

Guidelines for Handling Objectionable Behavior Directed Toward a Pastor (May include harassment, stalking, and other inappropriate behavior)

CRCNA Safe Church Ministry

***Disclaimer:** These guidelines have been developed by Safe Church team members and the Safe Church Advisory Committee. They have not been officially endorsed by the CRCNA, and are designed to be used as a sample only. It is recommended that a church always obtain a legal review of its policies.*

PREAMBLE

Pastors are often put on a pedestal. Sometimes vulnerable and/or needy parishioners become fixated on their pastor, fantasizing about either a romantic attachment towards the pastor, or attempting to exert a pseudo-control over the pastor reinforced by their vilification of the pastor to others, by threats, or by stalking.

A pastor has the right to expect that when he or she is targeted with unwanted attention or stalking, or when his/her work is being undermined by a parishioner's harassment or vilification, the officebearers of the church will help him/her identify the problem, help him/her to ensure proper boundaries can be maintained, and generally help support the pastor in dealing with harassment or other objectionable or inappropriate behavior, which may have veered into the area of criminal behavior.

DEFINITIONS

Consistory: The assembly of the local church composed of the minister(s) and the elders. The consistory oversees the doctrine and life of the members of the congregation and exercises admonition and discipline of the members when appropriate. In addition, the consistory provides regular pastoral care and discharges other tasks specifically related to the offices of minister and elder.

Council: The assembly of the local church composed of the minister(s), elders and deacons. The council is responsible for the common administration of the church and the admonition and discipline of fellow officebearers when appropriate.

Psychological Attachment: A clinically understood inappropriate desire for closeness with the pastor by a parishioner. Behaviors may take the nature of being excessively loving or hateful.

Stalking: Conduct directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear. Stalking involves repeated unwanted contact or attempt at contact, e.g. calls, visits, electronic communications. (For more elaboration, see Appendix A)

Harassment: Continued, unwanted, inappropriate demands, threats, gestures, innuendos, remarks, jokes, slurs, displays of offensive material, or any other intimidating or assaultive behavior towards another person, or about that person to a third party. (For more elaboration, see Appendix A)

Sexual Misconduct: All forms of sexual assault, behaviors of a seductive or exploitative sexual nature, unwanted sexual attention, inappropriate emotional intimacy, unsuitable demands, displays of offensive material, or other related intimidating behavior, as well as sexual activity such as touching, kissing, fondling, or intercourse.

Objectionable or Inappropriate Behavior: Refers to behavior that may not fit accepted definitions of harassment, abuse, or misconduct, but nonetheless would cause a reasonable person to feel seriously offended and would violate the trust and well-being of individuals and the community of believers.

Emotional Abuse: Abuse characterized by behavior that may result in psychological trauma, including anxiety, chronic depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Such abuse is often associated with situations of power imbalance. The abuse may take the form of verbal and emotional cruelty.

Power Imbalance: The presumption of a person having greater power in a relationship due to age difference, vulnerability difference, status difference, difference in title or given authority, or other differences that make one person more likely to acquiesce to another. A pastor by virtue of position and status is assumed to have greater power than a parishioner.

BOUNDARY SETTING

Since the reality of the relationship between a pastor and a parishioner assumes an imbalance of power, it is important not to confuse sexual and/or physical abuse with harassment and/or stalking behavior.

Perpetration of abuse assumes a power imbalance, where the perpetrator has more power (by virtue of age difference or difference in status and position) than the victim. It is the pastor's responsibility (by virtue of his/her position of greater power) to set and keep boundaries with a parishioner.

In the case of a parishioner who harasses and/or stalks the pastor, it is incumbent upon the council of the church to support the pastor's boundary setting, to limit such a parishioner's behavior, and protect the pastor. This may necessitate special visitation with the parishioner by council representatives in which limits are clearly stated. Limitations may be that the pastor will not visit the parishioner in his/her home, that all of the parishioner's calls are screened by the pastor's administrative assistant or spouse, or that all electronic communication from the parishioner is blocked. Pastoral discipline as a consequence to the parishioner may be appropriate if he/she does not stop the harassing behavior. A report to the police if the harassment veers into the criminal behavior of threatening and/or stalking of the pastor may also be required.

