

SEXUAL ETHICS POLICY

Approved by Rio Texas Board of Ordained Ministry 2017

Purpose and Commitment

The Rio Texas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church is committed to providing a safe, respectful, and nurturing environment in its churches, at its conference owned facilities, and wherever its people gather in keeping with God's sacred trust. Sexual misconduct on the part of any clergy person, employee, or volunteer of any congregation, institution, organization, or agency within the Conference violates the mission of the church to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The Rio Texas Annual Conference will not condone or tolerate instances of sexual misconduct, sexual harassment, gender harassment, or sexual abuse and is committed to a prompt and thorough investigation of allegations in compliance with The Book of Discipline and the conference and local church's Safe Sanctuaries and Sexual Ethics Policies.

Theological Foundation

The Rio Texas Annual Conference believes that every person is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and that all Christians are equal in Christ (Galatians 3:26-28). We are committed to the prevention of sexual misconduct, harassment or abuse in any form and to address allegations justly. "Contrary to the nurturing community, sexual harassment creates improper, coercive, and abusive conditions wherever it occurs in society. Sexual harassment undermines the social goal of equal opportunity and the climate of mutual respect between men and women." (Book of Discipline 2016, paragraph 161.J) Furthermore, "Violent, disrespectful, or abusive sexual expressions do not confirm sexuality as God's good gift." (Book of Discipline 2016, Paragraph 161.I).

Definitions

Clergy and laity in ministerial roles shall include clergy as defined by The Book of Discipline 2016 Paragraph 142, retired clergy members of the annual conference, and any other person in a ministerial role as explained and illustrated on pages 777-778 of The Book of Resolutions 2016

"Sexual misconduct within ministerial relationships is a betrayal of sacred trust. It 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, unwelcome touching and advances, use of sexualized materials including pornography, stalking, sexual abuse of youth or those without capacity to consent, or misuse of the pastoral or ministerial position using sexualized conduct to take advantage of the vulnerability of another." (Book of Resolutions 2016, page 776) Further, "The continuum of behaviors called sexual misconduct within the ministerial relationship represents an exploitation of power and not merely "inappropriate sexual or gender-directed conduct." Sexual misconduct in any form is unacceptable in church and ministry settings whether it is clergy-to-lay, lay-to-clergy, clergy-to-clergy, lay-to-lay, staff-to-staff, staff-to-volunteer, volunteer-to-volunteer, or volunteer-to-staff. Anyone who works or volunteers under the authority or auspices of the Church must be held to the highest standards of behavior, free of sexual misconduct in any form." (Book of Resolutions 2016, page 777)

“Sexual harassment is a form of sexual misconduct and is defined in Paragraph 161.J (Book of Discipline, 2016) in the Social Principles. To clarify further, it is unwanted sexual or gender-directed behavior within a pastoral, employment, ministerial (including volunteers), mentor, or colleague relationship that is so severe or pervasive that it alters the condition of employment or volunteer work or unreasonably interferes with the employee or volunteer’s performance by creating a hostile environment that can include unwanted sexual jokes, repeated advances, touching, displays, or comments that insult, degrade, or sexually exploit women, men, elders, children, or youth.” (Book of Resolutions 2016, page 776-777)

“Gender harassment” is unwelcome or unwanted conduct that is gender specific, either cross gender or same gender. Although not specifically “sexual”, gender harassment may be recognized in patterns of behavior creating a hostile or abusive working environment. Both sexual and gender harassment are exploitations of power and are discriminatory by law.” (GCFA Legal Manual, www.umc/gcfa).

“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 (1996 Book of Resolutions, page 130). It can include coerced or forced sexual contact (including those unable to give informed consent), sexual interaction or contact with children or youth and sexual exhibitionism or display of sexual visuals or pornography” (Book of Resolutions 2016, page 777) Sexual abuse within the ministerial relationship involves a betrayal of sacred trust, a violation of the ministerial role and exploitation of those who are vulnerable. In the State of Texas, sexual misconduct by clergy can be a criminal offense. (Penal Code Chapter 5)

“Pornography is sexually explicit material intended primarily for the purpose of sexual arousal that often portrays violence, abuse, coercion, domination, humiliation, or degradation. In addition, any sexually explicit material that depicts children is pornographic.” (Book of Resolutions 2016, page 126) “The use of pornography in church programs, on church premises or with church property by persons in ministerial roles (lay and clergy) is a form of sexual misconduct, a chargeable offense for laity and clergy in The United Methodist Church.” (Book of Resolutions 2012, page 162)

Training

The Rio Texas Annual Conference provides sexual ethics continuing education for all appointed part-time and full-time clergy and laity serving under appointment. This training offers clergy the opportunity to stand in opposition to the sin of sexual misconduct within the church through education and discernment with colleagues. The Rio Texas Annual Conference is committed to ensuring all policies and training are available in English and Spanish.

