

# Ministerial Ethics: A Covenant of Trust

Christian Life Commission

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**BGCT** 

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# Ministerial Ethics: A Covenant of Trust

## Foreword

This document represents a response to the following motion made at the 2002 annual meeting of the BGCT in Waco by Joe Trull, messenger, First Baptist Church, Driftwood:

*I move that the President of the Convention, the Chair of the Executive Board, the Chair of the Administrative Committee and the Chair of the Christian Life Commission appoint a committee, coordinated by the Christian Life Commission, representative of Texas Baptists (including male and female, minister and laity, and ethnic and age diversity) of 9-15 persons to study and develop for consideration by the 2004 Convention a “Code of Ethics for Baptist Ministers” which could serve as a model for ministers, churches, and Baptist institutions to utilize, adapt, and adopt if they so choose, as guidelines which reflect basic ethical obligations for ministry, define the ministerial profession, and serve as a support to protect the individual minister.*

The original committee consisted of 15 members: Becky Brown (Houston), Bobby Broyles (Ballinger), Bob Campbell (Houston), Phil Christopher (Abilene), Terry Cosby (Burnet), Jan Daehnert (Dallas), Peter Leong (Houston), Dan McGee (Waco), Carolyn Ratcliffe (Plainview), Belinda Reyes (San Antonio), Gwen Sherwood (Houston), Hazel Thomas (Houston), Bill Tillman (Abilene), Foy Valentine (Dallas), and Dennis Young (Houston). The committee began meeting in 2002 with Phil Christopher serving as chair. At the initial meeting the committee identified biblical/theological/ethical issues which seemed to be central to ministerial ethics. These issues are developed in the following text. The committee also deliberated at some length regarding the language of “code” versus “covenant.” By consensus, the committee preferred “covenant” over “code” as more consistent with Baptist ecclesiology and polity. The committee decided to produce a printed resource for Texas Baptists on ministerial ethics and so named a writing subcommittee which included Phil Christopher, Bill Tillman, Dan McGee, Hazel Thomas, Dennis Young, Bobby Broyles, and Joe Haag (Christian Life Commission staff). After several meetings and the completion of initial drafts by members of the subcommittee, Terry Cosby was enlisted to edit the drafts into a consistent form. After Joe Haag did additional editing, the full committee met on August 18, 2004, to consider next steps. The committee positively evaluated the text and made a number of suggestions regarding content, style, publication, distribution, and promotion. All of these suggestions were carefully considered, and most are reflected in the following text. The Christian Life Commission is indebted to the BGCT Communication Center for the design and publication of this resource, to Joe Trull for making his original motion, and to the members of the Clergy Ethics Committee for their work on the concept and content of **Ministerial Ethics: A Covenant of Trust**.

# A Covenant of Trust

# I. Foundations

## Introduction

Stories of fallen clergy are not hard to find. Many of these accounts focus on sexual misconduct, but other kinds of misconduct are well represented, including the misappropriation of funds and the misuse of power. That these stories come to our attention through the media and other channels so regularly that we are more saddened than shocked by them bears witness to the critical nature of this problem. Clergy misconduct is a crisis which demands immediate attention.

Facing this present reality should not make us long for an innocent past when “*these things just didn’t happen.*” The history of the church serves as a poignant reminder that “these things” have *always* happened. The task before us is both critical and urgent, but at the same time perennial. Christian ethics and authentic discipleship is the critical and urgent task for *all* Christians of *every* age.

Christians who embrace the “the priesthood of all believers” are doubly reminded of this truth. Since we believe that all Christians are called to minister, we must also affirm that following Jesus does not mean one thing for vocational ministers and something less for laity. We should not expect one level of discipleship and ethical behavior for pastors and other professional ministers and another level for church members whose ministries are lived out in secular work places. The high calling which is ours in Christ Jesus is just that—*ours*, the responsibility and privilege of the whole Body of Christ to serve God and God’s creation in Christian ministry.

It is nonetheless the case that the call to follow Jesus which we hold in common is lived out in particular vocations. Being a professional minister in a local church raises categories of ethical conduct which are specific to professional ministry. What follows is an attempt to name and describe some of the most basic and important aspects of clergy ethics. The next three subsections (ministerial integrity, the stewardship of power, the biblical concept of covenant) are foundational, while the following sections (call, relationships, stewardship of time, health, economic responsibilities, sexual conduct, and community involvement) explore specific aspects of ministerial ethics.

