

Boundaries Revisited: Staying in Bounds, Ministering Well, and Living Well

Steve is an unmarried pastor, serving in a small town. One of the stresses of his ministry is social isolation – it is hard to find friends, let alone pursue a romantic relationship. He feels drawn toward Carol, one of the members of his church, and he senses she reciprocates his interest. Steve wants to operate ethically, but he also wants to pursue this relationship. He wonders “Do I just have to say ‘no’ to this? Do I need somebody’s permission before I ask her out? And who would I ask for permission? My Superintendent? The church chair? Carol and I are both mature adults, so why should I have to ask anybody? And if we do start dating, should I keep it a secret? Or make it public right away?” He tries to imagine how this might look from Carol’s point of view. “I’m her pastor. Would she feel free to turn me down? To stand up for herself? And what if the relationship ends badly?” His head spinning, Steve thinks of discussing this with his friends. But he knows which friends will naturally encourage caution, and which ones will tell him to “go for it.” He begins to wonder if there is any way to sort this out.

Marie is recently out of seminary and serving in her first church. Her student debt load is high, the pay from her little church is modest at best, and trusting God to provide for her needs does not seem to be working. It is becoming clearer and clearer that she will not be able to make her student loan payments. Finally, she decides to ask the finance committee about increasing her salary, but they make it clear that the church budget cannot be expanded or the terms of her call changed. After the meeting, filled with doubt and uncertainty about whether she needs to give up on ministry altogether, she receives a call from Louise, a member of the committee. Louise says she has significant money in reserve and would like to help Marie by paying a large portion of her student loan debt. “Don’t worry about paying me back right away. I just want to help you and lessen your worries. But we’ll need to keep this secret; others in the church might not approve.” Marie wonders, “Is this an answer to my prayers? Or a trap to avoid? This might go wrong, but it also might be the solution to my problems and let me continue my ministry here. And, after all, Louise has always been a trustworthy person.”

Pastor Elaine had been counseling a parishioner, David, for a year. Although she is not professionally trained in counseling, she has a knack for it and people readily open up to her. David is professionally accomplished and appears to be a confident, successful man. However, over time Elaine has come to see how disturbed he is and that he frequently bends the truth or tells outright lies. Now a conflict has seized the church and David is a key player. He is making accusations about Elaine and other staff that, while plausible, are known to Elaine to be false. But David makes a good case and people are taking him seriously. Elaine is in a quandary – if David continues unchecked, the church will likely be torn apart. But she cannot see a way to correct the record without revealing some of what she has learned about him in her counseling. Is there any way she can let the truth about David be known, without violating her role as his pastor and counselor?

Robert has always defined himself as one who serves others. But lately the stresses of life have been catching up to him and he finds himself harried and depleted on all fronts – his marriage, his parenting, and his ministry. “I’m always there for others. Is anyone there for me?” he asks himself. Not one to ask for help, he is surprised one day after a Council meeting when Anne, one of the Council members, pulls him aside and comments on the strain she sees on his face. “How are you doing?” she asks, and to his surprise a torrent of frustration and hurt pours out of him. Anne is a great listener and a pattern soon

develops of them meeting and talking about his life struggles, as well as her own. Suddenly, in the middle of one of their conversations, Robert is stunned to realize how important Anne has become to him. “I’ve never touched her,” he reminds himself, but he also realizes that he keeps these meetings private and that they feel emotionally very close. “Do I have to give up one of the best things in my life?” he wonders. “And how can I back away from this, since I know she counts on me, too?”

Mark is a youth pastor and has been seen as one of the “best and the brightest” all of his life. Intelligent, warm, expressive and a natural leader, he senses that he may be destined for doing great things for God. Others are drawn to him and, he admits, it feels pretty good. He recently attended a workshop on clergy ethics and left feeling frustrated. “Just a bunch of rules to keep ministry professional and impersonal,” he grumbled to himself. “Maybe if you are emotionally out of touch, you might need to slavishly follow those rules. But I know how to read people and situations. I can navigate those gray areas. Anyway, there’s a new paradigm emerging in ministry, and it is all about authenticity and friendship, not some antiquated pastoral hierarchy.” Mark took out his phone and smiled to himself as he saw 27 texts from 6 of his students. “They know I’m always there for them,” he thought, “especially the ones who need me the most.”

