

**Covenant of Clergy Sexual Ethics & Guidelines for Our Life Together**  
A Policy of the Michigan Annual Conference  
of The United Methodist Church

**Preamble**

This policy states expected standards of behavior and defines inappropriate sexual conduct by clergy so that we maintain healthy relationships of integrity and safety for the sake of our common ministry to the people of God in the name of Jesus Christ. While this policy focuses on a clergy person's professional role, it is understood that any form of clergy sexual misconduct brings great harm to the clergy person's family. This policy also provides guidance so that when incidents of sexual misconduct, sexual abuse, or sexual harassment are alleged, the complainant and the respondent may experience grace, justice, and reconciliation. Grace extends unconditional love while holding us accountable to the consequences of inappropriate behavior.

**Statement of Covenant**

God has called us, through the grace of Jesus Christ, into covenant with God and one another. This covenant is intended by God to be a means of reconciliation, justice, faith, hope, and love. We live out this covenant in the Church. This covenant implies that there are standards to which clergy are expected to adhere and assumes that each clergy person seeks to live according to these high standards. "*Ordination and membership in an Annual Conference in The United Methodist Church is a sacred trust.*" (*The Book of Discipline of The UMC – 2016* ¶362). Sexual misconduct, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment of any kind is sinful behavior against God and one another. Not only does such behavior violate a person's humanity, but also constitutes an unjust use of status and power which breaks this sacred trust. Therefore, all clergy are expected to live out the highest ethical standards regarding the role of human sexuality in all interpersonal relationships.

**Theological & Pastoral Reflections**

We recognize that sexuality is God's good gift given as a birthright to all persons as a part of their fundamental humanity, and we call all persons to the disciplined, responsible fulfillment of themselves, others, and society in the stewardship of this gift.

As clergy called and set apart for leadership in the church, we have agreed "*for the sake of the mission of Jesus Christ in the world*" to dedicate ourselves to "*exercise responsible self-control by personal habits conducive to bodily health, mental and emotional maturity, fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness, social responsibility, and growth in the knowledge and love of God.*" *The Book of Discipline of The UMC - 2016* ¶310.2d Like any of our behaviors, our sexual behavior and relationships must comply with the highest standards of a Christ-like life. We in the church are expected to live in covenant with each other and hold each other to those standards.

Clergy sexual misconduct involves both a misuse of the gift of sexuality and an abuse of the power inherent in any pastoral relationship. When sexually intimate acts take place within the pastoral relationship they become tainted with ambivalence, confusion, guilt, and sometimes fear. Secrecy, which often accompanies such acts, only reinforces these feelings and further signals that there is something wrong with the relationship. Sexual relationships where one or both persons are exploitive, abusive, or promiscuous are beyond the parameters of acceptable Christian behavior and are ultimately destructive to individuals, families, churches, clergy colleagues, and the social order.

An inherent imbalance of power exists in any clergy relationship simply through the clergy role. A similar imbalance of power can also exist when one clergy supervises another clergy. The sacred trust inherent in ordination, consecration and licensing that makes effective

ministry possible leaves persons in clergy relationships open, vulnerable, and predisposed to believe that clergy shall act only in ways that will contribute to those persons' well-being. Therefore, the only appropriate and acceptable clergy response to the trust and power given them through their roles is to minister within healthy boundaries to all persons as beloved children of God.

### Definitions

**Clergy:** The term “clergy” as used in this policy includes all ordained, commissioned, licensed, and consecrated persons serving in the Michigan Annual Conference, including those serving in extension ministries, appointments beyond the local church, on leave, honorable location, retired, and those lay persons assigned to pastoral ministry in a local church by a District Superintendent. All clergy are accountable to Christ, to *The Book of Discipline of The UMC - 2016*, to the Annual Conference, to one another, and to those whom they serve.

