

Why Do We Need Boundaries Training?

People in helping professions want to be available for others, which is one reason we are pastors. There are times, however, when we need to set some boundaries to keep us from getting into trouble by overstepping or failing to think ahead. It might be helpful to think about boundaries as rules that keep our behavior on the right track. Marie Fortune, from The Faith Institute, which teaches boundary training, says that such training is “how we help really good people not do stupid things.”¹

When we have hard and fast rules about our own behavior, we don't have to stop to think about whether something is acceptable or not. When my husband started teaching at community college, he made it a rule that if a student was in his office the door would be open and he would never place himself between the student and the door. Boundaries are designed to keep us from placing ourselves in difficult, sometimes even dangerous (at least for our jobs), positions.

Boundaries need to be set whenever there is a power differential, meaning one person is perceived to be more powerful in a certain situation. The teacher in the classroom is always perceived to be more powerful than the students, even if the teacher sometimes feels powerless to control anything. Parishioners often perceive the pastor to have more power and so boundaries need to be set to protect everyone, those who feel vulnerable and those who may find themselves in places where power may be a trigger for conflict.

Times are changing so quickly that it is sometimes difficult even to know what boundaries we need to set for ourselves with regard to our congregation. This training

¹ From a Faith Institute recording on Boundaries from 7-29-15.

will provide an opportunity to explore ideas and share examples that will help us decide the places where we need to have clear boundaries so that we don't do "stupid" things.

Questions to Consider:

1. What are some roles that you have where you are the one with the power? What are some roles where you perceive others have the power?
2. What are some rules of behavior that you have set for yourself that serve as boundaries?
3. What are some areas in your life or job where you need to set better boundaries?

Confidentiality/Privacy

As a pastor it can sometimes be difficult to know whether or not we should share something about another person, particularly if we have been asked to pray about it. One rule of thumb to use as a boundary is this: If it isn't our news to share, it is better to keep it confidential unless we ask if it can be shared. Sometimes things that should be kept in confidence are shared because there is concern for the person or persons involved, but that is actually just one form of gossip. If something like that is shared with the pastor by a person who is not involved, she can make a phone call or visit to see if that person wishes this information to be shared with others in the church.

The pastor should not share vague prayer requests that make the congregation or session wonder who it is about. If it is shared in confidence, keep it in confidence. Under no circumstances should something shared in confidence be used as a sermon illustration, even if the pastor thinks he has hidden the people involved. When people are having a difficult time, it is easy to think that things are pointed at them.

With the prevalence of social media, it is important to be clear how people want things shared as prayer requests. Some people may only want their request mentioned

in worship, not shared via email, web site, or Facebook page. It is the duty of the pastor to be clear whether specifics are to be shared as prayer requests, and if so, in what formats. Once something is shared in an electronic format, it is public. Make sure you check to be sure that such sharing will be appreciated.

Questions to Consider:

1. Is it possible to keep something too confidential that has been shared with you?
2. Have you ever had a confidence that you shared with someone broken? How did that feel? How did it affect your relationship with the person who broke the confidence?

Children and Youth

Church should be a safe place for children and youth. The Book of Order requires each congregation to have a Child Protection Policy in place, but there are special boundaries that a pastor should set. You do not want to allow yourself to get into a position in which a false accusation is made and you have no one to vouch for you.

The pastor should never be alone in the church or a vehicle with one child or youth. It would be preferable to have another unrelated adult present at every function that goes on at the church, but if that is impossible, wait outside the building until everyone has arrived and wait outside again until all have been picked up. If you must transport children or youth so that they can attend, have another adult in the vehicle.

If a youth or child needs to speak privately with the pastor, try to talk in a restaurant or in their home with parents nearby and doors open. Doors to classrooms and offices which have children/youth and adults in them should be left open.

Pastors should not “friend” children or youth on their personal Facebook page. Set up a church youth page if this is the best way to communicate with youth and their

families. Post only information regarding church activities or that promote the children/youth with regard to school or sport activities. Be sure to have permission before posting pictures of children/youth on public access pages. Remember that pictures can carry information about the location of those included.

Texting has provided a new opportunity to interact with youth. Youth will share prayer concerns and personal achievements with a pastor via text when they otherwise would not. For many youth sending a text is the only way to get a response. There are also dangers with texts because of the brevity of them. Keep all texts between yourself and youth/children from the church. If, at any time, a text you receive seems to cross a boundary, speak immediately to a member of session about it and share it with the parent(s) of the youth.

Questions to Consider:

1. Are there things you need to change about how you meet with children/youth?
2. What communications boundaries do you already have set when dealing with children/youth? Are there things you need to consider changing?

Communication

With the technology we all possess at our fingertips, communication can be rapid and spread quickly. This is an important place to have firm boundaries set for ourselves.

