

Policy on Church Professional Sexual Misconduct

Adopted: June 2005; Amended: June 2006; June 2008; June 2011; June 2013; June 2017

I. Purpose

Church professionals work in a covenant of sacred trust characterized by great power and even greater responsibility. Sexual misconduct is one of the gravest violations of this trust. This breach of relationship threatens not only those immediately affected, but also wounds the church itself. The South Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church states unambiguously that sexual misconduct, on the part of any church professional, is an unacceptable breach of sacred trust representing a tragic breakdown of character and commitment. The intention of this policy is to define sexual misconduct, establish procedures by which a complaint can be made and acted upon, provide appropriate support to all persons involved in a complaint, and delineate an educational requirement related to sexual ethics.

II. Theological Foundation

Jesus Christ is Lord. Living in Christ's grace we have life, health and hope. Jesus shows us the way to live before and with one another. In Christ, God has shown love for all persons (men, women, youth and children) and intends that all persons should relate to one another in love and justice. In Christ, God values all human life and intends that in all relationships the dignity and worth of everyone be respected. Therefore, sexual misconduct is an offense against God, our neighbor and ourselves. The church must clearly discipline those who violate God-given sexual boundaries. One who repents of sinful behavior is promised forgiveness; all persons are both in need of and should receive forgiveness and should be offered avenues for redemption. Nevertheless, forgiveness does not cancel the need for church discipline, which has also been clearly practiced in the church from its inception.

III. Definitions

- A. **Sexual Misconduct** occurs within the professional relationship when a church professional engages in sexual contact or sexualized behavior with a parishioner, client, employee, student or staff member (adult, teen, or child), whether or not there is consent from the individual. Beyond the professional relationship, sexual misconduct includes any inappropriate sexual conduct or sexualized behavior on the part of a church professional.

Sexual misconduct includes, but is not limited to, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, the use or possession of pornography, and any form of criminal sexual conduct. (§ 2702.1, *The Book of Discipline 2016*) T

This definition excludes relationships between spouses. It is not intended to restrict church professionals from healthy, mutual, social relationships with parishioners. Dating relationships, however, between church professionals and their parishioners, clients, students, or staff members are never appropriate because of an imbalance of power.

- B. **Sexual Harassment** is the attempt to coerce any person into a sexual relationship, or the subjection of any person to unwanted sexual attention. Behaviors considered in determining whether or not sexual harassment has occurred include: unwanted sexual advances or demands either verbal or from exploitation of a position of power. Such actions may include sexually oriented humor or language, questions or comments about sexual behavior or preference. Other actions include unwelcome or undesired physical contact, inappropriate comments about clothing or physical appearances, or repeated requests for social engagements when there is an employment, mentor or collegial relationship between the persons involved.
- C. **Pornography** is sexually explicit material utilized for the purposes of sexual excitement and erotic satisfaction. This includes but is not limited to material that portrays violence, abuse, coercion, domination, humiliation, or degradation for the purpose of arousal. In addition, any sexually explicit material that depicts children is pornographic and is a criminal act to access, possess and/or distribute.

- D. A **Complaint** is a written, dated and signed statement claiming sexual misconduct.
- E. A **Church Professional** is a clergy person, diaconal minister or layperson in any status or relationship with the Annual Conference whose appointment is set or approved by the Bishop. (This includes, but is not limited to, retired clergy not under appointment and those approved as local pastors, but not appointed.)
- F. A **Complainant** is a person who submits a written, signed allegation of sexual misconduct. A complainant may be a parent or responsible party in the case of minors or in the case of an adult incapable of self-reporting.

IV. Sexual Ethics Support Team

- A. **TEAM PURPOSE:**
The Bishop of the South Georgia Annual Conference may, at his/her discretion, create and deploy on a case-by-case basis, a Sexual Ethics Support Team. The team purpose shall be to offer support for any party involved in a complaint of sexual misconduct including: the complainant, the accused church professional, and/or a congregation affected by such a complaint.
- B. **TEAM MAKEUP:**
The South Georgia Annual Conference Sexual Ethics Support Team shall consist of persons chosen by the Bishop in consultation with the Conference Crisis Team, Cabinet, Board of Ordained Ministry and/or the Conference Pastoral Counselor. The Bishop shall be sensitive to issues of race, gender, and the inclusion of persons who will advocate appropriately for potential victims of sexual harassment, misconduct, and abuse. The Conference Pastoral Counselor is accountable for coordinating, training and supporting the work of this team as directed by the Bishop.
- C. **TEAM FUNCTION:**
 1. The Bishop may offer one or more persons in response to the needs of a complainant, an accused church professional, or a congregation experiencing a sexual misconduct complaint.
 2. When deployed, a support team member(s) will:
 - a. Explain the procedures available within the structures of the church for addressing a complaint and for following fair process as defined in *The Book of Discipline 2016*.
 - b. Offer resources and consultation to the accused church professional, the complainant, and/or the congregation and assist in any appropriate manner.
 - c. Accompany the person(s) to whom they are assigned (either complainant or accused) to meetings with church authorities if the person(s) so desires.

