

SACRED SPACES SAFE PEOPLE

An Introduction to Establishing Boundaries in Ministry

What are boundaries?

Boundaries are limits that allow for a safe interpersonal connection
and

Boundaries are the properly communicated expectations that enable us to protect children or adults in vulnerable situations and to protect ourselves.

Why is it important to establish clear boundaries when ministering to others?

- They help both us, and those to whom we are ministering, to be clear about our respective roles and the nature of the relationship.
- They establish a framework in which our ministries can be established and thrive.
- They signal that we can be trusted and can provide protection, for those to whom we minister, from our potential abuse of power.
- They bring structure to our interactions with each other.
- They help to maintain what one writer refers to as the “sanctity of self within relationships”.

What do our Canons say about boundaries?

Ministers must guard against the possibility of misunderstanding and over-dependence. Ministers must preserve appropriate inter-personal disciplines and boundaries, and they shall be aware of the power of the Minister’s position. (Canon 1, Title D, clause 18)

Open communication with those to whom we are ministering will help avoid misunderstandings. Whether or not we admit it, we can never deny the existence of the inequality of power in a pastoral relationship.

How do I know what boundaries to appropriate in a specific pastoral situation?

Ask yourself:

- Is what I am doing in the best interests of the person to whom I am ministering, or is it more for my own self-interest and for my benefit?
- Is what I am doing consistent with the role of one who offers this ministry?
- How would I explain what I am doing to others in authority in the church?
- Is what I am doing healthy?
- Will what I am doing stand up to external scrutiny and not lead to misunderstanding?

Some examples of boundaries

- Keeping an appropriate physical space between you and the person to whom you are ministering.
- Taking care not to touch a person in a way that could be confusing for the person (i.e. open to misinterpretation).
- Maintaining the confidentiality of any information that is shared with you.
- Setting limits around your availability for providing ministry, e.g. not answering phone calls after 9.00 pm.
- Being clear about the role from which you are offering support, e.g. as a friend, a colleague or as a minister.
- Being deliberate about what you disclose about yourself in pastoral situations.
- Setting limits on your social media use.
- Taking care if you are offered a gift.
- Not engaging in spiritual abuse. Lisa Oakley, an advisor to the Church of England, defines spiritual abuse as “a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it”.
- Maintaining appropriate sexual boundaries. There are no circumstances in which it is okay to engage in any sexual behaviour with, or sexually abuse, a person to whom you are ministering.

General advice on how stay safe when offering pastoral care

- Accept that this is a vitally important ministry, but one with pitfalls, and you need to be constantly on your guard.
- Always listen to your gut. If something in the relationship feels wrong to you, then it probably is.
- Ensure you have a supervisor or other person to whom you can speak honestly about any boundary concerns.
- Be aware of your own needs and find healthy ways to address those; sharing them with the person to whom you are ministering is not an option.
- Attend Diocesan or other training events and seminars on this topic.

We acknowledge with humility and gratitude that, in developing the insight and material in the video and this pamphlet, we have drawn significantly on the work of the Reverend Dr Sarah Park of the Diocese of Auckland New Zealand, and Dr Lisa Oakley, an advisor to the Church of England and co-author of *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse* (SPCK, 2019)

Further support from the Diocesan Safety Team

The Diocesan Safety Team is led by Rev'd Jean Malcolm and Roger Wigglesworth. The Team can be contacted at safety@anglicanmovement.nz. You can also call Roger on 021 541 618, or email roger@anglicanmovement.nz