(See Appendices B and C for further notes and links to resources on boundary setting.)

CONFIDENTIALITY

Complaints of this nature need to be addressed with sensitivity to those affected. Information regarding the complaint expressed among the pastor, the accused parishioner, and the members of the council, as they are drawn in to deal with the situation, must be kept in confidence.

STEPS IN DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS OF A PASTOR AGAINST A PARISHIONER

Step #1 – The Pastor indicates to the parishioner that the behavior must cease

The pastor must ensure that the parishioner is fully aware of the specific behavior that is objectionable and the reasons why the behavior is inappropriate, unwelcome, and must cease. It is recommended that the pastor keep a written record both of the unwanted advances, his/her response to each such behavior, and the parishioner's response to any expressed objection

Step #2 – Determine the nature of the behavior

If the objectionable behavior continues, the nature of the behavior must be assessed. Is it harassment, emotional abuse, psychological attachment, stalking, or something else? Appropriate further action depends upon the nature and severity of the behavior. The pastor may wish to consult with the council or its Executive Committee for assistance in assessing the behavior. Members of the local Safe Church team, the denominational office of Safe Church Ministry, or the office of Pastor-Church Relations may also serve as valuable resources at this point.

Step #3 – Ensure that the pastor and the parishioner each have appropriate support

The pastor may report to the council what is going on and request that a support person be assigned to each party concerned. Of particular importance is the establishment and strengthening of appropriate boundaries between the pastor and the parishioner.

Step #4 – A caring and confronting visit with the parishioner

The pastor may ask one or two officebearers to accompany him/her in visiting with the parishioner. The purpose of the visit is to listen to the parishioner's explanation of the behavior, and to stress that the behavior is unwanted and objectionable to the pastor and must be discontinued. If the parishioner continues the objectionable behavior or disputes the interpretation of the behavior, further action needs to be taken by the council.

Step #5 – The church council offers support and takes action if necessary

If the parishioner continues the objectionable behavior, the council must exercise a plan. The plan may include a written statement of boundaries to which the parishioner agrees. Appropriate response to the pastoral needs of the pastor and the parishioner must be given attention. If necessary, discipline of the parishioner as outlined in the Church Order may be considered by the consistory. Resolution of the conflict must be sought. If the behavior is severe and illegal, a police report must be made. Protection of the privacy and professional life of the pastor must be provided through strong boundary setting, including, if needed, a Personal Protection or No Contact Order.

Step #6 – Going beyond the local council

If the council refuses to address the situation or refuses to stay involved to the degree the pastor needs assistance, the pastor may need to find alternative support. Options include contacting Safe Church Ministry, the Office of Pastor-Church Relations, the Regional Pastor, or Church Visitors.

CONCLUSION

A safe church environment is the responsibility of the whole church. The pastor of a church is responsible for helping a church develop and maintain proper professional boundaries in his/her relationships with parishioners, as supervisor of other church staff, within the council and leadership of the church, and as part of the council. The council of the church must be supportive of its pastor and must ensure the administration of the church includes safe church policies and procedures. Such policies and procedures must outline expectations in the event of abuse or harassment, including the harassment of a pastor by a parishioner. Members of a church must agree to be led by their council and pastor, and abide by the policies and procedures which the church has adopted.

APPENDIX A:

DEFINITIONS ELABORATED

Stalking: A pattern of repeated and unwanted attention, harassment, contact, or any other course of conduct directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear. Exact definitions vary according to jurisdictions, but stalking may include these behaviors:

- Repeated, unwanted, intrusive, and frightening communications from the perpetrator by phone, mail, and/or email.
- Repeatedly leaving or sending victim unwanted items, presents, or flowers.
- Following or lying in wait for the victim at places such as home, school, work, or recreation place.
- Making direct or indirect threats to harm the victim, the victim's children, relatives, friends, or pets.
- Damaging or threatening to damage the victim's property.
- Harassing victim through the internet.
- Posting information or spreading rumors about the victim on the internet, in a public place, or by word of mouth.
- Obtaining personal information about the victim by accessing public records, using internet search services, hiring private investigators, going through the victim's garbage, following the victim, contacting victim's friends, family work, or neighbors, etc.

