

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

If you feel you are the victim of a crime – or if you believe a child has been sexually abused by someone in a ministerial role – report the incident to the appropriate legal authorities immediately.

Child Abuse & Neglect Hotline
1-800-392-3738

Contact the Office of the Bishop or a district superintendent to make a report (if you so choose) as soon as possible.

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HIGHEST IDEALS

Clergy Sexual Ethics

Questions

Q. What is clergy* sexual misconduct?

A. Sexual misconduct is an abuse of power through sexual conduct or activity which violates the free choice, or abuses the vulnerability of a minor or adult parishioner, client, church staff person, student staff person, volunteer, or colleague. Sexual misconduct also includes the use or possession of pornography (§2702.1i).

**This brochure refers to “clergy” and “pastors,” but the Missouri Conference also has a sexual misconduct policy prohibiting sexual misconduct by any church professional which is defined as “full, associate, and provisional ministerial members of the Missouri Annual Conference, as well as ordained deacons and elders, diaconal ministers and local pastors, in both the effective and retired relationships, and other persons serving the Missouri Conference or any local church under appointment of the Bishop or under the supervision of a District Superintendent, including persons keeping their membership in another annual conference or in another denomination....”*

Q. What physical actions can be described as sexual misconduct?

A. Sexual misconduct may include physical contact such as:

- Sexual touch, including sexual intercourse and inappropriate caressing or fondling;
- Prolonged embrace when a brief hug is appropriate, or a kiss on the lips when a kiss on the cheek is appropriate;
- Tickling, stroking, or other touch that makes you uncomfortable; and
- Any touch that disregards your feelings or is against your will.

Q. What verbal behavior can be described as sexual misconduct?

A. Sexual misconduct may also include verbal behavior, such as:

- Comments that sexualize a relationship by expressing or implying sexual interest;
- Inappropriate comments about your body;
- Suggestive comments, jokes, or innuendo;
- Intimate questions, including questions about your current or prior relationship; and
- Discussion of the intimate details of the pastor’s own relationships or experience.

Q. Are there other behaviors that can be considered sexual misconduct?

A. Other descriptive examples of sexual misconduct include, but are not limited to:

- Seductive behavior of any sort;
- Sexual bribery – the solicitation of sex-related behavior by promise of rewards;
- Sexual coercion – intimidation by threat of punishment; and
- Any improper verbal and visual behavior, including the use of sexually explicit words, gestures, or images, including pornography of any sort.

Q. How does clergy sexual misconduct differ from other types of misconduct?

A. Because clergy persons are in a position of trust and authority, there can be an imbalance of power between a pastor and a person with whom the pastor has a ministerial relationship. This imbalance is greatest when someone has sought the advice or counsel of a pastor in a time of stress. No matter who initiates the contact, it is the pastor’s responsibility to maintain the proper boundaries of the relationship. A pastor who initiates sexual contact or allows it to occur risks crossing the boundaries and committing a breach of professional ethics and the rules in our *Book of Discipline*.

Q. Is sexual contact with my pastor ever appropriate?

A. It is not unusual for a person to feel attracted to his or her pastor. If you express your feelings, it is your pastor’s professional responsibility to explain why a relationship may be inappropriate. He or she should do so in a manner that respects your emotions and does not make you feel bad about yourself.

While it must be acknowledged that our *Book of Discipline* does not prohibit dating and/or romantic relationships between single clergy and congregants, any such relationship is extremely complicated. If there is a mutual interest and relatively equal power between the pastor and the parishioner, the pastor may ethically pursue the relationship only after fully removing himself or herself from the ministerial role in that person’s life. Unwillingness by the pastor to be open and honest with the congregation and his or her supervisors about the relationship may indicate that manipulation is present and that a permissible relationship is not possible.

Q. What can I do if I believe I am a victim of clergy sexual misconduct?

A. *First*, have faith in yourself. *Second*, make a report to any of the district superintendents or the Bishop’s Office. The names and contact information for all these people are listed on the back of this brochure.

Q. How will my concern be handled?

A. Once a written and signed complaint is made to the Bishop, a prompt and thorough investigation will be conducted and appropriate corrective action shall be taken if necessary. The procedure dealing with certain types of misconduct may be governed by §§361, §362 and §§2701-2719 of the *2016 Book of Discipline*. The investigation will be handled with as much discretion as the circumstances permit to protect the privacy of individuals involved.

Q. Should I be afraid of retaliation?

A. No. Retaliation will not be tolerated for reporting sexual misconduct, harassment or abuse in good faith. Retaliation will be considered a separate and independent act of misconduct. If you feel you have been the subject of retaliation, report your concern to the Bishop or a district superintendent, or contact one of the trained advocates who may assist you in ultimately making such a report should you so choose.

Q. What about forgiveness?

A. Forgiveness is a sacred teaching of the church, but this teaching in no way protects a person guilty of sexual misconduct from church discipline. It is not appropriate for church authorities to pressure persons harmed by sexual misconduct to “forgive” the offender as a way to restore to the offender the privilege of serving as a professional in the church.

Q. Where can I find a copy of the Sexual Ethics Policy?

A. The policy concerning all church professionals of the Missouri Conference of The United Methodist Church can be found by contacting:

- District Superintendents offices (see back panel).
- The Office of Connectional Ministries of The Missouri Annual Conference, kienne@moumethodist.org or 573-441-1770.