

Sexual Harassment:

Good Practice Guidelines
for Churches

The **Methodist** Church 





Foreword

Water steadily dripping onto rock will eventually wear it away. It is not that the rock is weak or soft, it is simply the repetitive erosion of its surface that causes it to be damaged. This is what harassment is like, it is the repetitive undermining of someone's self-esteem and value and it is wrong. And yet, we can all be prone to do it, and we can all suffer from the consequences, both as individuals and tragically as a Church.

In these guidelines the Methodist Church is stepping forward to enable a safer worshipping and working environment for all associated with its work. More than this, it is aiming to initiate a change of mindset and behaviours to take responsibility away from victims and bring those who harass to task.

Words alone won't bring about the change, but within these guidelines is a wake-up call, in God's name, to challenge bad practice and to make the Church a safer place for everyone.

The Revd Dr Barbara Glasson

President of the Methodist Conference 2019/2020

Introduction

Sexual harassment is a form of abuse. It is a recognised form of sexual violence and misconduct, and also an abuse of power over another, not only inappropriate sexual or gender-directed conduct. The Methodist Church is committed to working to promote a safer culture and to prevent abuse from occurring and it seeks to respond well to those who have been abused.

The Church's witness to God through Jesus Christ involves its seeking to be a community marked by love and care for one another and for all whom it encounters. Our church communities are thus called to embody the transformational love of God and witness to God who offers healing, hope and life in all its fullness. In this imperfect human community the presence of the Holy Spirit makes such witness possible. The ways in which we relate to one another and others are therefore vital for both human flourishing and the witness of the Church. Within our structures, processes and patterns of relating, we seek to embody our affirmation of the dignity and worth of all people.

It is therefore important that we understand and respect appropriate boundaries. Stepping over these boundaries can violate another person's sense of self, dignity and integrity. Even if unintentional, the impact of our behaviour can sometimes be offensive or demeaning of others. Sexual harassment communicates that someone's value is based on the sexual role they play without their consent, and diminishes them to an object for use by the harasser. We each have a responsibility to raise our own levels of awareness in this regard. There is also a corporate responsibility to establish and uphold appropriate boundaries of behaviour so that all, particularly the vulnerable, are valued and treated as people of worth.



This guide complements existing
Safeguarding and Complaints and
Discipline policies. It should be
read in conjunction with those.



The Purpose of Good Practice Guidelines

This Guide is intended firstly to raise levels of awareness in our churches, and in our communities, about where stepping over the boundaries mentioned on page 4 might be defined as 'sexual harassment.' This awareness-raising needs to take into account our different backgrounds, cultures, generations, and experiences. The awareness-raising is not intended to excuse unacceptable behaviour.

Secondly, this Guide will offer clear information about what to do should you experience or witness sexual harassment, including guidance on how to offer pastoral care or support to those who have experienced sexual harassment.

Thirdly, we are reminded that Christian communities are also human communities where sexual harassment is experienced by women and by men. A report commissioned by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in 2016, however, concluded that more than half of all women polled had experienced some form of sexual harassment in the workplace. Churches and church communities are places of work for many. They are also places of sharing, close contact, and 'family-style' relationships. Churches are not exempt from sexual harassment or other forms of sexual misconduct.

Finally, this Guide is designed to support a growing shift in the culture of our Church, from one of failing to recognise, excusing or hiding unacceptable behaviour, to one of robust and honest exchange about difficult issues which we can address positively at all levels. Our churches seek to be caring communities, where people meet for worship, sharing and learning. We are each responsible for nurturing a culture of care. This includes seeking opportunities to listen and learn; to challenge and to change when our behaviour falls short of this culture of care. As each one of us changes through increased self-awareness, new habits, and affirmation of good practice, so our culture overall changes, from one of blame or shame, to one of compassion and care. The Positive Working Together programme is one example of this culture shift, with an increasing awareness in our churches of the dynamics of conflict, including bullying and harassment, and positive ways to respond. To help fulfil these purposes, we must be clear what we mean by sexual harassment.

What is Sexual Harassment?

