

RESOLUTION 36 SEXUAL ABUSE WITHIN MINISTERIAL RELATIONSHIPS

There is little doubt that sexual misconduct in church and society is a significant and troubling topic for our communities and congregations worldwide. We are aware that this unwanted behavior damages the moral environment where people worship, work, and learn. In 1996, the General Conference made a commitment to focus on sexual misconduct within the church and take action to address this brokenness and pain within The United Methodist Church. (*Book of Resolutions 1996*, p. 128; *2000*, p.135)

Power and Responsibility

These words of Ann Smith capture the essence of this critical issue: "The abuse of power occurs when we use power to gratify our own needs rather than to carry out God's sacred trust. It happens when we refuse to own the responsibility of guardianship that comes with the privilege of power . . . until we understand that power is the responsibility to give, instead of the opportunity to take, we will continue to abuse it." (*Alive Now*, Sept./Oct. 1996)

In accordance with *The Book of Discipline*, ¶161F, all human beings have equal worth in the eyes of God. As the promise of Galatians 3:26-29 states, "all are one in Christ;" therefore, we as United Methodists support equity among all persons without regard to ethnicity, situation or gender. In our congregations and settings for ministry, we seek to create an environment of hospitality for all persons, male or female, which is free from misconduct of a sexual nature and encourages respect, equality and kinship in Christ.

Those in positions of authority in the church, both clergy and lay, have been given much responsibility, vested with a sacred trust to maintain an environment that is safe for people to live and grow in God's love. Misconduct of a sexual nature inhibits the full and joyful participation of all in the community of God. Sexual misconduct in church and ministry settings impedes the mission of Jesus Christ. Ministerial leaders have the responsibility not only to avoid actions and words which hurt others, but also to protect the vulnerable against actions or words which cause harm.

As our children, youth and adults come to worship, study, camps, retreats, and schools of mission, they bring a heightened awareness of the issues of sexual abuse, sexual harassment, incest, rape, and sexual assault. In the safety and sanctity of the church's settings, we as church leaders and volunteers can be confronted with questions and disclosures of sexual violence and abuse from persons in our churches. We as clergy or lay ministers are asked for guidance and support from vulnerable and sometimes broken individuals. As we enter these pastoral and ministerial relationships, we do so facing the complexity of risk, vulnerability, and moral/ethical dilemmas. It is not only our pastors who find themselves searching for good information and wise advice to share; it is also our lay and clergy, volunteer and paid persons who fill ministerial roles with children, youth, young adults, and adults. These leaders may find themselves needing information and sufficient training or preparation for their ministry. All will need an appropriate and affirming ethic to guide their own behavior within a ministerial

relationship with a group or individual parishioner. Clarity about the nature and scope of sexual misconduct is essential.

Sexual misconduct by either a lay person or clergy person within a ministerial relationship can be defined as a betrayal of sacred trust, a violation of the ministerial role, and the exploitation of those who are vulnerable in that relationship. Sexual abuse within the ministerial relationship 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. (*Book of Resolutions 1996*, p. 130)

"Sexualized behavior" is behavior that communicates sexual interest and/or content. Examples include, but are not limited to displaying sexually suggestive visual materials; making sexual comments or innuendo about one's own or another person's body; touching another person's body; hair; or clothing; touching or rubbing oneself in the presence of another person; kissing; and sexual intercourse.

"Sexual harassment and sexual abuse within the ministerial relationship" represent an exploitation of power and not just "inappropriate sexual or gender-directed conduct." Sexual harassment is a continuum of behaviors that intimidate, demean, humiliate, or coerce. These behaviors range from the subtle forms that can accumulate into a hostile working, learning, or worshiping environment to the most severe forms of stalking, assault, or rape. It is important to see both sexual harassment and sexual abuse within relationships at work, school, or church as part of this continuum of brokenness. (*Book of Resolutions 1996*, p. 130)

Those in Ministerial Roles

Both laity and clergy fill ministerial roles in our church programs. In addition to clergy or professional staff, any United Methodist may fill a ministerial role by participating in such ministries as:

- leading and participating in lay speaking ministries;
- counseling or leading events for children, youth, and adults;
- teaching and leading in church schools for children, youth, and adults;
- counseling victims of violence, domestic violence, or sexual abuse;
- counseling couples about marriage, divorce, or separation;
- filling the pulpit temporarily;
- volunteering to chaperone trips, work camps, or special events;
- working in Walks to Emmaus and Chrysalis retreats;
- mentoring;
- supervising church staff members; and
- serving as missionaries.