In a fast-paced, immediate gratification world, we tend to respond to things quickly. It is important to set boundaries that allow time for effective communication to take place. One should never respond when hungry, angry, lonely or tired (HALT). I have never seen anyone's reputation hurt by asking for time to consider a response. I have seen trust destroyed and job effectiveness ruined because a quick response was

made out of anger or fatigue. You can also ask someone you trust to check the correspondence for tone and usefulness before sending it. If I would not say something to someone's face, it is a good bet that I should not communicate it in any other format.

In every case of communication, we must decide the most appropriate way to share information. There is some information that should only be shared in person, often these are difficult conversations which need nuanced response as others react to the information. Whether information should be communicated by post, email, Facebook or web site depends largely on the type of information and with whom it is to be shared. I always assume that an email could be shared more broadly than my original addressees and consequently I may be less open in an email. Whenever using an electronic form of communication, remember that anything sent electronically is in the universe forever. There is no such thing as deleted email, they can be recovered, so consider well before pushing send. Facebook and web sites can be very public and that must be considered whenever posting. Communication that enhances mission and ministry is what we want to achieve.

Questions to Consider:

1. Have you ever responded to an email out of anger and then wished you had not? What have you done in the past to avoid doing so again?
2. What do you consider to be some communication that should only take place in a face-to-face conversation? What types can be shared by Facebook or web sites? Is there any communication that still needs an old-fashioned letter as its format?

Social Media Usage

Social media is a part of life today, but there are boundaries that pastors need to be sure they have set up. Be clear about who you want to give access to the

information you share on social media. If you choose to allow parishioners to be friends and followers, that should limit what is shared. Political beliefs and social agendas ought not be shared freely when those we pastor can access them. If it is important to have a place to share those beliefs, then keep an account that is not available to members of the congregation.

Because the congregation pays the salary of the pastor, they often have a sense of ownership of that person that is increased by familiarity. This means that the more you share about yourself in social media, the more people will feel they know you and have a sense of power over you. Remember the power differential that exists between pastor and parishioner, and be sure not to exert influence with regard to social or political agendas, which can occur, even if not intended. Social media can be a tool but it can also be a detriment to the work we are trying to achieve.

Much of social media is also abbreviated, giving little space for explanation. Tweets are limited to 120 characters, which may make for pithy remarks, but may also lead to misunderstanding. Pinterest is a great place to share hobbies and ideas, but can breed a false sense of familiarity and connectedness. Be careful what and how you share on all social media because it is also forever.

Social media has created a culture of over-sharing that has leaked into the rest of the culture. Having good boundaries about what we share and how we react to others can provide a model for appropriate use of media. Be clear, as in so many things, about the purpose of your post and its content, whether pictures or comment.

Questions to consider:

1. Do you use social media as part of your church presence? What boundaries do you have in place to protect your privacy and to protect your ministry?

2. Are there things you might reconsider sharing after thinking about these issues?

Computers

We all use computers in our work and the lines between personal and work items can begin to be skewed. Clear boundaries need to be set up so that there is no confusion or misuse. Remember that besides email and social media, there are other things on the computer that can be accessed if someone desires. The only way to delete files permanently is if the drive on which they existed is physically destroyed. Assume that anything you write, search, post, watch, or record, can be found by someone else.

If the computer you use belongs to the church, you should avoid using it for personal work. Online shopping or paying of personal bills is not secure nor appropriate on a church computer. If the computer you use for church work is a personal computer, the issues become even more complex. One way to avoid intermingling work that belongs to the church and personal items is to use separate data storage for each type of work, whether physical media storage or cloud storage.

When the pastoral relationship is dissolved, the files that belong to the church need to stay with the church. This would include things like minutes of board meetings, financial reports, manuals, and directories. If you have kept files stored separately, it will be much easier to be sure that all files are left with the church.

Questions to consider:

1. How do you keep church work separate from personal work now? Are there things you might need to change?

2. Are there things you need to change about how you separate personal computer usage from work time?

Personal Boundaries/Sabbath Time

The job of a pastor is never-ending. We may not be at the church all the time, but often we are processing issues, praying for others, studying a text, or trying to find good sermon illustrations even when we are not supposed to be “working.” That doesn’t count the times we get phone calls at home or need to make a night-time visit to the hospital for an emergency. This reality makes it important to set personal boundaries and take Sabbath time. When you are on an airplane, the person giving the emergency information always reminds you to put the oxygen mask on your own face before helping the person next to you. We need some “down” time in order to have the energy to be caring pastors when we are needed.

Many pastors take Monday or Friday off from work and leave their computers and cell phones at home. Early in my career a colleague encouraged me to block out two Saturdays a month with no church activity and to limit evening meetings to two per week. When my children were young it was important to me to be able to pick them up from school each day and spend some time with them. So instead of taking one whole day off, each afternoon I left work at 3pm and returned in time for any evening meetings. Find what works for you so that you can rejuvenate and rest.

