

**Committee on Ministry  
Presbytery of Baltimore  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

## **MINISTERIAL ETHICS GUIDELINES**

**adopted at the 752nd Stated Meeting  
of the Presbytery of Baltimore  
January 27, 1994**

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September 9, 2021**

**These guidelines may be used by the sessions of the congregations of the  
Presbytery of Baltimore to develop guidelines for elders,  
deacons, trustees, staff, and volunteers.**

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## **I. Vision Statement**

### **Preface - The Covenant Relationship**

The relationship between minister and people is based upon trust. Repeatedly, Scripture asserts that religious leadership is a covenantal relationship that presumes the trustworthy exercise of power in behalf of those in their care. The role of ministry involves shared expectations that ministers will use their skills and authority for the wholeness and well-being of others.

Because religious leadership is a covenantal relationship, unethical behavior is a tragic betrayal of trust and an abuse of power. All who enter professional relationships with religious leaders trust themselves to one whom they expect will provide for their care, safety, and justice. Pastoral oversight is a privilege and a trust. This is especially the case for those who are vulnerable and need protection and safe-keeping. Such persons entrust religious leaders with representative and symbolic power in light of the office of ministry and the God in whose name leaders dare to speak, preach, pray, and bless.

Power in ministerial relationships is inevitably unbalanced because of the power associated with the office of ministry as well as the actual power that leaders have in relationships and especially in contexts in which persons trust that their vulnerability will be honored. Persons in religious leadership, like all others in helping professions who have access to people in their most vulnerable moments, are always responsible for keeping appropriate boundaries and assuring the safety of those in their trust.

While Scripture often links the appropriate exercise of power and ministry, we live in a culture that is uncomfortable with acknowledging the reality of power. The Committee on Ministry hopes this policy will help those in religious leadership to acknowledge the responsibility accompanying the exercise of power with which they are entrusted. Clergy are far more likely to abuse such power when they fail to acknowledge it.

### **Fundamental Principles of Ethical Conduct**

- A. In all matters, ministers of Word and Sacrament are to maintain practices that give glory to Christ, advance the goals of the Church, and nurture, challenge, and protect the welfare of church members, parishioners, clients, and the public.
- B. Ministers are to act in a manner that upholds and enhances the honor, integrity, morality, and dignity of the Faith.
- C. Ministers are to limit their ministry to those positions and responsibilities for which they are qualified.
- D. Ministers are to conduct themselves in a manner that assures security and confidentiality and avoids conflicts of interest.
- E. Ministers are to demonstrate respect, honesty, and fairness when interacting with clergy-colleagues and persons in related professions.
- F. Ministers are to maintain professional competency throughout their careers.
- G. In personal as well as professional relationships ministers are to have honest and sincere motives, upholding the peace, unity, and purity of the Church, and sharing faith, hope, and love with all people.
- H. Ministers are to maintain covenantal faithfulness and trust in their sexual relationships.
- I. Ministers are to respect and be sensitive to the vulnerability of others and avoid all exploitation.

## **II. Professional Practices**

### **Preface**

Professional practices are based upon the standards of personal integrity and respect for others. These standards are concerned with not only sexual and financial practices, but also with inclusiveness and ethnic sensitivity.

### **A. Representation of Qualifications**

Ministers and professional staff shall accurately represent their professional qualifications in education, training, and experience in all communications with the church and the public sector:

- in composition of dossiers;
- in materials prepared for publications;
- in information issued for speaking engagements;
- in announcements of professional services offered.

Such communications shall be objective and truthful. Ministers and other professionals are responsible for correcting any misrepresentations promptly.

### **B. The Focus of Professional Practice**

Ministers shall work for the enhancement of their congregations or institutions.

1. The purpose and pattern of leadership is to be understood in terms of service rendered rather than power gained.
2. To further the peace and unity of the Church, the believing community (the congregation) is to be accepted as it is. From that point, ministers are to nurture it toward faithful discipleship in Christ's body through growth in worship, mission (service), evangelism, stewardship, and education.
3. To strengthen the total life of the believing community, individuals of the community are to be nourished with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.

### **C. Practice and Personal Expertise**

Ministers and church professionals shall work within their personal and professional qualifications and limitations, seeking regular consultation and supervision as appropriate.

1. God-given talents and professional expertise, natural and acquired, are to be shared for the integrity, unity, and health of the believing community.
2. Medical, financial, psychological, or other counseling needs beyond the expertise of the pastor are to be referred to qualified professionals in their appropriate fields.

### **D. Financial Matters**

Ministers of Word and Sacrament and professional staff shall be financially responsible.