**Clergy Relationships:** A clergy relationship exists between a clergy person and any other person

1. when the other person is a parishioner of a congregation to which that clergy person is currently, or was previously appointed;
2. when the other person is mentored or supervised by, is a colleague with, or receives ministry from a clergy person serving in any function for which he or she was ordained, licensed, hired or approved by the Annual Conference or its representatives;
3. when a clergy person uses the authority of the clergy office or role in establishing a relationship with the other person, including pastoral care / counseling relationships, and;
4. when the other person is a member of a community which recognizes the clergy person as a person in ministry.

**Healthy Boundaries:** “*Healthy boundaries provide a nurturing and safe physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual environment for individuals.*” (L. Sperry, *Sex, Priestly Ministry, and the Church, 2003, p.10*) Clergy who practice healthy boundaries recognize that they have personal, professional, and ethical limits, understand clearly where those limitations are, and live out their ministry accordingly. Healthy boundaries are a clear reflection of our Wesleyan commitment to do no harm, to do all the good we can, and to stay in love with God. (R. Job, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living, 2007*)

**Clergy Sexual Misconduct:** Clergy sexual misconduct occurs when a clergy person initiates or allows any sexual contact or behavior with a person with whom he or she has a clergy relationship and includes, but is not limited to, the chargeable offenses listed in ¶2702 of *The Book of Discipline of The UMC - 2016*. This is further defined in Resolution #2044:

Sexual misconduct within a ministerial relationship is a betrayal of a sacred trust. 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. (*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2016, p. 776*)

**Sexual Harassment:** Sexual harassment [is] any unwanted sexual comment, advance, or demand, either verbal or physical that is reasonably perceived by the recipient as demeaning, intimidating, or coercive...Sexual harassment includes, but is not limited to, the creation of a hostile or abusive working environment resulting from discrimination on the basis of gender.” (*The Book of Discipline of The UMC - 2016, ¶161.J*)

“[Sexual harassment] is unwanted sexual or gender-directed behavior within a pastoral, employment, ministerial (including volunteers), mentor, or colleague relationship that is so severe or pervasive that it alters the conditions of employment or volunteer work or unreasonably interferes with the employee or volunteer’s performance by creating a hostile environment that can include unwanted sexual jokes, repeated advances, touching, displays, or comments that insult, degrade, or sexually exploit women, men, elders, children, or youth.” (*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2016*, p. 776)

Sexual harassment can consist of a single intense or severe act, or of multiple persistent or pervasive acts. There are many possible scenarios which could constitute sexual harassment. Each situation must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

**Sexual Abuse:** Sexual abuse [in ministry] is a form of sexual misconduct and occurs when a person within a ministerial role of leadership (lay or clergy, pastor, educator, counselor, youth leader, or other position of leadership) engages in sexual contact or sexualized behavior with a congregant, client, employee, student, staff member, coworker, or volunteer.” (*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2016*, p. 777) Sexual abuse within the ministerial relationship involves a betrayal of sacred trust, a violation of the ministerial role and exploitation of those who are vulnerable.

**Pornography:** Pornography is sexually explicit material that portrays violence, abuse, coercion, domination, humiliation, or degradation for the purpose of sexual arousal. Pornography sexually exploits and objectifies both women and men. Any sexually explicit material that depicts children is abhorrent and victimizes children. Pornography ruins lives, careers, and relationships. We oppose all forms of pornography and consider its use a form of sexual misconduct. (*The Book of Discipline of The UMC - 2016*, ¶ 161Q).

### Standards for Clergy Conduct

- A. Clergy members of the Annual Conference are accountable for their integrity and conduct in their personal lives and professional ministries. Thus, it is inappropriate for any clergy person to use pornography, or to commit sexual misconduct of any kind, either with someone with whom they have a clergy relationship or not. A violation of our covenant with God, of clergy relationship, of clergy responsibility, and of clergy authority is abusive and unethical, which could result in the discontinuance of the clergy person’s ordained, commissioned, licensed, or consecrated status, and/or assignment.
- B. Clergy have the responsibility for developing healthy and ethical relationships with all other persons. Married clergy have made a vow to nurture and maintain fidelity and faithfulness in their marital relationship. Single clergy must maintain appropriate conduct in dating relationships as understood in our Christian teaching, and honor their vow to maintain celibacy in singleness. (See *The Book of Discipline of The UMC - 2016*, ¶ 310.2d)
- C. A single clergy person engaging in a romantic relationship with a single person with whom he or she has a clergy relationship does not necessarily commit sexual misconduct. However, the clergy person must be aware of the inherent imbalance of power that he or she has in this type of clergy relationship and take full responsibility for the related potential for harm. A single clergy person entering into this type of relationship bears the burden of demonstrating that there has been no abuse of power or exploitation in the relationship, in light of all relevant factors, including the personal history and mental status of the other person and the likelihood of an adverse impact on the person or on others.

