Staying in Bounds

A young mother of two children is divorcing her husband, and her pastor, Bill, has been providing a good deal of pastoral support and care. She works as a secretary in an office in town, and Bill has her doing increasingly more of his secretarial tasks on a voluntary basis. The church is small and cannot afford to hire a part-time secretary, and she cannot get any other volunteers. She resents this extra work as a single, working mother, but feels guilty about her resentment because Bill has been so helpful to her.

John is single and is a pastor in a small, isolated community. He is lonely and becomes a close friend to a man his age in his congregation. They often spend free time together fishing and enjoying other leisure activities.

Mary has been counseling a middle-aged man in her congregation whose wife died of cancer a year ago. He informs her that he is more open with her than with anyone before. He presents her with a small gift as an expression of appreciation. She finds herself increasingly attracted to him, and later accepts his invitation to have coffee with him after a meeting at church.

Bob is an outgoing priest who relates warmly to many persons in his congregation with frequent hugs. A younger woman, who is newer to the parish, is included in his friendly ways, but feels uncomfortable, especially when these hugs occur in the privacy of his church office. She does not want to offend him, so she keeps quiet and tries not to see him alone. She moved to the community from another state and really enjoys the fellowship of the church and does not want to cause any problems.

A professional writer is invited by the pastor, Jane, to come to a singles group she is leading. Jane is writing an article on singles ministries and hopes they might eventually collaborate on a book. Jane asks her to edit her article. At first the writer feels flattered. Then she begins to feel that she is being used and is angry. She would like to tell Jane how angry she is, but she cannot. She finds she needs the group and does not want Jane to reject her.

Today, inside and outside the church, many are focusing a great deal of attention on the professional conduct of clergy. Usually the emphasis is on sexual misconduct and gross violations of professional ethics. Unquestionably, sexual misconduct by clergy needs to be identified and dealt with directly and responsibly by church officials.

The concern, however, is that focusing attention on gross violations exclusively prevents us from seeing more subtle boundary issues. It is a dangerous attitude when we as clergy persons feel immune to boundary violations because we would never engage in gross misconduct. Boundary violations exist on a continuum from subtle, almost imperceptible violations, to obvious, legally punishable behavior. The more we are aware of the subtleties of professional boundaries that we all violate at times in our ministries, the more we can responsibly direct our professional behaviors toward positive servant ministries to others.

We began this article with five common ministry situations. In your thinking and experience, which situations involve boundary violations? Several? All? None of them? Probably all of us in the ministry have been in a variation of at least one of these situations. The ministry involves a complex set of expectations and needs, professionally and personally. Boundaries are not always clear to us, at least when we are in the midst of our activity. We, also, may have a definition of professional boundaries that is too limited.

Marilyn Peterson in her book, At Personal Risk, provides a helpful definition of professional boundaries. She maintains that boundaries are the limits that allow for a safe connection in the professional-parishioner relationship based on the parishioner's needs. Thus, a boundary violation occurs when a pastor places his or her needs above those of the parishioner. Peterson’s definition is useful because it enlarges our understanding and application of boundaries; it allows us to explore a broader continuum of professional behaviors.

Now, consider the five ministry situations in light of this definition. In each situation, whose needs are being met? The situations are not all the same, and they may not all share the same degree of seriousness or harm. Nevertheless, do they share in common a subtle shift from a servant ministry to a personal agenda of the pastor? It is clear when this happens in sexual misconduct; it is not as clear when it happens in more subtle ways. For example, it is common for pastors to develop some personal friendships in their parishes. These may present no difficulties. But a pastor needs to be aware that the dynamics in the pastoral relationship are changed. And it is possible for some subtle professional boundaries to be crossed when a relationship is altered from pastoral to personal. If you look closely at each of the five situations, you may find the seeds for the growth of a more serious ministry disruption.

Peterson calls attention to four key ingredients in a boundary violation that we can apply to the five ministry situations. First, roles are reversed. The parishioner
becomes the caretaker of the pastor. Initially the
parishioner may feel elevated and important. Because the
pastor continues to perform the regular ministry functions
to the parishioner, the reversal of roles may be obscured,
and the parishioner may not experience the violation until
some conflict develops.

