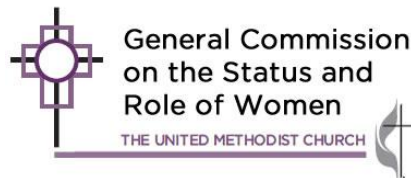


Responding to Sexual Misconduct in the Church:  
Using Response Teams to Promote Healing in  
The United Methodist Church



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## Introduction

A Response Team is used to support and encourage the healing of all persons affected by sexual misconduct in the Church. The Response Team is not called to any judicial or Disciplinary processes for legal resolution of a situation. Bishops may employ a Response Team whenever a congregation and individuals experience trauma.

Response Teams may assist in addressing different crises in local churches, such as:

- Ministerial or clergy sexual misconduct
- Laity sexual misconduct directly involving the congregation
- Sudden death of a pastor or prominent lay person in the congregation
- Embezzlement or misuse of funds
- Accusations of discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, age, and/or nationality
- Sudden sabbatical by a pastor
- Church closures
- Sexual abuse of a church member at a church camp or other church affiliated event
- Any other instance as requested by the Bishop or the Bishop's representative

Response Teams may also provide training and retreat experiences for congregations, clergy, church staff, and church lay leadership wishing to develop healthy responses for situations affecting congregational health and community. Response Team members may be selected by the bishop and extended Cabinet.

### **This guide specifically addresses the use of a Response Team by a bishop in cases of sexual misconduct by a ministerial leader in the Church.**

It is recommended that Response Teams include lay and clergy persons and represent gender, racial/ethnic, geographic, and age diversity of the congregations and constituent groups within an annual conference. **It is recommended that the Cabinet reach out to ministers/leaders in each district to identify potential team members. All team members must complete training and have the skills, maturity, and passion for responding to trauma.** Members must be available to travel on short notice. People with experience in pastoral care, psychology, social work, counseling, grief counseling, conflict transformation, and law could be considered as potential members.

Upon receipt of a formal complaint of the chargeable offense of sexual misconduct (§2702.i), the bishop initiates and guides the church's response to sexual abuse by a ministerial leader. This response will promote accountability and healing for all involved. The *Book of Discipline* allows for the use of a Response Team to provide pastoral care when handling and following-up on a complaint. The bishop may select "persons with qualifications and experience in assessment, intervention, or healing" to assist during the supervisory response (§362.1b). These persons may perform distinct roles, such as

individual support for the accused and the complainant, as well as working as a team to facilitate communication with and support for the congregation and families affects. **The bishop and cabinet are mandated to “provide a process for healing within the congregation, annual conference, or other context of ministry...”** as part of the supervisory response (“¶2016 *Book of Discipline*” 362.1f) and judicial process (¶2701.4c).

When victims feel heard and believe the Church is attending to their needs and seeking a process for justice-making, they are more likely to continue engaging the Church in problem-solving and resolution rather than reactively pursuing civil procedures (e.g. suing the annual conference). **It is important that an individual support person be assigned to the accused and the victim upon receipt of the formal complaint.** The support person walks alongside through the restoration or judicial process. It is also important for the support person to have support during the process. Often, Response Team members provide this support and any needed supervision.

When staff, lay leadership, and congregations have intentional time and space set aside to hear and understand the process of response by the Church and also openly share feelings, thoughts, and concerns, healing can begin for all. An excellent resource for addressing and promoting healing within the Church is “*When a Congregation is Betrayed: Responding to Clergy Misconduct*” by Beth Ann Gaede and Candace Reed Benyei (Alban Institute, 2006).

