

“Sex and the Church”: Sexuality, Misconduct, and Education in Methodism

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This article describes Methodism’s efforts to address misconduct within ministerial relationships as an important dimension of sexuality education within a religious context. The United Methodist Church (UMC) makes a concerted effort to promote awareness, justice, and healing in cases of sexual abuse within ministerial relationships. The most prominent programs and strategies are framed by a professional ethics paradigm, as illustrated by ministries of the UMC’s Commission on Women. Understanding this foundation and programmatic emphasis is vital for sexuality educators attempting to work with Christian churches to promote a more holistic approach to sexual health.

KEYWORDS *Clergy sexual misconduct, Methodism, professional ethics*

INTRODUCTION

Historically, mainline Protestant churches have been reticent to talk about sexuality. Debra Haffner, executive director of the Religious Institute, is accurate in her claim that “with the exception of teaching that sexual intercourse belongs only in heterosexual marriage, the majority of U.S. faith communities are mostly silent about the broader dimensions of sexuality” (Haffner, 2010). One would be justified in asking: Do Christian churches teach anything about sexuality beyond a concern for abstinence from sexual intercourse outside of marriage? Can churches that continually divide themselves over the acceptance of homosexuality offer anything constructive in the field of sexuality

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education? After so many prominent scandals of sexual abuse by priests and pastors, can churches regain their credibility to speak about healthy sexuality? This article answers yes to all of these questions and details the ways in which one denomination, The United Methodist Church (UMC), is going about these tasks.

Talk about sex in churches is complex and often conflicted. It is true that the UMC preaches abstinence, discriminates against “practicing” homosexuals, and does not have a consistent policy about clergy dating their own parishioners. However, the UMC also advocates for “full sex education” as a right of all children, denounces heterosexism in society, and aggressively investigates allegations of misconduct among its clergy. When the UMC engages its leadership and membership in learning about sexuality, sometimes explicit curricula are utilized, but more often messages about sexuality are conveyed implicitly through policies, procedures, and articles or implied by the absence of substantive engagement (a null curriculum). The UMC has undertaken several notable efforts at sexuality education in the past 20 years: a cautious but progressive report on homosexuality in 1994, sexuality education curricula for teens, and an ongoing series of monthly articles on a variety of aspects of “Sex and the Church” by the General Board of Church and Society. Christian churches can and do have something to contribute to sexuality education, but reports of sexual harassment and abuse by clergypersons severely undermine the credibility of these religious organizations.

Sexual misconduct by ministerial leaders is, unfortunately, not isolated to a few overpublicized cases. A national study by the Baylor School of Social Work reveals a startling prevalence of clergy sexual misconduct (CSM), defined as “sexual advances or propositions [by ministers, priests, rabbis, and other clergypersons] to persons in the congregations they serve who are not their spouses or significant others” (Garland, 2009). Co-investigators Diana Garland and Mark Chaves discovered that “more than 3% of women who had attended a congregation in the past month reported that they had been the object of CSM at some time in their adult lives” (Chaves & Garland, 2009; Garland, 2009). Methodism is not immune from this problem. Recent research suggests 140–500 cases of misconduct every year by clergy within the UMC (Dolch, 2010). Only a fraction of these cases results in the removal of ordination credentials. The sad facts are that most cases of misconduct are not reported and that many offenders are not held accountable and removed from ministry. This is why the most concerted efforts in sexuality education by the UMC focus on misconduct prevention and response.

The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women (GCSRW) has been on the forefront of promoting awareness, justice, and healing in cases of misconduct of a sexual nature in the UMC. In 2009, the Commission on Women created a new staff position dedicated to strengthening the diverse efforts already in place throughout this denomination to prevent and respond to sexual abuse within ministerial relationships. This position offers

a denomination-wide vantage point for viewing and assessing Methodist efforts to address the problem of sexual misconduct by ministerial leaders, and it is from this viewpoint that these diverse efforts are presented and evaluated. This article presents the most prominent programs and strategies of the Commission on Women and explains the professional ethics paradigm motivating these efforts. Understanding this foundation and programmatic emphasis is vital for sexuality educators attempting to work with Christian churches to promote a more holistic approach to sexual health.