1. Those who serve congregations are to provide their services to members of their believing community(ies) without additional compensation(excluding honoraria and gifts).
2. Ministers are to stand ready to render professional service to individuals and communities in crisis without expectation of additional compensation beyond the call.
3. Financial arrangements for professional services provided for non-members are to be determined in advance with concurrence of the session.
4. Ministers and professional staff shall not use church funds, accounts, and/or resources for personal or

- private advantage.
5. Ministers and professional staff shall not use parishioner funds, accounts, and/or resources for personal or private advantage.
  6. Ministers and church professionals are to be prudent and responsible in personal financial matters.
  7. Full-time ministers are not to be employed outside of their full-time call except in cases approved by the session, with the concurrence of the Committee on Ministry.

### **E. Confidentiality**

Ministers shall conduct all professional matters in a manner that assures confidentiality and seeks to avoid conflict of interest.

1. Personal records (taped records are to be made only with permission) of conversations with staff members, members of the congregation, and/or non-member clients are to be stored where security and confidentiality are assured.
2. Confidential information is not to be shared except when written permission is given by the person involved, except as required by law.
3. Privileged information shall not be used for personal gain.

### **F. Speech and Conduct**

Ministers are to talk and act as Scripture counsels in Ephesians 4 and Philippians 4.

1. Ministers and church professionals are to speak the truth in love, and make judgments with understanding, tact, and discretion.
2. All persons are to be treated with a sense of respect, a spirit of fairness, decency, and concern Christian equality.

### **G. Dating within a Congregation**

The Committee on Ministry is concerned for the well-being of each pastor in our Presbytery, each congregation as a whole, and each individual member of our congregations. Well-being is achieved only when the unique covenantal relationship between pastor and congregation is strong and healthy. This relationship must be built on trust, open communication, and a respect for appropriate boundaries between the pastor and individual members.

A dating relationship between a pastor and a church member is ethically problematic and may be a violation of appropriate professional boundaries. Therefore, it is generally not advisable for a pastor to date a member of his or her congregation.

However, if a pastor does become involved in a dating relationship with a church member, he or she must carefully consider the impact it will have on the member, the congregation, and his or her own personal and professional life. The member's place in the church community and relations with other members will certainly be affected. Feelings of jealousy, hurt, or anger may arise in other members. Secrecy surrounding a relationship can, and probably will, undermine trust and communication. The relationship will, in all probability, be subject to intense, if well-meaning, scrutiny and comment. The pastor's integrity and judgment may be questioned.

To minimize potential unhappiness or conflict in any of these relations, a pastor in a dating relationship with a church member should:

1. recognize that such a relationship precludes a pastoral relationship with the member and take steps

to insure that the member has access to pastoral care elsewhere;

2. consult with a member of the Committee on Ministry (who will consult with the COM chair in confidence) and other trusted colleagues who will give honest feedback concerning the pastor's performance of duties and observance of professional ethics;
3. promptly advise the Session of the relationship in order to anticipate the reactions of the congregation and to dispel any aura of secrecy that might prove destructive;
4. recognize that the well-being of the congregation may require either the pastor or the member to leave and find a new congregation.

#### **H. Preaching the Word.**

A member shall make her or himself available to preach the Word when her or his duties permit.

Ministers are to exercise diligence and discernment in the study of Scripture, listen for the voice of God through the discipline of daily prayer, theological reflection on the message of the gospel, exhibit sensitivity to the context of the congregation, be attentive to what the Spirit is saying to the church, demonstrating awareness of events in the world, and practicing consistent and personal obedience to Jesus Christ.

The presentation of the proclamation of others as one's own is both plagiarism and a denial of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and is unacceptable in continuing members of this presbytery. Continuing members are expected to proclaim the Word given to them, rather than using sermons created by others, except under the most extraordinary circumstances. When using substantial portions of the language of others, credit must be given. This requirement extends to ruling elders and anyone occupying a pulpit of the Presbytery of Baltimore. Plagiarism may be considered *reason to terminate a contract, dissolve a call, or remove an individual from our Pulpit Supply List.*

### **III. Colleague Relationships**

#### **Preface**

There are practices in all human relationships that make possible greater harmony, reduce points of tension, and in the calling to ministry within the church, lead to confidence and trust among those who are charged with representative leadership (elders, deacons, ministers of the Word and Sacrament), as well as those who have taken vows of membership. The assumptions that are held in the larger society of correct behavior are not always shaped by Gospel norms. There are ecclesiastical and religious traditions that have established certain norms and practices of their own that are not in accord with those in the Presbyterian and Reformed Tradition. Therefore, we find it necessary and desirable to remind the continuing members of The Presbytery of Baltimore of conduct expected in collegiality as they pursue their callings among us.

#### **A. Relationships with Staff**

Ministers are to give all staff members equal respect without regard to age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnic origin, disability, marital status, or job description. Staff positions include Ministers of Word and Sacrament, other professionals and support staff: secretarial and custodial employees, and volunteers.