In recent years, there has been more and more attention to the issues of boundaries in ministry and more awareness of the devastating impact unhealthy ministers can have on individuals, congregations, and the cause of Christ. Thankfully, only a few ministers are truly pathological and intentionally destructive, although these can wreak huge damage. The vast majority of ministers serve with the best of intentions – they want to make a positive difference in the church and the world, and try to operate with the high ethical and spiritual standards. But many of these well-intentioned ministers can drift into unhealthy behaviors, finding themselves in compromising situations that they never anticipated. The five examples noted above reflect the kind of complexities pastors can easily find themselves facing, struggling with questions about what is good ministry, how do I care for myself, and what does it mean to be both a person and a pastor.

How do healthy boundaries contribute to good ministry?

Boundaries in ministry are not simply, or even primarily, a set of “Thou Shalt Not” rules. While they remind us to avoid egregious missteps, such as sexual misconduct, they are primarily designed to help pastors connect to people in a manner which is spiritually healthy and safe. Pastors are frequently invited, consciously or not, into the sacred spaces in others’ lives. In these spaces and at these times, people are in a highly vulnerable state – what a pastor says or does can be extremely impactful. Perhaps because pastors so often experience the limits to their power and their lack of status, they very frequently underestimate how much spiritual and psychological power they have and the privilege that others accord them. The playing field between pastor and parishioner is never level. Boundaries remind pastors of this fact and lift up a cardinal principle of pastoral ethics: *A boundary violation occurs when a pastor places his or her needs above those of the parishioner.* (See Marilyn Peterson’s book *At Personal Risk* for a fuller discussion of this point.) This enables us to identify four possible warning signs of boundary problems: 1) The parishioner is inappropriately taking care of the pastor; 2) The parishioner is

placed in a “double bind,” in which he or she feels trapped and without a good option; 3) Information about the interaction is being kept secret from people who have a right to know; and 4) The pastor is using his or her pastoral office to meet personal goals and needs. The five examples offered above touch in various ways on these four factors.

By maintaining awareness of boundaries, the pastor and the parishioner are both freed to enter the sacred space of spiritual connection with safety. The pastor is aware of his/her needs and is able to mentally set them aside to attend to the spiritual condition of the parishioner. The pastor knows that the parishioner needs him or her *as pastor* in that moment. When boundaries are clear, the parishioner experiences spiritual freedom – not feeling controlled by or beholden to the pastor, but able to bring his/her authentic self to the pastor without fear of negative consequences. While confidentiality is offered and protected, unhealthy secretiveness is avoided. (It is a truism that the dysfunction of a system is proportional to its number of secrets.) The pastor neither intrudes nor withdraws, but stays engaged in a manner which is sensitive to the needs of the situation. Such a pastor is not driven by a “need to be needed,” by a desire to get emotional compensation for all of the energy he or she pours into ministry, or by the ego gratification coming from pastoral authority and power.

How do healthy boundaries contribute to good self-care?

All pastors bring personal needs into the context of ministry. Some of these are the basic needs of all humans – we need food, shelter, rest, and safety. Other needs are more complex – the need to be connected to others, to experience a sense of personal worth, to see that we are accomplishing something, and to give expression to our core values. All of us live with the reality that our needs have been distorted by painful experiences in our past. We may deny some of our needs (“I don’t need people to take care of me, I take care of them.”) or have exaggerated needs (“I can’t stand it when people are unhappy with me”). It seems that pastors are particularly prone to struggle with acknowledging their needs and experience guilt and shame about them. This leaves pastors vulnerable to unconsciously act out their needs in the course of ministry, often in ways that are unhealthy for the pastor and for those the pastor is serving. Playing the martyr, manipulating, seeking secret gratifications, rationalizing using others, passive aggression – the list of possible unhealthy behaviors is a long one.