## Ministerial Integrity

Ministerial ethics begins with ministerial integrity, which can be defined as “completeness” or “wholeness.” Jesus captures the gospel sense of integrity with the command, “*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Matt. 5:48). In the English text “perfect” renders the Greek word *teleios* which means “complete.” This teaching concludes Jesus’ authoritative interpretation of the Law (“*You have heard that it was said. . . . But I say to you*”) which in turn interprets the Sermon’s theme, “*unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt. 5:20). Integrity in the gospel sense entails being completed or formed by the Word of God which comes to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus’ conclusion to the Sermon suggests that such integrity is the embodiment of wisdom:

*Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!* (Matt. 5:24-27)

The reaction of those who heard the Sermon connects integrity to the life-changing impact of gospel truth: “*Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes*” (Matt. 5:28-29). We begin to have integrity in the gospel sense when we hear and follow Jesus on our way to becoming a truthful people. Receiving, embodying, and telling the truth of God in Christ is the essence of ministerial integrity. Indeed, the failure of ministerial integrity is in large measure the failure to know and bear witness to this very truth.

The church is complicit in the loss of ministerial integrity. We live in a consumer society, and churches routinely function as subsets of this society. We come to church as individuals with needs, and we expect our ministers to meet our needs. We feel guilty, and we need forgiveness. We feel lonely, and we need companionship. We feel grief, and we need to be comforted. We feel depressed, hopeless, empty, alienated, trapped, aimless, and we need encouragement, assurance, reconciliation, liberation, and direction. We feel bored, and we need to be entertained. Sensitive to our needs, ministers try to meet them, offering absolution, friendship, understanding, motivation, and spiritual inspiration.

While congregants’ needs are heart-felt, and ministers’ attempts to meet them are genuine, the consumer approach to church and ministry undermines ministerial integrity. Christian ministry is not first and foremost about identifying and meeting the needs of people, but about leading people to follow Jesus and thus to become the people of God. Following Jesus, we are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, to love our enemies, to be agents of reconciliation, to do justice for “the least of these,” to love God as we love one another, to serve God as we serve one another, and to bear witness to the cosmos-shaking reality that “*the Word became flesh and lived among us . . . full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14).

When the task of ministry becomes defined by something less than helping the people of God to be formed by the way of Jesus, ministerial integrity is bound to suffer. This is not to deny the clear connection between human needs and Christian ministry, but rather to give an account of what it means to lose (and to regain) ministerial integrity:

Ministerial  
integrity is defined by  
Completeness  
or  
Wholeness

*Only a few months into his or her first pastorate, the new pastor realizes that people's needs are virtually limitless, particularly in an affluent society in which there is an ever-rising threshold of desire (which we define as "need"). There is no job description, no clear sense of purpose other than the meeting of people's needs, so there is no possible way for the pastor to limit what people ask of the pastor. Not knowing what they should do, pastors try to do everything and be everything for everybody. The most conscientious among them become exhausted and empty. The laziest of them merely withdraw into disinterested detachment. Not knowing why their pastor is there, the congregation expects the pastor to be and do everything. They become unrealistic critics of the clergy rather than coworkers, fellow truth-tellers.<sup>1</sup>*

There are, of course, other expressions of the loss of ministerial integrity, but all involve the same dislocation from the One who centers us and integrates our lives. Ministerial integrity does not originate in the lives of ministers, vocational or otherwise, but in the Word who became flesh and lived among us, from whose "fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:14, 16). These God-given graces grant us the truthfulness, courage, constancy, patience, faith, hope, and love required to follow Jesus in Christian ministry.

The integrity which flows from Spirit-gifted virtues is formed or learned in the context of the community of faith. Scripture plays a crucial role in this formative process, teaching congregations and the ministers who serve them to learn and embody the ways of God. The same biblical stories that teach us what God does (God speaks the universe into existence; calls a people out of slavery; commands them to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly; comes among them as Savior and suffering servant; and tabernacles with them as the Spirit of truth) also bear the expectation that we will reflect the ways of God in our common life. We will reflect God's creative Spirit and honor the creation, liberate the oppressed, do justice in the face of injustice, love mercy and practice forgiveness, serve God as we serve one another, speak the truth in love, encourage one another in righteousness and not settle for anything less. As we are committed to follow Jesus in our common life, the community of faith becomes the training ground for the integrity of character which is requisite for ministry.

## The Stewardship of Power

Life in the Body of Christ inevitably raises power issues, and these issues are central to ministerial ethics. An important scriptural starting point for interpreting power in the community of faith is Philippians 2:1-11:

*If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.  
Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,*

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 124.

