

BOR #2045: Eradication of Sexual Harassment In The United Methodist Church and Society

Since the mid 1970s when the term “sexual harassment” was first recognized, the world has seen an evolution in awareness, laws and litigation, policies, advocacy, and international collaboration to eradicate sexual harassment in the workplace. In our own communities we have moved from debating whether or not sexual harassment is even a problem to witnessing women and men join together across national boundaries to address it in global settings, churches and ministries, and multinational workplaces.

Since the 1990s, sexual harassment is a recognized form of sexual violence and misconduct in our societies and in The United Methodist Church. The Church declared sexual harassment a sin against individuals and communities, and a chargeable offense against our clergy or laity. Critical to our understanding of the impact of harassment is the recognition that it is certainly an abuse of power over another, not only inappropriate sexual or gender-directed conduct.

Definitions

Beginning with the continuum of behaviors that includes sexual harassment: Sexual misconduct within ministerial relationships is a betrayal of sacred trust. It is a continuum of unwanted 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. It includes criminal behaviors in some nations, states, or communities.

Sexual harassment is a form of sexual misconduct. The Social Principles define it as “any unwanted sexual comment, advance or demand, either verbal or physical, that is reasonably perceived by the recipient as demeaning, intimidating, or coercive. Sexual harassment must be understood as an exploitation and abuse of a power relationship rather than as an exclusively sexual issue. Sexual harassment includes, but is not limited to, the creation of a hostile or abusive working environment resulting from discrimination on the basis of gender” (§ 161J).

To clarify further, 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. It can create a hostile, offensive environment that can include unwanted sexual jokes, repeated advances, touching, displays, or comments that insult, degrade, or sexually exploit women, men, elders, children, or youth.

Generally, anyone can be a target and anyone can harass—women, men, youth, interns, volunteers, all racial/ethnic groups, any level of employee, clergy, or laity. In the learning place, it affects any student of either gender, any grade, any teacher or professional, or any volunteer.

Businesses, governments, congregations, and organizations lose significant human and financial resources when harassment is permitted to devastate workers, customers, or members. It damages self-esteem, productivity, and ability to minister or earn wages. It can result in illness, absenteeism, poor performance, loss of promotions and opportunities. For students it can result

in failure, absenteeism, isolation from peers, loss of self-esteem and learning potential, withdrawal from teams and groups, and illness. Families of the harassed and others in work, worship, and learning places are also victims of the hostile, intimidating environment harassment creates.

Harassment in the Church

In the church, harassment can occur between a staff person, pastor, committee or council chairperson, church school teacher or helper, student, camper, counselor, youth worker, volunteer, or chaperone, paid or unpaid. It can happen on the bus to camp, in a youth group or Bible study, on a church computer or in choir rehearsal. The devastating effects on persons when it happens in a faith community jeopardize spiritual life, theological meaning, and relationships. For some, the loss of a sense of safety and sanctuary can be permanent. In 1990, the General Council on Ministries released the study mandated by General Conference in 1988 examining sexual harassment in The UMC. Then, half of the clergy, 20 percent of laity, nearly half of students, and 37 percent of church staff had had an experience of harassment in a church setting. Nearly 20 years ago we had much work to do to eradicate this form of sexual misconduct and violence.

Four quadrennia later, good work has been done toward the elimination of sexual harassment in the Church. Thirty-five annual conferences now assign oversight of harassment issues to a “team,” and many conferences require sexual misconduct awareness training for all clergy. Since the General Conference mandated sexual harassment policies in 1996, more and more churches of every size continue to report policies in place (in 2007: 34 percent of smallest and 86 percent of largest membership congregations have policies—up from 9 percent and 36 percent, respectively, in 1995). The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women has provided support and counsel to victims and

church officials in hundreds of cases.

But the most recent surveys of our progress in eradicating sexual harassment (2005 and 2007¹) are very troubling: sexual harassment remains a significant problem for women and men, lay and clergy in our church settings, programs, and with church property (including computers and the Internet):

1. Awareness of the denomination's policy on sexual harassment is relatively high (higher among clergy than laity), but awareness of the resources for victims and congregations is much lower.

2. While every local congregation is required to have a policy and procedure on sexual misconduct, including sexual harassment, in 2007 only 34 percent of small and 86 percent of largest membership churches report that they do.

3. Ninety percent of pastors have attended at least one sexual ethics training, but only one of four pastors has attended supplementary training.