## **Deployment of Response Team**

A Response Team is asked to go into a congregation by the bishop. The bishop’s office or the district superintendent, on behalf of the bishop, notifies the church leadership of the decision to deploy the Response Team. Contact is made by the bishop’s office with the team leader/coordinator (may be a conference staff person or a volunteer) to discuss the specific situation and congregation. The bishop informs the team of the plan for disclosure to the congregation and announcement of the Response Team’s congregational meeting. It is important for the congregation to know in advance what the meeting is about and be able to choose to attend or not. The team leader contacts the team members to discuss availability for upcoming meetings which may include the church staff and SPRC prior to the congregational meeting. **Remember, Response Teams are called into a situation of trauma to promote healing for the congregation, staff, leadership, and individuals involved. It is strongly recommended that the interim or “afterpastor” have specialized training for this ministry and receive support, also.**

In coordination with the district superintendent, the team leader will contact the local church and schedule meeting times. It is recommended the SPRC and church staff meetings be conducted before the first congregational meeting.

Travel arrangements, hotel accommodations, and meal arrangements are made by the annual conference staff person, as necessary for the team members.

#### Meeting space:

All meetings should be held in a location with no interruptions. Sitting in a circle so everyone can see one another is recommended. It is important to provide a space which will encourage people to talk honestly, openly, and freely. Invite participants to state what they hope will come out of the conversations.

#### Agenda for all meetings:

- Introduction of Response Team members and any judicatory leaders (best if offered by a church leader or DS). Explain the function of the Response Team
- Grounding the meeting in scripture, offer a brief spiritual reflection time stressing God's presence in the midst of trauma/uncertainty.
- State clearly the nature of the complaint and the disciplinary process set forth in The Book of Discipline. To assure fairness and justice concerns, everyone should be given detailed information about the policy for responding to sexual misconduct complaints.
- Response Team leader or member offers definition of sexual misconduct and grief work.
- Response Team leads participants, in small groups, through a process of naming feelings and thoughts of their own experience upon learning of the complaint. (Use "Questions to Consider" handout)

**For SPRC:** Some committee members may have worked very closely with the leader and have difficulty separating personal feelings with leadership responsibilities. Some may feel guilty for not addressing "red flags" noticed previously. Clearly establish next steps in terms of disclosure to congregation (if it has not already taken place), congregational care, interim/after-pastor support, staff support/healing. Discuss how and when children and youth will be told of ministerial leader's absence if placed on leave. It is recommended this information be shared by Sunday school teachers and Youth Leaders/Ministers.

**For Staff:** Acknowledge the reality of the working relationship with the ministerial leader. Staff are in a unique position because of this relationship. It is not unusual for staff to have had concerns and felt unsafe in confronting them. Others will see the leader as a mentor and have much hurt, sadness, and anger. How do staff honor their need for grief work and also maintain their responsibilities as staff. Who will be the **spokesperson** for responding to questions from church members and the public? The staff must know this plan.

**For Congregation:** The Response Team members should be introduced by a local church leader i.e. SPRC Chair or Lay Leader. This meeting should be limited to adults. The adults need to be able to speak honestly and compassionately about this difficult matter. Do provide childcare if it is needed. Media is not permitted at this meeting. If the number of participants is over 15,

divide into group of 6 to 8. Using the “Questions to Consider” handout in the small groups, discuss openly feelings, thoughts, and concerns of participants. Allow at least 45 minutes for discussion. Come back together as one large group and share some of the answers from each small group. (**Even if the congregation does not want or resists the intervention of the Response Team, they will likely complain later that “nothing was done to help us” if no healing process is provided.**)

- Response Team offers follow-up meetings. Decisions need to be made as needed. As in all healing, the time after receiving the initial information is crucial for support and healing.
- Response Team provides a six month follow up meeting with church leadership.

Response Team must set aside time to debrief. This is critical for the self-care of the team and for providing feedback regarding follow up.

What worked well?

What didn't work well?

Summary of meetings to DS and/or Bishop.

