

While the greatest sexual offense in a religious setting is sexual misconduct of a minor, another tragedy that is often overlooked is the potential for sexual harassment to occur between employees and volunteers. In a setting where care, compassion, and support are welcomed and desired, at times, the line gets crossed and sexual harassment occurs.

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.

In some cases, harassment can lead to legal problems for the organization. A religious entity could be held liable if it did not properly identify, educate, communicate, or respond to the 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.
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 that take a proactive approach to preventing sexual harassment will not only do themselves a favor, but also will help to protect workers, volunteers, and members who look to the organization to provide a safe and secure environment.