Ministers are to accept staff members as persons of worth who are dear to God, assuring that staff members

know each other's position descriptions and responsibilities, respect one another's competencies, offer constructive suggestions to one another, avoid gossip and keep confidences, forgive misunderstandings, and are tolerant of differences of opinion and style of operation.

## **B. Relationships with Parish, Congregation, Session and Presbytery**

Ministers called as pastors have unique responsibilities to that congregation, as well as to the Presbytery of their membership.

1. Pastors are to devote time and energy ministering to the people of their parish and to the activities of their congregations.
2. Pastors are to be active in the work of the Presbytery.
3. Terms of call concerning vacations and study-leave are to be obeyed.
4. In administrative and pastoral duties, pastors are to strive earnestly for impartiality.
5. Congregational funds, other than budgeted salaries and allowances, shall not be used for the personal or private advantage of pastor and staff. Personal and church finances shall be kept totally separate.
6. When people regularly visit a congregation from a neighboring church it is appropriate that the pastor inform the people's pastor of these visits.

## **C. Leaving a Congregation**

When pastoral relationships with congregations are dissolved, certain ethical behavior is required in order to preserve the peace and unity of the church. In the case of honorably retired ministers, a continuing ministry within the presbytery beyond the congregation(s) served is encouraged. When a pastor leaves a congregation:

1. all pastoral and administrative duties in the congregation are to be terminated;
2. the pastor is not to return to officiate at any baptism, wedding, or funeral, except at the invitation of the new pastor and/or the session;
3. ordinarily the pastor is not to return as a regular worshipper or participant in the congregation without consultation with the Executive Presbyter or the Committee on Ministry;
4. pastors shall exercise great care to have no further influence on the former congregation and its members by conversation, correspondence, or other action;
5. all belongings are to be removed from church and manse so that the interim and new pastor can use the facilities;
6. former pastors shall exercise no part in the selection of a Pastor Nominating Committee or in the selection of a successor (pastor, interim, stated supply);
7. interim pastors and stated supplies shall not encourage personal loyalties because their tenure is temporary and their function is intended to prepare the congregation for the calling and installation of a new pastor.

## **D. Pastor and Predecessor**

Ministers of the Word and Sacrament who become pastors of congregations from which ministers have been called, retired, or resigned have responsibilities toward the former pastor(s).

1. The relationship is to be marked by courtesy.
2. The relationship is to be marked by awareness of loyalties that have been in place. Courtesy and wisdom should unite to cause the currently installed pastor to be sensitive to those loyalties. In some cases the pastor may invite former pastors to participate in events that have great meaning for members of the congregation. The same sensitivities and courtesies are to be exercised by ministers who are interims or stated supplies.

### **E. Pastor and Successor**

Ministers who have resigned, retired, or accepted another call shall behave in a manner that affirms the ministry of the successor.

1. Ministers are to treat successors with courtesy.
2. Ministers are to refrain from commenting on or voicing judgments about the ministry of a successor.
3. Ministers are not to initiate professional contacts with persons in former parishes.
4. Ministers making social visits with members of former congregations are to take care that professional matters do not intrude.

### **F. Specialized Ministries**

Ministers-without-pastoral-charge are faced with unique responsibilities.

1. Invitations to preside at weddings or funerals are to be accepted only when extended by the current pastor or, for congregations without an installed pastor, the clerk of session.
2. The sacraments of Baptism and The Lord's Supper shall be celebrated only at the invitation of a pastor or a Session or by the permission of Presbytery.
3. Counselors are not to seek out counsees from congregations having a pastor unless the counsee is referred by the pastor.

## **IV. Pastor/Counselee Relationships**

Professionalism in the counseling vocations is the art of being helpful to those who need and seek assistance in living. Behavior that hinders healing and eventual wholeness in a client is ethically and morally wrong.

### **Basic guidelines for healthy, ethical pastor/counselee relationships.**

1. Pastors are not to allow personal problems, desires, and issues to invade the relationship that comes to exist between themselves and counsees. Every pastor is subject to the danger of becoming inappropriately involved in the life of a person being counseled. When pastors become aware that they have inappropriate feelings, they shall immediately seek the advice of a trusted colleague or another professional counselor.
2. Pastors must learn to deal with their own feelings in ways that will not be detrimental to the counseling relationship. However, the personal dynamics present in the counseling relationship are not to be denied, but must be treated in a way that will harm neither the counselee nor the counselor.
3. Knowing when to refer a counselee is imperative. Most pastors and many counselors are not equipped to deal with mental illness and, therefore, are to limit their work to spiritual and behavioral issues. However, some kinds of behavioral and emotional problems are beyond the expertise of the parish pastor. Pastors and pastoral counselors are to become knowledgeable about community resources and be willing to refer to other professionals. Illnesses that demand medication or hospitalization require the care of a licensed physician.
4. Pastors may be called on to help counsees make decisions that pertain to financial transactions. In such instances, pastors shall not use their association with the counselee to benefit their own causes or create any conflict of interest.
5. Pastors shall maintain the highest standards in the counseling relationship in order that healing and comfort may be experienced by the counsees.