Second, a double-bind occurs. In a boundary violation a
parishioner is caught in a conflict of interest, and the
available options involve some kind of risk. Parishioners
can be placed in untenable binds. They may be dependent
on the pastor; consequently, they can feel trapped and
unable to move independently. A fear of losing the
relationship with the pastor and with the congregation binds
them.

Third, a secret is involved. Critical information can be kept
from the parishioner that gives the pastor an unfair
advantage. The pastor gains the cooperation of the
parishioner without having to reveal his or her true motive
or full agenda. Without this full knowledge that is
necessary for reasonable choice on the parishioner’s part,
the parishioner is manipulated into participating in the
pastor’s plan.

Fourth, a professional privilege is indulged. The pastor, by
virtue or his or her role, uses the pastoral office and power
to further personal goals.

Identifying a boundary violation is difficult because the
violation usually involves a process of interactions rather
than a single event. It hides beneath the surface of a
relationship’s legitimate purpose and may not be identified
until some serious problem develops. Many more subtle
boundary violations occur before a pastor engages in sexual
misconduct. Increased awareness of these subtle violations
is important to the prevention of gross misconduct.

A basic professional expectation is that the pastor is
responsible for monitoring the boundaries; blame cannot be
placed on a parishioner for a professional violation. The
pastor as a professional needs to monitor his or her
behavior and be aware of the early danger signals.
• Getting too caught up in your own agenda and
  ministry goals, as valid as your goals may be
• Using people to insure your own success rather than
  listening to their needs
• Starting to feel more like a friend than a pastor
• Spending more time with certain members because of
  the return it gives you
• Beginning to see someone outside more formally
  structured settings
• Failing to develop other interests and relationships
  outside your parish

Professionals in general, and pastors in particular, follow a
high calling rooted in personal restraint. Being a
professional does not mean simply exercising particular
skills and knowledge; rather, it means being responsible to
the person with whom we are dealing. It means monitoring
our own self-interests and professional power while
operating within the context of our relationship with
someone else. As Peterson points out, whenever
professionals operate outside the boundaries of self-
restraint and places their own needs first, they violate the
reason for the professional relationship.

The characteristics of boundary violations may be
summarized as follows:
• Boundary violations are a common occurrence and
  often appear harmless
• Many boundary violations go unrecognized
• Most begin as innocent situations that feel good to the
  parishioner and professional alike
• Usually violations are not felt until something goes
  wrong
• Victims of violations often resist seeing the wound to
  themselves and continue to believe the professional’s
  actions were based on concern for their well-being
• Violations betray the larger social framework of
  covenantal trust bestowed on professionals and
  weaken the underlying confidence in the pastor-
  parishioner relationship
• Misconduct by one pastor causes parishioners to
  mistrust other ministers

You can take some preventative steps as a professional
minister. First, be uncompromisingly honest with yourself.
Besides the sense of call from God to the ministry, personal
needs drew you to the ministry. These needs may include
acceptance, intimacy, recognition, success, etc. You need to
know your own depths. The more you are in touch with
what is inside you as a human being, the better prepared
you will be to seek out necessary and helpful resources to
help you maintain the trust placed in you.

Second, find a responsible colleague group or another
mature professional for supervision, and meet on a regular
basis. Make yourself accountable to respected peers. Share
and discuss your ministry situations in relation to boundary
issues and professional conduct. No person in ministry
today should operate alone and without intentional
supervision.

Third, actively maintain relationships and interests outside
your ministry setting. Enlarge your identity beyond your
professional life. In a more isolated location this may not
be easy, but being professional means that you do not let
yourself be a victim to external circumstances. In fact, it may not be your isolation that is the problem but, rather, interpersonal passivity apart from your ministry role.

Last, remember God calls you to a servant ministry. You are the pastor of a congregation not to find friends or make your mark; you are called to meet the needs of others for the sake of the Gospel.

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Professional Boundaries in Ministry
Suggested Resources


Peter Rutter, Sex in the Forbidden Zone: When Men in Power—Therapists, Doctors, Clergy, Teachers, and Others—Betray Women’s Trust, Jeremy Tarcher, 1989.

The Midwest Ministry Development Service