*in heaven and on earth and  
under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.*

We are arrested but not surprised by Paul's counsel to the Philippian church, for it simply captures in an extraordinarily moving way the fundamental truth which pervades the four gospels. *The way of Jesus is the way of the cross, which is not only the center of salvation history but also the ethical norm of our common life.* Jesus takes up the cross and commands his followers to do likewise. Paul's application of this central truth to the Body of Christ is that we should become servants of one another as Christ has served us.

The faithful memory of this teaching is always critical to congregational life, just as its disregard accounts for many of the saddest moments in church history. The call to servanthood is the high calling of Christ's ministers, paid or unpaid, vocational or volunteer. In Matthew and parallel passages in Mark and Luke, Jesus said we should not "lord it over" one another and that the greatest of God's people must be servants rather than tyrants (Matt. 20:20-28). Jesus' instruction to his disciples suggests that the corporate executive model of the pastorate in which the pastor rules the church fails to appreciate this distinctively Christian sense of leadership. Christian leaders lead by serving. Power in the conventional sense is, in effect, turned on its head, so that the greatness of leadership is not determined by how many lives we control, but by how faithfully we serve each life with whom God has entrusted us.

To confirm this point and to mute our every attempt to revise the meaning of service, Jesus concludes this instruction with the sentence, "*whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave*" (Matt. 20:27). "Slave" is descriptively clear. Ministers cannot honestly claim to *serve* congregations by *overpowering* them. According to the gospel, the faithful stewardship of power in congregational life paradoxically entails the renunciation of power. This "revolutionary subordination"<sup>2</sup> is ethically normative for the people of God and stands in judgment over the misuse of power in the community of faith. When ministers attempt to create churches in their own image, consider the church's property as their own property, access the church treasury as their own treasury, manipulate church members and church life on behalf of their own self-interests, they violate the Christian stewardship of power.

Positively, Paul exemplifies the meaning of servanthood in ministry as honoring every member of the Body of Christ. Just as the human body consists of many members and thrives on their comprehensive inter-working, so the Body of Christ depends on the collaboration of the diverse spiritual gifts of church members. 1 Corinthians 12:23 presses the implication of a crucial part of Paul's analogy ("*those members of the body we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor*") to mean that we particularly honor the contributions of church members who in conventional thinking might not seem very important. The servant approach to power is unconventional precisely in that it reverses the slope of conventional social stratification, assuming the vantage point of "below" rather "above." Instead of people on top wielding exclusive authority, people on the bottom are invested with authority and significance as well.

In very close context with the call to servanthood in the gospel passages quoted above are other teachings which have implications regarding the stewardship of power. In Matthew 18:15, Jesus instructs his disciples,

*If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.*

Jesus goes on to say that if the offender refuses the reconciling initiative, the one who has been offended should

<sup>2</sup> Cf. John Howard Yoder, "Revolutionary Subordination," in *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), pp. 163ff.

# Honoring every member Servanthood of the body of Christ

continue to make reconciling initiatives until the offender “refuses to listen even to the church.” At that point, the offender should become “as a Gentile and tax collector,” that is, the subject of the church’s missionary activity. Jesus concludes his instruction with a remarkable statement, “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:18).

Two implications regarding the stewardship of power in Matthew 18:15-20 complement the call to servanthood. First, ministry involves us in reconciling initiatives which many of us would consider risky. Issues (offenses) should not be swept under the rug and forgotten, but faced positively and redemptively. Jesus describes these initiatives as persistent, eventuating in the possible removal of the offender from church membership. Second, the followers of Jesus are invested with the authority to bind or loose, i.e., to hold onto or release offenses, “for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt. 18:20).

The term “offense” is not defined or qualified and could presumably include moral transgressions as well as personal attacks. The same Jesus, who in the near context of Matthew’s gospel issues several calls to servanthood, here instructs his followers to take reconciling initiatives, to be persistent in doing so, and then grants them power to bind and to loose. Clearly, servant ministry requires *courageous leadership*. We tend to avoid the kinds of initiatives prescribed by Jesus exactly because they are risky and may lead to confrontations. But the one who calls us to servant ministry calls us also to congregational leadership, to be good stewards of the very power we possess as ministers, which is the power to claim and reclaim lives in Jesus’ name. The sort of leadership and exercise of power prescribed here is not imperial, but distinctively Christian and consistent with the way of the cross. This is not the power of the tyrant who threatens, extorts, and manipulates, but the power of the good shepherd who simply will not give up on lost sheep. To be faithful to Jesus’ call to servant ministry is to be willing to be good stewards of the power resident in spiritual leadership.

