



**LIVING GOD
RENEW AND
TRANSFORM US**

World Communion of Reformed Churches

Called to communion, committed to justice

GUIDELINES FOR DEALING WITH SEXUAL HARASSMENT

This document is not intended to be legalistic or punitive. It is meant to serve as a covenant for how, as a community, we deal with sexual harassment, seeking care, compassion and justice for all parties involved. It is our hope that the situation necessitating these guidelines will not arise.

1. Introduction

The Gospel affirms the basic dignity of all humankind, created in the image of God. This statement challenges the Christian community to act and respect all humankind regardless of their differences such as sex, age, race, ethnicity, class and religion. Human sexuality is a gift from God and it is to be celebrated. The roots of sexual harassment and abuse are not in human sexuality but in the abuse of power. Care must be taken that power is not used to violate, harass or intimidate. Although offenders may believe their behaviour is innocent or unintended, sexual harassment is defined by the perception and experience of the victim.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches affirms its commitment to the basic dignity and human rights of all people. We believe that we must strive to be a community, which challenges all forms of violence and disrespect and expresses the faith and principles of the gospel in appropriate action. A fundamental respect for each human being includes a commitment to the rights and dignity of all regardless of sex, race, age, class, caste or tribe. Sexual harassment is not exclusively a sexual issue but must be understood as an exploitation of power relationships.

It is a global reality that the human family is broken. One such form of brokenness is violence against the human person. This violence expresses itself in ways such as sexual abuse, child abuse and sexual harassment, and is directed predominantly towards women. The World Communion of Reformed Churches acknowledges that it has not only played a role in healing and restoring but that it also shares responsibility for this brokenness. Therefore, we commit ourselves to continue to work for the healing and restoration of the human family.

2. Definition of sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is defined as any form of sexual advance that is uninvited, unwanted and unwelcome. Sexual harassment may involve a wide range of behaviour, from verbal innuendo and subtle suggestions to offensive and unwelcome hugs, squeezes, pinches, kisses, overt demands and physical abuse or assault. Unwelcome acts will be considered as violations of an acceptable code of conduct especially when the accuser has in some way made her/his feelings of what is "unwelcome" known in advance. The World Communion of Reformed Churches acknowledges that even within its gatherings, our families and churches, sexual harassment does occur.

3. Sexual harassment includes but is not limited to one or more of the following:

- ◆ Overt or covert sexual advances or contact.
- ◆ Mental abuse (which may include obscene jokes, innuendoes, unacceptable visual contact, seduction).
- ◆ Physical abuse or assault (which may include fondling, unwelcome hugs and kisses, and genital contact).
- ◆ Any intentional touching or fondling (either directly or through the clothing) of such areas of the body that are sensitive and personal.

4. What are some of the things you can do if you are being sexually harassed?

- ◆ Refuse any inappropriate gesture or contact.
- ◆ Make it clear to the aggressor by words or gestures that such behaviour is unwelcome.
- ◆ Draw public attention when or if harassment persists in public places.
- ◆ Share your concern with someone you trust.
- ◆ If you are sexually harassed or falsely accused, make a report to the Pastoral Team of the general council.

5. Procedures to be followed for Formal Complaints at the General Council

To begin the process, complaint or accusation of sexual harassment shall be brought to the attention of the Pastoral Team or

the general council coordination office.

- ◆ The accusation may be verbal or written.
- ◆ The Pastoral Team will meet privately and conduct interviews with the complainant who may choose a friend to accompany him/her and to provide moral support.
- ◆ The Pastoral Team will schedule and conduct private interviews with the accused with the purpose of investigating the accusation.
- ◆ The accused shall be informed of the charge and advised that he/she may also choose an appropriate friend to accompany him/her and to provide moral support.
- ◆ After initial interviews, the Pastoral Team will determine whether or not to proceed with the investigation and follow up with appropriate action.

6. Actions to be considered by Pastoral Team

Issues to be considered by the Pastoral Team in making recommendations may include the intent of the accused, awareness of the appropriateness of the behaviour in question, awareness of why the behaviour is or is not appropriate, and willingness to take responsibility for the behaviour and its consequences.

The Pastoral Team may recommend the following actions to be taken in relation to:

a) Care for the victim:

1. The members of the Pastoral Team and the General Secretary shall respond with sensitivity and care to the victim.
2. Counselling and protection are offered to the victim.

b) The accused:

1. **Education/awareness:** In cases where the situation is not necessarily sexual harassment but shows poor judgement. Clear guidance needs to be given and counselling may be recommended.
2. **Educative warning:** In cases where the situation is unquestionably inappropriate and unwise behaviour, but is not clearly sexual harassment. A clear warning states why the behaviour is inappropriate, and calls for an immediate cessation of the behaviour.
3. **Disciplinary measures:** In cases where the situation involves sexual harassment and has resulted in relatively serious consequences. The following actions will be taken as deemed appropriate:
 - ◆ Restrictions to be placed on the participation of the accused during the meeting and the individual may be asked to leave the meeting and the premises at his/her own expense.
 - ◆ Restrictions to be placed on the accused from having contact with the victim.
 - ◆ In consultation with the victim, recommendations may include that an apology from the accused appropriate to the situation be made to the victim.
 - ◆ The victim may also choose to take legal action beyond action by the Pastoral Team.

The Pastoral Team for the General Council

1. Composition

A Pastoral Team consisting of the following persons has been established to deal with cases of sexual harassment:

- Rev. Chris Ferguson, General Secretary
- Rev. Dora Arce-Valentin, Executive Secretary, Justice and Partnership
- Rev. Cheryl Meban, Executive Committee member
- Martin Engels, a pastor from the local context (to also act as the liaison with police, legislative authorities as is needed).

The team brings the following principles and skills:

- ◆ Ability to maintain **confidentiality** within the team.
- ◆ Awareness of the implications and ramifications of the dynamics of power in social and human relations.
- ◆ Experience in pastoral counseling for such cases.
- ◆ Commitment to give of their time, to respond with care for the victim and to give assistance as is needed.
- ◆ Ability to give independent and balanced evaluation of the concerns of both accuser and accused.

2. Guidelines

- ◆ It is the aim of the Pastoral Team to act with fairness, justice, and discretion and it will seek to extend appropriate pastoral care in every situation.
- ◆ Persons accused of sexual harassment will be considered innocent until the accusation has been substantiated by careful examination of the evidence provided.
- ◆ The charges will be taken seriously. The team will be responsible for investigations and carrying out appropriate action.
- ◆ The investigation must not be discussed with anyone except those whom the team has officially decided to speak to and/or include during the investigation process.