

## Healthy Boundaries, Healthy Ministry

Marie M. Fortune

Maintaining the integrity of the pastoral relationship and protecting those who are vulnerable are two essential dimensions in the practice of ministry. In order to fulfill these goals, one must have healthy boundaries sustained by self-awareness, self-discipline, and accountability.

Accountability is a recognition that we function within an institution with standards and expectations as to our behavior in a pastoral role of leadership within a community that is vulnerable to and trusting of us. Ultimately we are accountable to our faith community and to God, but practically we are accountable to those who credential us to serve. The institution of the faith community, if it credentials individuals for leadership, has a responsibility to do all it can to insure that its leaders do no harm.

There are facts of life in ministry that should inform our work to supervise and train candidates for ministry:

1. Power is real in the role of minister whether we like it or not. It accrues by virtue of our training, knowledge, experience, and role as faith leader and interpreter.
2. Ministry is a public role and should be transparent. We minister with individuals in a faith community. Even though there are times when we are with a congregant privately and confidentially, the fact that we are relating to this person in ministry should not be a secret, but rather be transparent.

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3. Congregants, clients, students, staff members, and others are vulnerable but not powerless. There are many variables that contribute to their vulnerabilities not the least of which is social location. But personal crisis trumps all other variables. Vulnerability means having fewer resources at a particular moment in time which makes one susceptible to harm!
4. Ministers are at risk to cross boundaries because of the intimacy of ministry but are rarely vulnerable unless in a particular situation that inverts the balance of power based on, for example, size, gender, status, or age. If a clergywoman goes to visit a male congregant who is bigger and stronger than she. If he chose to, he could sexually assault her. In this case, her role as clergy means little.
5. Boundaries in ministry are important in many areas including but not limited to sex, finances, use of drugs and alcohol, use of the internet, and avoidance of plagiarism.

How do we teach and support our supervisees in these important dimensions of ministry? Several aspects of learning are at work in ministerial supervision, and all are instructive to the supervisee. Supervisory training includes direct teaching for which the supervisor is responsible. How do we increase supervisees' awareness of power, vulnerability, and boundaries in ministry? How do we help them integrate awareness and discipline into their ministerial self-image so that the practice of healthy boundaries becomes second nature? These are some of the challenges of supervision and formation in ministry. There is also the supervision process that often instructs through modeling. The supervisor's awareness of and maintenance of healthy boundaries with the supervisee becomes a primary source of instruction. This element of teaching boundaries is critical and often overlooked.

One of the primary responsibilities in supervising a student is to insure the student's safety in the assigned ministry setting. For example, if we are a senior minister or rabbi supervising a seminarian in our congregation and if the seminarian reports to us that the chair of the Board of Trustees, a longtime member and generous giver, has made sexual advances to the seminarian, we must intervene immediately. Or if we are the seminary faculty advisor and if the student reports that the clinical pastoral education (CPE) supervisor is sexually harassing her or him, we must intervene including reporting the CPE supervisor to the program and to the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, Inc.

Of course in order to be able to intervene in these situations, we must make clear to the supervisee that, if they come to us with these concerns, we will take action. Establishing this norm (in the context of policy and procedures within the congregation or training program) is also an important learning

opportunity for the supervisee. But this is the only way that trust can be established and nurtured between supervisor and supervisee.

Basic orientation of a supervisee should include presentation of policies and procedures regarding conduct and misconduct within the setting of the assigned ministry. This is both practical and educational. The supervisee needs to understand that he or she is expected to follow the policies of this setting and to understand that violation of the policies will result in consequences *and* sharing of information with their seminary and denomination or movement.

For example, a student intern who was doing youth ministry in the congregation was discovered to have served alcohol to the teenagers and showed them pornography. This was reported to the seminary advisor who talked with the student and noted that he had “boundary issues.” If I had been that advisor, I would have ended the internship and indicated to the student that I would not be able to provide a positive reference to his denomination for ordination. This misconduct is very serious and suggests much more than poor judgment. In fact, serving alcohol to minors is a misdemeanor in most states.

When a supervisee engages in minor inappropriate boundary crossing, this can be a teaching opportunity, and it is the responsibility of the supervisor to use this opportunity. But when the boundary crossing is serious and potentially harmful and/or illegal, the supervisor should act to protect the congregants from the supervisee and prevent the supervisee from being credentialed. In other words, the supervisee needs to learn about accountability very early in ministry.

