

QUESTIONS TO ENCOURAGE DIALOGUE AND CONVERSATION

Regarding Violence and Harassment in the Workplace

Bill 168 Occupational Health and Safety Act

PREAMBLE

On June 15, 2010 the Ontario government passed Bill 168 into law. Under the Occupational Health and Safety Act: Violence and Harassment in the Workplace, all employers are required to comply with this legislation. Ministry Personnel, secretaries, custodians, music directors, and anyone else employed by your Pastoral Charge or ministry are protected by this Bill. Hamilton Conference believes that discussion of these issues in every church setting will help prevent future conflict within the church. These policies, when upheld by all employees, volunteers, governing bodies, and church members will foster a safe and respectful workplace for all.

Under the Act, violence and harassment are now deemed to be hazards in the workplace and must be addressed by Ontario organizations by implementing policies, measures, procedures, and programs to ensure the safety of all workers in Ontario.

This legislation presents unique challenges and opportunities for the church.

How do we help those who have been harassed or victimized feel safe to come forward? How will we ensure a spiritually, psychologically and legislatively appropriate response? How do we insure a work environment where people feel safe and not harassed? How do we respond when someone identifies that they are being harassed?

Of course our goal is to prevent violence and harassment from ever taking place. However, should they occur this legislation provides us with the opportunity to surface the issues and address them in a direct and meaningful way should they occur; to help those who have been harassed and those who have harassed; and to maintain the presence of the church as an institution of faith, healing, and integrity.

1. Issues of violence and harassment, and the implementation of violence and harassment policies, procedures and programs need to remain part of ongoing conversations within our faith communities to raise awareness and prevent them from occurring. How can this be achieved?

Points for discussion

- What resources does The United Church of Canada or your ministry have in place to prevent violence and harassment? (e.g. Ministry and Personnel Committee, Pastoral Oversight Committee or written documents regarding how we will conduct ourselves in the church)
- Making respectful behavioral standards part of the performance review process
- Ongoing education
- Discussion groups linking issues to theological perspectives
- Creative and innovative prevention programs
- Making standards public and holding people accountable
- Educating employees on how to respond and manage incidents of harassment and violence
- Creating effective strategies for prevention through education and awareness
- Vulnerable people are made aware of how to safely report mistreatment with the security of knowing it will be addressed

2. In June of 2010, the Ontario government passed legislation making violence and harassment in the workplace a violation of the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Employers must implement policies, measures, procedures, and programs to ensure the safety of all Ontario workers.

Points for discussion

- Why would people tolerate harassment in their work environment?
- What would prevent people from disclosing or reporting violence or harassment in their workplace?
- What makes it difficult for us to address these behaviours in our churches or organizations when we are aware of them?

3. Implementing violence and harassment policies, procedures, and prevention programs will increase personal safety in our churches, organizations, and communities as well as protect those who are vulnerable.

Points for discussion

- Who is most vulnerable to violence and harassment and why?
- How are we currently assisting people to feel safe to report incidents of violence or harassment?

- What do we still need to do to increase the likelihood that people will report?

4. Some issues and/or concerns are unique to our situation because we are a faith-based community. What might they be?

Points for discussion

- Shame, Guilt
- Secrecy
- Fear of causing problems
- Violations of trust
- Difficulty accepting these things could happen in our communities and churches
- Fear of not being believed
- Fear of consequences for the reporter and the person being reported

5. There are many examples in the Bible with regard to the mistreatment of others and the consequences.

Points of discussion

- What happened to Pharaoh and the people of Egypt for the mistreatment of the slaves?
- How did Jesus deal with the men who wanted to stone a woman they said was caught in adultery? (John 8: 1-11)
- What do these examples teach us about creating safety to “report” mistreatment, prevention and consequences? Can you think of other examples of violence or harassment in the Bible?

6. Implementing new policies, procedures, behavioural standards and expectations with regard to violence and harassment can sometimes lead to resistance. What areas of resistance might be encountered in our congregations or organizations?

Points for discussion

- Denial of the problems
- Fear of change
- Legislation can feel like an intrusion
- Additional workload and responsibilities
- Not knowing how to report in a safe way
- Lack of knowledge about what harassment is under the legislation
- Not understanding what process will take place once a complaint has been made

7. There may be challenges when confronting harassment in our church. What might some of these challenges be?

Points for discussion

- Seeing the issues as spiritual only
- Lack of understanding of the psychology about the different types of harassers and that responses to the harasser need to vary accordingly
- Fear of reporting someone in a perceived position of power or authority
- Afraid to “rock the boat”
- Lack of knowledge or training on how to confront and respond to reported incidents
- Difficult to achieve a balanced response between either a tolerant or a punitive approach