## Expectations

- A. Clergy frequently relate to persons who are fragile and vulnerable and therefore must exercise special care:
  - 1. to maintain their own psychological, emotional, and spiritual health;
  - 2. to be properly and adequately prepared and educated, including continuing education, in order that they may provide appropriate help for those in their care;
  - 3. to seek counsel, advice, and supervision from one's spiritual director, counselor/therapist, accountability partner/group, mentor, or District Superintendent;
  - 4. to know their own abilities and set appropriate limits beyond which they will refer those for whom they provide pastoral care to other professional care givers.
- B. Clergy shall participate in educational training programs of the Annual Conference related to Healthy Boundaries and Clergy Sexual Ethics and will sign and abide by the related covenant document.
- C. Clergy of the Annual Conference are bound to one another in a covenantal relationship of mutual accountability, care, and support. Those within the clergy covenant are encouraged to prayerfully discern when it is appropriate to offer caring support to colleagues who may be in need of assistance.

## Reporting

- A. The Church is a place for healing and justice; therefore, it must recognize, prevent, and stop sexual misconduct. As leaders in the Church, clergy in particular bear responsibility for confronting one another with knowledge of sexual misconduct since it places an unfair and unavoidable burden on the victim(s). Truth-telling may be risky and painful, and may stir up strong feelings of fear and anger for all involved. Even so, truth-telling has the power to release both offenders and victims from the secrecy, denial, and guilt that result from sexual misconduct. The Church is called to bring about reconciliation, and restoration of all parties as identified in *The Book of Discipline of The UMC - 2016*, ¶362.1.
- B. When an allegation of clergy sexual misconduct is made, all care will be taken by those involved in any investigation to determine the nature of the complaint and the appropriate response. Every complaint will be taken seriously and treated with integrity and confidentiality. *The Book of Discipline of The UMC - 2016* will be followed in response to all complaints.
- C. Retaliation – It is important to protect persons who disclose clergy sexual misconduct. Retaliation against those persons by anyone will not be tolerated.
- D. Reporting – If persons have experienced, become aware of, or are accused of any incidence of clergy sexual misconduct, they should immediately contact the office of a District Superintendent or the Office of the Bishop. Clergy who have experienced sexual harassment or another form of sexual misconduct by a clergy or lay person should immediately contact the office of a District Superintendent or the Office of the Bishop. These addresses and phone numbers are available in any local United Methodist Church. In addition, if an incident involves minors, the elderly, or the disabled, reporting to the Michigan Department of Human Services (855-444-3911) is also mandatory.

### NOTE:

This document is provided solely for the purpose of this Covenant of Clergy Sexual Ethics. The statements, reflections, definitions, standards, and expectations named herein do not create any additional chargeable offenses, nor sanction any conduct which may constitute a chargeable offense, pursuant to *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*.

If any provision of this policy is in conflict with *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* shall prevail. Such conflict shall not be grounds for invalidating the entire policy. Revised February 21, 2017, to be effective January 1, 2019.

### **Guidelines for Our Life Together**

Michigan Conference of The United Methodist Church

The Michigan Conference seeks to be both proactive and preventive in responding to issues that impact the church and its mission. In response to current concerns in both the Church and the world, we have adopted the following Guidelines. All clergy in our community, both active and retired, are asked to uphold these Guidelines.