Sexual harassment is unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature which:

- violates your dignity
- makes you feel intimidated, degraded or humiliated
- creates a hostile or offensive environment

Sexual harassment is a form of unlawful discrimination under the Equality Act 2010. The law says sexual harassment has occurred if the behaviour is either meant to, or has the effect of:

- violating your dignity, or
- creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment

Sexual harassment can include:

- inappropriate comments or jokes of a sexual nature
- favouritism or gift-giving
- uninvited touching, hugging or kissing
- physical behaviour, including unwelcome sexual advances
- various forms of sexual assault
- displaying pictures, photos or drawings of a sexual nature
- sending emails with a sexual content
- requests or demands for sexual favours

Adapted from the Equality Act 2010, via the Citizens Advice UK website

Coercive Control

Sexual harassment is not always physical. Another area of behaviour which is closely aligned with sexual harassment is Coercive Control. This uses controlling behaviour to make a person dependent by isolating them from support, exploiting them, depriving them of independence and regulating their everyday behaviour. It may use an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim. This can occur in the workplace and in the church as well as in the home.

How is Sexual Harassment different from Sexual Misconduct?

The term 'Sexual Harassment' covers a wide range of commonly encountered behaviours all of which are unacceptable. This Guide deals specifically with Sexual Harassment as defined on page 8. Definitions are not always clear cut, with people using terms in different ways. 'Sexual Misconduct' is sometimes used only to refer to offences within the context of a workplace or where behaviour is regulated by a Code of Conduct.

Sexual harassment may include a range of criminal offences including rape, sexual assault, abuse or violence, stalking and exposure. These offences often involve the abuse of power or authority over others. They are criminal offences and should always be reported. See below for more information about how this might be handled within the Methodist Church.

Other Definitions

Confidentiality

The following offers an initial checklist when considering issues of confidentiality. Please look at the full Methodist Church guidelines on confidentiality.

It is important that the things people share should be treated in confidence. This means not sharing the information with anyone, including your own family and friends. There are three exceptions to this:

1. If someone specifically gives you permission to share the information;
2. If you think that the person or another person is at risk;
3. If the person indicates that they have been involved in or are likely to be involved in the commission of a crime.

The basics of confidentiality

- Things people share should be treated in confidence.
- Don't assume that a person's friends or family know any details.
- Check out what you have permission to share, and with whom.
- Confidentiality is just as important with children as with adults.
- Don't share information without express permission, even in open prayer or intercessions.
- If you know someone in more than one context, remember to keep the boundaries.
- If you believe someone to be at risk, disclose the information to the appropriate person or agency.
- If you are communicating or storing data using technology, then ensure you are following the relevant part of the guidelines.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding is the action the Methodist Church takes to promote a safer culture. This means we will:

- promote the welfare of children, young people and adults
- work to prevent abuse from occurring
- seek to protect and respond well to those that have been abused.

The aim of the Methodist Church's Safeguarding Policy is to "create Christian communities of love and care, where good practice to promote the welfare of children, young people and adults becomes a way of life."

Bullying

The Positive Working Together guide of the Methodist Church says this about bullying:

"any behaviour, always involving a misuse of power, which an individual or group knows, or ought reasonably to know, could have the potential effect of offending, humiliating, intimidating or isolating an individual or group should be regarded as unacceptable.

'Unacceptable behaviour' changes its label to 'bullying' or 'harassing behaviour' when it causes actual harm or distress to the target(s), normally, but not exclusively, after a series of incidents over a prolonged period of time.

Lack of intent does not diminish, excuse or negate the impact on the target or the distress caused. The degree of intent is only relevant in terms of how the behaviour should be challenged and the issues subsequently resolved."

Any incidents of bullying should be reported to your minister, a safeguarding officer, or a church or circuit steward in the first instance.

Exploring Assumptions

There may be some assumptions at play in our churches when it comes to guidance for responding to sexual harassment. For example, our culture, our generation, the language that we use may dictate much of our unconscious behaviour and may give unintended offence. Likewise, while we would be correct to assume that most people who experience sexual harassment are women, men do also experience sexual harassment. What care do we take of the boundaries of trust, power, openness and honesty which are part of the fabric of our community lives? What happens when we step over these boundaries inappropriately? What care do we take of ourselves in the midst of this? The following blocks illustrate some of the issues around these assumptions.

Language and Culture

The words we use convey meaning and carry weight - whatever our intention.

How might a word, joke or phrase be interpreted by someone who has experienced sexual harassment?