(Source: Stalking Resource Center, National Center for Victims of Crime/Office of Violence Against Women, US Department of Justice. www.ovw.usdoj.gov/aboutstalking.htm , also see www.stalkingawarenessmonth.org/about for additional resources.

In Canada - See <http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/cp-pc/crimhar-eng.htm> for excellent resources)

Harassment: Harassment is unwelcome conduct that is based on race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information. Harassment becomes unlawful where 1) enduring the offensive conduct becomes a condition of continued employment, or 2) the conduct is severe or pervasive enough to create a work environment that a reasonable person would consider intimidating, hostile, or abusive. Petty slights, annoyances, and isolated incidents (unless extremely serious) will not rise to the level of illegality. To be unlawful, the conduct must create a work environment that would be intimidating, hostile, or offensive to reasonable people.

Offensive conduct may include, but is not limited to, offensive jokes, slurs, epithets or name calling, physical assaults or threats, intimidation, ridicule or mockery, insults or put-downs, offensive objects or pictures, and interference with work performance.

(Source: www.eeoc.gov/laws/practices/harassment.cfm)

APPENDIX B

BOUNDARY SETTING FOR THE PASTOR/CHURCH LEADER

Most of the time when speaking of boundary setting for a pastor or church leader, we are speaking of the vulnerability of a parishioner to the pastor's abuse of the imbalance of power in the relationship. Excellent materials on this type of boundary setting and prevention of abuse can be found at these websites:

<http://www.crcna.org/SafeChurch/what-safe-church-ministry-team>

<http://abuse.mcc.org/prevention/church-leaders/healthy-boundaries>

<http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/resources/learn-the-basics/ce-faqs>

However, in this document we are addressing the situation in which the pastor becomes the target of harassment or other objectionable behavior. The key to prevention is for appropriate policies and boundary practices to be firmly in place. The following websites are educational in this regard:

Stalking:

<http://www.ovw.usdoj.gov/aboutstalking.htm>

Harassment Prevention:

https://www.cfmws.com/en/AboutUs/Library/PoliciesandRegulations/Corporate/Documents/Guidelines_HarassmentPreventionJune2011.pdf

Policies of Harassment and Discrimination:

<https://www.cpg.org/linkservid/3F47EDF3-E9B4-9FAA-4FEDE21B95E573E1/showMeta/0/>

Sexual harassment:

<http://www.calvin.edu/student-life/forms-policies/sexual-harassment.html>

APPENDIX C

NOTES ON GOOD BOUNDARY SETTING

1. The pastor is aware of the imbalance of power in his/her relationship with parishioners, church staff, and other office bearers in the church.
2. The pastor maintains good support systems (personal and professional) and guards against vulnerabilities which may come if professionally or spiritually “burned-out.”
3. The elders and pastor have created a system of pastor accountability and supervision.
4. Typical boundary practices include:
 - a. Generally hold sessions with individuals or couples by appointment. Sessions are generally limited to an hour. These practices help maintain professionalism in the relationship.
 - b. See people only when another staff member is present in the office. This basic principle eliminates sessions when the pastor is alone in the building/office area or after normal work hours
 - c. Avoid sessions with an individual of the opposite sex unless the door is open, or there is a window in the office door
 - d. Avoid sessions with an individual of the opposite sex in the person’s home or in the pastor’s home. In an emergency situation, the pastor asks another adult to accompany him/her or be present in the home.
 - e. When a parishioner seeks excessive attention of the pastor by phone, the pastor has the administrative assistant screen all calls from that individual, and ensure that time with the pastor is by appointment only.
 - f. When a parishioner’s needs or psychological situation is beyond his/her level of expertise, the pastor makes a referral to other appropriate professionals.
 - g. When a parishioner’s behavior is demanding, vilifying, harassing, or in any other way objectionable or inappropriate, the pastor relates clearly what behavior is objectionable and must cease. The pastor takes responsibility for stating what his/her boundaries are. This is done in a kind, but firm manner. When articulating one’s boundaries, it is said as a matter of professional policy and shouldn’t be taken personally.
 - h. Inappropriate electronic communication can be blocked and the parishioner is informed that this has been done.
 - i. When the pastor is the target of stalking behavior, threat of violence, or other dangerous behavior, he/she is prepared to notify appropriate law enforcement.