Friendships Between Clergy and Parishioners

Genial relationships and approachability provide the atmosphere for parishioners to rely on clergy for pastoral care and spiritual guidance. But cordiality and approachability are only two aspects of genuine friendships. In deep friendships, people are mutually vulnerable, open with one another, and accountable. Generally, friends are presumed to be committed to maintaining the relationship over time and through changes in circumstance. These qualities function differently in friendships between clergy and parishioners. The following are some guidelines and points to consider in developing friendships between clergy and laity.

- Close friends share confidences. Between clergy and laity, there are some topics which cannot be discussed. Pastoral confidences are clearly among those topics, as are some aspects of church politics.

- If clergy develop friendships with lay people in the congregations they serve, the clergy should always guard against enlisting laity in church power struggles or otherwise using those friendships to gain advantage in the congregation.

- As in any pastoral relationship, the basic rule applies: if a clergy person is using friendship with parishioners to meet her or his emotional needs, a boundary is at least in danger of being crossed.

- Similarly, clergy in friendships with laity should avoid social interactions that could be perceived in the congregation as favoritism or exclusion of those who are not in a favored social circle.

- Clergy should generally avoid talking about congregational business with parishioners outside of the normal channels where that discussion would ordinarily take place (i.e. committee meetings, etc.)

- After leaving a congregation (transition guidelines are also discussed in this workshop), it will be important to be clear about ongoing friendships in that congregation. Any friendship that will interfere with a new pastor’s ability to form bonds with her or his congregation is an unethical boundary crossing.

- As in many dual relationships, friendships between clergy and parishioners are always proscribed within appropriate boundaries, and it is a good practice to be clear and explicit about those boundaries: discuss the difficulties of being simultaneously spiritual leader and friend.
Dual Relationships and Clergy or Church Leadership Roles

A dual relationship occurs when persons in relationship fulfill two or more roles for one another simultaneously. For example, one’s attorney might also be a personal friend; these are distinct relationships with separate sets of boundaries and expectations. In churches, dual relationships may occur. But because of the position of trust in which church leaders are placed, and because of the common access church leaders have to confidential information, special care must be exercised to maintain appropriate boundaries in dual relationships which occur in faith communities.

One Prohibited Dual Relationship

One dual relationship is prohibited, and in fact cannot be maintained due to the conflicting demands of the two roles. A pastor or other spiritual leader functioning in a professional capacity (e.g. pastoral counselor, spiritual director, or other roles pastors may assume by virtue of their duties in church) CANNOT simultaneously be the Pastor and lover or romantic partner to a person in her or his parish. The Rocky Mountain Conference single clergy dating policy discourages romantic relationships between clergy and parishioners. In the event that these relationships do take place, the policy gives specific guidelines which clergy must follow. Most importantly, however, it should be noted that a pastor cannot fulfill her or his pastoral duties to a parishioner while simultaneously cultivating a romantic relationship with that person.

Other Dual Relationships

Dual relationships are best avoided if possible. At times, however, they may be unavoidable. If dual relationships do occur in the course of pastoral or church leadership responsibilities, here are guidelines that may help.

1. Try to avoid being both spiritual leader and friend. While of course clergy try to maintain friendly relationships with parishioners, boundaries of confidentiality as well as appropriate emotional boundaries will make a genuine friendship difficult. Usually, a deep friendship presumes that both persons are equally vulnerable and can share themselves equally. This will be a very difficult relationship to create while also being a spiritual leader to one’s friend.

2. If dual relationships do begin to form, it may be best to have a frank discussion with the individuals involved. That discussion can include the difficulties inherent in dual relationships, strategies for creating and maintaining appropriate boundaries, and a mutual agreement on using which strategies will be used.
Single clergy are in a delicate position when it comes to dating members or constituents of the church to which they are appointed. For many, such a relationship constitutes an abuse of power. Romantic or sexual relationships between clergy and their parishioners “...are never appropriate because of the imbalance of power,” according to the Judicial Council.

Annual conference polices are not consistent on this issue. Some conferences ban clergy from dating within the parish under any circumstances. Other conferences discourage but allow the practice, with certain safeguards in place.

