

When Christian Solidarity Is Broken

[sous-titre]A Pastoral and Educational Response to Sexual Harassment

Christian community and solidarity

The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. (Isa. 32:17)

Christians affirm the basic dignity of all humankind, created in the image of God. In ecumenical gatherings, an environment of welcome and hospitality encourages the full and equal participation of all. The WCC strives to bring together a community based on the values of solidarity and mutual concern that challenges all forms of violence and harassment. The WCC is committed to raise awareness about sexual harassment in order to prevent it from occurring and to provide a safe space free from intimidation for all participants. When human sin breaks the trust in this community, Christians are called to be present for one another, especially for those who struggle for their safety, dignity and rights. God calls us into right relations with one another – to show care and respect for each human being.

Cultural diversity

Our cultural diversity adds to the strength of our community and is something to be cherished and celebrated. As we encounter one another's differences we should be careful not to assume that our way of being and behaving is comfortable for everyone else. Sometimes our differences of age, gender, culture, spirituality, religion, ability, language, caste, ethnicity and class make it a challenge to understand and communicate effectively with one another. How can each person be encouraged to take seriously his or her own responsibility to act with care in the multi-dimensional, cross-cultural interactions of the ecumenical world? What may be considered normal friendliness and sociability to one person can be misinterpreted in a culturally mixed group and even between individuals of the same culture or background. This is why we must take extra care and sensitivity with one another in an ecumenical environment. Finding appropriate expressions of the friendship and warmth felt for others in a positive, non-threatening way is a challenge faced by the ecumenical community.

Violence and power

Harassment is an intolerable manifestation of unequal power relations between people. Sexual harassment often also includes discrimination on the basis of gender, age, race or class, causing stress or humiliation to the person being harassed. This may happen in situations where dominance and abuse of power result in a lack of respect for and mistreatment of people as sexual objects. This ultimately demeans and destroys the dignity of a person. Sexual harassment is most often experienced by women from men. So harassment is not an isolated incident or individual problem. Rather it is a problem stemming from wider patterns and dynamics of power in our societies. Harassment can also occur between people of the same gender and sometimes involves women harassing men.

The Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace carries forward the commitment of churches around the world to overcome the institutional and personal violence that women experience. Sexual harassment has been identified as the most common expression of this violence. Incidents of sexual harassment and assault at church and ecumenical meetings have engaged the churches and the ecumenical movement in seeking responsible action and policy. Many churches, organizations and governments have introduced institutional or legislative remedies to protect those who experience the dehumanizing effects of violence and sexual harassment.

The purpose of these guidelines is to set a positive foundation upon which to build Christian community marked by solidarity, despite the brokenness in our midst. These guidelines are intended to encourage men to reflect on their attitudes towards women and those who are privileged on the basis of race, class, gender, social status, position of leadership and age to reflect on the spirit of justice and community that the ecumenical movement upholds.

They are also intended to encourage individuals to assert their dignity and contribute to the renewal of community. How can each of us, in our worship, work and meetings, help to create a reconciled, respectful community, conducive to the full humanity of all?

What is sexual harassment and assault?

On a continuum of severity, harassment ranges from whistles in the street and obscene phone calls to sexual assault. Sexual assault includes rape, sexual intercourse without consent, and sexual contact without consent.

Several kinds of behaviour with a sexual connotation, if unsolicited and unwanted and especially if repetitive, can be forms of sexual harassment. Examples are: suggestive looks or comments, teasing or telling of jokes with sexual content, letters, calls or materials of a sexual nature, imposed touching or closeness, pressure for dates or activities with a sexual overtone, or offers to use influence in return for sexual favours.

The feelings of the person experiencing any unwelcome behaviour are what is important. This depends on each individual and the context. In the end, harassment is not what someone necessarily intends to do but how his or her actions impact another's person's feelings and well-being.

Some steps to prevent and deal with sexual harassment

- Be clear with yourself and others about your personal boundaries – what sort of closeness with others feels comfortable or appropriate for you?
- Refuse any inappropriate gesture or contact.
- Respect other people's personal boundaries. If you are not sure ask first (i.e. would it be okay if I gave you a hug?).
- If you experience harassment, make it clear that the behaviour is unwelcome. You can say "no" with a look, words or gestures.
- Harassment is never the fault of the person being harassed. By its nature, harassment is unwanted attention or behaviour. It is not consensual.
- If harassment persists, and you are in a public place, make your protests louder so that the public notices the harasser.
- Trust your intuition and feelings if someone's behaviour makes you feel uncomfortable. People who experience harassment sometimes try to rationalize or deny what is really going on.
- Talk about it with people you trust, so that the name of the harasser and the kind of objectionable things done are known. This is important so that others are not subjected to the same treatment. Silence may only provoke more harassment.

- In serious cases where legal or other follow-up action is necessary, a verbal and written record of events will be helpful.
- If you see or hear of someone being harassed, don't keep silent. You could approach the person being harassed to see how you can help. Tell the person doing the harassing that their actions or words are inappropriate and make everyone feel uncomfortable. If the case is severe call for help.
- If you have experienced harassment, the solidarity care team can provide a safe space to talk about the situation and your feelings. They can also support you with whatever follow-up measures might be appropriate when you return home (i.e. local centre against sexual harassment and assault or support group through a local church).

Concluding statement

The churches and the World Council of Churches are called to develop a truly inclusive community free of violence and injustice. Sexual harassment and all forms of violence will not be tolerated or condoned. Offenders will be held responsible for their behaviour and are subject to appropriate disciplinary action.

The location and members of the solidarity care team will be announced at the assembly.