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Preserving Boundaries in Ministry

Identifying and honoring personal boundaries is essential to providing responsible, effective ministry. Seeing that some boundaries are not appropriate and “resetting” them is also a hallmark of good ministry skills. Violating boundaries can destroy the pastoral relationship and interrupt any possibility of a successful ministerial relationship.



In professional situations, people are at risk when their needs and the conditions that produced the needs demand resolution and they must rely on professionals to deal with the issues. Dependence on professionals such as counselors, clergymen, physicians, and social workers exposes the needs of the individual requesting support.

Violating boundaries occurs when a trusted person or someone in a professional relationship takes advantage of the vulnerability of an individual seeking assistance. Violating boundaries is destructive. It destroys trust and can destroy lives. It is critical that people in ministry pay attention to this risk because pastoral relationships are particularly susceptible to violation of personal boundaries.

For example, when a member of the faith community is seeking counsel, there is always an imbalance in the power in the relationship. Boundaries are violated when the personal needs of the person in authority infringe on the physical, sexual, emotional or spiritual boundaries of the person seeking help. Those in interpersonal and counseling ministries must be aware of these risks and pay attention to some basic guidelines that help maintain balance in difficult circumstances or challenging relationships.

You may also be confronted with situations where the boundaries are not so clear. In some cases, the person seeking help may be asking for or expecting support that you feel is beyond the appropriate boundaries of the particular relationship. In those situations, the questions to ask are: “Does this (the action or encounter) serve the needs of the person seeking my counsel or service?”, and/or “Will that

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action or encounter empower the person to be better able to deal with their own circumstances and situations?" If any act or encounter with someone who is seeking assistance or support from you is suspect, or if the answer to either or both of the questions is "no" or even "probably not", don't do it. Find another way to support the person that does not cross the line or negatively impact your boundaries, or theirs.

Preserving appropriate boundaries within the context of ministry is the responsibility of the one providing the service. That person is always in a position of authority in the situation. Being alert to risky situations; noticing and pointing out risky boundaries; and adhering to strict standards of conduct can help assure that the ministerial relationship is one that nurtures the person seeking assistance and leaves the person who is serving with an experience of making a difference in the life of another.

Until each of us is aware of our own boundaries and sensitive to the boundaries of the other people in our lives, even well-intentioned people will intrude on personal space. As you become clearer about your boundaries and become more aware of the boundaries—or lack of boundaries—with those to whom you serve, you will greatly increase your effectiveness in meeting the needs of those seeking your care. Good boundaries yield healthy relationships.

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