

Self-care and Prevention of Sexual Misconduct

“PRACTICAL STEPS FOR PREVENTION, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND JUSTICE

Establishing the ground rules:

- It is never appropriate to have sexual contact with parishioners.
- It is always the pastor’s responsibility to keep the appropriate boundaries.
- Pastors and other leaders are also responsible for setting up and following procedures to hold pastors accountable.
- No pastor or church is free from the risks of misconduct. The only responsible path is to be aware of the problem, vigilant about prevention, and tenacious in following procedures of accountability.”¹

WATCHING FOR PROBLEMS AND WARNING SIGNS.

Be self-aware in paying attention to the risk factors and warning signs.

- Watch for signs that you are attracted to a parishioner and/or a parishioner is attracted to you. Signs for you or a parishioner may include:
 - ✓ Do you anticipate and/or find reasons to be around him or her?
 - ✓ Are you secretive?
 - ✓ Would you be uncomfortable if others knew how you felt?
- Personal vulnerability, for you or a parishioner, greatly increases the risk. Sources of vulnerability may include:
 - ✓ Loneliness
 - ✓ Depression
 - ✓ Crisis (Examples include: financial, death, relationship issues or marital strife.)²
 - ✓ Overwork and Fatigue: “I am so tired of... Overwork and sleep deprivation may not kill me today, but they can quickly and powerfully harm me emotionally and spiritually. The habitual lack of rest [Sabbath] is eventually very destructive, often wiping out the gains from sacrificial hard work.”³

¹ Willimon, William H. Calling & Character: Virtues of the Ordained Life. (Abingdon Press; Nashville, 2000), p. 77-78.

² Ibid., p.78-79.

³ Larson, Craig Brian. Pastoral Grit: THE STRENGTH TO STAND AND TO STAY. (Bethany House Publishers; Minneapolis, 1998), p. 56-58.

RESPONSE AND PREVENTION

What do I do when I recognize a problem or warning sign?

- If you recognize an attraction, immediately establish better boundaries. Read and/or get training in the dynamics of transference and counter-transference.
- Enlist a spiritual advisor, someone who can help guide you.
- Join a peer accountability group and/or see a counselor. Seek out those appropriate places where you feel safe in talking about the problems and temptations.⁴
- **Do not go it alone!**
- “Whatever the [situation], it is always the pastor’s responsibility to keep the boundaries.”⁵

How can I help to prevent problems?

- If you counsel parishioners, be under regular supervision. Do not be alone with parishioners.
- Be faithful in on-going sexual ethics training.
- With your S/PPRC establish realistic expectations and procedures of accountability.
- Observe Sabbath. We as Ordained Clergy and Local Pastors are unique in that while others are observing Sabbath, we are putting in our “one day of work!” “Be still, and know that I am God (Ps. 46:10). The discipline of [Sabbath] shows that God has set boundaries in my life: the limitations of time and energy. To acknowledge without resentment the weakness of my humanity is to honor God as divine.”⁶
- Exercise at least 3 times per week on regular basis. (Joining a gym or fitness club is especially helpful, and may be something negotiated with S/PPRC as either a benefit the church provides or a requirement of employment making it a reimbursable expense.) We recognize our bodies as temple. To say, “I don’t have time” and to willfully neglect our bodies is to desecrate God’s temple.
- Join a peer accountability group.
- Engage a Spiritual Director or Mentor, someone who you can speak with openly and frankly.
- Seek out avenues for building and strengthening intimacy in your own life. Spend quality time with your spouse. Marriage enrichment programs can be particularly helpful. “...the temptation of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat. Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationship and have opted for power and control instead.”⁷ Misconduct is all about power and control.
- Be faithful in the spiritual disciplines of Bible study and Prayer.
- ***Trust your gut! If feels wrong, it probably is!***

⁴ Willimon, Calling & Character: Virtues of the Ordained Life, p. 78.

⁵ Ibid., p. 79.

⁶ Larson, Pastoral Grit: THE STRENGTH TO STAND AND TO STAY, p. 65.

⁷ Nouwen, Henri J.M. In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership. (Crossroad; New York, 1989), p. 60