V. Procedures for Reporting and Responding to Complaints of Sexual Misconduct

- A. A person desiring to report an alleged incident of sexual misconduct by a church professional may contact a Sunday School teacher, choir director, or any other trusted person including their pastor, another United Methodist pastor, a District Superintendent or the Bishop. If a pastor is contacted with such a report, that pastor shall personally notify his or her Superintendent or another member of the Cabinet within 24 hours. Regardless of who receives the report, the Bishop and/or Conference Crisis Team shall be notified immediately thereafter.

The South Georgia Conference urges any clergy to consider it a moral obligation to act as a legally mandated reporter when the alleged victim is a minor or adult incapable of self-reporting. (See [Book of Discipline 2016](#), ¶341.5)

- B. The provisions of ¶363 and ¶2701-2719² of *The Book of Discipline 2016* shall determine and in all ways define the process of appropriate response.
- C. In all cases of complaint involving sexual misconduct, great care shall be taken to explain to both the accused church professional and the complainant their rights to fair process as provided in *The Book of Discipline 2016*.

VI. Prevention Education: Developing Boundary Awareness

Every church professional or lay person in any status or relationship with the Annual Conference

whose appointment is set or approved by the Bishop, and lay speakers serving as supply pastors, shall be required to attend a five hour seminar on sexual ethics every three years. The Conference Pastoral Counselor or other designated persons will offer seminars on sexual ethics across the conference on a regular basis throughout each three-year cycle. *Note: Any person newly assigned, appointed, or serving ad-interim shall be required to complete a training workshop within the first conference year of active service. Afterwards, these persons will assume the three-year training cycle.* Audits for compliance are conducted based on the Annual Conference year. The cost for the Sexual Ethics Workshop will be \$35.00 per participant. Local churches are encouraged to reimburse the pastor for this expense.

For ministers who serve outside the bounds of the Annual Conference, a comparable course on sexual ethics approved by the Conference Pastoral Counselor will satisfy the requirement. In such cases, the minister is responsible for sending certification of course participation to the Conference Pastoral Counselor.

South Georgia Annual Conference clergy who serve outside the bounds of the annual conference are also required to be in compliance with this policy. There are two ways for these clergy to complete the requirement every three years:

1. The clergy may attend a comparable five-hour sexual ethics seminar sponsored by another United Methodist Annual Conference. In such case, the clergy person is responsible for sending certification of course participation to the Conference Pastoral Counselor. The content of the seminar must be similar in content to the course in South Georgia.
2. The clergy may contact the Conference Pastoral Counselor and request an electronic or hard copy of the course material. Attached to the packet is a one-page statement that must be signed and returned verifying that the clergy has read and understands the course content.

Because of the intimate nature of ministry, relationships can be sexualized. Therefore, seminars on sexual ethics will be designed to help church professionals do the following: gain a clear understanding of what is best practice; become boundary sensitive; be alert to situations that place them at risk in pastoral ministry; and become aware of the power differential accorded to them by virtue of their role as minister.

Because sexual ethics is a serious matter, failure to comply with the continuing educational requirement will generate an administrative complaint (See Book of Discipline ¶363a). Retired ministers are exempt from the continuing education requirement related to ethics unless they are serving a full-time or part-time appointment in a local church or extension ministry; however, all retired ministers remain under all other provisions of this Sexual Ethics Policy.

VII. Regarding Local Church Staff Parish Relations Committees

Local church staff parish committees are encouraged to develop and implement a policy on sexual misconduct and polices that require members of their church staff (not included in the above requirements) to receive training in sexual ethics. At least once per quadrennia, the Conference Pastoral Counselor will conduct seminars designed specifically for church staff hired and supervised by the local church staff-parish relations committee. Professional staff members (youth directors, music directors, and children's directors) are encouraged to attend.

ENDNOTES

1. The subject of dating a parishioner, client, student, or staff member, and the suitable steps that can be taken to help protect persons in this situation shall be part of the curriculum in the Sexual Ethics Seminar.
2. Disciplinary paragraphs updated to reflect *The Book of Discipline 2016*.