## **V. Procedure When Confronting Offenses**

When unethical behavior occurs, the appropriate result may include reconciliation and restoration to fellowship, or the removal of that minister from his or her duties. These can occur through the agreement of session and pastor through consultation with the Committee on Ministry, or through the result of a disciplinary process set in motion according to the "Rules of Discipline" in the Book of Order. If an offense leads to a criminal or civil conviction, although Scripture mandates forgiveness upon repentance, Scripture does not guarantee a right to ecclesiastical office.

The only proper investigation of an accusation of a member of Presbytery is by a Special Disciplinary Committee designated by that body. This committee decides if there is basis for dismissal of an accusation or the filing of a charge. If a pastor acknowledges his or her offense(s), a disciplinary committee shall be formed to make recommendations to the Presbytery regarding disposition.

In cases of alleged sexual misconduct, the chairperson of the Committee on Ministry shall activate proper procedures according to the "Policy and Procedures for Sexual Misconduct" of the Presbytery.

## Glossary

### **accusation**

An accusation is simply the statement that an offense has occurred. An accusation may or may not be made to a governing body.

### **church professional**

See "professional staff."

### **congregation**

The congregation is the active, inactive, and non-resident membership of a particular church and is, in fact, synonymous with that church.

### **counselee**

The counselee is a person who seeks and receives personal pastoral or psychological counseling.

### **counselor**

A counselor is any person--minister, psychotherapist, or church officer--who engages in face-to-face dialogue dealing with another person's spiritual, social, or psychological problems.

### **fees**

This term refers to a schedule of charges for services rendered.

### **gifts**

Gifts consist of money or property given to a pastor or professional staff person.

### **governing body**

A governing body is a level of the Presbyterian Church. At the congregational level it is the Session. Above that it is the Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly, respectively.

### **honoraria**

Honoraria consist of money or gifts freely offered by a member or parishioner in response to particular services offered by a pastor.

### **Lord's Supper**

One of our two Sacraments, the Lord's Supper is sometimes referred to as Holy Communion, Communion, or the Eucharist.

### **ministers of the Word and Sacrament**

This is the official designation of those persons ordained to specific pastoral ministry within a congregation or to a special ministry.

### **parish**

The parish, as contrasted with the congregation, includes (1) visitors and friends of the church who are not members, and/or (2) the immediate geographical surroundings of the church, including the people who live in those surroundings.

### **pastoral counselor**

An ordained minister of the Word and Sacrament who is counseling professionally.

**polity**

The rules and practices of governance as contained in Scripture, the Book of Order, the Standing Rules and Manual of Operations of the Presbytery.

**power disparity**

The difference in power between a pastor and a church member, especially in counseling situations, requires that clear boundaries be maintained. Such boundaries, recognized as essential in all “helping professions,” create a safe environment for the member and help the pastor to maintain perspective and avoid the risk of exploitation when providing emotional and spiritual support. Though boundaries are designed to protect the member, usually the more vulnerable partner, they also protect the pastor and the health of the congregation as a whole. It is the pastor’s responsibility to set and maintain healthy boundaries in his or her relationships in the congregation, just as it is the responsibility of therapists, health care providers, teachers and other professionals to set and maintain standards in their professional relationships.

**practice**

Practice is the exercise of vocation in the church and outside of it. It also refers to one's witness of Christian faith.

**predecessor**

The predecessor is any former installed pastor in a congregation. Most often the term refers directly to the most immediate former pastor.

**professional staff**

This term describes those staff members who lead specific programmatic ministries for a congregation, but are not ordained as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament. Such workers would include church musicians, directors of Christian Education, and youth directors.

**related professions**

Related professions include people-oriented services such as welfare workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, medical doctors, and nurses.

**specialized ministries**

Some Ministers of the Word and Sacrament have employment in specialized ministries such as education, hospital and military chaplaincies, and professional counseling.

**successor**

The successor is the newly installed pastor in a congregation.

**support staff**

This consists of staff members who are not ordained and do not lead in specific programmatic ministries in the congregation. Support staff would include such workers as secretaries and custodians.

**unethical behavior**

Unethical behavior is any behavior that seeks to go against the instructions of Scripture, the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), or those offenses considered to be and defined by the Presbytery as unethical.