

# HEARTS OF THE CITY

Exploring  
attitudes and  
issues behind  
the news.

## The Beat

The United Methodist Church established Shalom Zones to help neighborhoods recover after the 1992 riots. The social service agencies help with a myriad of issues from housing to jobs, child care and immigration. For information in central Los Angeles call (213) 749-6310. In the San Fernando Valley call (818) 830-4036.

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## Navigating the Real World

A rotating panel of experts from the worlds of ethics, psychology and religion offer their perspective on the dilemmas that come with living in Southern California.

**Today's Question:** Sexual harassment in the workplace once meant mainly to demand sexual favors in exchange for special treatment or promotion. Now it sometimes seems to include any sexualized behavior in the workplace that may be offensive—for example, leering, posting pin-up calendars and even calling a co-worker "honey" or "dear." However, some say that such behavior, unlike the sexual abuse and exploitation of children, is a normal, healthy aspect of adult life that cannot and should not be forbidden. Has our society gone overboard in its attempts to legislate "politically correct," de-sexualized behavior in our workplaces?

Compiled by JOHN DART, Times staff writer

### Dennis Prager

Talk show host on KABC-AM and writer of the Prager Perspective, a newsletter

Real sexual harassment is evil, but our society has gone overboard. Why? First, because the primary impulse behind much contemporary feminist legislation is not liberation of women but anger at men—specifically men's sexual nature. Second, too many men are intimidated by feminist demands. Third, liberal politicians want women to think they need them for protection. Sexual double standards used to be against women; they are now against men. At work, she can wear clothing that reveals all she wants, but if he comments on what she reveals, he is liable for a lawsuit. Strong women are also victims of sexual harassment hysteria. No Victorian rules portrayed women as so weak and as so needing special protection as do America's sexual harassment laws.

### Orli Peter

Director, Mt. St. Mary's College psychology graduate program; member of the college's committee on sexual harassment policy

Considerable research shows that women find hostile or offensive much sexualized behavior that men consider harmless or humorous. Therefore, we are not going overboard when we remove sexualized behavior from the workplace that would offend or threaten what the law calls "a reasonable woman." It is also important to protect individuals, both men and women, from being subjected to sexualized behavior by those who hold power over them—as with employees and bosses, students and professors, congregants and clergy. The less powerful persons in these relationships risk retaliation if they object. Sexualized behavior under these conditions is not a normal, healthy aspect of adult life that we need to honor.

### Scott Rae

Associate professor, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University; co-author of "Beyond Integrity, a Judeo-Christian Approach to Business Ethics"

Broadening the definition of sexual harassment from simply sexual extortion to sexual behavior that creates a hostile working environment has generally been helpful. Men generally perceive sexual harassment differently than do women, and men are rarely the victim of sexual assault. But the trend has gone overboard in two respects: when due process is denied to the accused (when they are assumed guilty until proven innocent) and when it produces a chilling effect in gender relations. Men routinely report minimizing their contact with female colleagues for fear of sexual harassment accusations. What started out as an attempt to bring the genders closer together has actually driven them farther apart.