In the paragraph which follows Jesus’ instruction concerning reconciling initiatives, Peter anticipates the church’s potential to abuse the authority to bind and loose. He asks Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy times seven” and goes on to tell the story of the unforgiving servant who, though forgiven much, refused to forgive even a little (Matt. 18:21-35). Jesus’ clear instruction to Peter is clear also to us. As we exercise the sort of spiritual and pastoral leadership implicit in “binding and loosing,” we do so with no less compassion and mercy as the one who calls us to ministry.

The stewardship of power involved in spiritual leadership takes other forms, including prophetic preaching and teaching, ministry initiatives, leadership in engaging spiritual disciplines, spiritual direction and mentoring. The critical issue of leadership is not who is in charge, but rather charging the Body of Christ with the imperatives of Christian discipleship. Professional ministers do not have to own the ideas or micromanage the process, but ministry entails spiritual leadership which is a legitimate expression of servanthood.

## The Biblical Concept of Covenant

The context of ministry is the covenant community, which is literally the people of God created and sustained in covenant. Covenant in scripture is a solemn promise which covenantal parties recognize as binding, and covenants which bind God and the people of God together pervade the Old Testament. In some covenants God binds himself with a promise to the community (e.g., the covenant with Abraham in Gen. 12:1-3), and in others the community is bound by God’s command (e.g., the Mosaic covenant in Exod. 20:1-17 and elsewhere). In every case there is a promise which one or both parties are bound to keep and which promise constitutes the covenant itself. So solemn is this promise that the prophets warn that the community’s dereliction of the covenant will result in certain destruction.

In the New Testament covenantal language is consummated in the Christ event. In Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection,

# Take Reconciling Initiatives

God calls into being the people of the new covenant, symbolically enacted at the Last Supper in the sharing of the bread and the cup.

*The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

(1 Cor. 11:23b-26)

The new covenant in Christ's blood realized the deepest sense and richest end of the covenants between God and Israel—the joyous surrender of the community to the One who calls the community to life through covenant love and indwelling Spirit. The power of covenant love is anticipated in the gospels ("The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one")<sup>3</sup> and consummated at Pentecost ("All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability").<sup>4</sup> According to Acts, the Spirit-inspired unity which overcame language barriers led to the sharing of possessions:

*All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44-47)*

Whatever else this and other descriptions<sup>5</sup> of the early church may imply for contemporary practice, they unequivocally declare that God calls the church to be a covenant community in the Holy Spirit marked by a profoundly deep and cooperative fellowship:

*I . . . beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4:1-6)*

That God's covenant community is the context for ministry shapes our understanding of ministry and ministerial ethics in several ways. First, ministry is rightly described by plural rather than singular modifiers; ministry is *ours*, not *mine*. While we ordain some to vocational or professional ministry, we expect the whole covenant community to participate in ministry, and we honor the contributions of every member.

Second, ministry presupposes trusting relationships. In the face of the many things that tend to fracture the fellowship, the New Testament calls us to trust in and live by the unity which is ours in Christ.

Third, ministry is framed by the promise of mutual commitment and accountability. We are covenant-bound to support each other in building up the Body of Christ and to expect faithfulness and competence in ministry.

Fourth, ministry envisions individual and cooperative initiatives held together in creative tension. We covenant neither to always wait for someone else to act on ministry opportunities nor to always assume that no one else is able and willing to act.

Fifth, we function as a *community*. We are not autonomous individuals who happen to come together on certain occasions because we hold similar interests. We are Christ's Body called to bear witness in our communal life that the Word became flesh and lives among us. The way we minister or fail to minister to one another and to the world in large measure corroborates or undermines our communal witness.

Sixth, we subordinate personal agendas to building up the whole Body. In fact, our willingness to work selflessly for the good of the community authenticates our covenant to live as community. Among other things, this means we resist every move to splinter the community into competing special interests. We covenant to talk with each other and not about each other in the interests of common ministry.

<sup>3</sup> John 17:22-23.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:4.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Acts 4:32-37.

## II. The Call to Ministry

To Abram: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). To Moses: “So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites” (Exod. 3:10). To Isaiah: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? . . . Go and say to this people” (Isa. 6:8-9). To the Twelve: “Follow me” (Matt. 4:19).

