

## Harassment in the Church: Employment or Social Settings

When you hear the words “sexual harassment,” do you ever think of places that are supposed to be safe havens? Have you considered that harassment could occur in your own church, or has already occurred in your own church?

Harassment is a pattern of behavior that makes another person feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Perpetrators of harassment can be anywhere. They may be in staff or volunteer positions or just be members of the congregation. Harassment in the church could occur in the workplace or in a social setting.

### Respect and Dignity

Everyone deserves respect and dignity, and no organization wants to be sued because it allowed harassment to occur. Here are some suggestions about how to prevent harassment, and to deal with it if it does happen.

#### 1. Create, communicate, and adhere to clear zero tolerance policies.

Define appropriate boundaries between colleagues, supervisors and workers, and even fellow church members. See **Model Policies for the Prevention of Sexual Harassment**.

Ross Mitchell, Safety Analyst for Praesidium, Inc., the company with which the Church Pension Group collaborated to develop its *Safeguarding God’s Children* program, says, “Many churches have policies that address some of these issues. When developing policy for your program, look to existing policies for guidance, and remember it is okay to set boundaries that are stricter in your program.”

Make sure church members and staff know about these policies and can easily follow the procedures. Adriana Dominguez, Account Manager with the Religious Services team for Praesidium, says, “Policies aren’t helpful if they’re stored on a shelf. Have some type of core training before people start employment or participation in a program.”

She also recommends that you keep the policies and procedures top of mind by providing “touch points,” such as a blurb in the church bulletin or a short activity in a meeting. “Keep it at the forefront without taking it to the fatigue point,” she says. “And cater to different learning styles—visually, in groups, individually.”

One important consideration as you create your policies and procedures is to make sure to provide multiple channels for reporting. That’s necessary because it is possible for the harasser to be the same person to whom reports of harassment are to be made. The inverse can also be true, that the harassed is the person to whom reports might be made.

#### 2. Recognize harassment when it happens.

Take all complaints seriously, and take action right away. Investigate the complaint. Document the complaint and your investigative process, and maintain confidentiality.

Ross says that in the current climate — with the **Me Too** movement and continual discussion of harassment in the news cycle — it is a good time for churches to reaffirm that they have policies and protocols in place to address instances of harassment. The current climate provides churches the perfect opportunity to raise awareness without raising red flags (i.e., the congregation thinking an incident has occurred in the church).

“Let everyone know you take harassment seriously and keep the messaging consistent: Harassment will not be tolerated here. People are more likely to come forward if something does happen if they know it will be taken seriously,” he says.

### 3. Address and correct the behavior immediately.

This may be somewhat difficult to do if an accused parishioner (for example) doesn't hold a position (either volunteer or paid) at the church. As Ross says, “Churches are not in the business of excluding people.” That being said, many churches have policies or procedures that provide guidance on how to handle a wayward congregant. If your church finds itself in this position, check your policy manual—you may already have a protocol in place.

“Sometimes, though, you have to make tough decisions,” Adriana adds. “If you continue to see challenges with a certain person, and you have tried to correct the behaviors with additional training, education, and support, there may come a point when you must decide whether this is the right place for this person.” This is understandably a difficult decision to make, but you want to be sure you are providing a safe environment for all.

Sometimes, a harasser will retaliate against his or her accuser. Ross says, “In the congregant-to-congregant context, this may manifest as the accused person encouraging others to ostracize the accuser. In the employment context, you may see the accuser inexplicably demoted or transferred to another position.” Be on the look-out for this behavior, and nip it in the bud. Retaliation is prohibited under the law.

## Training Can Help with Prevention

“Set up the people in your congregation and on staff for success by training them and reinforcing best practices in your programs. Safety is everyone's job, and it takes commitment,” Adriana says. “Involving leadership in trainings, in active supervision, and in response protocols will go a long way toward creating a culture of safety.”

Train employees, volunteers, and clergy, so that they can recognize and respond appropriately to harassment. Two *SafeguardingOnline* modules could be useful:

- *Safeguarding God's People: Preventing Sexual Harassment for Workers*
- *Safeguarding God's People: Preventing Sexual Harassment for Managers & Supervisors*

## Insurance Coverage

Directors' and Officers' Employment Practices Liability insurance is offered through The Church Insurance Agency Corporation. This **insurance** covers allegations of harassment and retaliation, among other acts, when the accused and accuser are both employees of the church organization. If harassment were to occur between two volunteers, or between an employee and a volunteer (for example), that could be considered sexual misconduct, which might be covered by General Liability insurance.

By adhering to policies and protocols, training people so they know what to look out for and the steps to take, and by fostering a culture that doesn't tolerate harassment, your church organization can work to create an environment of respect and dignity for everyone.