

***New General Church Director for Clergy and Lay Misconduct Issues***

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The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women (GCSRW) has hired a clergyman to coordinate efforts on sexual ethics. The position is a new one, both for the commission and the denomination, according to M. Garlinda Burton, the commission's chief executive. The Rev. Darryl Stephens, currently a visiting assistant professor of Christian social ethics and Methodist studies at UM-related Candler School of Theology, will begin working part time in March for the commission and start on a full-time basis on April 27. The plan, Burton explained, is to create a "strategic, coordinated and theologically solid program" for sexual ethics, focusing on prevention, intervention and education. Stephens' duties will include the creation of training resources specific to the UMC and its clergy and lay leadership; development and evaluation of policies and procedures within annual conferences and church-related entities regarding sexual misconduct complaints; and coordination of intra-agency resources on the prevention and just resolution of such complaints. Burton believes Stephens, an ordained deacon in the Texas Annual Conference, will bring "a fresh perspective" on how to understand, prevent and address sexual misconduct by church leaders. "His grounding in Christian ethics and gender issues brings a needed dimension to our notion of what it means to honor all people as sacred and reduce the exploitation of the vulnerable," she said.

"What we are lacking . . . is an equivalent degree of awareness and recognition of appropriate sexual boundaries and rules for adult relationships involving clergy," Stephens said in an interview with UM News Service (UMNS). The role of the clergyperson is to recognize the degree of trust involved in that relationship. "When sex enters a pastoral relationship, it's a violation of trust, it's a violation of power and boundaries," he noted. "It's not an issue of two consenting adults." Stephens, who calls himself a "committed" ethicist, has devoted considerable time to the examination of the denomination's Social Principles and co-founded a Wesleyan/Methodist Ethics Group in 2008 through the Society of Christian Ethics.