These biblical texts exemplify the call of God on people’s lives. Some people experience the call of God as a moment as powerful and dynamic as Moses before the burning bush (Exodus 3) or Saul blinded by the heavenly light (Acts 9). Others experience a call to a specific work or place of ministry like Deborah (Judges 4) or Mary (Luke 1). What is the call of God? Is it not the longings, yearnings, and desires that God places within the people of God to awaken them to and engage them in God’s will, presence, and activity in the world? God uses a variety of avenues to call people, but common to each is God’s sovereign choice, grace, and purpose for the good of humanity and the glory of God’s Kingdom. God’s call should elicit the faithful response of the person called and a way of life that honors the One who calls.

In calling us to the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-19), God calls some to proclaim the gospel of reconciliation (Rom. 10:14-15) and to equip others for Christian service and the building up of the church (Eph. 4:11-12). With the call of God comes the call to live in a manner worthy of the calling (Eph. 1:1). Unfortunately, not all of those called have lived up to the high ethical standards to the One who calls them and the Spirit who leads them. Paul lays the foundation and challenge of ethical behavior for those called as servant and vocational ministers:

*Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.* (1 Cor. 4:1-2)

In Ephesians 5:1-5, Christians are admonished to imitate God, to live in love, and not to allow immorality, greed, and vulgarity in their lives. In Colossians 3:1-17, Paul counsels the church “to set your minds on things that are above . . . put to death . . . whatever in you that is earthly . . . clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Here and elsewhere in the New Testament, perfection is not a prerequisite for doing ministry, but ministers must be alert to the dangers that lead to moral and professional destruction.

Clearly, ministers should hear and heed the voice of God in their lives. God’s call is not a one-time call, but one that requires the ongoing diligence of faithfulness to continue in obedience. Many leaders whose stories are told in scripture heard the voice of God initially only to be led astray by lesser voices in later life. For David, there was the temptation of sex; for Solomon, the idolatries of 700 wives and the undisciplined pursuit of pleasure; for Hezekiah, the pride of accumulated wealth; and for Josiah, the failure to discern the true voice of God even after years of blessing and walking with the Lord. Ministers must re-examine and renew their commitment to God’s call over time.

First and foremost, this commitment is to be followers of Jesus. The lifestyle, priorities, and morality of the called should reflect the image of Christ. The call to ministry is a call to faithfulness above and beyond any considerations regarding the size or temporal measure of the ministry to which ministers are called.

Ministers do well to remember not only the time and circumstances of their unique call but the holiness and the character of the One who calls them. Because the minister’s call is not just vocational, but intensely personal, ministerial accountability is intensely personal, and not based merely on outward performance.

In remembering the call and the One who calls, ministers find nourishment for persevering through difficult times.

To sustain the call, ministers must work at maintaining their physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and moral well-being. The pressures of life and work can erode the sense of purpose with which ministry began. Ministers find sustaining strength to continue when other voices would bid them to abandon their ministries as they remember the God who calls and the work to which they have dedicated themselves. Faithful remembrance brings a profound sense of humility and joy.

Hear  
and Heed  
the voice of God

### **For the minister:**

- ❑ I will remember the holiness of the One who called me into ministry and seek to be conformed to the image of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- ❑ I will respond to the call of Christ with faithful obedience and count it a joyful privilege to be asked to serve in ministry.
- ❑ I will review and renew my sense of calling with humility born of God's grace and seek the wisdom of my church and other mentors in diligently fulfilling my role in God's kingdom.

### **For the church:**

- ❑ We will honor and respect the call of God in the lives of our ministers and count their service among us as a gift from God.
- ❑ We will seek to help our ministers fulfill God's call on their lives by being obedient to God's call on our own lives, affirming that our ministers are sent by God to equip and encourage us.
- ❑ Together with our ministers, we will serve Christ's church and Kingdom in answering the Lord's call on our lives until the final call comes.



### III. The Minister's Relationships

While all relationships are important, the core relationships in ministers' lives should be given priority time, thought, and attention. Part of ministers' ethical responsibility involves cultivating enduring, enriching relationships with God, family, co-workers, and the congregation.

#### Relationship with God

Ministers should engage in daily habits that foster a deep relationship with God. These habits go beyond perfunctory study and prayer. Intrinsic to the work of ministry is the intimate knowledge of God that comes only with time spent in God's presence. Ministers do well to learn as much as possible about their craft and calling, but the ethical center of ministry is the minister's personal relationship with God.

Deepening this relationship requires more than preparing the next presentation, but involves spending time alone with God with no agenda other than being with God. While each minister has to decide how to schedule this time, the discipline of doing so should be faithfully observed on a daily basis. Nothing will help ministers' love for self and others more effectively than a deepening relationship with God. To fail this responsibility is unethical both because it denies ministers' deepest needs and denies to those who depend on ministers for leadership the true source of spiritual health and vitality.

