

Sexual Harassment: Response and Prevention

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to community where women and men work together in a “blessed alliance,” seeking to bring the Gospel to a broken and struggling world. When people in our communities find the courage and the space to speak up about harassment, trauma, and abuse, our churches can be just the safe sanctuary needed to have helpful, honest conversation that works to raise awareness, incite healing, and lament brokenness. Toward that end, the following resource is offered as a starting point for congregations and their leaders.

Definition

According to the EEOC, “It is unlawful to harass a person (an applicant or employee) because of that person’s sex. Harassment can include ‘sexual harassment’ or unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature. Harassment does not have to be of a sexual nature, however, and can include offensive remarks about a person’s sex. For example, it is illegal to harass a woman by making offensive comments about women in general. Both victim and the harasser can be either a woman or a man, and the victim and harasser can be the same sex. Although the law doesn’t prohibit simple teasing, offhand comments, or isolated incidents that are not very serious, harassment is illegal when it is so frequent or severe that it creates a hostile or offensive work environment or when it results in an adverse employment decision (such as the victim being fired or demoted). The harasser can be the victim’s supervisor, a supervisor in another area, a co-worker, or someone who is not an employee of the employer, such as a client or customer.”

How Can Church Leaders Help?

Sexual harassment is never okay. The doctrine of the Imago Dei calls us to value and respect every person in our congregation; Jesus also calls us to advocate for the weak and powerless and to defend those on the margins.

1. Be predisposed to believe the person reporting harassment.
2. Acknowledge the difficulty surrounding the decision to report harassment. Stand with the victim and support their courage to speak out.
3. Listen prayerfully to the victim, resisting temptation to minimize or dismiss their experience.
4. When someone reports or breaks silence to you, encourage them to document it in writing.
5. Break silence about sexual harassment from the pulpit, in leadership meetings, and in groups. Speak out with clarity and conviction. Work to create a culture of openness and healthy relationships based on sound biblical principles. Educate about harassment and include concern for harassment in congregational and pastoral prayers.
6. Raise awareness in congregational volunteer and leadership training.
7. Highlight local ministries that offer training, help, and support for victims.
8. Trust your intuition. If a joke, remark, or story feels inappropriate, speak out.
9. Recognize that sexual harassment is more about power than it is about sex.
10. Make sure the victim has access to appropriate support and counseling.
11. Develop guidelines for the prevention of sexual harassment at your church. For an example, see the [Freedom from Harassment](#) guidelines found within the Evangelical Covenant Church Employee Handbook (Covenant Offices, Chicago).
12. Know the laws of your state regarding harassment and abuse.

Web Resources

[Sexual Harassment In The Church: Apology 'Has Never Been Enough'](#)

[What churches must do right now to stop being part of the sexual harassment problem](#)

[Sexual Harassment and the Church](#)

[Helping Churches Conduct Business with Excellence](#)

[Eradication of Sexual Harassment in The United Methodist Church and Society](#)

For further articles and case studies: Churchlawandtax.com

Other Resources on Abuse and Assault

Covenant Resources:

[Christian Action Commission on Domestic Violence and Abuse](#)

[Advocacy for Victims of Abuse \(AVA\)](#)

Covenant Companion Articles:

[Church Has Opportunity to Shed Light on Harassment, Abuse](#)

[Voices: Church Must Speak on Sexual Assault](#)

[Teen Publishes Website, Book to Inspire Others](#)

This document was prepared as a collaborative effort between Develop Leaders and Advocacy for Victims of Abuse (AVA) of the Make and Deepen Disciples Team.