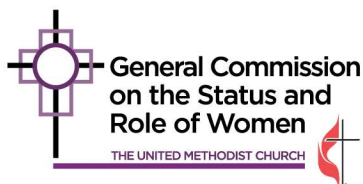


# SEXUAL MISCONDUCT IN THE CHURCH

Understanding the Role of Power

*Developed by the  
General Commission on the  
Status and Role of Women*

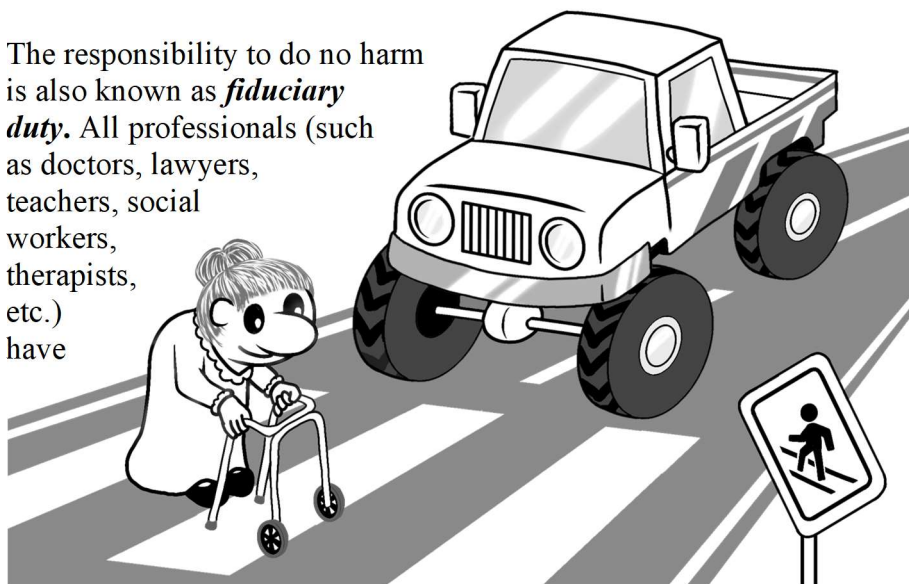


Clergy, church leaders, and anyone working in ministry, have power over the people they serve. This inherent power is often referred to as a **sacred trust**. People look to those in ministerial roles to nurture and guide them, making themselves spiritually and emotionally vulnerable, because they believe God has given their leaders authority. The Bible says that clergy and lay ministers have been “entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed” and “those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:1-2 *NIV*). In other words, where there is power there is also responsibility to do no harm; the betrayal of sacred trust occurs when professional boundaries are violated, potentially turning God-given power into a weapon of abuse (UM Sexual Ethics, 2019).

*Sexual misconduct within ministerial relationships is a betrayal of sacred trust. It is a continuum of 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.*

- Book of Resolutions 2016, #2044

The responsibility to do no harm is also known as **fiduciary duty**. All professionals (such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, social workers, therapists, etc.) have



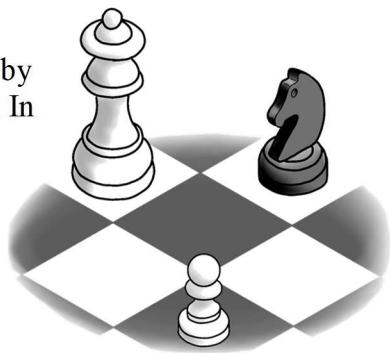
*Where there is power there is also responsibility to do no harm.*

an obligation to act in the best interest of their patients, students, and clients. It is not simply inappropriate for them to make romantic or sexual advances towards a person seeking help, it is considered malpractice. It may even lead to their license being revoked. This is equally if not more true for clergy and lay leaders, who also have theological stipulations to do all the good they can and do no harm.

## What is Power?

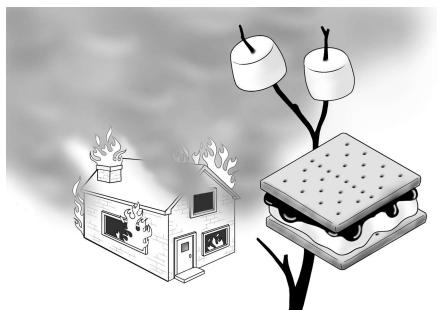
Rev. Dr. Marie Fortune (2012), founder of the *Faith Trust Institute*, explains that **power is ultimately about who has greater resources** within a specific context. Resources could be anything from money to education to physical strength. Sacred trust is also a significant resource that those in a ministerial role possess. Assets such as these bring with them influence; they give power to manage a situation and impact the outcome.

**Power is also relative.** No one is powerful alone; their power is defined by the vulnerability of those around them. In the game of chess, a knight has power compared to a pawn because it has a wider range of moves (i.e. the pawn has fewer resources), but when compared to the variety of moves a queen can make (i.e. greater resources) the knight is vulnerable. **Whether a person is powerful or vulnerable in a certain setting depends on the resources of the other people involved** (Fortune, 2012).



*Power is relative. In chess, a knight has power compared to a pawn because it has a wider range of moves, but when compared to the variety of moves a queen can make the knight is vulnerable.*

The dynamic of relative power hinging upon the comparative resources of those involved is evident in professional and ministerial settings. For example, a Youth Pastor is powerful in comparison to the teenagers in his church. He is older, more educated, presumably wealthier and physically stronger too, not to mention the sacred trust bestowed upon him as a minister of God. He may not always feel powerful but ultimately, he is responsible for those children when



*Fire, for example, can cook delicious food or it can burn down a house, it is neither good nor bad in and of itself.*

they are in his care. That said, the same Youth Pastor is vulnerable in comparison to his Lead Pastor; she has seniority, structural authority, more experience and other resources at her disposal. As a result, she has position and influence to impact the Youth Pastor's ministry, vocation, and life in general. She has the power in their relationship.

