

UMC pastor retires 'under complaint' after sex abuse allegations

by [Heather Hahn](#) in the [January 29, 2020](#) issue



(RNS)

A United Methodist clergyman has retired “under complaint” after facing formal accusations of sexual misconduct and abuse from four women.

Under a resolution with the West Ohio Conference, Donald “Bud” Heckman can no longer represent himself as under appointment by the church nor perform ministerial activities in the name of the United Methodist Church. The agreement also states that Heckman “publicly acknowledges in writing his personal regret” for sexual misconduct, harassment, and not being celibate in singleness and faithful in marriage.

The women detailed their accusations to UM News in October after a committee of investigation—a panel of four clergy and three lay members—determined there was enough evidence to charge Heckman with sexual harassment, misconduct, and abuse and hold a church trial.

Heckman—who is prominent in interfaith work—has not served as a pastor in a local church in more than 20 years, though the West Ohio Conference has oversight of his ministry as an ordained elder.

The resolution means there will be no church trial—which initially was scheduled in early December and then postponed.

“I deeply regret the harm that has been caused to any person due to an act of sexual misconduct by a pastor. There is no excuse,” West Ohio’s bishop Gregory V. Palmer said in a statement after the December 23 resolution. “It is my fervent prayer that all who have been impacted by this matter may continue to heal.”

However, three of the women who accused Heckman, including his ex-wife, told UM News of their frustration that he retains his clergy credentials and that they were not consulted in the conference’s settlement. The four women jointly filed their complaints in November 2018.

“I have anxiety issues so a trial would have been really scary for me,” said Megan Anderson, an editor of the news site *Interfaith Observer*. “But I would rather have a trial.”

Heckman, in a statement to UM News, strongly denied the allegations in the four women’s complaints.

“Rev. Heckman acknowledged to the church not being ‘celibate in singleness,’ which is considered a violation of the United Methodist covenant in ministry,” he said in the statement, referring to himself in third person. “He agreed to acknowledge as much publicly and accepted a just resolution to the judicial process. He did not agree to harassing or harming any of the four women.”

Cassandra Lawrence, an advocate for the four women, said she has heard from other women who accuse Heckman of harassment. All told, she said, at least 18 women have made allegations, though only four filed the complaints.

However, KR, one of the women who joined in the complaint, expressed concern that the resolution could hurt future efforts at accountability. She asked that her initials be used for fear of retaliation from Heckman.

“What this settlement says to victims of abuse is that they should think twice before filing a complaint, no matter how horrible their experience may be,” she said.

“Bud retaining his clergy credentials means that he retains tax benefits and is allowed to keep calling himself ‘the Rev. Bud Heckman,’ a title that allows him to maintain his VIP pass into interfaith and other faith-based spaces,” KR said.

Heckman has held leadership roles in interfaith circles for years. During the Obama administration, he served on the Interreligious Cooperation Task Force of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

But as the allegations became known, he has been asked to leave various positions. Tri-Faith Initiative, an Omaha, Nebraska, organization where he was executive director, severed ties with Heckman in February 2019 “as soon as we confirmed that there was some validity to the allegations,” Wendy Goldberg told the *Omaha World-Herald*. Goldberg is the initiative’s interim executive director.

Last year, the Religion Communicators Council board of governors also asked Heckman to step down as its president after the accusations came to light, Shirley Struchen, RCC’s executive director, told UM News. Staff at UM News are members of the professional organization.

Palmer, the West Ohio bishop, told UM News that the conference’s leadership feels Heckman “is ineligible for further appointment.”

The Book of Discipline, the denomination’s policy book, calls church trials “an expedient of last resort” and urges a just resolution of complaints before they ever get to that point.

Still, Laura Heckman—another formal accuser and the clergyman’s ex-wife—said she sees in the resolution “a missed opportunity.” This is the first such United Methodist complaint to become public since the Me Too movement started drawing greater attention to sexual misconduct.

“I think that the West Ohio Conference has systematically ignored our pleas to fully listen to our experiences,” she said.

The *Century* reported in its November 20 issue that Heckman had been accused of sexual misconduct and abuse and was expected to face a church trial. —United Methodist News Service