Sexual Harassment in Religious Settings

Many religious organizations say that they have policies against harassment, but the policies aren't always clear as to what defines sexual harassment. It is important to know and clearly communicate all aspects of harassment to staff and volunteers.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defines sexual harassment as follows:

"Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment."

In the life of a religious organization, sexual harassment can take place on several levels. It may happen between staff members. Or, it could evolve from a pastor, employee, or volunteer taking advantage of their position in relationship to another staff member, counselee, or someone who looks to them for pastoral or spiritual care. Victims and harassers can be of either gender.

Sexual harassment may be explicit, involving touching or using direct language or conduct. But it also may be categorized as implicit, involving jokes, comments, innuendos, display of offensive materials, and the use of gestures or facial expressions.

Simply stated, conduct becomes sexual harassment when someone is intimidated by gestures or other actions that are sexual in nature. What may be seen as "normal behavior" on the part of the offender may be sexual harassment to others.

Organizations can face serious legal liability for failing to address misconduct. Specifically, a religious entity may be held legally accountable if it fails to accurately identify, provide training on, clearly communicate policies regarding, or properly intervene in instances of sexual harassment.

To help prevent your organization from experiencing a sexual harassment allegation, the following are several safeguards religious organizations can adopt:

1. Clearly articulate that sexual misconduct or harassment of any kind will not be tolerated.
2. Have written and posted policies that clearly define what constitutes sexual harassment and how to report it.
3. Conduct initial training for new workers and ongoing training for employees and volunteers.

Have a clearly defined response policy as to what individuals and the organization will do in the case of an allegation.

Organizations can protect both their personnel and their own operations by taking a proactive stance against misconduct. By actively preventing sexual harassment, an organization fulfills its responsibility to ensure a safe, secure environment for its employees, volunteers, and members.

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