Saying that one person is powerful in comparison to another does not mean that the person will do harm. What it does mean is that there is the *potential* to harm (or to help for that matter). Fire, for example, can cook delicious food or it can burn down a house, it is neither good nor bad in and of itself. In the same way, **power is a neutral concept; it all depends how it is used** (Fortune, 2012).

## Myths about Sexual Misconduct

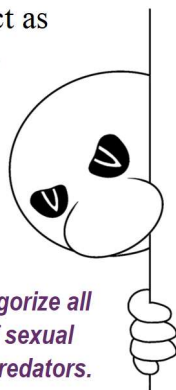
### Myth #1: "I don't have power."

Everyone feels powerless at times and clergy are certainly under the authority of others – even in their own churches – when, for example, salary or appointment decisions are being made. That said, **power is relative and determined by the levels of resources involved, not emotions** (Fortune, 2012). *See also: What is Power?*

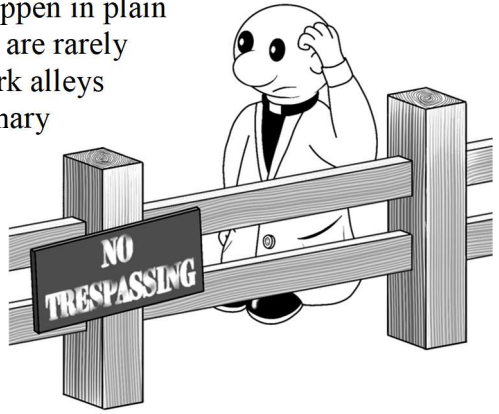
### Myth #2: "Perpetrators are all monsters."

It is easy to categorize all perpetrators of sexual misconduct as predators who intentionally prey on the vulnerable. That is simply not true in most cases. A survey conducted by The United Methodist Church's *General Commission on the Status and Role of Women* (2017), found that half of United Methodists asked (both clergy and laity) had experienced sexual misconduct in church, with most incidents occurring in a public setting such as meetings, classes or events. The prevalence of sexual misconduct –

*It is easy to categorize all perpetrators of sexual misconduct as predators.*



particularly the instances that happen in plain sight – indicate that perpetrators are rarely atypical deviants who lurk in dark alleys waiting to pounce; they are ordinary people found in all elements of church life. Rev. Dr. Marie Fortune writes that “some of the conduct can be described as wandering. Religious leaders who wander and violate sexual boundaries are often ill-trained and insensitive and use poor judgment” (2013, p. 15). Predators are one end of the spectrum. **Laying the blame solely with predators dismisses the issue and excuses people from taking a good hard look at their own behavior.** Self-awareness is crucial to maintaining integrity in ministry.



*“Religious leaders who wander and violate sexual boundaries are often ill-trained and insensitive and use poor judgment.”*

*- Rev Dr Marie Fortune*

### **Myth #3: “It was just a slip-up.”**

Although perpetrators of sexual misconduct should not all be labelled intentional predators, it is important to avoid the opposite extreme of dismissing an incident as a slip-up or mistake. Those in ministerial positions who violate sexual boundaries do so out of insensitivity, poor judgment, or ignorance. **Training, counselling, and supervision are required if perpetrators are to return to responsible ministry** (Fortune, 2013). What’s more, neglecting to name sexual misconduct for what it is degrades the experience of victims and attempts to explain away the reality of what happened (Kennedy, 2013). Sexual misconduct is the abuse and misuse of power, causing harm to those who are more vulnerable in that context.

### **Myth #4: “It was an affair.”**

Sexual misconduct is not an “affair,” regardless of what it might look like on the surface. It makes no difference if those involved are single or married. It does not matter if the incident was one touch, a sexual encounter, or a romantic involvement. **Any relationship between a church leader and a congregant is a violation of sacred trust and**

**an abuse of power.** Additionally, in the same way that mislabeling sexual misconduct as a “slip-up” degrades the experience of victims, neglecting to accurately name the abuse and misuse of power involved unfairly minimizes the harm being done (Kennedy, 2013).

The Judicial Council of The UMC asserts that dating, romantic or sexual relationships between clergy and their parishioners “are never appropriate because of imbalance of power”  
- Decision 1228, 2012

**Myth #5: “It was consensual.”**

For consent to be meaningful it requires those involved in sexual activity to be equal in power; fear, coercion or manipulation must be completely absent from the relationship (Faith Trust Institute, 2019).

**If someone cannot comfortably say “no,” then their “yes” is meaningless.** The power a church leader has over the congregant invalidates consent. To use an example from the hit TV show *Orange is the New Black*, despite a female prisoner appearing to want a relationship, her “consent” did not prevent a guard from going to prison himself when it was discovered she was pregnant. Her consent was meaningless because of the power differential, and it was the guard’s fiduciary duty to resist her advances and seek accountability with other guards or his supervisor. The same is true for church leaders. **It is always the responsibility of the person with authority to define and maintain sexual boundaries.**



*If someone cannot comfortably say “no,” then their “yes” is meaningless.*

For further resources, training, or consultation  
on specific situations, contact:

## UM Sexual Ethics

[www.umsexualethics.org](http://www.umsexualethics.org)

Confidential Toll-Free Number 1-800-523-8390

A Ministry of



**General Commission on the Status and Role of Women**

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



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