#### USING POLICIES AS A TEACHING TOOL IN SUPERVISION

A supervisor is in a position to help a supervisee be aware of and understand policies that shape accountability within their setting of ministry in their denomination or movement. The purpose of policy language is to clearly lay out the behavior parameters expected of the person in ministry. In the early days, the only language suggesting a standard of conduct was vague and general. For example, in the United Church of Christ, the “policy” only prohibited “conduct unbecoming the ministry.” This is clearly inadequate direction given our capacity to interpret in a way that would serve our own purposes. In addition, there is no specific behavior indicated against which to measure the minister’s conduct. Then, as now, there would be no consensus on “conduct unbecoming the ministry.”

There are three areas that call for accountability in pastoral relationships: conduct, intent, and impact. Impact is the bottom line ethical issue: What is the impact or potential harm to the congregant, student, client, staff member of the minister’s conduct? Therefore the conduct is the thing that can be measured against a standard. The intent is only secondary.

The Hippocratic Oath which was established for physicians in 500 BCE is the earliest known “policy” addressing professional misconduct: “Whatever house I may visit, I will come for the benefit of the sick, remaining free of all intentional injustice, of all mischief and in particular of sexual relations with both female and male persons, be they free or slaves.”

- “Whatever house I may visit”—in the setting of providing care for another
- “I will come for the benefit of the sick”—to maintain the integrity of the helping relationship
- “Remaining free of all intentional injustice, of all mischief”—all conduct that would cause harm
- “In particular of sexual relations with both female and male persons, be they free or slaves”—*specifically* sexual activity with anyone in the household regardless of status

The Oath addresses the setting, the goal of the relationship, the commitment to not engage in exploitative conduct, and specifically to not cross sexual boundaries with anyone in this setting.

This mix of general and specific expectations falls within the context of a concern for the misuse of one’s power to exploit a vulnerable person. Power and vulnerability are the core issues of healthy boundaries. Impact usually includes the betrayal of trust in the relationship which is perhaps the most damaging result of boundary violations. Policies should be both general and specific with the intent to guide us in our conduct but also with the intent to provide a standard against which to judge our conduct.

#### FIDUCIARY RESPONSIBILITY

The principle of a fiduciary from the profession of law can help us understand and be accountable for our ministerial conduct. A fiduciary responsibility arises when we are in a role of authority where we are called on to care for the needs of a vulnerable person. Originating from the Latin *fides*, “faithfulness,” a fiduciary is a person who acts in the best interest of the other even when this does not serve one’s own self-interest.

For example, let us say that I am teaching a seminarian who expects to finish her degree this year and that I would like to invite her to be my re-

search assistant for next year. However, she asks me for a reference for her ordination process because she plans to go into hospital chaplaincy following graduation. I would prefer that she remain and be my research assistant, so I might be tempted to withhold a positive reference for her. But as a fiduciary, I am expected to respond to her best interest rather than my own. I of course provide her with the requested reference so that she can pursue her vocation. To understand oneself in ministry as having a fiduciary relationship with our congregants, clients, students, and others provides a valuable touchstone for avoiding conflicts of interests and unhealthy boundary crossings.

As people of faith, this important principle also rests within our understanding of the hospitality code that is cited numerous times in Hebrew and Christian texts. The hospitality code mandates that we care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger or traveler. These are the groups of people specifically identified because of their circumstance of vulnerability and lack of resources. But the obligation to care for individuals in these groups is fiduciary in nature: even at the expense of oneself, care for the other is mandated.

The most significant dimension of this teaching is that it is not presented as an act of altruism. "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 22:22). It is based on a recognition that we all experience vulnerability in various situations. The obligation of those who have resources to care for those who are vulnerable establishes, in a larger sense, a relationship of mutual responsibility: When you are in need and I have resources, I will care for you; when I am in need and you have resources, you will care for me. This literal one-on-one responsibility works in a peer relationship but not necessarily in a pastoral relationship. My partner and I assume this reciprocity of care because we are peers in a committed relationship. But in a pastoral relationship, I have the fiduciary duty to act in my congregant's or student's interest beyond my own.