The article begins with a brief historical and institutional framing of the concept “misconduct of a sexual nature” in the UMC. Then, significant efforts within the UMC to prevent and respond to misconduct by ministerial leaders are described in terms of the work of the Commission on Women. These programs include professional education for clergy, prevention standards for laity, victim advocacy, misconduct response teams, denominational task force, national events, and a dedicated Web site. Each of these ongoing efforts provides resources for other religious leaders as well as greater opportunities for partnerships with secular sexuality educators. The article concludes with some emerging issues challenging the church and an invitation to sexuality educators to help churches connect their conversations about sex in terms of misconduct with a more holistic approach to sexuality education.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

The role of passionate leaders, many of whom are women, cannot be understated in drawing the church’s attention to the problem of misconduct of a sexual nature by ministerial leaders. In this, the UMC has a very similar history as the Episcopal Church (Fontaine, 2010). Systemic attention to the problem of ministerial misconduct in the UMC began with the efforts of women to address sexual harassment in the church. The following provides a succinct historical and institutional context for understanding Methodism’s efforts to address sexual misconduct.

A 1981 survey revealed that one of every eight United Methodist women had been sexually harassed on her job (UMC, 1988). Backed with this information and aided by swift legal currents in the United States during the 1980s to bolster workplace harassment laws, the denomination’s permanently established Commission on Women took the lead in bringing attention to the problem of sexual harassment in the church. The Commission successfully petitioned the denomination’s highest legislative body to address the issue on an institutional level in 1988, requiring that every regional (“annual”) conference in the UMC “develop clear policies and procedures related to sexual harassment establishing grievance procedures for victims and penalties for offenders” (UMC, 1988). The regional “annual” conference (hereafter

abbreviated “conference”) is the basic body of this church. The UMC includes approximately 60 such conferences in the United States and another 70 worldwide. It is at this level of structure that clergy are ordained, sexual ethics policies are written, and allegations of misconduct handled.

The Commission on Women concurrently pushed for updated research on the extent of sexual harassment inside church structures. A national survey showed that 50% of all clergy and 77% of female clergy reported having been sexually harassed in United Methodist church settings. Furthermore, one in six laywomen reported having been sexually harassed by their own pastor (Majka, 1990). This survey not only documented widespread sexual harassment in the UMC but also brought attention to a newly understood form of harassment—clergy misconduct of a sexual nature.

MISCONDUCT AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

Up until the 1980s, Methodists and other Protestants in the United States viewed sexual misconduct by ministers as a species of sexual sin, usually in the form of adultery, and clergy ethics was primarily understood in terms of providing positive moral models for the laity. Clergy malpractice insurance was not commonplace prior to 1980, and “no insurance company [at that time had] ever paid a claim on such a policy” (Ruth & McClintock, 2007). Absent was an adequate understanding of ministry as a helping profession with power and authority, both of which are subject to abuse by those entrusted as ministerial leaders. With the work of Marie Fortune (1989), Karen Lebacqz (1985), Lebacqz and Ronald Barton (1991), and others, perceptions in Christian denominations slowly began to change. Misconduct by ministerial leaders is now understood to be a violation of trust and an abuse of power. In short, clergy sexual misconduct is now understood primarily as an abuse of professional authority rather than as an inappropriate sexual liaison.

The UMC often uses the phrase “misconduct of a sexual nature” to direct the focus of attention on the misuse of power. Sometimes this misuse is through sexualized behavior. In those instances the misconduct is sexual misconduct. However, to label the subject as primarily sexual is to avoid the deeper subject of sacred clergy office and authority, in which clergy have a fiduciary responsibility to act in the best interest of those whom they serve. Those in positions of authority in the church, both clergy and lay, have been given much responsibility, vested with a sacred trust to maintain an environment that is safe for people to live and grow in God’s love.

According to the UMC, “sexual misconduct is a betrayal of sacred trust. It is a continuum of unwanted 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. . . . 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” (UMC, 2008).

Thus, any use of power to take advantage of the vulnerable party within a ministerial relationship is defined as sexual abuse. The ministerial leader, whether lay or ordained, has a duty to protect and to act in the best interests of the other person, who is considered the vulnerable party. While this perspective does not preclude the possibility that a person in ministerial leadership might find him/herself the victim of harassment or abuse by a layperson or that a layperson might wield substantial power over the ministerial leader due to other factors (e.g., age, race, gender, wealth), the UMC maintains that it is the responsibility of the ministerial leader to maintain appropriate interpersonal boundaries.

PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION FOR CLERGY

All clergy in the UMC (at least in the United States) are required to have up-to-date training in sexual ethics and professional boundaries. Typically, clergy are required to attend a four to six-hour boundaries training provided by their conference once every four years. Since each conference conducts trainings and monitors compliance on its own, the format, content, and quality of this training varies throughout the UMC. The depth of discussion in these trainings can vary, depending on the workshop facilitator, from the bleak warning “don’t hug anyone” to an open-ended discussion on the difficulties of dating for single clergy. Some conferences provide their own trainers and others employ outside leadership, including staff persons from the Commission on Women.

One of the difficulties in establishing consistent continuing education for clergy is that professional ethics is not a required part of the educational preparation for licensing or ordination in most Christian traditions. In the sphere of professional ethics, there is simply no common, prior academic preparation from which to “continue” the education of clergy. Unlike professions such as law, medicine, and accounting, Christian ministry has no consistent set of professional standards, no guild to offer accountability beyond each denomination’s regulating body, and no written examination of professional ethics prior to ordination. This is the case in the UMC and most other Christian denominations. Sexual ethics for ministry is not specifically

mandated by the UMC to be a part of seminary training, and there is currently no uniform requirement or pedagogical approach among United Methodist seminaries. Based on a national study, the Religious Institute concludes that “seminaries are not providing future religious leaders with sufficient opportunities for study, self-assessment, and ministerial formation in sexuality” (Ott, 2009). Many clergypersons in the UMC begin their ministerial careers unprepared to handle issues of professional power, intimacy, and abuse.

Society needs clear professional standards for clergy. National standardization of state laws regarding helping professions and ecumenical agreements regarding professional codes of conduct for clergy would be huge steps forward in preventing misconduct. The National Organization for Women, in calling attention to the problem of sexual abuse in ministerial relationships, urges states to criminalize clergy sexual misconduct, similar to statutes addressing misconduct by physicians and psychiatrists (NOW, 2009). Requiring clergy of all denominations to complete coursework and continuing education in professional ethics and boundaries is past due.

To address this problem, the Commission on Women is working with a team of seminary faculty and denominational leaders to strengthen existing curricular coverage and training regarding sexual ethics for United Methodists receiving a seminary education. This project aims to create, promote, resource, and implement a rigorous program of ministerial readiness regarding sexual ethics, professional ethics, healthy boundaries, and self-care as a standard aspect of United Methodist seminary education. Recommendations will include pedagogical objectives relating to sexual ethics for ministry to be covered during the course of the Master of Divinity curriculum; topical modules that may be integrated into existing courses in theology, ethics, pastoral care, biblical studies, field education, etc., or taught as a stand-alone course; guidelines for intentionally utilizing the implicit curriculum (e.g., student honor codes) to model professional ethics, policies, procedures, and adjudication of misconduct; a means of assessing individual student competency with regard to the above pedagogical objectives; and strategies for greater ongoing collaboration among UM seminaries, and between seminaries, general church agencies, and conference boards of ordained ministry.

PREVENTION STANDARDS FOR LAITY

Equally important as educating clergy is educating laity in healthy interpersonal boundaries in ministry. Too many persons in the pews are not able to recognize and name boundary violations by their ministerial leaders. Worse, many laypersons are the offenders. A 2005 survey of United Methodists conducted by the Commission on Women found that most incidents of sexual

harassment in the church were due to offenses of laypersons (Murphy-Geiss, 2005). Murphy-Geiss concludes that the UMC should expand its educational efforts beyond clergy and focus on preventing sexual harassment by male laity (2007). Laypersons in ministerial roles of leadership, such as Sunday school teachers, choir directors, and volunteer youth chaperones, expose churches to great liability when these persons are not adequately vetted and trained. Thus, the UMC approaches the task of educating laypersons in appropriate ministerial boundaries primarily through the legal lens of reasonable care in prevention.

The Commission on Women is promoting a three-point approach called Comprehensive Certification of Ministerial Workers, designed for lay volunteers working with children, youth, and at-risk adults. This work builds on the most recognizable “brand” of misconduct prevention ministry in the UMC, which is the *Safe Sanctuaries* program written by attorney and clergy-person Joy Melton (1998). *Safe Sanctuaries* is a plan of risk management which reduces liability for ministry, usually in a local congregational setting. Workers with children are all screened for criminal backgrounds, trained to work in pairs, to keep doors open, and to make faithful responses when allegations are made. The Comprehensive Certification program augments the risk-management strategies of *Safe Sanctuaries* with face-to-face training, background checks, and letters of reference, all of which are mandated and coordinated by the local judicatory rather than the congregation. Participants must be recertified every five years. Currently, this rigorous standard is mandated in only a couple of conferences in the UMC. The long-term plan is to raise the level of prevention and education of laity to this level across the entire denomination. Greater awareness about misconduct and abuse will create an institutional climate to discourage misconduct among ministerial leaders.