As their love for God grows, ministers' willingness to depend upon God also grows. 1 Peter 5:7 calls church leaders to "*Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.*" Ministers who try to fix everyone and everything take on responsibilities which belong properly to God. Walking closely with God deepens self-understanding and builds the faith needed to turn problems over to the Holy Spirit. Depending upon God, ministers find the freedom to be themselves.

#### Relationships with Family

Ministers' families can be encouragers, evaluators, healers, and sources of joy. Our families know us as no others, because what we are at home is most nearly what we are in truth. Because loving, healthy, grace-filled families accept us even as they know our faults, ministers need to understand and appropriate basic qualities that help shape healthy families.

One characteristic of healthy families is flexibility. Marriages face some of their greatest difficulties during times of change. The birth of children, kids starting school, job changes, and children leaving home are examples of stressful transitions. Many of these transitions, such as moving to another church or area of responsibility, occur several times over the span of a minister's career. In many families both partners work outside of the home, and these transitions affect both spouses. Flexibility, support, and special consideration are important gifts family members can give one another during stressful transitional periods.

Another characteristic of healthy families is the encouragement of family members to be authentically themselves. Trying to make everyone fit the same mold is not only impossible but mistaken. Ministers' family members all have unique callings, and their lives should not simply revolve around ministers' lives. Finding the talents and spiritual gifts of each family member and encouraging one another to pursue those gifts is a sign of a healthy family and a healthy church.

The minister's own authenticity is crucial to cultivating and maintaining healthy relationships, especially at home. For example, if a minister's family members see a different person at church than they do at home, the quality of respect and depth of intimacy within the minister's family are sure to suffer.

## Relationships with Co-workers

A cooperative ministerial team is the product of both good intentions and hard work, and cooperation begins with a common philosophy of ministry. Ministers who cannot find common cause with the rest of the ministerial staff should consider relocating to a church more in tune with that minister's sense of calling, gifts, and understanding of ministry.

Once the staff basically agrees about philosophy of ministry, it is important to establish clear job descriptions and responsibilities. This is an ethical concern since fairness to each staff member requires clarity regarding goals and procedures for accurately measuring job performance.

Clarifying staff responsibilities is one aspect of a larger issue, communication. Difficulties tend to occur when adequate time and attention have not been devoted to building effective communication. An informed church staff tends to be a more cooperative church staff. Regular memos, phone calls, and meetings with other staff foster trust. So does discussing ideas and accepting opposing ideas in an open and respectful manner. Regular "clearing the air sessions" are far more preferable than allowing months of misunderstanding and potential bitterness to build up. Just as in family relationships, ignoring negative feelings tends to cause greater distress in the long run. Expressing positive and negative thoughts and feelings in loving and encouraging ways enhances staff relationships.

Some ministers feel the need to express their negative feelings about other church staff to church members. While doing so may make them feel better in the short run, these expressions undermine real communication and trust among staff members in the long run. Direct resolution of problems with other staff members is essential. The pain of hearing from a third or fourth party about a fellow staff member's discontent is detrimental to staff relationships and creates fissures not only in the staff but also in the church body. Mustering the courage and integrity to work through problems directly and constructively with fellow staff members is foundational to healthy relationships.

When honest communication and appropriate confidentiality are practiced by ministerial co-workers, the door is opened to developing deeper and richer relationships. Trusting relationships among the church staff foster trusting relationships within the congregation.

## Relationships with the Congregation

Treating everyone with respect should be a goal for all ministers. Church members should know that their ministers genuinely care about and respect them. Respect is born out of the servant spirit which characterizes Christian ministry. As the apostle Paul affirms,

*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. (Phil. 2:3-4)*

Ultimately, love is the focus of all relationship ethics. Healthy relationships are loving relationships:

*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. (1 John 4:16, 19-20)*

respect  
is born  
out of the servant  
spirit

### For the minister:

- ❑ I will foster my relationship with and dependence upon God.
- ❑ I will act in loving and respectful ways toward my family and work through every challenge to enrich my relationships with each family member.
- ❑ I will act in loving and respectful ways toward my church family and work through every challenge to enrich my relationships with each church member.
- ❑ I will nurture good communications with all staff members, treat them with respect, keep their communications confidential, bear their burdens in prayer, and seek to encourage their ministries.
- ❑ I will treat others according to the spirit and letter of Jesus' teaching (e.g., *"In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets"* Matt. 7:12).

