

Maintaining Healthy Relationships: What You Should Know About Clergy Sexual Misconduct

Statement of Purpose

The North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church is committed to the well-being of all United Methodists in the Conference and to maintaining healthy relationships between pastors* and the persons they serve. When a clergy person engages in sexual misconduct, this commitment requires the Conference to act as fairly and as quickly as possible so that healing can begin.

The purpose of this brochure is to give victims of clergy sexual misconduct in the North Texas Conference some basic information that may help them recognize misconduct and assist them in beginning the healing process.

The primary goals of the Conference's procedures for dealing with claims of clergy sexual misconduct are:

- above all, to protect the vulnerable by preventing further abuse from occurring,
- to provide an aggrieved person with information about the church's policies and procedures,
- to seek justice by acknowledging that the aggrieved has been wronged and holding the offender accountable through appropriate discipline,
- to encourage the aggrieved and the offender to receive appropriate counseling or treatment to facilitate healing,
- to restore the well-being of the congregation and others who have been affected,
- to treat everyone involved with the fairness, respect and compassion that our faith demands.

Defining Clergy Sexual Misconduct: What It Is And Why It Is Wrong

Any sexual contact or sexualized behavior between a pastor and a person with whom he or she has a professional relationship is clergy sexual misconduct.

Because clergy persons are in a position of trust and authority, there is an imbalance of power between a pastor and a person with whom the pastor has a ministerial relationship. Although this imbalance is greatest when someone has sought the advice or counsel of a pastor in a time of stress, it is inherent in the ministerial relationship and is always present.

Because of this unequal power, a parishioner or employee cannot give meaningful consent to sexual contact with a pastor. 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 has crossed the boundaries and committed a breach of professional ethics.

Clergy sexual misconduct includes actual sexual assault and sexual intercourse, of course, but it also includes more subtle conduct. This conduct may be physical contact or verbal behavior, including behavior that creates a hostile or intimidating environment and the explicit or implicit use of authority or power to coerce someone into sexual contact.

Examples Of Clergy Sexual Misconduct

Sexual misconduct may include physical contact, such as:

- sexual touch, including touch of sexual areas and inappropriate caressing or fondling,
- a prolonged embrace when a brief hug is appropriate, or pressing against your body when hugging,
- a kiss on the lips when a kiss on the cheek is appropriate,
- tickling, stroking or other playful touch that makes you uncomfortable,
- any touch that disregards your feelings or is against your will,

Sexual misconduct may 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 relationships,
- discussion of the intimate details of the pastor's own relationships or experiences,

Any behavior that gives you a feeling of discomfort or confusion about your relationship with your pastor may be a warning sign of sexual misconduct. For example, you may feel uneasy because your pastor has given you a personal gift or excessive personal attention, or because your pastor seems to want to talk about his or her own problems when you meet for counseling.

Is Sexual Contact with my Pastor Ever Appropriate?

It is not unusual for a member of a congregation to feel attracted to his or her pastor. There is nothing wrong with you just because you have these feelings. If you express your feelings, it is your pastor's professional responsibility to explain why a relationship would be inappropriate. He or she should do so in a manner that respects your feelings and does not make you feel bad about yourself. In other words, by "rejecting" you, your pastor is maintaining the integrity of the ministerial relationship between you.

It is extremely complicated and never advisable for a pastor to enter into a romantic relationship with a member of his or her congregation. If there is a mutual interest and relatively equal power between the pastor and the parishioner (which there must be in order for meaningful consent by the parishioner to be possible), the pastor may ethically pursue the relationship only after fully removing himself or herself from the ministerial relationship with the parishioner. It will be very difficult for a pastor to do so successfully if he or she has ever served as a counselor to the parishioner.

Unwillingness by the pastor to be open and honest with the congregation about the relationship may indicate that manipulation is present and that a healthy relationship is not possible.

It is natural to feel fear, anxiety, and confusion if you have experienced sexual harassment or abuse. In many cases, aggrieved persons feel they are to blame because they did not object to the behavior in the beginning. Even if you did not object, your pastor has engaged in sexual misconduct if he or she has abused his or her power by taking advantage of your vulnerability. It may help to share your feelings with someone you can trust.

Options For Reporting Clergy Misconduct

The policy the Conference follows in dealing with formal misconduct grievances is contained in ¶ 2702 of The 2016 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church. To initiate a grievance you must contact the Bishop of the North Texas Conference or any of the District Superintendents. Their names, addresses, phone numbers and e-mail addresses are on the last page of this document.

Resource Persons are available to assist persons who believe they may have been the object of clergy sexual misconduct. Resource Persons are lay persons who have been trained to provide such assistance, and are not employed by the Conference or any related church body.

Resource Persons

A Resource Person's role is to actively assist and support the person who is alleging clergy sexual misconduct. The support continues through the Conference's complaint process to the end that the aggrieved is empowered to reclaim his or her voice and that the church may once again be a place of sanctuary.

A Resource Person is an ally, listener, helper, clarifier and supporter. A Resource Person is not a judge, therapist, lawyer, decision-maker, rescuer, or mediator.

The role of the Resource Person is to:

- listen to and support the aggrieved,
- explain the church's processes and procedures,
- provide resources and referrals

In addition, the Resource Person may:

- help the aggrieved write a formal complaint if requested by the aggrieved person,
- accompany the aggrieved person to meetings in the complaint process as allowed by The Book of Discipline,
- call to the attention of the Bishop if hostile, vindictive, or insensitive situations arise during the complaint process or if the process outlined in The Book of Discipline is not properly followed,

Resource Persons serve on behalf of the Annual Conference and have been trained to serve in this capacity. You may contact the Bishop's Office, one of the District Superintendents, or The Center for Leadership Development if you feel you have been the object of clergy sexual misconduct and would like to speak to a Resource Person.

You do not have to register a complaint, formally or informally, before accessing a Resource Person, nor do you need permission from any level of The United Methodist Church to access a Resource Person. You do not have to identify yourself to talk to a Resource Person nor are you required to use a Resource Person.

Contact Information

BISHOP

Bishop Michael McKee, 500 Maplelawn Dr. Plano TX 75075 P. O. Box 866128 Plano TX 75086, (972) 526-5015 bishop@ntcumc.org

DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS

East District, Dr. Vic Casad, PO Box 1326 Sulphur Springs, TX 75483-1326, (903) 439-1117 ds@ntceastdistrict.org

Metro District, Rev. Cammy Gaston, 399 W. Campbell Road, #200B (214) 941-7712 cgaston@ntcumc.org

North Central District, Dr. Ronald Henderson, 1333 W. McDermott, #180 Allen, TX 75013 (469) 342-6864 rhenderson@ntcumc.org

Northwest District, Dr. L. Marvin Guier, III, 2304 Midwestern Pkwy., #205, Wichita Falls, TX 76308, (940) 767-6621 guier@ntcumc.org

THE CART TEAM

The Center for Leadership Development, Rev. Marti Soper
500 Maplelawn Drive, Plano, TX 75075 , (972) 526-5006 msoper@ntcumc.org

CART Crisis Team Coordinator, Rev. Dretha Burris, Dretha.Burris@firstrowlett.org

CART Crisis Team Coordinator, Dr. John Millerman, jhmillerman@gmail.com

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

*This page refers to “clergy persons” and “pastors,” but these words should be read to include all persons serving as ministers or counselors or in other positions of power or authority in the Conference, which can include both clergy and laity in a variety of circumstances. The conduct described is inappropriate for any of these persons.