

Multiple women accuse United Methodist elder and prominent interfaith worker of sexual abuse

by [Heather Hahn](#) in the [November 20, 2019](#) issue

Four women have brought formal accusations of sexual misconduct and abuse against a United Methodist clergyman who is prominent in interfaith work.

The West Ohio Conference confirmed that Donald “Bud” Heckman, an elder in the conference, is suspended from active ministry and faces [“the strong likelihood” of a church trial](#)—tentatively scheduled for December 2–4.

“The West Ohio Conference takes seriously any allegation of a chargeable offense against a pastor,” the conference’s bishop, Gregory V. Palmer, said. Palmer declined to identify what church charges Heckman faces out of concern for Heckman’s due process rights and the people who brought the complaint.

Heckman did not respond to multiple attempts to reach him. However, the four women—and their two advocates—talked to United Methodist News about the allegations.

If found guilty, Heckman could lose his clergy credentials or face a lesser penalty.

Over the years, Heckman has worked in leadership roles at various foundations that support interfaith relations. During the Obama administration, he served on the Interreligious Cooperation Task Force of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

Cassandra Lawrence, a United Methodist consultant in interfaith work, helped the four women file the complaint after hearing from 15 women who had allegations of harassment or domestic abuse against Heckman. Not all of the women were willing to come forward, she said. Kevin Nelson, a United Methodist home missionary who has helped other clergy under complaint, is also their advocate.

The four women jointly filed their complaint in November 2018, Lawrence and Nelson said. In late summer, a committee on investigation—a panel of four clergy

and three lay members—determined there was enough evidence to charge Heckman with sexual harassment, misconduct, and abuse, they said.

The most recent allegations come from Megan Anderson, who first met Heckman at the Parliament of the World's Religions in 2015 in Salt Lake City. She then worked at the [*Interfaith Observer*](#) journal, and he served on the publication's advisory board.

She said Heckman urged her to come see the upscale hotel where he was staying. He invited her into his room and turned on the TV. He kept telling her to relax and move closer to him on the bed, and then he groped her, she said.

She said she left immediately and began trying to avoid him but occasionally saw him at interfaith events. He kept sending her sexually explicit text messages, she said. But within a few months, the texts stopped.

She worried about coming forward initially, she said, because she feared no one would believe her and that she might lose her job since the *Interfaith Observer* came under the foundation where he worked at the time.

Anderson decided to join the complaint after she heard from other young women who had similar experiences with Heckman.

"It made me angry, and I realized this is not going to stop," Anderson said. "I'm Catholic, which is part of the reason why I want the United Methodist Church to be so accountable in this moment. I watched my own church cover up years and years of sexual abuse."

Like Anderson, Emily Farthing said that she met Heckman at a professional gathering—the 2014 North American Interfaith Network Conference. Farthing, a UCC member, was the recipient of a young adult scholar award.

"I remember hearing from another young adult that he really was hoping to make contact with Bud because he controlled a lot of funding for interfaith groups," Farthing said.

To Farthing's surprise, she said, Heckman sought her out and offered to help her write grants.

She said he provided professional advice and promised to help her get into divinity school. He paid for her room—separate from his—at the 2015 Parliament of the

World's Religions.

She said he sent sexually explicit texts and, at the conference, came into her room in his underwear and sat on her bed—making her very uncomfortable.

Farthing said she finally stood up for herself when they later spoke over the phone about interfaith work. She said he concluded by describing how he wanted to sleep with her. “I called him out and said, ‘You can’t talk to me like that,’” she said. “And that was that.”

But then she learned he was telling other women, including Anderson, that they had dated and that he had helped her through a dark time. “I felt like he was using me as a prop to gain the confidence of other women,” Farthing said.

KR, who asked to use her initials for fear of retribution, also met Heckman through interfaith work. She dated him in 2011, breaking off the relationship in early 2012 when she discovered him with another woman. She said she then learned that he was still married, though he had told her he was divorced.

A few months later, she said, he started emailing, calling, and coming by her apartment every day, insisting he still loved her. She kept asking him to stop and not to contact her again. But he continued, she said.

“It was a combination of ‘I love you’ and ‘If you leave me, I will do XYZ to you,’” she said.

He told her, she said, that she was “not a good Christian” unless she forgave him. At the time, KR was in the US on a work visa, and she said he threatened to prevent her from staying in the US.

“The way I interpreted it was that he was saying he had so much power in the interfaith community that he’d make sure I lost the job that I had and that I wouldn’t be able to get another job, so I’d be forced to leave the country,” she said.

With a friend’s encouragement, she filed a report with the New York Police Department in July 2012. The district attorney’s office in Manhattan verified the criminal complaint to UM News.

Heckman was arrested and pleaded guilty in court to disorderly conduct, a noncriminal offense. The court required that he undergo counseling and abide by a

two-year protection order to stay away from KR, according to the court proceedings.

KR said she only informed the United Methodist Church in 2018 when she learned what other women had experienced and joined their complaint.

“I heard Megan’s and Emily’s stories and was inspired by how strong and brave they sounded,” she said. “They are both younger than I am, and I remember thinking that, for these women who have the courage to speak up, and for all those who still feel scared and cannot, I need to do this.”

Laura Heckman, the pastor’s ex-wife, is the fourth woman in the complaint. In 2011, she said, her husband of nearly 20 years moved out, but he still held out hope the two could reconcile. She later learned of his involvement with other women, including KR.

As a United Methodist, she provided the West Ohio Conference with public documentation of her then husband’s arrest and subsequent court plea. She didn’t file a complaint then because she had to put her name on it.

“I told them I can’t do that because I’m afraid for my safety and my children’s safety, and I don’t know how he’ll respond,” she said. “And they said they couldn’t do anything unless I filed a complaint.”

Like the others, she said hearing from other women—including some who are not part of the complaint—led her to go public.

“It shifted from being much less about Bud and much more about the church,” she said.

Palmer told UM News that this is a difficult situation for every person involved. The Book of Discipline, the denomination’s policy book, calls church trials “an expedient of last resort” and opens the way for a just resolution of a complaint before it gets to that point.

“I ask that you would hold in prayer all who are affected by this situation,” the bishop said. —United Methodist News Service