Survey Results on Our Progress

In 1996, the General Conference confronted the topic of sexual abuse and sexual harassment within the ministerial relationship. It called for the development of policies in our churches, conferences, agencies, and schools. It further called for training and advocacy practices. The General Conference also called for a survey of progress as a denomination conducted by the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women in cooperation with other general agencies.

Surveys of annual conferences and local congregations reveal that our progress in four areas is not enough: prevention, education, intervention, and healing. The General Conference continues to call for additional technical assistance in several areas:

1. resources for various constituencies within the church addressing prevention, education, intervention, and healing after lay or clergy sexual misconduct;
2. more training (entry level, follow-up, and advanced) for the various constituencies within the church addressing prevention, education, intervention, and healing;
3. discovery, development and implementation of models for intervention and healing in order to provide a consistent and thorough response when complaints of lay or clergy sexual misconduct are initiated;
4. development of a model for ongoing assessment of policies, practices, and responses of conferences in addressing clergy and lay sexual misconduct;
5. appropriate handling of the presence and involvement of legally convicted sexual offenders in local congregational activities and ministry;
6. opportunities for annual conferences to share their resources and experiences in responding to complaints of clergy and lay misconduct of a sexual nature.

Therefore, be it resolved, that The United Methodist Church renews its stand in opposition to the sin of sexual misconduct and abuse within the church. It further recommits all United Methodists to the eradication of sexual misconduct in all ministerial relationships, and calls for:

1. The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women to continue to convene and coordinate a cooperative work team to address the areas of prevention, education, intervention, and healing with regard to lay and clergy misconduct of a sexual nature. The team will include persons from the General Board of Global Ministries, the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, the General Council on Finance and Administration, the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, the General

Board of Discipleship, the General Board of Church and Society, and up to four additional persons from throughout the connection with expertise in these areas.

- a. The work team's expenses, including but not limited to costs of travel, will be paid from the existing budgets of the participating agencies.
- b. The work team will report its findings, actions, conclusions, and recommendations to the 2008 General Conference, including proposals for legislation if necessary.

2. The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, in cooperation with the various sponsoring bodies, to provide resources for leaders of lay events and programs within the church in order to help train and equip them to raise this important issue with laity (including lay speakers, lay leaders, Christian educators, persons in mission, leaders in Schools of Christian Mission, Walks to Emmaus, Chrysalis, and National Youth Ministry Organization events and training, and projects for young people through the Shared Mission Focus on Young People).

3. The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, through the cooperative work team, to ensure that resources for laity and clergy in ministerial roles are identified and promoted by the participating agencies for use in conferences, districts or clusters, and local congregations.

4. The Council of Bishops to reaffirm its commitment to preventing and eradicating sexual harassment, abuse and misconduct in the church through education, training, and sharing of resources. Each Episcopal area will develop ongoing plans to coordinate persons involved in prevention and intervention, including but not limited to: district superintendents, boards of ordained ministry, boards of laity, advocates, intervention and healing teams, trained mediators, and staff-parish relations committees.

5. United Methodist-related schools of theology to provide training on the prevention and eradication of sexual harassment, abuse, and misconduct within the ministerial relationship.

6. Annual conference boards of ordained ministry to provide education (entry level, follow-up, advanced) for all appointed clergy and for all newly appointed clergy and commissioned members. Annual conferences are also encouraged to provide similar education and training for those employed in ministerial leadership.

7. The General Board of Church and Society to continue to advocate for just laws that will help eradicate sexual harassment and abuse.

ADOPTED 1996, REVISED AND READOPTED 2000, REVISED AND READOPTED 2004. See Social Principles, ¶1611.