

## **Guidelines for Ministerial Personnel in Their Interpersonal Relationships**

This section offers guidance to churches regarding appropriate interpersonal behavior for all ministerial personnel in positions of leadership or pastoral care. Ministerial personnel are ordained or unordained persons appointed by the church to provide pastoral care, counseling, spiritual direction, or spiritual guidance.

In the church, all power and authority come from Christ and are entrusted to those who hold office or have leadership in the congregation. This is the foundational principle governing interpersonal relationships between parishioner and ministerial personnel. It applies equally to those ordained in the church but serving in the name of the Lord in other places. Leadership responsibility must be exercised in Christian love, following the example of our Lord. Preventing the abuse of authority requires the dedicated self-discipline of the leader and the guidance of the church of which the leader is a member.

Abuse committed by ministerial personnel is always abuse of the authority committed to them by the church, as well as a serious betrayal of the trust invested in them by those who need pastoral care and spiritual direction. By virtue of their office, ministerial personnel have authority to lead, protect, and enhance the spiritual lives of those in their care. To abuse that authority disregards a person's dignity in a relationship of unequal power at a time when that person is vulnerable.

Abuse may take the form of nonaccidental injury, exploitation of another for personal gain or sexual gratification, systematic diminishment of another, failure to provide proper supervision for those served by church programs, or coercion or control of another. The harmful effects of these types of abuses are (a) the increased personal power and gratification of the abuser, and (b) the weakened spiritual life and personal power of the victim. Together, the resulting imbalance of personal power between victim and abuser casts shame, doubt, and fear upon the victim and provides an impenetrable facade for the abuser.

The sin of sexual abuse by ministerial personnel carries special gravity because human sexuality is a gift from God and is rooted in divine creation. The expression of human sexuality is physical, emotional, and spiritual in relation to another person. It assumes a loving commitment to and responsibility for the other person. Furthermore, sexual contact between parishioner and ministerial personnel is always abuse because of the authority entrusted to leaders. The abuse of another's sexuality and the misuse of commitment and responsibility to another are never acceptable, permissible, or justifiable.

The responsibility for assuring that no abusive behavior takes place always belongs to ministerial personnel. The consent of the other person is never a justification, nor is provocation by another person a defense for abuse. The use of Bible verses to rationalize abusive behavior compounds the abuse of authority, and, as Christians, we denounce it.

The following guidelines are intended to be used by ministerial personnel:

1. Establish clearly defined boundaries you are committed to maintaining in your interpersonal relationships.
  - a. Conduct counseling appointments within normally scheduled daytime hours; have evening appointments only if others are present in the building or present at the appointment.
  - b. Acknowledge the risk of meeting alone in a congregant's or counselee's home. Ministerial personnel may choose to bring another officebearer to such a meeting, or the counselee may request the presence of another person. Inform a secretary of your schedule.
  - c. Meet with a minor child or adolescent once or twice and thereafter only with the consent and knowledge of the minor's parent or guardian. Avoid transporting a minor alone.
  - d. Limit the display of physical affection to a brief hug or a pat on the back or forearm. Avoid misinterpretation of affection by choosing not to give gifts to counselees or parishioners.
2. Be accountable to a colleague, spouse, or peer to ensure that you are maintaining proper boundaries in your interpersonal relationships. Openly discuss the threats to those boundaries with a colleague, spouse, or peer.
3. Give adequate attention to your spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being. Maintain a healthy attitude toward your ministry. Be alert to the dangers of negative attitudes in ministry and the potential for temptation and self-destructive behavior. Listen earnestly to the feedback and counsel of others who supervise you or to whom you report when they express concern about your behaviors or attitudes.
4. Be sensitive and honest about your sexuality and needs and about appropriate avenues for proper fulfillment and mastery of those needs so you conduct yourself in a responsible, moral way.

5. Use your office to promote the spiritual and interpersonal growth and healing of individuals, of the institution or congregation within which you work, and of the denomination you serve. This may take place through sermons, personal visits, planning the organization's or church's activities, developing new programs, selecting and hiring new staff and officebearers, and training volunteers or staff.
6. Agree to do your work according to the specified guidelines of your profession and according to the requirements of the organization's or church's malpractice and liability insurance.
  - a. Notify either local police authorities, child protection authorities, or legal counsel when faced with allegations of abuse against a church member or church leader. Refrain from investigating these matters on your own.
  - b. Know the laws governing the reporting of child abuse within your community, organization, or church. Failure to report is a criminal act in many states and provinces.
  - c. Keep accurate records of all allegations brought to you and any actions taken thereupon.
  - d. Keep accurate records of any pastoral care sessions and maintain them in utmost confidentiality.
  - e. Conduct screening of all paid staff or volunteer staff who will have direct contact with children.

Taken from the book Preventing Child Abuse, pages 62, 63 and 64.