

# Sexual Harassment

Sexual Harassment is determined by the impact of the behavior on the recipient NOT the intention of the actor. To some people hugs of friendship may seem like hugs of intimacy. (Uninvited hugs—even when passing the peace—may be experienced as a boundary violation by some people.) Offensive, insulting and/or hurtful behavior or comments may be considered harassment regardless of the intention of the actor - AND even if the recipient seems to be “going along” with the behavior.

## Verbal Harassment

Ask: Does the recipient seem uncomfortable or threatened?

- Sexual language or comments — explicit
- Using nicknames with sexual connotations (hunk, babe, doll, etc.)
- Telling sexual jokes or stories
- Spreading rumors, talking or asking questions about a person's sex life
- Sexual comments about a person's anatomy or clothing

## Non-Verbal Harassment

Ask: Does the recipient feel/seem uncomfortable or threatened?

- Staring at someone
- Facial expressions (winking, throwing kisses, etc.)
- Displaying sexually aggressive visual materials such as calendars of nude, semi-nude, and/or provocatively posed females or males
- Making sexual gestures with hands or body movements

## Physical Harassment

Ask: Does the recipient feel/seem uncomfortable or threatened?

- An unwanted massage of shoulders or back
- Touching hair, clothing, or body
- Brushing up against someone
- Prolonged hugs, especially with hands moving down the back or pelvic contact

## Myths

- Victims "ask for it" through behavior or clothing style
- Only women are sexually harassed
- Sexual harassment is more frequent in blue collar than in white collar environments
- If there are no complaints, there are no problems

Ask: Would I say or do the same thing if my spouse or significant partner were nearby?  
Does this behavior seem unwelcome?

# Role Risks

**Multiple roles:** Clergy lay rostered lay leaders often have multiple roles. Ministerial responsibilities may include such roles as: preacher, teacher, and evangelist. Each of those roles is consistent with ministerial responsibilities and will probably not change the relational closeness of the ministerial professional with those who are under their pastoral care. When roles are relationally consistent and clear, the ministerial role boundaries are easier to define. Roles that change relational closeness such as preacher, counselor, and friend, lack consistency and challenge clear boundaries.

Here are some role considerations:

1. Ask yourself, "Is this part of my role as a clergy / rostered lay leader?"
2. If you are engaging in inconsistent closeness roles, ask yourself, "Is the agenda of these multiple roles clear?" Another way of putting it is, "Am I fulfilling my intimacy needs through this relationship?"
3. Ask yourself, "Would I feel comfortable telling the judicatory leader about this relationship?"
4. Remember, not all requests from the people you care for are healthy and/or appropriate. It is the responsibility of the clergy / rostered lay leader to know the difference.
5. Dating a person under your care is unethical if you are in a counseling relationship with them and not recommended even if you are not counseling them. Since the clergy / rostered lay leader has more power than those under their care, it is difficult for the person you are caring for to discern what s/he needs and who you are to her/him.

**Counseling:** Counseling and other contacts should be made in an appropriate room, like an office, with a secretary or other personnel on the premises.

Unless you are a certified pastoral counselor, it is best to state to the person under your pastoral care that you refer people to a professional pastoral counselor after three sessions. It is helpful to remember that some people you counsel have strong positive transference feelings towards their counselor which includes sexual feelings.

**Visiting:** Home visits demand special consideration. Use your best judgment. Taking someone along with you like a competent lay leader or professional associate is advisable. Dinner or lunch visits can also be problematic. Choose a public place which is well lighted.

**Money:** Making a personal loan to someone under your ministerial care has the potential of becoming problematic; especially if a large sum of money is involved. Likewise, obtaining a personal loan from the church has the potential of causing conflict. Some leaders review the financial giving records of parish members. Such knowledge has the potential of changing boundaries and relationships. Be clear in your own mind of the risks and benefits of such a practice.

**Gifts:** Giving or receiving gifts can be a joy, but there are also risks involved. Beware of giving or receiving expensive gifts such as personal items or inheritances,

**Language:** Be careful of using language that creates a sense of intimacy. Be aware of your tone of voice and body language.

Self-disclosure is another area that can be tricky. Too much openness about your intimate life can confuse your relationship with those under your ministerial care. Ask yourself, "Whose needs are being met."

In some settings it is traditional to address the clergy / rostered lay leader by his/her first name. Sometimes people are able to do this and maintain respect for the ministerial leader's position, and sometimes people do it out of disrespect. It is usually better to use your title in order to maintain clarity of boundaries.

**Clothing:** Consider when you dress, that your appearance is consistent with the occasion and with your role.

## **ELEVEN GUIDELINES FOR PRESERVING BOUNDARIES: INDIVIDUAL AND PROFESSIONAL HEALTH**

### **1. To counsel or not to counsel**

- Do not attempt counseling unless you are trained as a counselor.
- Do not attempt to counsel victims, survivors, or abusers without special training in this area. REFER, REFER, REFER.

### **2. If you do decide to counsel, set limits.**

- Avoid counseling in any setting that might suggest dating or other social interaction.
- Limit the length and number of sessions — in advance.

### **3. Sexual feelings**

- Be aware of any sexual feelings, vis-à-vis congregants, clients, employees, students, staff, etc. (Expect to have these feelings. .
- Acknowledge these feelings to yourself, to a supervisor, and/or in consultation session — not to the individual who is the object of those feelings, nor to any other congregant/staff member.

### **4. Sexualized behavior: Do not attempt to sexualize any professional relationship.**

- If a congregant/staff member engages in sexualized behavior towards you, do not respond in kind. Rather maintain your role as a spiritual leader and consult with a colleague, consultant, or supervisor.

### **5. Stress management and self-care**

- Provide your own physical, psychological, and spiritual self-care with recreational times, time off to care for self or family, retreats, education leave, etc.

As a check to see whether you are doing this, list activities you engage in outside your congregation. (Institutions have an obligation to support individuals' self-care efforts through financial support and generous leave policies.)

### **6. Dual relationships: Do not enter into a dual relationship in which you are both spiritual leader and lover/partner to a congregant, client, employee, student, staff member, etc. If, nonetheless, you and another person agree to pursue an intimate relationship, end your role as spiritual leader.**

- Try to avoid dual relationships with congregants, clients, employees, students, staff, etc., in which you relate to an individual in two capacities.
- Try to avoid dual relationships in which you are both spiritual leader and friend.
- If a dual relationship is unavoidable (e.g., if you work in a small community, if you supervise employees and serve as their spiritual leader, if you are a priest in a seminary where you also teach) discuss the inherent problems and possible consequences with the individual(s) involved, establish whatever boundaries you can to limit the duality, mutually decide upon strategies for protecting the relationship you have as the other's spiritual leader, and be open about the duality.

## **7. Personal relationships and intimacy needs**

- Attend to your personal and familial relationships. Maintain and nurture them.
- As a check, list the relationships you have with people who are not members of your congregation/sangha.

## **8. Avoiding workaholism and burnout.**

- Be clear about your job description and the accompanying expectations. (Obviously, institutions must take the first step by providing job descriptions and specifying expectations.)
- When you encounter situations beyond your expertise, consult and refer. If your workload seems unreasonable or unmanageable, discuss this with a supervisor or consultant and see what can be done.

## **9. Supervision and evaluation**

- Ask a supervisor to meet with you periodically to review your position and work, if your supervisor does not do this on his/her own initiative.

## **10. Avoiding isolation**

- Maintain contacts with colleagues.
- Consult regularly.

## **11. Spiritual practice**

- Engage in regular prayer and meditation.