The reminder here is that we all experience vulnerability and that, when we do, we should turn to those who can appropriately respond to our personal needs. So if I am in personal crisis, I turn to my pastor or therapist, family, and friends for primary support and not to congregants, clients or students with whom I minister.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY VERSUS SECRECY

A thirty-five-year-old woman seminarian was doing her field placement at a local church and was being supervised and mentored by the senior pastor

who was fifty-five years old. He had made it clear that their weekly supervision sessions were confidential, by which he meant "what goes on in this room, stays in this room." After several months, she began to be uncomfortable with the supervisor's conversations. He began to ask her about her sex life with her husband, her sexual preferences, etc. After every supervision session, he would remind her: "what goes on in this room, stays in this room."

The student wanted to talk with her husband about this, as well as with her field education faculty advisor at the seminary. But the supervising minister led her to understand that confidentiality meant that she could not share what was going on in supervision. So she tolerated the supervisor's behavior even though she told him she was uncomfortable. When he began asking her for a hug at the end of sessions, she could no longer keep quiet. But initially she felt guilty for speaking to her faculty advisor and reporting the supervisor.

This is a perfect example of a supervising minister misusing the power and authority of his role with a student to take advantage of her vulnerability *and* to silence her in order to protect himself from the consequences. In the process, he distorted the meaning of confidentiality and equated it with secrecy to serve his own interests. Not only did he create an unsafe situation for her, he also distorted her learning about the meaning of confidentiality.

The privilege of confidentiality lies with the person who is vulnerable, the person who may seek a safe place to talk about personal issues. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to keep these confidences unless the supervisor becomes aware of information that might be harmful to the supervisee or someone else (for example, threats of violence). The supervisee owns the information and the conversation and should be free to discuss the experience of supervision with anyone outside that relationship, whether partner, faculty advisor, therapist, or friend. This is what is meant by transparency in ministry. As ministers, we should assume that our conversations in our supervisory or pastoral relationships will be shared with others and act accordingly. We will not share our conversations, but our students and congregants have every right to. We have no privilege here except to seek supervision ourselves for issues that may arise in our supervision of a student. Even here the student's confidentiality should be maintained. We may take a situation to a colleague or supervisor only in order to improve our care or supervision.

## GATEKEEPING

Another challenging aspect of accountability in supervision is the gatekeeping function that rests with the institutions of learning and credentialing. When a candidate for ministry presents herself to the credentialing body (denomination or movement), who connects the dots between the candidate's experience in training with the institution's standards for vetting?

The supervision relationship generally takes place within a teaching setting that should have some connection to a credentialing body of a denomination or movement. The supervisor is accountable to this teaching setting, for example CPE, for his conduct. But he should also be accountable to the credentialing body. If there are issues for the supervisee about poor boundaries, poor judgment, and/or misconduct, the supervisor is responsible to insure that this information goes to those who are responsible for determining fitness for ministry and credentials. Then it is the responsibility of that credentialing body to use this information in their discernment process.

Unfortunately, this gate-keeping function is not clearly defined and owned by many who have the capacity to carry it out. For example, in Protestant settings, most denominations assume that a master's of divinity degree from an accredited seminary means that the graduate has been vetted in terms of fitness for ministry. On the other hand, many seminaries do not see vetting as part of their job in granting degrees. They assume that denominations will do the vetting and determine fitness for ministry before ordination. The local congregation assumes that someone has vetted any ordained person who is referred by their denomination or movement as a possible candidate for placement or call. The sad fact is that too often no one is responsible for vetting. (This is less of an issue for Jews because the seminary is the ordaining body; there is more of a chance that issues that have arisen in a student's supervision and training will be factors in any decision to grant a degree and ordain.)

Trinity Lutheran Seminary learned this lesson the hard way in 2004. The seminary was a defendant along with the Synod and national Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in a lawsuit brought by fourteen plaintiffs who disclosed that Gerald Patrick Thomas, a Lutheran pastor, had sexually abused them. In 2003, Thomas was convicted of possession of child pornography and eleven counts of sexual abuse of minors and was sentenced to prison. The civil suit was brought against the seminary and the church because there was cause to be concerned about Thomas' behavior when he was in seminary and during an internship. It is a complicated case, but the bottom line is that

seminary faculty and a field education supervisor had concerns that they did not convey to the Synod where Thomas was ordained or to the subsequent calling congregation. He was allowed to practice ministry until he was arrested and prosecuted. Only then were his credentials withdrawn. The various entities within the ELCA failed to carry out the gate-keeping function necessary to protect vulnerable people from potential abusers.