The RMC Cabinet and Board of Ordained Ministry recommend that single clergy be very cautious in pursuing romantic relationships with those who attend the church where they are appointed. Clergy should refrain from dating any parishioner who has received counseling from that pastor, regardless of the time lapse from terminating the counseling relationship. Clergy should never seek sexual, social or business favors at any time. If a clergy person chooses to enter into a dating relationship with a church member/constituent, the SPRC and the DS shall be notified, with no overnight visits in a church-owned parsonage. Clergy who choose to date a church member/constituent can no longer serve as the ministerial leader to that person.

Clergy have the sacred responsibility not only to avoid actions and words which could potentially hurt others, but also to protect the vulnerable against actions or words which cause harm. This certainly applies to clergy dating those who are affiliated with the churches they serve.
GUIDELINES FOR APPROPRIATE CONDUCT BY CURRENT AND FORMER PASTORS

Clergy Session ’09 – produced jointly by the Cabinet and Board of Ordained Ministry,
Rocky Mt. Conference, United Methodist Church

In the Rocky Mountain Conference we serve as colleagues in a covenant community. We all wrestle with the complexity of pastoral relationships and friendships with parishioners that require us to be sensitive and clear, especially after we have ended an appointment. These are some behavior guidelines so that our covenant community is honored.

1. Make no disparaging remarks about the work or life style of a predecessor, successor or other ministers.

2. Practice the same ministerial code of ethics with pastors and congregations of other denominations as would be expected in the United Methodist Church.

3. Perform no pastoral functions in any church or charge to which the minister is not appointed, except at the request and under the direction of the pastor in charge.

4. Upon leaving the appointment, including retirement, sever pastoral relationships with parish, recognizing that all future weddings, baptisms, communions, counseling, visitations, and funerals should be fulfilled by the successor pastor, unless an unusual situation exists and is approved by the successor pastor. **To be clear:** When you receive a request from a former parishioner you will always refer them, without comment to their current pastor. You will only agree to any involvement after the appointed pastor invites you to participate.

5. For the health and welfare of the church, it is important that the former pastor and family, when they will be residing in the same community following serving as pastor, find another church to attend. The former pastor’s continued presence in the life of the church almost always hinders the congregation and the incoming pastor in developing the necessary relationship for successful ministry. This can be a difficult and painful event for the former pastor and family. However, considering the needs of the church, the best interests of all involved are better served by the former pastor and family participating in another church. Reconsideration of this may happen after a minimum of one year absence in consultation with the District Superintendent and current pastor.

6. The former pastor shall avoid all conversation and communication with church members about the new pastor, as well as problems and issues regarding the former church. If approached, the former pastor needs to tactfully explain that ethics do not permit such a discussion.

7. Continued personal relationships with congregants do not assist in the health and welfare of the local church, and is therefore discouraged. Exceptions to any ongoing relationships and regular contact with former parishioners need to be openly shared and negotiated with the current pastor and District Superintendent.

8. Before leaving, the exiting pastor will clearly communicate from the pulpit and in writing that you will no longer be able to function in any pastoral way with the congregation.

9. An exiting pastor shall not be present or participate in worship, events, or church groups for a minimum of one year. Immediate family members are discouraged from this as well. In the case of any exceptions, a written agreement will be reached by the District Superintendent and both clergy. In longer appointments, the District Superintendent can require a longer period of absence.

10. The currently appointed pastor is also expected to be sensitive, gracious and appropriately inclusive of former pastors.
Ethical Education Task Force Workshop
Supporting Documentation
Segment 2: Power & Appropriate Behavior

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Church ____________________________________________________________

Exiting Pastor Signature & Date ______________________________________

Entering Pastor Signature & Date ______________________________________

District Superintendent Signature & Date ______________________________

Consequences, even in retirement, in regard to this policy are based on the 2008 UMC Discipline, Par. 2702.1 (g) where clergy may be charged and tried for “relationships and/or behavior that undermines the ministry of another pastor.”
Participant Instruction

The following six scenarios are presented in script form, and each depicts an intentionally ethically ambiguous situation (some more ambiguous than others) in which church leaders might find themselves involved. One of the scenarios takes place in a workplace other than a church. Your facilitator will invite you to break into small groups, with each group assigned one or two of these scripted conversations. Use the following procedure to discuss your impressions of each scenario:

1. Assign a note taker to compile your group’s conclusions concerning the scenario so that they may be reported to the larger group when you reassemble after this exercise.