It is important to find time to interact with colleagues who understand the particular demands of being a pastor. It has been my experience that pastors who do not attend presbytery meetings on a regular basis are more likely to slip over a boundary line. We need accountability from one another and we need the community

that is our church, the presbytery. Other opportunities for collegial sharing are available such as Koinonia groups, study groups, and prayer groups. Many pastors find spiritual direction an important piece of their Sabbath time. Introverts also find reading and study time important in self-care.

Pastors also need to attend to physical well-being as well as spiritual. Make time to walk or exercise in order to clear your mind of the constant stream of job pressures. Enjoy an afternoon of gardening or hiking to experience God's glory in creation. Find some activity you enjoy that helps you remember that you are a child of God.

Questions to consider:

1. How would you rate yourself on self-care?
2. What changes do you need to make in spiritual and/or physical practices that promote well-being?
3. Is there someone to whom you are accountable for your self-care?

The Pulpit

Pastors have a great responsibility whenever we step into the pulpit. This is one of those places in which parishioners feel a great differential in power between themselves and the pastor. We need to take this responsibility very seriously while we joyously share the truth of the gospel.

The pulpit should never be used to promote a political candidate. Not only does that cross an ethical boundary, it could cost the church its 501(c)3 status. There is a difference between prophetic preaching of the gospel and promotion of a political agenda. Be sure you are aware on which side of that line you stand.

Care needs to be taken in sharing personal or family stories as part of a sermon. Be clear that the illustration is necessary to the message and not an opportunity to promote oneself or family members. Children often find it embarrassing to be mentioned in sermons and spouses may feel belittled, so use personal examples only with permission from those mentioned.

Sermons are intended to teach, guide, uplift, challenge, but not bully. Sunday morning worship is not the place to work out the conflict that exists between the pastor and members of the congregation or to promote an agenda that has not been approved by the session. If you wonder if you should say something from the pulpit, ask yourself what response you are hoping to evoke. If it is not largely a positive response, you may not be preaching the gospel and may be using the pulpit to achieve your own ends.

Questions to consider:

1. Have you ever said something from the pulpit that you later wished you had not said? Do you know what point you were trying to make and whether you achieved that goal?
2. Is there someone you trust enough to run a sermon by to be sure that you are achieving your goal if you are unsure?
3. How do you choose the texts for each week? Is there something you need to change in order to be more open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in your preaching?

Financial Boundaries

Finances are part of the required work of the church, but very clear boundaries need to be in place to protect the pastor. Whether or not the pastor knows the giving habits of families in the congregation is a matter for debate. Some pastors believe that financial giving is a sign of spiritual growth and feel it is important to know. Others believe that giving patterns could impact the level of pastoral care provided and do not

wish to know. Determining your reasons for wishing to know how people give is important so that you can be clear in your boundaries.

Pastors need to know about the financial health of the church. Learn to read the treasurer's report and know how much reserve is available in case of crisis. Sometimes the pastor needs to be the one to state the reality of the financial situation, in pastoral terms, of course.

Pastors should not sign checks for the church, even though it may seem expedient. If it is necessary to have a pastoral emergency fund that can be accessed quickly, be sure there are appropriate vouchers or other accountability procedures in place. Any funds to which you have access need checks and balances for your safety.

Pastors receive their pay based on the generosity of church members. That can often be a difficult place to be, particularly if there is conflict in the congregation. Guilt is not an appropriate way to encourage stewardship. Committee on Ministry members and/or presbyters can be called upon to help facilitate discussion when a financial crisis affects the pastor's salary or benefits. It is best to request help sooner in order to achieve a better outcome of the crisis.

The salary of the pastor is often well below the median salary of the congregation. We need to be aware of our material yearnings and clear that we do not need everything we want. Be mindful of the amount of debt you incur and prudent about how much personal financial information you divulge with your congregation. When reimbursable expenses are part of your terms of call, be sure that you have receipts to cover all requests for payment of those line items.

Some parishioners ask their pastor to be the executor of their estate or to help them deal with their finances as they age, because pastors are considered trustworthy. This is a very dangerous boundary to cross. This is not appropriate in the majority of instances. It can lead to conflict within the family and strain for the church. If you decide to take on such a task, be clear about accountability. You should also disclose this relationship to the personnel committee of the church.

It is never appropriate to solicit financial or in-kind gifts from parishioners. There was a time when pastors received special treatment with regard to fees from other professionals or reduction in cost of items. If that is offered, you may decide to accept with grace, but do not expect or solicit such favors. Try to be clear why such treatment is offered before deciding to accept. You do not want to find yourself in a place in which a church member feels that you are beholden to them because of the gifts they have provided.