### For the church:

- ❑ We will be guided by the conviction that our ministers serve with us in God's service and are not "hired help" to do ministry.
- ❑ We will respect our ministers' unique gifts, callings, and personalities as we encourage them to excellence.
- ❑ We will respect the importance of ministers' families and honor each family member.
- ❑ We will commit to develop and nurture strong relationships within the congregation and show that we are Christians by our love.



## IV. Stewardship of Time

The large clock situated in the towering steeple of a Dallas church is inscribed with the warning, “*Night Cometh.*” The haunting inscription is based on Jesus’ familiar teaching in the Fourth Gospel:

*As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.* (John 9:4-5)

The symbol of the clock and scripture reminds ministers about the stewardship of time in the context of the call to ministry. Ministers are all too familiar with the brevity of time as they deal with the endless demands of ministry. Night comes all too quickly, and at the end of each day ministers are left to ponder how faithfully they have fulfilled their mission of doing God’s work.

The busy work of keeping people happy drains ministers of direction and purpose. In addition, the ever-flowing stream of pastoral tasks remains constant as ministers respond to one more request, phone call, visit, meeting, preparation, or unexpected crisis. Ministers find it difficult to place a comma, let alone a period, at the end of the day. Everything seems so unfinished in pastoral ministry.

### The Gift of Time

Ministers lose sight of the gift of time by living exclusively in what the Greeks called *chronos* time. This chronological sense of time calculates its passage by filling out a daily planner. In *chronos* time events unfold one after the other, like the perennial passing of the seasons. Ecclesiastes captures the tendency of *chronos* time to become repetitious and routine:

*What do people gain from all the toil  
at which they toil under the sun?*

*A generation goes, and a generation comes,  
but the earth remains forever.*

*The sun rises and the sun goes down,  
and hurries to the place where it rises.* (Ecc. 1:3-5)

Another sense of time is captured by the Greek word *kairos*. In the New Testament *kairos* denotes a moment of opportunity and thus fills life with possibility, potential, and new perspective. Paul speaks of *kairos* time in his letter to the Galatians: “*But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son*” (Gal. 4:4). In this *kairos* moment, all of time takes on new meaning as Jesus Christ enters time and space. Time now offers the possibility of God invading ordinary moments with sacred presence. The holiness of each day provides a “wake-up call” that says, “Handle this day with care.” The scripture signals its own alarm:

*Sleeper, awake!  
Rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.”* (Eph. 5:14b)

### Self Management, Not Time Management

While time management books, daily organizers, and quick-fix seminars promise solutions for the unpredictable schedules of ministers, the answer for solving time issues does not rest in management techniques. Ministers become faithful stewards of time only when they remember that time is a gift from God. As the Psalmist proclaims, “*My times are in your hand*” (Ps. 31:15).

The stewardship of time grows out of understanding the minister’s purpose as a messenger of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19-20). Ministers confront the challenge of this purpose with requests prefaced by the observation, “I know you are so busy.” Ministers find it hard not to take this remark as a compliment as it makes them feel both in demand and worthy of their hire. Yet interpreting the stewardship of time in terms of sheer busyness is as lethal as it is seductive. Eventually, busyness leads to burnout.

John Wesley commented on the trap of busyness in his remark, “We have no time to hurry.” Instead of simply being busy, ministers’ lives and schedules need to reflect their divinely driven purpose rather than being merely directed by clock and calendar. Wise ministers travel with a compass, which enables them to interpret the priorities of ministry. These ministers consult the compass of God’s Word, the direction of prayer, and the leadership of the Holy Spirit in determining decisions regarding time.

The minister’s use of time demands discipline. Broken trust includes more than sexual misconduct or dishonesty. Even though ministers are chronically pressed for time, a certain degree of flexibility exists within the minister’s schedule. During the week ministers usually work alone in their offices out of sight of congregation or supervisor. No two days are the same. Definite tasks fill part of each week, but significant segments of time exist within the minister’s own discretion. For instance, ministers who have preaching or teaching responsibilities have a choice about the use of time. They can discipline themselves with faithful hours of preparation, or misuse their preparation time and throw together sermons or lessons at the last minute. Jesus’ rebuke to the unfaithful servant in the Parable of the Talents, “*You wicked and lazy servant,*” (Matt. 25:26) also warns ministers who invests their time poorly. The indictment of the minister who squanders time compares to the banker who embezzles funds or the corrupt accounting practices of corporate executives.