The training is planned and supervised by the Mission Vitality Center in conjunction with the leadership of the Cabinet. Training will also be in collaboration with and compatible with the conference's Safe Sanctuaries Policy.

Attendance at quadrennial sexual ethics training is mandatory for all clergy and laity under appointment. Failure to undergo the training in clergy sexual ethics will not be tolerated. If charges of sexual misconduct are ever brought against the accused, the accused documented failure to participate in the required training could be used as evidence against the accused in both church and civil venues. Further, the documented failure of the accused to participate in the required training will be considered in any decision to commit conference resources to the accused's defense.

Making a Report and/or a Complaint

The Book of Discipline sets forth the plan by which United Methodists govern themselves. It reflects their 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 2016 (Paragraphs 360, 361, 362 and 2701-2719). Further, in accordance with Paragraph 362, "A complaint is a written and signed statement claiming misconduct or unsatisfactory performance of ministerial duties."

Clergy are supervised by the office of the Bishop expressed locally through the District Superintendent. Conference employees and lay volunteers at Conference-based events are supervised by the Executive Director of Finance and Administration and/or the Executive Director of the Mission Vitality Center. Lay employees or volunteers in local churches are supervised by the leadership of their respective local church.

1. If you feel you are a victim of sexual misconduct by a United Methodist clergy person or a lay pastor appointed to serve a local church or other ministry in the Rio Texas Conference, contact your District Superintendent or the Bishop's Office.

Resident Bishop of the Rio Texas Conference	1-888-349-4191
Capital District Superintendent	1-512-444-1983
Coastal Bend District Superintendent	1-361-852-8262
Crossroads District Superintendent	1-361-573-4233
El Valle District Superintendent	1-956-428-0200
Las Misiones District Superintendent	1-210-408-4520
Hill Country District Superintendent	1-830-896-6400
West District Superintendent	1-325-486-1500

2. If you feel you are a victim of sexual misconduct by an employee or volunteer leader in a Conference-sponsored activity, contact the Executive Director of Finance and Administration or the Executive Director of the Mission Vitality Center.

Executive Director of Finance and Administration	1-888-349-4191
Executive Director of Mission Vitality Center	1-888-349-4191

3. If you feel you are a victim of sexual misconduct by a layperson in a professional church role other than as a lay pastor serving in a local church in the Rio Texas Conference, contact your local church pastor. (Complaints against lay pastors should be sent to the District Superintendent or the Bishop's Office.)
4. If you are a victim of sexual misconduct by a District Superintendent or other person in supervisory ministry in the conference, contact the Bishop's Office. If you feel you are a victim of sexual misconduct by the Bishop, contact the President of the College of Bishops.

Resident Bishop of the Rio Texas Conference	1-888-349-4191
South Central Jurisdiction College of Bishops President	
<i>(The presidency of the College of Bishops rotates annually; contact SCJ staff at http://www.scjumc.org/contact/ for the current president and that bishop's contact information.)</i>	

5. If you feel you are a victim of sexual misconduct by a fellow parishioner in your congregation, contact your local church pastor.
6. Texas state law requires anyone with knowledge of suspected child abuse or neglect to report it to the appropriate authorities. This mandatory reporting requirement applies to all individuals.

Texas Abuse Hotline	1-800-252-5400
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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.

Commitment to Justice and Healing

The Rio Texas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church will take appropriate corrective action upon completion of an investigation. If the investigation substantiates that the allegation is valid, immediate corrective action designed to stop the sexual misconduct, harassment, or abuse and prevent its recurrence will be taken. Such corrective action may include discipline, up to and including discharge or dismissal of the offending person. The Rio Texas Conference strives to be a vehicle of God's grace even in the midst of difficult situations.