Attention to boundaries is an invitation to pastors to take a critical three step process that is at the core of self-care. *First, pastors must be completely honest about their needs, even those that seem selfish.* This is not as simple as it sounds, since what we think we need is often only symptomatic of deeper needs. For example, pastors who think they need the “harmless distraction” of pornography usually have much deeper emotional and relational needs that this habit obscures. Until we are willing to clearly see, name and explore our needs, we are vulnerable to drifting into depletion and poor pastoral behavior. *Second, pastors must bracket their needs from inappropriately distorting the pastoral interaction.* This can be difficult to do, especially because some of the neediest members of the church will invite the pastor to ignore this boundary. For example, yes, a pastor deserves to be paid appropriately. And, no, a pastor is not entitled to play on the vulnerability of others to get more income, even if it is needed, or to accept financial help that will distort the pastoral relationship. This is complex

territory and *every pastor should have at least one, and preferably multiple trusted colleagues/mentors who can help him/her reflect on complex situations.* As we consult with others, we begin to see ourselves and the situation more clearly – how well we have or have not kept our needs in their proper place. The third step is that *pastors should take adult responsibility for addressing their needs and for accepting the consequences of their life choices.* This means exercising appropriate assertiveness and setting up a life pattern that is realistic in providing for one’s needs and not based on fantasies. These three steps of self-care are, in fact, a cycle – taking responsibility leads to increased self-awareness and further refinements in how we understand our needs and handle them in ministry. Such a reflective process can lead us to intentionally sacrifice some perceived needs for even deeper goals, but to do so in a manner which is honest and rings true.

How do healthy boundaries impact my life as pastor and my life as a person?

Everyone who has practiced ministry has experienced the strange and sometimes confusing conjunctions and dissonances between their pastoral functioning and their sense of personhood. People project onto their pastors far more credit and far more blame than any pastor truly deserves. Pastors in small towns may feel the weight that they are always “Pastor Smith” in the eyes of the community, never just “Mary” or “Bob.” Some pastors are relieved to set aside the pastoral mantle when they step into their home; other pastors seem to remain in a pastoral persona even with their families. Most pastors hope that in some sense ministry will be personally fulfilling, yet are often unsure if that hope is selfish or just plain delusional. How can healthy boundaries help a pastor with this challenge?

Boundaries help the pastor see and appreciate the flow back and forth between pastoral functioning and personhood, while also seeing that both states of being have their own integrity. As the pastor, one can let the most helpful and appropriate attributes of one’s person flow into the ministry, operating in full self-awareness but without self-concern. It is a relief to realize one’s worth is in being God’s child, not God’s worker! Awareness of this boundary can enable one to choose how to best function as a pastor in each situation, without feeling the tyranny of “I have to be myself” limiting one’s choices. The pastor can listen with genuine interest to the parishioner who is angry or disappointed, without internalizing that negative energy. In the same way, this boundary enables one to set aside the role of pastor at times and enjoy being a person. Just being oneself, or fully in one of one’s other roles (spouse, parent, friend, sibling, etc.), is a tremendous relief. Boundaries help the pastor to see that it is not only “OK” to have a personal life (relationships, interests, hobbies, etc.) separate from the pastoral role; it is an essential component of healthy life and healthy ministry. The paradox is that awareness of the boundary between personhood and pastoral role enables each to enrich the other – what one learns in ministry promotes personal growth and each step of personal growth enables more effective ministry. This is why having a rich, authentic personal spiritual life is so critical for pastors, and why being seduced into the role of “professionally spiritual” is so corrosive. The goal is more than achieving “balance” between personal life and pastoral life, but it is hard to find a word which describes the rich, dynamic synergy which enlivens both spheres.