Phrases such as 'church family', 'touch on', 'feel our way', or jokes of a sexual nature may be offensive for those who have experienced sexual harassment.

Consider alternative language. Ask why the joke needs to be told.

Do we need to be alert to cultural difference about appropriate hugging, touching or kissing?

Boundaries

The boundaries we hold on a personal and a community level vary between individuals, and across cultures.

For some the experience of a church 'family', or 'community' may not include a hug, touch, or kiss.

Consider the times in our church community when we assume physical contact is okay.

How can we ensure appropriate boundaries when, e.g. sharing the peace, offering a hug, or inviting a 'kiss of peace'?

If in doubt, always ask, and respect the answer.



Gender and Identity

Women in Europe are almost three times as likely to be subjected to sexual harassment than men (Eurofound, p57)

The fact that men are less likely to experience sexual harassment may exacerbate feelings of shame or embarrassment when it does happen.

Members of the LGBTQI+ communities may experience harassment because of their sexuality. This is discriminatory and unacceptable.

Sexual harassment is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men.
(‘Sexual Harassment in the Workplace’)

Self Care

How well do we know ourselves and our own needs?

What are the tools we reach for when we know we need self-care?

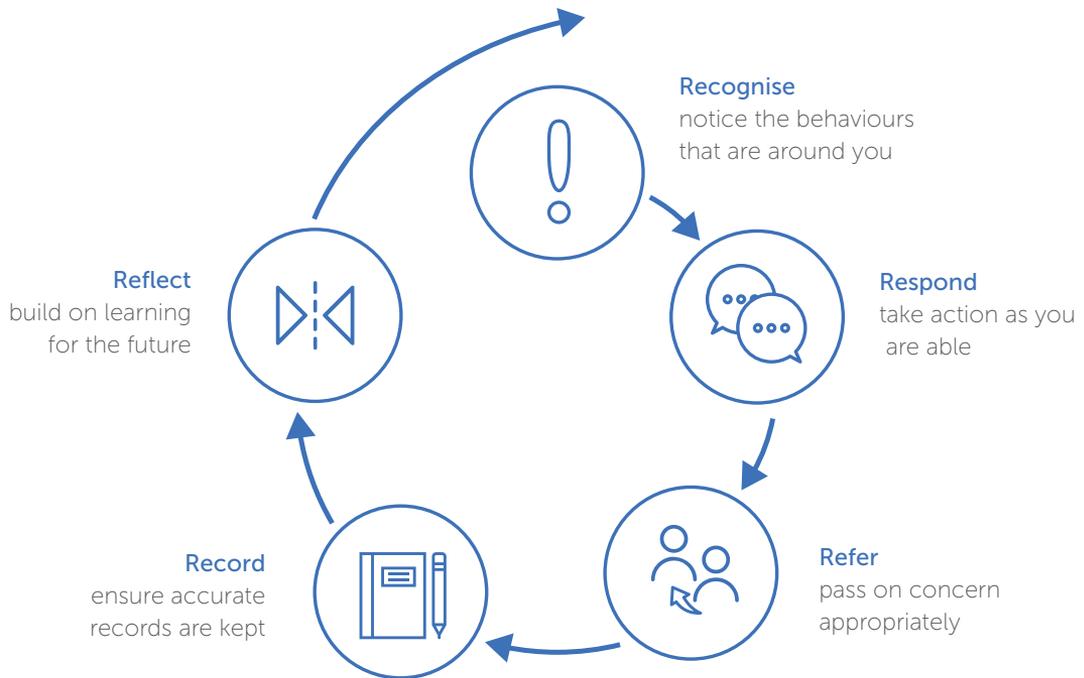
How courageous are we in asking with direct, un-laden language for support and care for ourselves?

What signals is our body giving us when we need to reach out for help? Not sleeping, depressive thoughts, loss of appetite, exhaustion?

Are there moments, or experiences when in aiming to express our own need we may have stepped over an appropriate boundary, however unintentionally, or failed to consider the needs of others in doing so?

Good Practice Guidelines

Sexual harassment is never appropriate. There are five clear steps we can all take to protect ourselves and each other and to change our church culture.



