

Boundaries Revisited

**Staying in Bounds, Ministering Well,
and Living Well**

2014

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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.

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