Back to our five examples

So how might we respond to Steve, Elaine, Marie, Robert and Mark? As the reader, you may have strong reactions to some of these stories. Each is making decisions that are fraught with many possibilities, some of them potentially disastrous for their life in ministry. But in addition to posing possibilities and dangers, these five situations illustrate the kinds of opportunities for learning that come regularly into the pastor's life. To ask oneself questions like "What choice will demonstrate respect for the sacredness of the other person?"; "How can I see my needs more clearly and respond to them with more integrity?"; "How do I honor my role as pastor and my personhood?"; and "Who should be my conversation partners as I think about this?" is to engage in deep and valuable pastoral reflection and work. Boundaries not only serve to keep pastors from hurting those who have been entrusted to their care. Boundaries are ultimately means for connecting with integrity to others, to oneself, to one's call and to the Spirit within and the Spirit that dwells in community.

Ross D. Peterson, D.Min.

Executive Director

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Professional Boundaries: “At Risk” Survey for Spiritual Directors

Do you wonder how close you are to blundering over professional boundaries in your ministry of spiritual direction and possibly hurting someone? How much risk are you willing to take? This survey may tell you. Of course, you must answer honestly. Circle your answer and add up your score and compare the total with the key at the end of the survey.

	No	Yes
1. Have you completed an academic course or workshop on professional ethics or boundaries for spiritual directors?	1	0
2. Do you inappropriately disclose aspects of your personal life to persons to whom you are providing spiritual direction?	0	1
3. Are you maintaining a vital, healthy and satisfying relationship with your spouse or closest relationship outside of your spiritual direction ministry?	1	0
4. Do you feel sexually attracted to someone associated with your spiritual direction ministry?	0	1
5. Do you fantasize about kissing or touching someone with whom you have a spiritual direction ministry relationship?	0	1
6. Do you comment to a directee with whom you relate as a spiritual director on how attractive he or she is, make remarks about his or her body, or make other suggestive remarks?	0	2
7. Are you in a “dual relationship” with a directee? (e.g., serving as both a pastor/spiritual director to a directee/parishioner.) If so, is there potential relationship overlap with questions of conflict, confidentiality, transference, and potential for harm?	0	1
8. Are you tempted to ask a directee to whom you are currently providing spiritual direction, or a former directee for a date?	0	2
9. Do you commonly loosen your clothing or adopt an informal manner when providing spiritual direction?	0	1

	No	Yes
10. Do you meet with a person with whom you provide spiritual direction for coffee, meals, or socializing outside of a formal spiritual direction ministry?	0	1
11. Has a person you provide spiritual direction for, given you an expensive gift, or does such a person frequently give you inexpensive gifts?	0	1
12. Are you stimulated by a current directee's description of sexual behavior or thoughts?	0	2
13. Are you in the midst of a difficult personal transition or family crisis yourself?	0	1
14. Do you regularly participate in a support, peer review or accountability support with other spiritual directors, and resist operating as a "Lone Ranger?" If longer term spiritual direction is appropriate in your setting, do you receive supervision or peer support and review of your spiritual direction?	2	0
15. Are you meeting with an individual(s) in your ministry of spiritual direction and keeping that fact secret from your spouse or other significant persons? (Note that there is a difference between secrecy and confidentiality.)	0	2
16. Do you provide clear expectations (i.e., a covenant) of the terms of your spiritual direction ministry to those directees you offer long term direction?	1	0
17. Have you wanted to talk with a colleague about a current directee situation with boundary implications, but feared doing so would show your lack of skill or lead to an ethics case against you?	0	2
18. Have you formally discussed with your church leaders the norms, standards, and policies for your ministry of spiritual direction held on church premises, particularly about doing this ministry alone? If you provide spiritual direction in a non-parish setting, have you discussed these with the directees and the appropriate people in your context?	1	0