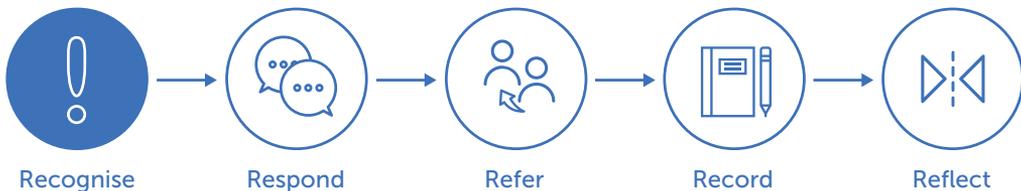


“The ways in which we relate to one another and others are vital for both human flourishing and the witness of the Church. Within our structures, processes and patterns of relating, we seek to embody our affirmation of the dignity and worth of all people.”

from the Introduction

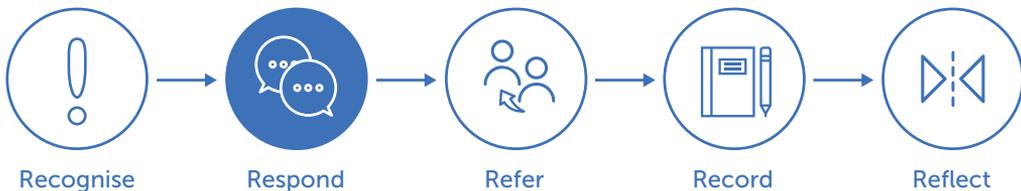
! Recognise...

- Recognise that sexual harassment does happen in church contexts and within Christian relationships. This means we might observe behaviour around us that is unacceptable.
- Recognise what sexual harassment is by ensuring that all in our church communities know what it is and how to respond.
- Recognise that our own attitudes and ways of thinking about other people may cause offence or belittle others. Each of us is part of the culture change.
- Recognise that if someone tells us about an incident which happened to them, they may be asking us for help.
- Recognise that it takes courage to stand up and speak out about unacceptable behaviour. Doing so helps us all to be aware of what causes hurt and how we can be a safer and more loving church community
- Recognise that the church is a community where we take responsibility for one another.
- Recognise that there are times when the behaviour of a minister or someone in a position of leadership may need to be challenged. No-one is always right.
- Recognise that different people have different boundaries; this may be because of cultural differences, or personal preferences. All have a right to have those boundaries respected.
- Recognise and understand existing policies and codes of conduct eg Safeguarding, Complaints and Discipline, Bullying and Harassment (Positive Working Together).



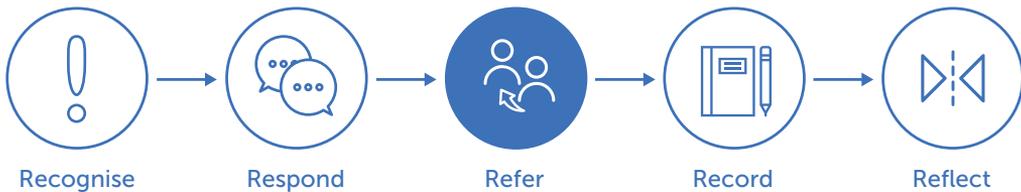
Respond...

- Respond by seeking out someone with whom you can have an honest and supportive conversation; it may be a minister, a safeguarding officer, or a church or circuit steward.
- Respond by telling a trusted friend if you have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment, and by asking for support to refer the issue further.
- Respond by offering pastoral care and support to the one who has experienced sexual harassment, being mindful of language, culture and boundaries.
- Respond within your capacity, and within the Safeguarding or Complaints and Discipline policies already in place.
- Respond by referring the issue on with the permission of the one who reported the incident (see 'Refer' below).
- Respond by noticing and affirming in yourself and in others the courage it takes to speak out and to step up against unacceptable behaviour.
- Respond by noticing that there are different routes to take, depending on the situation. Some incidents might be settled through talking or mediation. Others must be followed up through the church's processes including Complaints and Discipline or Safeguarding. See 'Refer' below.
- Respond by supporting those who challenge sexual harassment.



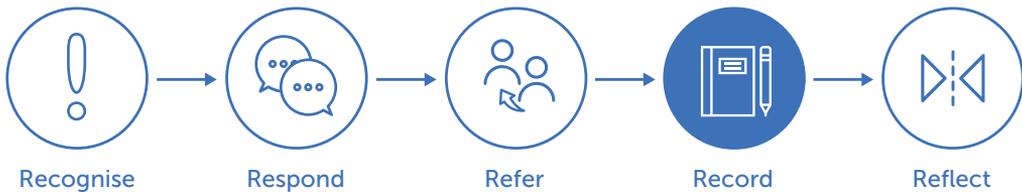
Refer...