Victim Advocacy

The Commission on Women provides confidential support for alleged victims of discrimination, harassment, and abuse in the church. Women and men who feel they have been victims of gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and/or sexual abuse have a place to call for help within this denomination. Misconduct of a sexual nature is not just a women’s issue, although 90% of complainants who call this Commission are women. The Commission helps to connect victims of misconduct with advocates in their conference. The primary functions of advocacy at the denominational level are to provide a safe place for sharing and processing a personal experience of victimization, to inform complainants of their rights and responsibilities and other aspects of church law and policy, and to connect the complainants with an advocate in their conference.

Misconduct Response Teams

A misconduct response team is a group of leaders within a conference trained for congregational intervention when an allegation of misconduct arises. Since policies, investigations, and judicial trials are handled at this level of institutional structure, leaders in each conference require training in prevention and response to misconduct. Teams may include specialists in congregational disclosure, church and state law, media communications, trauma and abuse recovery, interim ministry (“afterpastoring”), congregational systems, and victim advocacy. Several resources that attend to the multiplicity of roles involved in responding to misconduct are worth noting (Fortune, 2009; Gaede & Benyei, 2006; Hopkins & Laaser, 1995). The Commission on Women utilizes each of these resources for response team training.

To promote the effective use of response teams, the Commission on Women offers consultation, support, and training for judicatory leaders and response teams. An effective response team must work closely with the bishop and her/his cabinet of superintendents, who are responsible for maintaining the integrity of the process of investigation and judicial procedure. The entire process of judicatory response resides under the auspices of the bishop’s office. Thus, a response team can only be utilized at the discretion of the bishop. Currently, all response teams in the UMC are managed “in house”; the United Methodists hold each other accountable. Still in the conceptual stage is the creation of ecumenical response teams to alleviate the unavoidable conflicts of interest when judicatory leaders are asked to handle allegations of misconduct against their own clergy. The first national response team training for United Methodists was co-sponsored by the Commission on Women in 2001, resulting in a loosely organized network of response team leaders instrumental in establishing the denomination’s Sexual Ethics Task Force.

DENOMINATIONAL TASK FORCE

The UMC utilizes a 25-member Sexual Ethics Task Force to coordinate and communicate among its conferences and denomination-level (“general”) agencies. Currently, the Task Force includes leaders from several conferences, the Council of Bishops, and more than half of the denomination’s dozen or so general agencies. The Commission on Women convenes the denomination’s Sexual Ethics Task Force as an outgrowth of informal networking among conference leaders attending to misconduct issues in the 1990s. Between 2000 and 2002, a hybrid group of general agency staff and conference representatives evolved into the current Sexual Ethics Task Force,

meeting to promote “a comprehensive, holistic, and integrated approach to prevention and response” (GCSRW, 2002).

National Events

In July 2006, the Task Force hosted the UMC’s first national summit on sexual ethics, “Do No Harm . . . Do All the Good You Can.” This three-day event provided workshops and presentations by nationally recognized speakers about prevention and response to misconduct of a sexual nature. Gathered were approximately 250 leaders from nearly 50 conferences to discuss best practices and emerging issues. The discussions at the 2006 event helped set the agenda for sexual ethics for this denomination, including the establishment of a new staff position in sexual ethics in 2009. The next “Do No Harm” event was held January 26–29, 2011, in Houston, Texas, focusing on how best to coordinate conference ministries in sexual ethics. This event drew over 300 people.

The “big event” approach is important but insufficient for addressing misconduct of a sexual nature in the church. National events for key leaders in the UMC generate excitement increased awareness, yet the infrequency of these events (once every five years) requires that they be followed-up with much more regular opportunities for education and networking. A national event can provide a jump-start for denominational programs and discussions of “next steps” but is not by itself a long-term solution to the problem of sexual misconduct in the church.

DEDICATED WEB SITE

A significant new effort at long-term programming is a denominational Web site devoted to sexual ethics. In 2007, the Commission on Women expanded its ministry by launching the Web site, www.umsexualethics.org, to address sexual misconduct, abuse, and harassment by those entrusted with ministerial roles in the UMC. Revised and re-launched in 2009, the site has become a vital means for providing educational, informational, and other materials for persons within and beyond the UMC.