	No	Yes
19. Do you share privileged or confidential information with others, other than in appropriate supervisory relationships? Do you talk inappropriately about people from your spiritual direction ministry?	0	1
20. Do you and your directee have clear expectations regarding payment?	1	0
21. If you are in a “dual relationship” (serving both as a pastor/spiritual director) have you clearly communicated what role you are serving with them so as to minimize role confusion?	1	0
22. Do you place boundaries in your spiritual direction relationships and refer your directees to other professionals for care and or therapy?	1	0
23. If you provide spiritual direction in your home, have you made physical changes to the facility (e.g. putting windows in doors or walls) to lessen the risk factors for abuse?	1	0
24. If you provide spiritual direction in your home, do you have plans for how to handle emergencies that may occur on the property (e.g., heart attack, falls, fire, etc.) and have you practiced these plans? Do you have liability insurance?	1	0
25. Have you recently participated in a background check as a church volunteer or for a professional credential?	1	0

Enter to the right the combined total of points in the *No* and *Yes* columns

Score:

- 0 Excellent, you are less likely to be professionally compromised.
- 1-2 Review your ministry. Read material on professional boundaries.
- 3-4 Review your ministry for problem areas. Make needed changes.
- 5-7 Consult with a respected colleague or mentor; you are engaging in high risk behavior
- 8+ You probably have already crossed boundaries and may have harmed another. Seek therapy and supervision. Come to terms with your situation by making immediate changes.

Adapted with permission from Midwest Ministry Development Service.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION CASE STUDIES
FROM
“Trustworthy Connections,” By Anne Winchell Silver
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“Sacred Space”

“ADAM AND BETH: *Adam is the rector of a small church in a rural area. He has no paid staff and runs the parish with the help of family members and volunteers. One way he tries to focus on prayer and contemplation amid all the practical demands of his position is to offer spiritual direction to Beth, a woman from a neighboring county.*

When Beth arrives for today’s meeting, he greets her enthusiastically and removes a stack of hymnals from one of the chairs in his small, fluorescent-lit office to make room for her to sit. During the silence of their opening meditation, the telephone rings. Although a volunteer had been assigned to answer calls, the ringing continues until finally Adam mutters an apology and picks up the phone. As the meeting goes on, several parishioners peek in and wave at him through the window in office door. Toward the end of the hour, a woman delivering a large cake for the church’s centennial celebration walks into the office with it and reminds him that he’d promised to pay her on delivery.”

“Payment”

“MARIA: *Maria is an occupational therapist who has been offering spiritual direction one or two evenings a week in her church for several years. Recently she cut back her hours at the nursing home where she works in order to have time to see more directees. She is usually able to make ends meet on the reduced income, even though her activities as a spiritual director involve significant overhead, including insurance coverage, parking fees, travel to peer supervision group meetings, spiritual direction organization dues, and workshops and courses she takes to supplement what she learned in her training program. She does not charge for spiritual direction because she believes it is a gift or charism. But whenever unexpected bills crop up, she has to work more hours in the nursing home when she would prefer to be doing more direction. She is beginning to wonder whether it would be appropriate to ask her directees to pay just enough to cover her expenses.”*

“Dual Relationships”

“SAMUEL AND TRUDY: *Samuel is a seminarian doing his field placement at a small suburban parish. He is intensely interested in spirituality and began offering spiritual direction informally before entering the ordination process. Now several members of the congregation have approached him to discuss spiritual issues. Because there are no other directors available in or anywhere near the community, he has agreed to see them.*

At tonight’s vestry meeting he notices that Trudy, an older member of the congregation who told him some unusually intimate things about her life during their spiritual direction session last week, seems to be avoiding eye contact with him. When the vestry meeting ends she glances at him, looks away and hurries out of the room. Samuel wonders whether she might be feeling awkward about seeing him in this context after what she shared with him.”