- If you experience or witness sexual harassment it is important to share this with someone else.
- Those to whom you might helpfully refer such incidents might be:
 - Your minister, a church steward, safeguarding officer or a trusted leader
 - The Local Complaints Officer, usually the Circuit Superintendent or a Safeguarding Officer.
- If you would prefer to contact someone outside your local situation, contact details for the Connexional Complaints Worker can be found on the Methodist Church website.
- The policies and procedures included at www.methodist.org.uk/sexual-harassment give further detailed guidance.



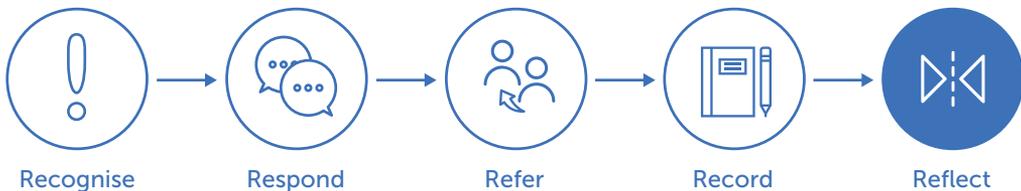
Record...

- If an incidence of sexual harassment has been reported to you, you should
- Record the incident by writing down dates, times and summary of the harassment. Share this with your church safeguarding officer.
- Record the incident by ensuring when and by whom appropriate action is taken. Share this with your church safeguarding officer.
- Record any learning for you, your leadership team, your church or the wider church, and ensure that this learning is implemented. Ensure this is stored securely, either in a locked drawer or a password protected electronic document.



▷◁ Reflect...

- Reflect through ongoing listening to and offering pastoral care for all who have experienced sexual harassment.
- Reflect through continuing to learn about boundaries, behaviours, and culture change for the whole Church, local, regional and connexional.
- Reflect through ongoing training and continual equipping of your local church to recognise and respond to sexual harassment.
- Reflect through exploring the Positive Working Together pages of the Methodist Church website and taking up opportunities for training.
- Reflect by reading through the references at www.methodist.org.uk/sexual-harassment to inform yourself and those around you of your learning.







A Personal Reflection

Bringing these guidelines together has been the work of several years, initially seeking to respond to a number of confidential disclosures while I was Vice-President of the Conference (2017/18). These made it very clear that, sadly, there are many within our Methodist Church who have experienced sexual harassment. One female presbyter wrote to me 'I have often been groped in church, only to have this behaviour laughed off, I am relying on you to break the silence'. Another female professional employed by the Methodist Church told me she had never experienced sexual harassment before coming to work for the Church. What an indictment upon us.

During this period of conferring with many individuals and areas of work within and beyond the Church, to whom I am hugely grateful, I have often reflected on what it might mean for us to live as a broken, but healing community. We are broken; we all recognise that we do make mistakes, we do misunderstand each other, we do misread the signals and cause offence. Sometimes this is intentional, an abuse of power or trust, sometimes it is unthinking; it always needs challenging and we need to change. That is where we can demonstrate that as well as being broken, we can be healthy, we can change, we can heal, we can learn new ways of behaviour, we can pay more attention to the needs of the body as a whole.

It is time to move beyond words to action; my hope and prayer is that these Good Practice Guidelines will help us in that.

Jill Baker, Chair of the Methodist Council, May 2020

This Guide, published in 2020, was commissioned by the Methodist Church of Great Britain and prepared by Place for Hope with input from Methodist Church Connexional Team members in the following areas: Complaints and Discipline; Safeguarding; Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Faith and Order; the Learning Network.

Contact Details

To contact the Safeguarding Team or the Complaints and Discipline Officer, contact The Methodist Church Reception Desk tel: 020 7486 5502.

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Place for Hope supports the Methodist Church through delivery of training on conflict and on bullying and harassment under the Positive Working Together Programme.

Place for Hope accompanies and equips people and faith communities so that all might reach their potential to be peacemakers who navigate conflict well.

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