4. More than three-fourths of the clergywomen and half of the laywomen had experienced sexual harassment in the Church (only a third of laymen had); the most commonly reported settings were church meetings and offices, and workplaces and social gatherings at seminary.

5. Perpetrators are most often men and increasingly laypersons in the local church. Clergy commit over a third of reported offenses. A significant change since the 1990 study was significant increases in the number of laity harassing laity, and laity harassing clergy.

6. Local churches were most likely to trivialize reports/

complaints while seminaries and UM offices were more likely to move toward action against offenders.

7. Personal friends and relatives were most helpful to victims, while district superintendents, personnel officers, and seminary administrators were among the least helpful.

8. The most lasting negative effects were inability to work with the offender, emotional impacts, and worsened feelings about self and the church.

9. Smaller membership churches need resources and training specifically developed for their unique settings and dynamics.

1. "Sexual Harassment in The United Methodist Church 2005," and the "Quadrennial Local Church Survey 2007," by the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women," Chicago, Illinois, Gail Murphy-Geiss, Principal Investigator.

In The United Methodist Church, constant vigilance is needed to keep effective, updated policies and procedures in all places in the church. Regular training of our lay and clergy leaders is a critical ongoing ministry of our church, with focus on the troubling use of "cyber-sex" (sexualized material in telecommunications) in church programs, with church property, or on church premises.

In 2006, a significant national symposium addressing sexual misconduct in The United Methodist Church, "Do No Harm," was held. At that critical event, participants asked episcopal leaders to focus on clergy training, lay leadership training, and early intervention with problem clergy. Advocacy and intervention teams have been working in many conferences but not all, and

every episcopal area needs to maintain working, effective channels and procedures. We need and are grateful for strong episcopal leadership across the Church who maintain our achievements and forcefully address existing barriers to a harassment-free denomination.

A Vision of God's Hospitable Community

Sexual harassment destroys community. This alienating, sinful behavior causes brokenness in relationships—the opposite of God's intention for us. From the first biblical stories of human community in the garden to the letters of Paul to the first Christian communities, we learn that all of us, both female and male, are created in the image of God, and thus have been made equal in Christ. We are called to be stewards of God's community of hospitality where there is not only an absence of harassment, but also the presence of welcome, respect, and equality.

Therefore, the General Conference calls for intensified efforts worldwide to eradicate sexual harassment in the denomination and its institutions including these strategies:

1. Episcopal leaders implement plans to address and eradicate sexual harassment in each episcopal area including regular, updated training of clergy, early intervention with problem clergy, and regular training of lay men and women, especially in smaller membership churches;
2. The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, in collaboration with appropriate agencies (including the General Board of Discipleship's Safe Sanctuaries ministry), continue to develop and distribute resources to reduce the risk of abuse in local churches and increase United Methodists' understanding and action on sexual harassment in church and society;

3. The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, in collaboration with appropriate agencies, develop and distribute resources on sexual harassment specific to those in ordained ministry and to lay leaders, students, faculty, and administrators of United Methodist-related educational institutions;

4. Annual conferences throughout the connection will encourage their local and national governments to collect accurate data on the incidence and nature of sexual harassment in their workplaces, and encourage their national governments to adopt laws, policies, and procedures for eradicating sexual harassment;

5. The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women continue to monitor and assess the Church's progress in eradicating sexual harassment and will seek ways to report its findings to the Church on the specific areas to be strengthened within the life of the Church including policy development, prevention, education, and training;

6. The General Board of Church and Society and the General Board of Global Ministries advocate for laws that prohibit sexual harassment in US workplaces, and continue to provide resources to the denomination on international initiatives to eradicate harassment and other forms of violence against women;

7. The Office of Christian Unity and Interreligious Relationships work cooperatively with the World Council of Churches "Decade to Overcome Violence" (2001-2010); and

8. The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women continue to conduct assessments of The United Methodist Church's progress to eradicate this behavior from the Church worldwide.

For more information and resources, see The Book of Resolu-

tions, 2012, “Sexual Misconduct Within Ministerial Relationships” (#2044) and the original text of this resolution in The Book of Resolutions, 2004, p. 155.

ADOPTED 1992

REVISED AND ADOPTED 2000, 2008, 2016

RESOLUTION #2045, 2008, 2012 BOOK OF RESOLUTIONS

RESOLUTION #37, 2004 BOOK OF RESOLUTIONS

RESOLUTION #31, 2000 BOOK OF RESOLUTIONS

See Social Principles, ¶ 161J.