

The West Virginia Conference Sexual Ethics Policy

What Do We Expect of Church Leaders?

Church leaders should do no harm.

The church is a unique environment in which we expect no harm to be done. The church seeks wholeness and healing, in unity expressed as the Body of Christ. Where such unity prevails, there is no exploitation, no humiliation, and no abuse.

People in a ministerial role will be held accountable.

The ministerial role is one of power and responsibility. Persons called to ministerial roles are expected to dedicate themselves to the highest ideals of the Christian life for the sake of the church and the most effective witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Conduct is as important a witness as the sermons preached, the rites celebrated, the counsel offered and other church tasks performed. Church leaders, whether clergy or laity, must maintain appropriate sexual boundaries that respect the fact that a power differential exists between them and those whom they serve.

What Is Sexual Misconduct According to The United Methodist Church?

Sexual misconduct is a chargeable offense, for both laity and clergy. Chargeable offenses include, but are not limited to: child abuse; sexual abuse; sexual misconduct; the use of pornography; sexual harassment; and gender discrimination (*The Book of Discipline 2016*, par. 2702.1).

Definitions

Sexualization of the ministerial relationship is a betrayal of sacred trust. **Sexual misconduct** 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, touching and advances, use of sexualized materials including pornography, stalking, sexual abuse of youth or those without capacity to consent, or misuse of the ministerial position using sexualized conduct to take advantage of the vulnerability of another.

Sexual harassment is “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 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.” (*The Book of Discipline 2016*, par. 161.1)

Sexual abuse is a form of sexual misconduct and occurs when a person within a ministerial role of leadership (lay or clergy, pastor, educator, counselor, youth leader, or other position of leadership) engages in sexual contact or sexualized behavior with a congregant, client, employee, student, staff member, coworker, or volunteer.

Pornography is sexually explicit material that portrays violence, abuse, coercion, domination, humiliation, or degradation for the purpose of arousal. Any sexually explicit material that depicts children is pornographic.

Dating irrevocably alters the relationship between clergy person and parishioner and is discouraged within the congregation. Because of vulnerability and power differences within the ministerial relationship, meaningful consent is difficult. Any decision to initiate a dating relationship within this context would require transparency with all involved, including the district superintendent and pastor-parish relations committee, and plans for alternative pastoral support for the person involved.

How Does The United Methodist Church Respond to Sexual Misconduct?

The Book of Discipline sets forth the plan by which we United Methodists govern ourselves. It reflects our understanding of the Church and of what is expected of its laity and clergy as they seek to be effective witnesses in the world as a part of the whole body of Christ. Complaints will be handled according to *The Book of Discipline*. *The Book of Discipline* will not substitute for actions which might be brought in a civil or criminal court. Any person reporting sexual misconduct will be heard with compassion. Appropriate support will be given to the complainant(s), the respondent(s), their families, and the congregation or Conference agency involved.

1. If you feel you are a victim of sexual misconduct within the West Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church, you are encouraged to contact one of the following people (contact information may be found below*). If the misconduct involves a/an:
 - a. *Clergy person*, contact a District Superintendent or the Bishop.
 - b. *Employee or volunteer leader* in a Conference-sponsored activity, contact the Bishop.
 - c. *Lay person in a ministerial role*, contact a District Superintendent.
 - d. *Lay person in a local church leadership role* contact your pastor or a District Superintendent.
2. Allegations involving minors or an adult incapable of self-reporting shall be reported to the appropriate government authorities. In WV, a report must be made to the Department of Health and Human Services Hotline (1-800-352-6513, for both children and vulnerable adults). If the reporter believes a child suffered serious physical abuse or sexual abuse, he or she must also immediately report to the state police or a local law enforcement agency with jurisdiction to investigate. In Garrett County MD, contact Child Protective Services at 301-533-3005. For MD Adult Protective Services, call 800-917-7383. In addition to these reports, the notification procedures described in #1 above and the church's Safe Sanctuary policy shall be followed.
3. Retaliation on account of a good faith report of sexual misconduct shall not be tolerated and shall be considered a separate violation of this policy.

**The Bishop's office and each district superintendent may be contacted through the conference office at 304-344-8331. Direct contact information is on the conference website at www.wvumc.org.*

What Support Does the West Virginia Conference Offer to Those Affected by Sexual Misconduct?

A Conference Response Team is named and maintained by the Bishop consisting of persons specially trained to respond as outlined by *The Book of Discipline*. This Team and the Cabinet shall consult and agree upon appropriate case management procedures.

How Will We Help Reduce Sexual Misconduct?

Education and awareness are key elements in the reduction of sexual misconduct and in effective intervention when sexual misconduct occurs. The West Virginia Conference will provide education to clergy and laity in ministerial roles to reduce sexual misconduct.

This education shall include

1. ethical standards of behavior
2. resources for spiritual, emotional, physical well-being, and
3. a description of the complaint process and resources available to affected individuals and congregations.

Basic education and training shall be required

1. for laypersons in ministerial roles – within six months of employment.
2. for clergy – within six months of initial appointment

Basic education and training shall be offered to volunteers and non-ministerial employees in the church.

Following completion of basic education, supplemental training on these subjects shall be offered and/or approved by the West Virginia Conference and required both for clergy and laypersons at least every four years while serving in a ministerial role.

Congregations shall

1. become educated about issues related to appropriate boundaries and sexual misconduct,
2. draft, approve and follow a local church policy regarding Sexual Harassment, Sexual Abuse and Sexual Misconduct. Until such a policy has been adopted, the Conference policy and procedures will be in effect for the local church.
3. show concern for the health of the congregation and that of their leaders,
4. be aware of the demands on the time of their ministerial leaders and establish reasonable expectations, and
5. support continuing education, training, consultation, and peer connections for their clergy and lay leaders.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Book of Discipline, Abingdon Press, 2016. A free edition is available online at www.cokesbury.com under UMC, 2016 Book of Discipline Free Edition (www.cokesbury.com/forms/DynamicContent.aspx?id=87&pageid=920) Paragraphs 362 & 2702 detail complaint procedures and chargeable offenses.

Child Abuse reporting information, including list of mandatory reporters:
www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/mandat

ChildHelp national reporting hotline is 1.800.4.A.CHILD (1.800.422.4453).

Local church policies recommendations: www.umsexualethics.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Local-Church-Policy-Alert-REV.pdf

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence resource list, including wide variety of national agency resource links relating to abuse: www.ncadv.org/resources

Resources relating to sexual misconduct and healing: 1-800-523-8390 or www.umsexualethics.org

This policy has been adapted, with appreciation, from the Susquehanna Conference.