The Michigan Conference will use these Guidelines as a complement to *The Book of Discipline of The UMC - 2016*. They address timely concerns that are not addressed in other resources. They will be utilized as an educational tool of the Board of Ordained Ministry, license certification school, for further dialogue, and at other conference trainings.

While no policies or other documents can anticipate all of the challenges and situations that may arise, the Guidelines for Our Life Together delineate key areas of personal and professional relationships, integrity, power, and conflicts of interest. These guidelines are designed to assist our community to have a common understanding of difficult issues, which may arise.

**As clergy within the Michigan Area, we will be guided by the following:**

#### **A. IN OUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WE WILL**

1. Be above reproach in all that we do;
2. Serve the members and constituents in our current appointment and not provide ministerial services elsewhere unless a consultation between the former pastor/retired pastor and the pastor under appointment determine that it is for the health and in the best interest of the congregation;
3. Keep appropriate confidences and privileged information;
4. Avoid communicating (verbal, written, and electronic) negatively about a colleague, especially our predecessor or our successor;
5. Avoid the appearance of impropriety in visitation and counseling sessions;
6. Maintain a healthy emotional and social balance and maintain boundaries between pastoral identity and self-identity, private and community life, self and others;
7. Separate our ministerial role from our personal lives in relation to those directly served by our ministry (see Standards for Clergy Conduct [C.] in the Covenant for Clergy Sexual Ethics);
8. Encourage the congregation in the care and upkeep of the parsonage, leave the church and parsonage clean and in good condition, and accept financial responsibility for damage to the parsonage beyond normal wear and tear (see Conference Parsonage policy);
9. Practice habits that encourage and promote the physical, emotional, and spiritual health of our families and ourselves.

#### **B. IN ISSUES OF INTEGRITY WE WILL**

1. Be fiscally responsible;
2. Be honest;
3. Properly represent the policy, mission, and program of the Annual Conference and The United Methodist Church;
4. Acknowledge sources for preaching and in written material; we will not plagiarize another's work;
5. As full-time clergy, accept employment outside of the appointed charge only with the consent of the S/PPRC and conference cabinet (§ 338.1);

6. Maintain the highest ethical standards regarding the use of modern technology, avoiding even the perception of inappropriate use of the internet and understanding that email and text messaging are not a private domain and should not be treated as such;
7. Provide pastoral services for weddings, baptisms, and funerals to church members without charge; the receipt of honoraria is acceptable.
8. Abstain from pornography and gambling in any form;
9. Abstain from misuse or abuse of alcohol and drugs, prescription or other.

**C. IN REGARD TO POWER ISSUES WE WILL**

1. Be aware of the power that is inherent in our various roles and use that power to maximize ministry opportunities that communicate worth, mutuality, and collegiality;
2. Provide ministerial services in order to build up the body of Christ;
3. Establish clear, appropriate boundaries with anyone with whom we have a ministerial, business, professional, or social relationship;
4. Not use our ministerial status, position, relationship, or authority to abuse, misguide, negatively influence, manipulate, or take advantage of anyone.

**D. IN AREAS WHERE THERE MIGHT BE A CONFLICT OF INTEREST WE WILL**

1. Advise and refer persons to other clergy or other professionals such as lawyers, doctors, counselors, etc. when appropriate; be aware that our judgment can be impaired by prior dealings, by becoming personally involved, or by becoming an advocate for one party against another;
2. Absent ourselves at an appropriate time from discussion and decision when there is an actual or potential conflict of interest in matters affecting ourselves, our family, or our financial interests;
3. Never take advantage of anyone to whom we are providing services in order to further our personal, religious, political, financial, or business interests or those of our family;
4. Use discretion concerning the acceptance of or return of gifts for ourselves or our family;
5. Avoid using the congregation as a captive audience for products or services created or provided in a non-clergy role;
6. Not accept or confer an office, position, assignment, or receive compensation, which may present the appearance of favoritism or a conflict of interest.

Adopted from existing Guidelines of the Detroit Annual Conference and the West Michigan Conference for the Michigan Conference to be effective January 1, 2019. Revised February 20, 2017.