## NOTES TO CONSIDER IN RESPONSE TEAM MINISTRY

*The Response Team can be vital in providing support to move forward in healing and to provide education to help understand the nature of sexual misconduct by a faith leader.*

1. A response with restorative justice as the agenda and goal must include accountability and pastoral care/compassion. A tone of calmness and resisting overreacting is important in setting the atmosphere for responding.
2. The image of a house damaged in a storm can be helpful in thinking about your response to the trauma: A church perched at a precarious angle because its foundation has been shattered by trauma from sexual misconduct will need more than putty on the windows and a new coat of paint to make it look better!  
**Response Teams are designed to respond at a foundational level!**
3. Individual support must be offered to the victim, accused, and the family members of all parties. **Will individual members of your team serve as a resource for support?**
4. Response Team will often go into the church and meet with staff, church committees, and /or congregation. This time together must be grounded and centered as God's people bringing our humanness to this place!
5. It is crucial that everyone's story is heard. Nothing should be discounted. This is an important step for healing to begin. **Everyone is valued!**
6. **INTEGRITY, INTEGRITY, INTEGRITY!** This must be demonstrated by all involved in responding. It restores equilibrium to the church as there will be heightened anxiety, and everything often questioned. People want their questions heard. Important questions have healing power. This is an important piece for the **interim pastor** to remember.
7. Anticipate scrutiny, anxiety, hurt, mistrust, hostile reactions from staff and/or congregation. It is **CRUCIAL** the team understand the group needs help. It is important to allow time for these feelings to be expressed.
8. Set a follow up meeting time. This is important.
9. **Healing Service.** How will the church minister to itself?

## CONVERSATION FOR HEALING

1. What were your thoughts/ feelings when you were told or heard of your ministerial leader's charge of sexual misconduct? How have your feelings changed since you first heard?
2. Sudden loss or sudden change of relationship has affected most of us at some time in our lives. When have you experienced a sudden change of relationship with someone you knew personally? What mix of feelings did you experience?
3. Has your local church ever experienced a sudden loss or disruption? (natural disasters, sudden death of a pastor or church member, loss of trust in a leader) How did the church respond?
4. What does it mean for you when someone in authority has betrayed trust? How do you feel as you name this?
5. What are the three most significant concerns that you have going forward? For people? For your church? For the conference? Where would you like to see yourself in relationship with these persons/entities in the future?
6. Romans 8: 38-39 says " neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, not powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God." Colossians 1:17 says, "In Christ, all things hold together." What do these passages mean for us today? Are there other scriptures, hymn lyrics, poems, etc. you draw from during these times?
7. As we work through grief related to this loss, where is there a spark of hope or new beginning? Where is God in all of this?

Restorative justice emphasizes a right relationship with God, self, and community. When such relationships are violated or broken through **sexual misconduct**, opportunities are created to make things right. When allegations of misconduct are reported in The United Methodist Church, we are asked to respond in ways which encourage restorative justice, by promoting accountability and healing, in every situation. The following short list is offered as suggestions when responding to sexual misconduct.

## 10 WAYS TO RESPOND AND PROMOTE HEALING

1. Be **open** to receiving the complaint. Stay aware of any resistance you may have and understand its source.
2. Set aside **undistracted time** to hear the individuals' stories.
3. **Show up** fully and listen attentively. Be able to tell the person what you have heard disclosed.
4. **Affirm** the person's decision to come forward with the complaint and/or cooperation in the process.
5. **Explain** the process. Give a written outline of what to expect.
6. Explain the option and importance of having a **support person** walk alongside parties throughout the process. Offer to give names of trained persons for consideration and **follow up** to encourage this assignment.
7. Encourage and offer resources for **professional counseling**. Explain how payment will be managed on behalf of the church.
8. Deploy a trained **Response Team** for congregational and staff support/healing.
9. Attend to the congregation. Be **transparent** in a message revealing a complaint of an alleged chargeable offense of a sexual nature has been received by the bishop's office. Explain the process including status of clergy and the name of the interim pastor if one is being appointed.
10. Assign a support person for the **interim pastor**.