

When Ministerial Professionals Encounter Boundary Violations: Sexual Harassment by Congregants

Sexual abuse, sexual misconduct, and sexual harassment are chargeable offenses both for clergy and laity per *The Book of Discipline* ¶ 2702.

“**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. It includes criminal behaviors in some nations, states, and communities.”

(The Book of Resolutions 2016, #2044)

“**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. Contrary to the nurturing community, sexual harassment creates improper, coercive, and abusive conditions wherever it occurs in society. Sexual harassment undermines the social goal of equal opportunity and the climate of mutual respect between men and women. Unwanted sexual attention is wrong and discriminatory. Sexual harassment interferes with the moral mission of the Church.” *(The Book of Discipline 2016, ¶ 161.J)*

“Sexual harassment is a form of sexual misconduct and is defined [above] in the Social Principles. 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 by creating a hostile environment that can include unwanted sexual jokes, repeated advances, touching, displays, or comments that degrade, or sexually exploit women, men, elders, children, or youth.” *(The Book of Resolutions 2016, #2044)*

REMEMBER: It is always the responsibility of the person in the ministerial role to maintain appropriate boundaries. If you are a clergy person or other church leader who has encountered boundary violations or harassment by a lay person, here is a SUGGESTED PROCESS for re-asserting and maintaining appropriate professional boundaries. At any point in this process, you may contact your senior pastor, District Superintendent, the CART Team Coordinator or the director of the Center for Leadership Development to begin the official complaint process.

Who to Contact:

If you would like to speak with someone about your options for taking action in response to sexual harassment, you may contact the following individuals for a confidential conversation:

Your District Superintendent**CART (Congregational Assessment, Response and Transformation) Team Coordinator**

Rev. Liz Greenwell | greenwell@ntcumc.org | (972) 526-5040 ext. 226

Center for Leadership Development Director

Rev. Cammy Gaston | cgaston@ntcumc.org | (972) 526-5036

If you would like to have a confidential conversation with a person outside of the official process to help discern your next steps, you may contact:

Rev. Carol Montgomery | cmontgomery@tmf-fdn.org

If you would like to contact a confidential hotline, staffed by the Commission on the Status and Role of Women of the UMC, you may call 1-800-523-8290

Suggested Process:**A. Initial Incident Response**

1. Pastor perceives an advance has been made.
2. Pastor needs to establish professional pastoral boundaries:
 - Identify your role as the pastor:
 - i. “I am your pastor...” “As your pastor I...” “The United Methodist Church takes this kind of conduct very seriously and considers this behavior as sexual harassment...”
 - Identify that they are part of a community, not just “you and me” framing.
 - i. “We are in relationship to a congregation, denomination, calling(s), roles, responsibilities...” Expand the awareness of your context by bringing in others you are both responsible for and in relationship with.
 - “I cannot be your pastor if...”
3. DOCUMENT – Written and verbal (SPRC Chair).
4. Inform the DS. What? Where? When (include date, time)? Who? “Advance” behavior or verbiage? Witnesses? What happened after clarifying boundaries?
5. Call Director, Center for Leadership Development to engage CART process.

B. If inappropriate behavior continues:

1. Re-establish boundaries
 - I will not meet with you privately
 - Explain that someone will be in the church if/when you meet and that confidence will be maintained.
 - Reiterate your identity/role to congregant
2. DOCUMENT – written to SPRC and DS.

C. If violation of boundaries persists:

1. Call an informal meeting for the purpose of clarifying communally the role and responsibility of the pastor and appropriate behavior of congregants. (In the North Texas Conference, this is usually done by the CART Team who can organize and facilitate this meeting, often with the District Superintendent).
2. Invite:
 - a. DS – certainly informing them of your purpose; who will be attending; follow-up communication plan; meeting location; etc. Ask DS if it is appropriate (or wise) to have a conversation with the annual conference Chancellor for any recommendations, suggestions; simply being put “on notice”.
 - b. Violator – Ask them to bring a friend or family member– someone they trust – for a conversation with others about issues related to serving as pastor. They are to bring someone who can be reflective with them, not a person acting as legal counsel.
 - c. SPRC Chair
3. Seek resolution with CLEAR boundaries about how to behave appropriately and why the boundaries have to be maintained. Consider preparing a “Behavioral Covenant” identifying what you need as pastor and be prepared to name what behaviors need to stop by the violator. Write out the agreed “ways of being” and have everyone sign as witnesses and prayer partners.
4. If you sense it will help, plan a follow-up meeting for a “check-in” and if further clarification/information is needed – supportive accountability.
5. Follow-up with a letter to everyone involved as to purpose of the meeting; those attending; if resolution was reached, note the specifics; thank everyone and seek continued prayer for everyone. (Copy to DS).

D. If the violator refuses to sign a Behavior Covenant:

1. Be clear that the violator is making a choice about their relationship to the church and is choosing not to be in contact, communication, on church property or attend any church programming until they agree and sign the behavior covenant.
2. Have everyone in attendance note and sign that they witnessed a refusal to sign by the violator. Follow-up by sending a certified letter to the violator, specifying a procedure they can initiate for future participation in any church sponsored activities. (Who to contact, etc)
3. Send copies of all documentation via certified mail to the DS (and possibly the Bishop’s office). DO NOT ELECTRONICALLY SEND ANY DOCUMENTATION. DS along with the pastor should certainly review the status of things with the Chancellor at this time.
4. Consider meeting with those in leadership, stressing the need for confidentiality.
 - a. SPRC Chair and Committee
 - b. Trustees
 - c. Lay Leader
 - d. Staff
 - e. Custodian(s)
5. Make clear that professional, appropriate boundaries are taken very seriously in the UMC as well as the need for our congregants to be responsible for maintaining safe, healthy, respectful and honoring behavior to one another and those in professional leadership.
6. Have a reporting/communication and response plan in place if/when the violator appears on church property, during church programs/services, or makes contact with church leaders.

If flirtation has happened between a clergy and a lay person (mutual attraction/ enticement):

1. **Name** and confess your participation in the confusion of boundaries and your role as pastor. Name the mixed messages/signals to bring them to light.
2. **Repent** – Identify your role as pastor and being responsible for maintaining clear, healthy, professional relationships with all in the congregation and apologize by naming the confusion and harm your behavior has brought to your relationship with the congregant.
3. **Reconcile** – Identify what boundaries must be made and kept as well as what damaging or misleading behaviors must be stopped. Pastors – talk with a grounded confidant and make a behavior covenant with clear accountability structures built in. Example: regular and frequent meetings with confidant reflecting on issues related to wandering over healthy, professional boundaries.

Dating between clergy and parishioners

The question of whether it is acceptable for a clergyperson to date a parishioner continues to be the subject of much debate. Despite varying opinions, the Judicial Council asserts that dating, romantic or sexual relationships between clergy and their parishioners “are never appropriate because of imbalance of power.” (*Judicial Council Decision 1228*). Relationships that pre-date an appointment, such as when a non-parishioner significant other decides to begin attending church, are not ethically inappropriate, but can be systematically difficult. The superintendent should be notified when a significant other becomes a regular participant in the life of the congregation.