us. SPRC members should know your churches policy and monitor its enforcement. The Northern Illinois Conference supports this work through on-line trainings options and background check recommendations. You can learn more about this from the conference website at: <https://www.umcnic.org/shepherding-team/congregational-life/age-related-ministries/safe-sanctuaries>

Adult/Adult Harassment (Parishioner or Employee):

Whether lay or volunteer, there are times when we violate one another's space intentionally or unintentionally. Every congregation should develop their own Sexual Harassment policy. Having a policy in place helps parishioners and staff understand the boundaries and the steps to be taken if they feel their boundaries have been violated. If your church receives a sexual harassment complaint take it seriously, remain neutral, follow the steps in your policy and seek reconciliation for all parties. Your District Superintendent can also provide resources for addressing such situations. The NIC Sexual Harassment policy may serve as a template for your own local church policy work. This policy can be found in the Annual Conference Journal Resolution 703-04.

Clergy and Sexual Harassment:

There is a code of conduct for clergy with clear boundaries identified in the United Methodist Book of Discipline. Clergy supervision is the responsibility of the District Superintendent and the Bishop. If an issue arises concerning harassment and actions of the pastor it should be immediately reported to the District Superintendent. There are also times when clergy feel they have been the recipient of harassing behavior. The clergy person may choose to work with this situation through the SPRC or with the assistance of the District Superintendent.

Additional Resources:

A 3 session SPRC training video series can be found at the Missouri Conference website: <https://www.moumethodist.org/boundaryPPRC>

The UMC General Commission on the Status and Role of Women: <http://www.gcsrw.org/>

United Media Resource Center catalogue at: <https://www.umcnic.org/umrc>