

UNDERSTANDING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES: INSIGHTS FOR MINISTRY

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The **Program for Psychology and Religion** at St. Louis Behavioral Medicine Institute specializes in the integration of spirituality and psychotherapy to help clients achieve wellness.

We are experts in the assessment and treatment of clergy and lay ministers and offer effective systems of evaluating clients and suggesting directions for the psychological and social aspects of formation, treatment, and future growth of religious professionals and candidates for ordination and religious vocations.



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Boundaries ???

- "Boundaries are necessary to protect us from people who do not have them."
 - *What are boundaries?*

Examples of Boundaries

(Cloud and Townsend)

- Skin – the most basic boundary that defines a person
- Words – how we express non-physical boundaries
- Truth – knowing God’s truth, and knowing the truth about yourself
- Geographical & Time– separating oneself physically to maintain safety, or to allow for emotional and spiritual replenishment
- Emotional Distance – to protect one from continued emotional harm, until it is safe to re-enter relationship
- Other People – support and accountability groups support new healthy boundaries
- Consequences – for when others continually disregard your boundaries

Boundaries: Common Applications

- Commonly applied in ethics training when distinguishing between power differential in relationships
 - *Useful and wise application*
 - *Clergy ought to be aware of the position of power their office contains*
 - Clergy -- laity
 - Pastor -- parish staff

Boundaries: Common Applications

- Power Differential in Clergy to Parishioner Relationship
 - Power refers to the potential and ability to have influence upon another
 - Clergy gain this power as "expert" and through respect
 - Unhealthy clergy gain power through intimidation and guilt
 - There also can exist power difference between genders, ages, race, office,

Boundaries: Power Distorts Consent

- The difference in power is why Rev. Dr. Marie Fortune posits there is no such thing as consensual sexual relationship between clergy and church members.
- Individuals usually seek counseling or support from their religious leader at times of stress or crisis. During these times, they are emotionally vulnerable and can be taken advantage of by a religious leader.

Information on this slide comes from The Faith Trust Institute <https://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/resources/learn-the-basics/ce-faqs>

Sexual Misconduct is a Boundary Violation

- Sexual abuse happens when someone in a ministerial role (clergy, religious or lay) engages in sexual contact or sexualized behavior with a congregant, employee, student or counseling client in the ministerial relationship.
 - Sexual abuse can include physical contact
 - Sexual abuse can also include verbal behavior

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Boundaries ???

- Truly boundaries in ministry are unique from other professions
 - *What dynamics make boundaries in the vocation of clergy unique?*
 - *Assuming modern clergy are receiving training on boundaries, why do boundary violations persist?*

The God Complex

- Boundary violations occur as a function of interpersonal needs and environmental dynamics.

Needs for validation and intimacy + stress of job demands + outside stressors = depleted inner resources and vulnerability to poor judgement

Clergy persona + reinforced persona = belief in the accuracy of the persona (projective identification) = GOD COMPLEX

Awareness of the "shadow" causes anxiety. Unacceptable impulses is controlled by acting in an exacerbated opposite way, until the façade cracks.

Boundary Complexities

That boundaries function in dynamic systems is why saying:

“Don’t do that!”

is not a 100% effective strategy for preventing boundary violations.

Boundaries: Broader Applications

- Salvador Minuchin's Structural Family Therapy
 - *Individuals, subsystems and whole families are demarcated by interpersonal boundaries*
 - *Boundaries manage proximity and hierarchy*
 - *Vary from rigid to diffuse*

A Broader Understanding of Boundaries The Boundary Dilemma

- Separation, Individuation, Differentiation
 - *Three terms that describe a key task of maturation*
- The term "exist" implies differentiation; "ex-ist" = "to stand out"
- The existential dilemma consists of balancing the tension between being:
 - *A part of vs apart from*
 - *Attachment vs. Separation*
- The type and place of our boundaries will in part determine the successfulness of resolving this dilemma

The Boundary Dilemma: A Part Of & Apart From

- Affiliation and association contribute to our identity
- But, we are not our affiliation or association, we are individual beings
- No matter how strong the affiliation, we remain isolated individuals
- Boundaries mark where we end and others begin, they mark what belongs to our responsibility
- We are created for intimacy, and seek relationships to meet this need
- Our chance at having satisfying and fulfilling relationships is increased to the extent we have acknowledged and accepted the dilemma of isolation and set healthy boundaries

Types of Boundaries

- Rigid Boundaries = Disengaged Individuals and Subsystems
 - Cons:
 - Rigid boundaries are overly restrictive, permit little contact with outside subsystems
 - Disengaged individuals are isolated
 - Limits warmth, affection and nurture
 - Pros
 - Disengaged individuals are independent
 - Subsystems with rigid boundaries foster autonomy, growth & mastery

Types of Boundaries

- Clergy with Rigid Boundaries
 - Cons:
 - Fill only prescribed roles in the life of the parish, inflexible
 - Relate in prescribed ways according to how they define their role/identity
 - Limits warmth, affection and nurture shared with and shown to parishioners
 - Pros
 - Strict definition of roles, may limit risk of "boundary violations"
 - Delegation of responsibilities can foster greater ownership by members of the mission and work of the parish

Types of Boundaries

- Diffuse Boundaries = Enmeshed Individuals and Subsystems
 - Cons:
 - Members of enmeshed subsystems become dependent
 - Poor differentiation, poor independence, little autonomy
 - Pros
 - Heightened sense of mutual support

