

**An excerpt from ETHICS IN PASTORAL MINISTRY**  
**A PROPOSED CODE OF ETHICS**  
**Code of Professional Ministerial Responsibility**  
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## **PROFESSIONAL OBLIGATIONS**

### ***A. Theological Competence***

1. We give time to developing our theological knowledge and pastoral skills through private study, participating in professional programs, and taking study leaves and sabbaticals.
2. We develop a competence in providing theological reflection as the specialized expertise that distinguishes us from other helping professionals. That is, we are committed to being able to mediate meaning by bringing the resources of Christian faith to bear on specific situations in the lives of people.

### ***B. Service of People's Need for Salvation***

1. We are to preserve and promote through our own behavior the way to love God and to love the neighbor as the self.
2. We exhibit a deep commitment to the church and loyalty to its traditions and teaching in the way that we bring its traditions and teachings into contact with the lives and circumstances of the people we serve.

### ***C. A Commitment to the Other's Best Interest***

1. We must be approachable and available to help people.
2. We respect the dignity of each person by providing service without regard to their economic status, age, gender, race, sexual orientation, or physical and mental abilities.
3. We have room for gratuitous service, for going "the extra mile," for flexibility, and for the unexpected.

### ***D. Care of Ourselves***

1. We strive to keep physically and emotionally healthy by getting proper nutrition and adequate sleep, by taking exercise, days off, and vacations, by guarding against the misuse of alcohol and drugs, and by nurturing friendships outside our pastoral relationships to meet personal needs for intimacy. We strive to manage our time according to the priorities of our ministry and family obligations. Those who are married must give first priority to their families; others fulfill family obligations in light of their primary commitment to ministry.
2. We strive to keep spiritually healthy by following a regular discipline of reflective reading, private and public prayer, spiritual direction, and

other ascetical practices that enhance our awareness of and responsiveness to God.

3. We strive to keep morally healthy by participating in a confidential, supportive community of colleagues to get counsel and support for our vision and values.

#### ***E. Use of Power***

1. We do not minimize or ignore the unique power that we have over those seeking pastoral service, but we strive to use our power in ways that respect the dignity of persons by empowering them to come into their own freedom and so to participate more fully in the mission of the church.
2. We should be sufficiently self-disciplined so as to maintain clear boundaries in our pastoral relationships and restrain from exploiting the trust and dependency of those who seek our service by not using them to satisfy our needs for attention, acceptance, and pleasure.
3. We strive to avoid, to the extent possible, those dual relationships (e.g., with our employees, students, friends, business relationships) which could impair our professional judgment, create conflicts of interest, or lead to exploiting the relationship for our own gain. When dual relationships are inevitable, we must lessen their potential for conflicts of interest and exploitation by monitoring our role and boundaries and by being clear about whose needs are being met.

#### ***F. Accountability***

1. We strive to internalize and abide by professional standards of practice (such as those in this code).
2. We strive to hold one another accountable to professional standards.

### **SEXUAL CONDUCT**

- A. We must witness in all relationships the “ministerial boundaries” appropriate to our state in life, whether celibate, married, or single.
- B. We must avoid any covert or overt sexual behaviors with those for whom we have a professional responsibility. Prohibited behaviors include, but are not limited to, all forms of overt or covert seductive speech or gestures as well as physical contact that sexually abuses, exploits, or harasses another person.
- C. We are to provide a safe place for people to be vulnerable without fearing that sexual boundaries will be violated.
- D. We strive to be aware of our own and another’s vulnerability in regard to sexuality, especially when working alone with another.
- E. We bear the greater burden of responsibility for maintaining sexual boundaries in the pastoral relationship, for we hold greater power.

- F. We must not initiate sexual behavior, and must refuse it even when the other invites or consents to it.
- G. We must give preference to the perspective and judgment of those who are vulnerable and dependent on us in order to determine whether touching would be an appropriate expression of pastoral care.
- H. We must show prudent discretion before touching another person, since we cannot control how physical touch will be received. That is, we are to take into account how age, gender, race, ethnic background, emotional condition, prior experience, and present life situation all affect how our touching may be received and interpreted.
- I. We should become familiar with the dynamics of transference and counter transference which can make us vulnerable to violating sexual boundaries.
- J. We strive for a greater self-awareness in order to recognize the sexual dynamics at work for us in pastoral relationships and to heed the warning signs in our lives which indicate when we are approaching boundary violations.
- K. We should satisfy our needs for affection, intimacy, attraction, and affirmation outside the pastoral relationship.
- L. We should seek supervision or other professional help to remain focused on our professional responsibilities and to hold firm to the sexual boundaries of the pastoral relationship.
- M. We must report clear violations of sexual conduct to the appropriate ecclesial and civil authorities, and then do what we can to see that justice is done for the victim, the offender, and the community from which the victim and minister come.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

- A. We are to keep confidential all information which is disclosed to us while serving in our professional role as a religious authority and representative of the church.
- B. We respect the absolute confidentiality of the seal of confession. Under no circumstances may we disclose, even indirectly, any information received about a penitent through a sacramental confession.
- C. We should become knowledgeable of state laws regarding the “religious privilege” of confidential information and the reporting requirements for child abuse.
- D. We strive to take necessary steps to ensure confidentiality by seeing that offices are properly soundproof, records are secure, and staff members are informed of their duty in matters of confidentiality.
- E. We must seek the permission of the one who has disclosed private information to us before using it in a public way.
- F. We must obtain the consent of the one who owns the information on sacramental and financial records before making that information public. However, we may disclose data from these records for statistical purposes, for example, as long as we protect anonymity.

- G. We should seek legal guidance before disclosing records at the request of a governmental agency.
- H. We should get explicit permission to use in our preaching, teaching, or writing any knowledge that we acquire about a person in the course of exercising our pastoral ministry, or at least disguise that person's identity.
- I. We should be reluctant to release information even when we have permission to do so because of our fundamental desire to protect ministerial confidentiality as a zone of safety. Spiritual directors and confessors, in particular, may want to refrain from writing letters of recommendation for their directees or pentents, especially when there are other people available who can write them.
- J. We must refrain from gossip that is false, degrading, defaming, invasive, and harmful to another's reputation.
- K. We should clarify with those for whom our loyalty may be ambiguous or conflicted just how information we acquire will be used and whose interest we are serving, theirs or some other person or institution (e.g., vocation office, diocese, and seminary).
- L. We must intervene when there is evidence of the abuse of children, the elderly, or the disabled. When it is necessary to avert a serious threat of harm to another, justice requires that we make a reasonable attempt to elicit voluntary disclosure, but if disclosure is not made and permission to disclose is not granted, then we should inform only those who need to know and tell them only what they need to know in order to avert harm.