“Attraction”

“ALEXANDRA AND BOB: *Alexandra is a divorcee’ in her fifties who offers spiritual direction at her church on Sundays. Her newest directee, Bob, is a tall, powerful-looking man who recently turned forty. During her second meeting with him, she finds she is fascinated by his decidedly ‘masculine’ approach to spirituality. As he reflects on the day’s gospel reading about Jesus and Mary Magdalene, she loses track of time, and their conversation goes on for at least a half and hour longer than scheduled. At the end of the meeting, he tells her how much he appreciated the intense quality of her listening and then mumbles something about how his wife usually seems a lot less interested in what he says. Hearing this, Alexandra realizes that is has been some time since a man, especially one like Bob, complimented her.”* (pp. 47-48)

“Fixing Things”

“ESTHER AND SISTER FRANCES: *Esther is a childless widow in her early sixties with a moderately debilitating medical condition that not seem to be improving despite several years of treatment by various specialists. She sees a psychologist once a week and a spiritual director once a month in an effort to deal with her feelings of despair and helplessness over this problem. Her spiritual director, Sister Frances, sometimes finds it difficult to listen to her reports of no improvement month after month but tries to remind herself that ‘fixing things’ is the therapist’s and the doctors’ (and God’s!) territory. When Esther arrives for their next meeting, she looks even more despondent than ever and announces that her health insurance coverage has been reduced and her coverage for therapy terminated. For the rest of the hour Sister Frances hears only parts of what the directee is saying, because she is busy searching through her mental repertoire of possible solutions to the insurance problem.”* (pp. 61-62)

“Referral”

“BROTHER IAN AND JESSICA: *Brother Ian has had several meetings with Jessica, his newest directee. In each conversation he had the feeling that there was something important that she was not telling him, but her responses to his gentle, indirect questions had shed no light on what it might be. When she arrives for today’s appointment, he notices that she looks a bit shaken and has not succeeded in covering up a large bruise on the side of her face. He greets her and, as she walks gingerly toward her chair, asks if she is all right. She pauses, looks away and sits down and then replies quietly that she is not. It turns out that her husband has been unable to find a job since he was laid off six months ago, and several times lately he has lost control and hit her when he got angry.”*

“Self-Care”

“SISTER OLIVIA AND SISTER PERPETUA: *Sister Olivia has been a spiritual director for many years. Lately the demand for spiritual direction has increased while the number of sisters in her community available to respond to this need has decreased. To make matters worse, a few months ago a member of the community, Sister Perpetua, suffered a stroke and does not seem likely to recover enough to resume offering spiritual direction. So Sister Olivia and the other four sisters in the convent have divided up Sister Perpetua’s responsibilities, including meeting with many of her directees and conducting retreats she had scheduled. This means that Sister Olivia has added six new, grieving directees to the barely manageable number she had already, along with additional retreats and household tasks. Several times lately she has caught herself dreading the prospect of yet another direction meeting, or feeling too impatient or irritated to listen well to a directee. Last night, while helping Sister Perpetua into her wheelchair, she had a dizzy spell that made her wonder whether she might be about to have a stroke herself.”*

“For Directees: What to Expect”

“WANDA AND XAVIER: *Wanda was raised in a home where God was depicted as a demanding, punitive taskmaster. She grew up believing that life was a minefield of temptations to sin and that God was continually disappointed in her for failing to measure up to “His” high standards. Now that she is in her thirties and has two young children of her own, she wants to explore other ways of thinking about God.*

Recently she started meeting with Xavier, a spiritual director at a church that is very different from the one in which she was raised. During their first conversation, when she tried to describe how God had seemed when she was growing up, Xavier began telling her that God was actually all-forgiving, all-accepting, and all-loving. At first she was delighted and relieved to encounter such radically different God imagery. But now that they are meeting for the fourth time, she realizes she is starting to feel impatient whenever her spiritual director interrupts her musings to tell her what God is ‘really’ like. She wonders how he can be so certain about the nature of God. She also wonders if he would be offended if she told him that his certainty is beginning to remind her a lot of her parents.”