Questions to consider:

1. Do you have a clear idea of your personal financial situation? If not, is there someone who can help you make a budget and be clear about spending?
2. Are there policies you need to set-up in the church to protect yourself and others with regard to finances? Are you clear about how discretionary funds are tracked?
3. Are you making good use of the financial perks that come from being a pastor, like housing allowance and reimbursable expenses? Do the minutes of session make clear each year that these are set up, before the calendar year begins?

Visitation/Counseling

The Book of Order requires every council to have a sexual misconduct policy. This should include some boundaries for visitation and counseling. Pastors should also

carry extra insurance coverage if they do very much counseling. Again the boundaries here may seem extreme, but in today's culture, boundaries are as much to protect the innocent as to avoid the possibility of guilt.

There was a time when in-home visitation was a regular and required part of the job of a pastor. That is becoming less true as families become busier and time for visits becomes less available. If you do make visits and feel even the slightest bit uncomfortable about being alone with someone, then trust your instinct and take an elder with you. Better to be safe than sorry.

When doing counseling it is important to be sure that the pastor is not alone in the church building with anyone. If privacy is needed, there should be a window into the office and another unrelated person nearby. More than one person's reputation has been tainted by a false accusation from someone whose advance was spurned. Protect yourself by having someone who can vouch for your behavior if necessary.

The other boundary that needs to be set by pastors is one of competence. Most pastors do not have training in mental health services and are limited in the level of counseling that can be provided. Be quick to offer a referral to a trained mental health care provider if the issue is beyond your purview. This does not mean that you cannot continue to provide pastoral care to the person, but be clear about the boundaries between such care and actual counseling.

Questions to consider:

1. Have you ever been uncomfortable about visiting someone in their home? What did you do about it?
2. Do you have a list of mental health providers in your area that you can refer to people in need of such care?

3. What boundaries do you have in place for counseling in your office?

Boundaries around Leaving a Church

Pastors and their families have a convoluted relationship with the church. The pastor is not a member of the church, while the spouse and children are. The whole family is part of the community and fellowship of the church and, hopefully, are loved and supported by them. This makes things difficult when leaving a church, but strong boundaries are crucial for the health and growth of the congregation.

When pastors leave a congregation, contact with members must cease. This can be difficult for spouses and children to understand, but a clean break is necessary for the new pastor to establish a relationship that will flourish. Whenever possible, pastors need to tell the congregation that they will no longer be available for pastoral care or conversations about the church. This is especially important if the pastor is staying in the area for another position or retiring in the same town where she has served.

It is tempting to offer support in a crisis to a family with whom we have had a pastoral relationship, but that keeps the new pastor from being able to establish that same level of relationship. Many pastors find it helpful even to remove former church members from their Facebook contacts in order to reduce the temptation to provide that care. Retired pastors are often still loved by the congregation and must establish clear boundaries about interaction from the beginning. Retired pastors who provide the congregation with an understanding of the boundaries and their necessity, do a strong service to the church and can be wonderful models within the presbytery.

Questions to consider:

1. What are some ways that you can make clear to parishioners when you leave a church that you can no longer serve as their pastor? How do you respond when they try to get you to do so anyway?
2. What responsibility does a retiring pastor have to the congregation?

Admitting Mistakes/Taking Responsibility

We live in a culture that increasingly does not understand personal responsibility. There always seems to be a blame game going on when crisis or difficulties arise. The church should be the one place where people understand that no one is perfect, that everyone makes mistakes, and that responsibility can be admitted and forgiveness given. But too often churches follow the culture in this regard.

One measure of maturity is the ability to take responsibility for one's actions. Pastors hopefully have achieved some level of self-differentiation and are able to admit when they have made a mistake. This ability to take responsibility and to accept the consequences of the actions, is a sign of a healthy person and can help create a healthier congregation. It also often goes a long way in setting up forgiveness and the ability to move past the crisis. Admitting responsibility does not mean there will be no consequences, some boundary crossings require strong consequences. But failing to admit actions and accept responsibility usually only makes things worse for the individual and for the church.

Accepting responsibility for actions that may seem minor can begin to set up a new and healthier culture. For example, it is fairly easy to admit that I have not adequately communicated something and accept responsibility when someone else fails to follow through on a task. This allows the other person space to try again and stops the blaming that can often happen.

Questions to consider:

1. Can you remember a time when you accepted responsibility for a mistake and moved yourself and the church toward a healthier place?
2. Can you think of a time when you have admitted that you had a part in a misunderstanding and then the relationship improved or a crisis was diminished?

What Next?

This manual is really designed to help pastors and others begin to think about the boundaries that need to be set in a complex world. Daily the issues become more involved and opportunities to do “stupid” things increase. This training continues with group processing of case studies that will engage you in considering areas that you might need to address in your own situation. We hope that you will find ways to share these ideas with your congregation so that each church might be built up in the love and grace of God in Christ Jesus.