

# **Guidelines for Ministerial and Counseling Relationships**

## **General guidelines that should govern relationships**

- The church leader is always responsible to safeguard the relationship.
- The church leader must always act and talk in such a way as to prevent harm to the other.
- A church leader is not a surrogate – not a father, not a mother, not a spouse, not a child, not a therapist, not an accountant, not a lawyer, etc.
- Spending time alone and frequently with a counselee or parishioner is the highest risk for the church leader and for the counselee or parishioner.
- Know the difference between secrecy and privacy and confidentiality.
  - Secrecy raises suspicion and is unhealthy
  - Privacy means sharing information only with those who have a need to know
  - Confidentiality means the individual has an expectation that information is not shared, or the person has a legally recognized privilege to communicate without worry that the information will be shared.

Example: visiting someone is not a secret; the topics of conversation are private; specific comments *may* be confidential.

- Accountability is not a hassle – it is a necessity.
- Once a healthy boundary is crossed, the relationship changes; many times the relationship deteriorates or ends.
- Consider every relationship like a body of water – don't get in over your head. Drowning in poor judgment is still drowning.
- Scriptures do not justify, minimize, or rationalize misconduct.

## **Other specific guidelines that should govern relationships**

- Do not borrow money from or loan money to a counselee or parishioner.
- Do not give gifts or receive gifts of a personal nature from a counselee or parishioner.
- Visit a counselee or parishioner with another person present whenever you can.
- Visit a counselee or parishioner of the same gender whenever you can
- Restrict home or office visits to no longer than an hour per time and no more than once per week
- Visit the counselee or parishioner in a public place whenever you can.
- When visiting a counselee or parishioner in a hospital, do not close the door; remain visible from the doorway
- For office visits, the door should be fitted with a window and you should be visible through the window.
- When visiting in the home or in an office, do not share a couch with the counselee or parishioner.

- Visit the counselee or parishioner during normal visiting hours (during the day for elderly or ill persons, or early evening for students or employed persons).
- Technology creates new forms of visitation (i.e. text messaging, emails, phone calls, Face book, etc.) and each one is a form of visitation that can increase daily or weekly contact beyond what is healthy.
- Report your visits to a colleague **or** governing body member **and** your spouse. If you or the counselee or parishioner cannot or will not report on your conversation or visit, then a boundary was likely crossed.
- Affection should be limited to a brief hug, hand on the forearm or on the shoulder of another. Offering or accepting more than that with a counselee or parishioner is putting the relationship at risk.
- Whenever the counselee or parishioner is a minor, inform the parents whenever you schedule a visit and report to them on the nature of the conversation.
- Establish a policy that allegations of abuse (by victim or offender) are reportable.
- Establish a policy that threats of suicide or homicide are reportable.
- Do not have a sexual relationship with a parishioner or counselee. This includes sexual talk, emotional intimacy, sexual jokes, discussions about self- or another's sexual practices or behaviors, sexual fantasies, sexual touch, i.e. the behavior and feelings that lead up to sexual intercourse.

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