



Sexual Abuse and the Church

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It is denominational meeting season, when various Christian denominations gather to worship, take up the business of being the church, and discern how they are called to live and work. Our own United Church of Christ [General Synod](#) takes place this week (July 11-18, 2021).

Recently, some of our siblings in Christ in the [Southern Baptist Convention](#) responded to concerns about systemic failures to address sexual abuse in their midst. Often, such abuse was perpetrated or enabled by clergy, or ministers participated in protecting lay abusers from accountability. At times, the business of the SBC was disrupted by the urgent claims of survivors of sexual assault seeking to be heard. While they ultimately voted to [investigate concerns](#) that past allegations were mishandled, there is not yet a clear indication of how future allegations will be handled or of how to navigate denominational accountability within a context of congregational polity (where local churches make their own decisions about hiring pastors and staff). On the other end of the polity spectrum, the Roman Catholic Church, which has strong hierarchical processes as a denomination, has been forced to confront its systemic practices of ignoring abuse claims or moving abusive clergy to new parishes.

I know it is possible for wider expressions of the Church to hold abusers accountable, because the United Church of Christ has a robust process for processing claims of clergy sexual abuse (or other misconduct). This process is known as a “fitness review,” and it is handled by an Association or [Conference](#) Committee on Ministry where a minister holds their standing. Members of the Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization (MESA) ministry team train and resource these committees so that their practices align with the UCC’s [Manual on Ministry](#). There is not a statute of limitations on when concerns may be brought, so long as the minister is alive and still has standing in the UCC. Outcomes from a fitness review range from “affirmation of standing” through “termination of standing,” with multiple outcomes that offer a program of growth for ministers (when appropriate).

And while the UCC does not yet have consistent practices for church discipline of lay persons accused of sexual misconduct, the UCC National Setting is committed to assisting congregations in minimizing abuse. The denomination's abuse prevention resources can be found [here](#), and the Insurance Board's [SafeConduct™ Workbench](#) and congregational resources for [behavioral covenants](#) provide additional support. Nearly every Conference holds an expectation that clergy and others who work with youth and children are [mandated reporters](#) when suspicions or allegations of abuse arise. Further, the United Church of Christ has several resources for churches who wish to commit themselves to a journey of healing after sexual abuse, no matter where or when such abuse occurred, such as [Break the Silence Sunday](#). BTSS seeks to make a safe and brave space for survivors to share their stories of rape and sexual assault and to be heard compassionately by the Church.

Let me be clear: this is not a “thank God we are not like those other groups” post. I am acutely aware that the United Church of Christ has not always processed these concerns well. I know that we have further to go to make our denomination one where all people are safe from sexual violence and where anyone can share their stories of abuse with confidence that they will be heard and respected. But our covenantal system has created safeguards to minimize abuse, developed processes to hold abusers accountable and remove them from ministry if necessary, and cultivated ways in which we can process painful experiences liturgically. May these resources be offerings to the wider Body of Christ that extends beyond our denominational borders to any and all groups of Christians who hope to keep people safe from sexual violence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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