The site offers resources for victim/survivors, judicatory leaders, local churches, and persons accused of misconduct. Victims of misconduct may learn about their rights, the process of filing a complaint, details of the UMC’s judicial process, and how to find an advocate to accompany them. The site helps a person name her/his experience of victimization and provides words of encouragement from a survivor of abuse by a pastor. Conference leaders are briefed on denominational law and provided sample policies. The site also walks them through their roles and responsibilities and offers guidance on how to establish a team for responding to misconduct. Local churches

may find information on the responsibilities and expectations of those in ministerial leadership as well as sample policies and guidelines for how to be in ministry with registered sex offenders. Persons accused of misconduct will find a crash-course in appropriate professional boundaries, denominational policies on pornography and chargeable offenses, and information on how to find a support person. Averaging nearly 50,000 hits a month, this Web site may be the most visible and accessible means for conveying information to and being in communication with United Methodists about sexual ethics.

EMERGING ISSUES

Technology, pornography, sex offender registries, and cross-cultural differences are only a few of the emerging issues challenging churches as they educate about and respond to misconduct of a sexual nature. Each of these issues creates challenges for the church and new opportunities for sexuality education.

Technological innovations have tremendously impacted the ways in which people socialize and engage in intimate relationships and sexual behaviors. How can sexuality educators help churches to comprehend, explore, and exercise healthy ways of being connected in community and with one another using the latest communications technologies? In 2010, the General Board of Discipleship of the UMC produced a training kit, “CyberSafety for Families,” to address this topic. As technology changes, the church will have to continue revising and revisiting these issues. Now that people around the globe can connect and communicate instantaneously at any time, churches need more guidance than ever in teaching healthy boundaries within ministerial relationships in the realm of social networking.

Online pornography use among clergy is quickly becoming an issue in the UMC. Churches need guidance on discerning the differences between pornography and erotica, use and addiction, and fantasy play and harmful predation. How can sexuality educators help churches to negotiate this threatening landscape of pleasure, lust, and abuse? The UMC recognizes that the objectification of persons, especially women and children, is an increasingly visible problem in our society and churches. However, the trend toward pathologizing the use of pornography in terms of addiction often confuses church leaders trying to respond to the debasement and exploitation of women. Helping churches understand the appropriateness of addiction models for discussing online pornography use will aid churches in addressing this as a problem of sexual misconduct and abuse.

State sex offender registries are now forcing congregations to discuss issues that in generations past were never talked about in church. Churches that strive to be inclusive and inviting of all persons struggle with how they can relate to persons convicted of sex crimes. There are many pressing

questions facing churches as they grapple with this new legal category and social label. What exactly does it mean to be on “the list”? Can a registered sex offender participate in worship? How does a congregation receive a registered sex offender into membership? Is anyone beyond the redemptive power of God, and if not, can a registered sex offender ever be redeemed and healed? If so, can that person be allowed into ministerial leadership?

Establishing cross-cultural standards for addressing misconduct is just the beginning of a much-needed conversation about how attitudes and practices differ on a whole range of sexual topics from culture to culture. Nearly one-third of the membership of the UMC resides in Africa. The UMC also has conferences throughout Europe and the Philippines. This diversity creates linguistic and cultural challenges for addressing misconduct within this church. What resources can sexuality educators provide the UMC and other denominations for cross-cultural consistency in the ways they understand, define, and teach about sexual misconduct and about sexuality more broadly?

TOWARD A MORE HOLISTIC CONVERSATION ABOUT SEX AND THE CHURCH

The UMC has made great progress in sexuality education, insofar as misconduct issues are concerned. Healthy interpersonal boundaries, power and vulnerability, meaningful consent, and fiduciary duty are all becoming a part of the standard lexicon for discussing misconduct of a sexual nature in this church. Understanding this as a foundation for and entrée to a wider conversation about sexuality in the church is important for sexuality educators desiring to work with Christian communities. Many churches would like to move beyond the hot-button issues of homosexuality and abortion and embrace the beautiful complexity of God’s wondrous creation, including the full range of human sexual selves, but the churches simply do not know how to enter into this conversation. Even the straightforward question, “What does sexual health require?” may make many congregations uncomfortable. The UMC and other denominations will need the help of sexuality educators as they move beyond talking about sex in terms of sin and misconduct toward a more holistic conversation about sex and the church.

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