Types of Boundaries

- Clergy with Diffuse Boundaries
 - Cons:
 - Difficult to distinguish who is leading and who is following; who's pastoring who?
 - Risk that personal feelings cloud judgement
 - Roles get obscured and blurred
 - Am I your pastoral leader or friend?
 - Are you my parishioner or my friend/family?
 - Pros
 - Parishioners may feel an emotional bond, or closeness with their clergy
 - Parishioners experience the clergy as human too

Types of Boundaries

- Clear and Flexible
 - *Healthy relationships navigate within clear and flexible boundaries.*
 - Clear boundaries = aware of individuality, respectful of needs, roles clearly defined
 - Flexible boundaries = permeable, allows for closeness without venturing into enmeshment and allows modification of roles in order to meet needs for autonomy, growth, affiliation and support, with clarity. (No hidden agendas)

Types of Boundaries

- Clergy with Clear and Flexible Boundaries
 - *Clearly defined role and responsibility*
 - *Clear understanding and respect of others' autonomy, individuality*
 - *Clear understanding of one's own responsibility*
 - *Flexible enough to accommodate appropriate nurture, and warmth*

Poor Boundaries: Contributors to Burnout

- Role overload – living in the glass house, always “on”.
- Role boundary issues – not setting limits, not taking time away, not saying “no”.
- Role ambiguity – lack of clarity of responsibilities can lead to “over doing it.”
- Role insufficiency – not taking care of their needs prior to attending to others.

Solutions and Prevention of Burnout

- Role overload – living in the glass house, always “on”.
 - Find social groups where you can be a “regular person.”
 - Have a weekly Sabbath
- Role boundary issues – not setting limits, taking time away, not saying “no”.
 - Ask others for help; delegate
 - Take time away.

Solutions and Prevention of Burnout

- Role ambiguity – lack of clarity of responsibilities can lead to “over doing it.”
 - Clarify what is expected
 - Be assertive about setting limits
- Role insufficiency – not taking care of your needs prior to attending to others.
 - Love and care for your self as well as your neighbors.

Set Boundaries to Seek Balance in Daily Experiences

- Aversive vs. Nourishing Experiences
 - Aversive = those things which we would rather avoid, or put off.
 - Nourishing = those experiences which enrich our day, bring us a sense of energy or restoration.
 - Characteristics of Nourishing Experiences
 - Sense of Mastery (we perceive we are good at it, & we finish it)
 - Pleasure (we enjoy it)
- For non-avoidable aversive experience practice acceptance.
- Increase frequency of nourishing experiences.

Personality Based Boundary Conflicts

(Cloud & Townsend, 2017)

- Compliant
 - Say yes to the bad relationships because they have been taught that saying no, or standing up for oneself is bad
- Avoidants
 - Say no to the good relationships because they have an inability to recognize their own needs and refuse to ask or let others help
- Controllers
 - Don't respect others' limits; they resist taking responsibility for their own lives, so they need to control others
- Nonresponsives
 - Lack attention to the responsibilities of relationship; too absorbed in their own needs to respond to others

Potential Boundary Conflicts

- Dual relationships
 - Relating to an individual or a group in more than one role
 - Consider all the roles a clergy may be in
 - Counselor
 - Preacher
 - Administrator/Supervisor
 - Friend
 - Family
 - How then do they avoid dual relationships?

Potential Boundary Conflicts

- Issues Related to Power
- Expression of Concern and Comfort by Physical Touch
 - Always ask first ? But what about the power difference ?
 - Where on the continuum is the line?
 - If it is uncomfortable for the other person it has crossed a boundary.
- Sexual Misconduct
 - Any unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature that is committed without consent or by force, intimidation, coercion, or manipulation. Sexual misconduct can be committed by a person of any gender, and it can occur between people of the same or different gender.

Potential Boundary Conflicts

- Requests for Time and Energy
 - Ministry will take as much as you allow it
 - Is it a 24 hour a day job?
 - Is there an "on call" system and back-up?
 - Can you say no?
- Smart Phones
 - What are expectations for responding to e-mails and texts?
 - When do you unplug?

Potential Boundary Conflicts

- Social Media
 - How much personal information do you share?
 - How will the information you share be perceived and interpreted?
 - Do you engage in online conversation?
- Finance & Conflicts of Interests
 - Hiring members to do work at church
 - Using members in their professional role or purchasing services from members

Potential Boundary Conflicts

- Family
 - *Family members expectations of their roles*
 - *Expectations for family time*
 - *Church's expectation of the family*
 - *Family's expectation of the church*
 - *What is the primary vocation, spouse & parent or clergy?*
- Friends
 - *Are friends in the church a good idea?*
 - *How much can you safely share, how much persona do you project?*

Potential Boundary Conflicts

- Limits on pastoral counseling
 - *Awareness of limitation of you knowledge and expertise*
 - *Limiting the number of sessions can avoid developing dual relationship*
 - *Counseling the opposite sex/gender.*
- Need to be like/validated
 - *This is the slippery slop upon which most boundary violations slide down.*

Boundaries at Their Best

- Keep the good in, and the bad out of our lives
- Promote autonomy and individuality
- Provide safety for appropriate & healthy intimacy
- Respect our needs, and other's needs
- Account for differences in professional and personal relationships
- Healthy boundaries are clear and flexible

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