2. Assign parts in the conversation to members of your small group.

3. Have the volunteer readers read the conversation aloud while the rest of your small group listens.

4. Discuss the following questions:
   a. What ethical issues are raised here?
   b. Were boundaries crossed in this situation? What were those boundaries, if so, and how were they crossed?
   c. Could the situation have been handled better? What should the characters have done differently, if so?
   d. Recalling the distinction between boundaries and policies, could a church create a policy or procedure that could make this issue easier to navigate? What is that policy, if so?

5. After you have completed your discussion, be prepared to report your conclusions to the larger group.
1. Hugging and Touch Boundaries (4 Characters: Pastor, Congregants 1, 2, and 3)

**Pastor:** Before we end our service, I just want to say a word about hugging. Some people —like me— are not comfortable with that kind of intimate physical contact and we need to respect that. So, if someone comes to you with their hand outstretched, shake their hand instead of giving them a bear hug. Open arms (demonstrates what open arms look like) means it’s okay to hug. Outstretched hand (demonstrates outstretched hand) means a handshake instead of a hug. Okay? If you have any questions, please see me after service. God bless you all.

**Congregant 1:** (Comes up to pastor with outstretched hand, which Pastor shakes) Pastor, I am so glad you said that. I have been uncomfortable with hugging for a long time and didn’t know what to say. Thank you for giving me permission NOT to hug!

**Pastor:** You’re welcome. God bless you!

**Congregant 2:** (Comes up to pastor with arms open while pastor extends hand to shake) I can understand not greeting one another with a holy kiss, but what’s wrong with a little hug?

**Pastor:** Nothing’s wrong as long as both parties are comfortable with it. We really need to honor each other’s personal boundaries.

**Congregant 2:** (shaking the pastor’s hand) Well, okay. I really didn’t mean any harm.

**Pastor:** (smiling) No harm done. God bless you!

**Congregant 3:** (Comes up to pastor with arms open while pastor extends hand to shake) You didn’t really mean that, did you?

**Pastor:** (smiling) Yes, I did. Will you shake hands with me?

**Congregant 3:** Come on, it says in the Bible that there is a time to embrace!

**Pastor:** And a time to refrain from embracing. Will you shake hands with me?

**Congregant 3:** You know, you are in a congregation of huggers, so you should just relax and get used to it.

**Pastor:** I would still like to shake your hand in the spirit of Christian kinship, but I respect your decision not to shake hands. Can you respect my decision not to hug?
2. Hugging and Touch Boundaries (3 characters: Pastor, little boy, and congregant)

Pastor: (to 4-year-old boy with long hair) My goodness your hair is long. Are you ever going to cut it?

Boy: (laughing) No! I like my hair. It’s very shiny.

Pastor: And curly. (tugs gently on a curl)

Boy: (still laughing) Stop that.

Pastor: Oh, come on. That didn’t hurt (tugs gently on a curl again).

Boy: (no longer laughing) Stop pulling my hair.

Pastor: You know I’m just teasing you and that it doesn’t hurt at all (reaches to pull hair again).

Boy: Stop! (runs away)

Congregant: Pastor, I heard the boy say no, and no should always mean no.

Pastor: I wasn’t hurting him.

Congregant: It doesn’t matter. We need to teach our children that yes means yes and no means no, and we should respect that.

Pastor: But I wasn’t hurting him!
3. Triangulation (2 Characters: Employee and Director; this is not a church setting.)

Employee: (to Director) Hi boss! Here are the office supplies we ordered.

Director: Could you please give them to Jim? He is the one who ordered them.

Employee: Well, I’m not really going that way right now so I was hoping you would take them.

Director: You have to go by the office to leave the building. Can’t you drop them off on your way out?

Employee: Well, um, I, uh, well, I’m just not comfortable going into the office.

Director: Why not?

Employee: Jim is really hard to get along with so I just stay out of his way.

Director: Does Jim know you feel that way?

Employee: I don’t know what he feels. He never talks to me, he always does whatever he wants without checking with anybody else, and he acts like he’s better than everyone. So could you please take these to him?

Director: I think you and Jim need to work out whatever problem you have between you.

Employee: I’ve tried talking to him and he just doesn’t listen.