Subsequently, some of the ELCA leadership began to review their procedures and suggested that there needed to be better communication among the entities. Whoever is making a decision needs all the relevant information. It remains to be seen whether seminaries and denominations are adequately sharing relevant information about students and candidates for ministry. Confidentiality need not limit this process. Students/candidates should be asked permission to share information from the seminary experience with the credentialing bodies. If they are unwilling to do so, then their request for credentials is denied or tabled indefinitely. This process provides for accountability, and students should not be allowed to opt out of the process.

## MINISTRY IS ABOUT CROSSING BOUNDARIES

When we talk about respecting boundaries in pastoral relationships, some people jump to the conclusion that we are instituting a new rule: "Thou shall not cross boundaries." These are the people who respond to a discussion of appropriate touch boundaries with, "Okay, I just won't ever touch anyone again," and stick their hands in their pockets.

This reactionary response is more concerned with political correctness than with healthy boundaries. We cannot do ministry without crossing boundaries. The point of policies, training, and discussion of boundaries is to help us understand when it is appropriate and necessary to cross boundaries in ministry and when it is a violation of boundaries that can cause harm. This requires us to spend time and attention on our choices.

Ministry with an individual is a public, professional relationship entered into voluntarily by a congregant, client, student, and so forth. Those we serve assume a trust relationship with us where they can receive resources as needed and where they are safe from harm. In this relationship, they tacitly allow us to cross boundaries *in their interest*. In fact they expect us to do so. For example, if I am supervising a student and if I become aware of a fellowship opportunity that might be of interest to the student, I will initiate communication with the student to inform the student of this opportunity. I have crossed

a boundary with that phone call or e-mail. Likewise in a congregation, if I get word that a member has been hospitalized, I will most likely go to visit that person before they even notify me. But generally this is an appropriate boundary crossing in service to strengthening the pastoral relationship.

This is one of the differences between a pastoral relationship and a therapy relationship. A minister has the prerogative to initiate contact with a congregant *for the congregant's well-being*. A therapist, like a doctor, must wait until a client seeks out their help. This is a boundary crossing, and it can be essential to good ministry. But it is our responsibility to understand the difference between boundary crossing that serves the congregant, and boundary crossing that violates trust and seeks to exploit the congregant.

When as a minister, we encounter an individual in a vulnerable situation, we have two options for response: (a) How can I support and empower you and lessen your vulnerability? or (b) How can I take advantage of your situation to meet my needs? For a predatory person, the choice of options here is simple. But for the non-predator who is simply confused and sometimes overwhelmed, the choice is less clear. In fact for many of us, we may not even realize we are faced with this choice of how we respond to a vulnerable person. An appreciation for this choice is essential to an integration of boundary awareness and healthy ministry. The challenge that we all face daily in ministry is how to assume that we begin with the question: How can I support and empower you and lessen your vulnerability?

#### IN CONCLUSION

Structures of accountability within our various settings of ministry or supervision are vital to the maintenance of healthy boundaries. Policies and procedures provide us with a valuable framework for understanding our ethical responsibilities and reflecting on our behavioral choices. Colleagues who share our commitment to healthy boundaries can help us think through our confusion about a particular situation. The disciplines of self-care are an obligation of ministry. If we are not taking care of ourselves physically, emotionally, and spiritually, we jeopardize our capacity to use good judgment regarding healthy boundaries.

A colleague of mine suggests this touchstone: He says that we should never want something from a congregant, client, student, etc. We can want something *for* them but *not from* them. We can want them to find healing, for-

giveness, peace, and so forth, but if we want them to give us attention, money, sex, etc., we are in trouble.

Finally, we must remember that ministry is a privilege, not a right. We are called into ministry by God, and we serve at the pleasure of our faith communities. We are all accountable; the same rules apply for us all. Healthy boundaries give shape to our pastoral and teaching relationships and as such are a great gift. They enable us to bring our gifts and skills to bear on a hurting world in ways that can make for healing.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews in Christian scripture describes our mandate for ministry this way: "Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed" (Heb. 12:12-13). In spite of our drooping hands and weak knees, we are called to bring healing and not harm.

#### NOTES

1. I do not use vulnerability here to refer to openness or trust but rather to a situation of having less power than the minister or helping professional.
2. Ludwig Edelstein, trans., "The Hippocratic Oath," no.1 in *Supplements to the Bulletin of the History of Medicine* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1943).
3. This does not mean that my congregants do not respond to my personal crisis, such as illness or death in the family. But they do not do so as my family and friends do.
4. David L. Miller, "Texas Verdict Spurs Policy Review," *The Lutheran* (October 2004): 48, 58.

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