Director: I’d like you to try again. Then, if you feel you can’t talk with him or that you are not being heard, the three of us can sit down together and sort things out. I really need the two of you to be able to work together.
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4. Triangulation (2 Characters: Pastor and Wendy having telephone conversation)

(Telephone rings) Pastor: Hello, this is Pastor Dogood. May I help you?

Wendy: Hi Pastor Dogood. This is Wendy. I’m the daughter of Bessie Bestgiver. She would kill me if she knew I was calling you, but I thought you should know that she has fallen and has really hurt herself.

Pastor: Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that. Is she at home or in the hospital?

Wendy: She’s at home and it would be great if you would call on her, but you can’t tell her I called. She would take my head off if she knew I told you.

Pastor: I can call her today, but I’m not sure why it needs to be such a secret that you told me she was hurt.

Wendy: She specifically told me not to tell anyone because she was so embarrassed about losing her balance and falling in the store in front of a bunch of people, and her dress flew up and her shoe fell off and she knocked over a display of beach balls and they went bouncing all over the store. It was a mess.

Pastor: Okay. I won’t tell her you told me. I’ll just telephone and say I’m calling about the next UMW meeting and then casually ask how she is doing. How would that be?

Wendy: Can’t you just drop by the house and see her? Then she won’t be able to lie about how bad she is hurt.

Pastor: I don’t usually drop by unannounced. It’s not something I would do. Aren’t you worried she would get suspicious of that?

Wendy: Oh no, she won’t figure that out. Just make up some reason that you were in the neighborhood and then tell her that you just stopped by to ask her about the MUW, or whatever.

Pastor: The UMW? I guess I could do that, if you think that is best...
5. Intimacy (2 Characters: Pastor Patty and George, a male church member, at George’s house during a pastoral visit)

George: Hi Patty, thanks for coming by. Come on in and sit down.
Patty: I can’t stay, George. I have a meeting tonight with S/PPRC.
George: Oh really? About what?
Patty: Well, actually, us.
George: What?!
Patty: Yes, well, it seems someone has complained about our “relationship.”
George: What? Why? What’s wrong with you visiting me? You are my pastor.
Patty: Well, some folks think it’s not appropriate for us to be alone together so often.
George: But Patty, you know how lonely I’ve been since my wife went to live at the Alzheimer’s ward. I have really struggled with being alone. In fact, I would love it if you could visit more than once a week.
Patty: I know. And I wish I could, too. But I think you should know that we may not be able to meet for dinner at your house any more. Or meet as often.
George: What do they think is going on here?
Patty: I guess I’m going to find out what they think tonight.
George: Are you going to get in trouble?
Patty: I might. I should have thought about how our visits would look to other people.
George: If there is anything I can do to explain that nothing wrong is going on here, please let me know. I’ll go with you tonight if you think that would help.
Patty: Thanks, George, but not tonight. They might be calling you, though, which is why I dropped by. I wanted to give you a heads up, so you wouldn’t be caught off guard. I don’t think it will be bad, they may just want you to confirm what they heard from me.
George: And what are they going to hear from you?
Patty: That nothing inappropriate is going on here.
6. [Intimacy] Characters: Pastor Dan and parishioner Sally, a divorcee

**Pastor Dan:** Sally, you look lovely today. How are you?

**Sally:** I guess I’m lovely, if I believe what you tell me.

**Dan:** I’m a pastor. I never lie.

**Sally:** So, when you told me you liked me, you weren’t lying?

**Dan:** Of course not. I consider you a good friend.

**Sally:** But you know I wouldn’t mind if you wanted to be more than friends. I mean, I’ve been divorced for over a year now, and you’re single, and we get along so well...

**Dan:** I can’t say I haven’t thought about it. You are very attractive, and as you said, we are both single. It’s just that the Conference frowns on pastor/parishioner dating.

**Sally:** How do they expect you to meet anyone when you are way out here with nothing but farms and fields as far as the eye can see? If two people like each other, why can’t they date? So what if one is a pastor!

**Dan:** I know, I know. Perhaps if we asked permission...

**Sally:** Why does everyone have to know our business?

**Dan:** Sally, I don’t think it’s a very big secret at the church that we like each other. Isn’t it obvious?

**Sally:** Yes, around here. But they don’t care. And if they don’t care, why should anyone else care?