### Stewardship of Time before God

Ministers cannot depend on external controls, whether these take the form of demanding church members or relentless deadlines. Ultimately, ministers are accountable to God; inward obedience to Jesus Christ controls the ethical minister’s choices concerning the use of time. Paul frames the stewardship of time for the whole church: “*For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life*” (Eph. 2:10).

The ethics of ministers’ use of time includes faithfully meeting deadlines and honoring commitments rather than succumbing to procrastination. On the other side of the time equation, the Sabbath principle calls ministers to set aside time for prayer and spiritual formation. The proverbial saying, “The bow that is always bent fails to shoot straight” finds validation in Jesus’ instruction to the disciples: “*He said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while’*” (Mark 6:31). Finally, *quality* family time must not be allowed to substitute for quantity of family time. The minister’s ethics of time, whether leading people to faith or spending time with his or her family, finds direction in Paul’s counsel, “*Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as the wise, making the most of the time*” (Eph. 5:15-16a).

the **bow** that is always  
**bent**  
fails to shoot straight

### **For the minister:**

- ❑ I will live in gratitude for the gift of time and the ways in which God redeems our time in Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:15-16a).
- ❑ I will be committed to the good stewardship of time. I will be disciplined in my use of time, which includes not wasting time or working at all times.
- ❑ I will be faithful in my use of time by honoring my commitments, being faithful to my promises, and being diligent in study (Matt. 5:37; 2 Tim. 2:15).
- ❑ I will recognize that God is Creator, time is finite, and there are limits to what I can humanly accomplish in ministry (Acts 14:11-15).
- ❑ I will honor the Sabbath principle by regularly taking time off for rest and re-creation (Gen. 2:2-3).
- ❑ I will provide for my family by taking time to nurture and support our relationship (I Tim. 5:8).

### **For the church:**

- ❑ We will recognize ministers' need for rest and time to be away from work. We will protect their time to have a day off and their family time.
- ❑ We will provide time and financial support for study, continuing education, and refreshment away from pastoral duties.
- ❑ We affirm the concept that "every member is a minister" and will not expect the pastoral staff to always be on call.
- ❑ We will encourage our staff to know the difference between a true pastoral crisis and a need which can wait until a more appropriate time.



## V. The Minister's Health

Jesus spoke to the first disciples about life and life “*to the full*” (John 10:10). While the allusion is more to quality of life, some readers unfortunately construe Jesus’ point as having little to do with physical life. Although the New Testament does not provide a strict guideline for ministers to be healthy, the implication toward health is at least implied in God’s perfect creation. Matthew 5:48 and 1 Peter 1:16 call us toward holy perfection. Is this admonition only applicable to spiritual matters? If this were the case, then God’s holiness would not extend beyond the spiritual. The New Testament also calls us to be good stewards of God’s gifts, and health is clearly one of God’s most precious gifts.

In fact, a close reading of 2 Timothy 2:3-7 reveals pastoral concern for Timothy’s physical health. This passage shows an appreciation for the importance of physical and mental conditioning. Jesus’ miracles of healing and of the multiplication of the fish and loaves demonstrate God’s concern for physical life. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus confirms the legitimacy of our physical needs: “*your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things*” (Matt. 6:25-33). According to Paul, the Christian’s body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and intended to glorify God (1 Cor. 6:19-20). We are psychosomatic beings; that is, our mental/emotional selves are integrated with our physical selves. We are responsible to God for how we live the totality of our lives.

Ministers should be attentive to their bodies. To know ourselves means to have a realistic assessment of physical and emotional health. The following questions can be helpful in moving toward healthy self knowledge:

### How Do I Think?

Ministers need periodically to examine how they access, process, and apply thoughts. This self-examination is important because the moral life can be depicted roughly as the combination of convictions, attitudes, and actions which we display throughout our lives. A simpler way to make the same point is that our mind-style shapes our lifestyle. The New Testament (e.g., 2 Cor. 10:5; Phil. 4:1-9; Col. 3:5-10; 1 Pet. 5:7-8) is quite clear that thought life is important—so important as to affect overall health. Implicitly and explicitly, these passages demonstrate functional, strategic, and tactical methods to address thought life.

For centuries, Christians have observed practices for developing our inner selves. These exercises, sometimes called spiritual disciplines, engage mind, body, and spirit. Meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration form a foundation of disciplines which are also checks and balances that greatly enhance ministers’ health. Some form of spiritual direction, whether through a spiritual director, accountability group, or peer group, can foster spiritual formation, emotional maturity, and honest self-awareness.

### What Do I Eat?

Obesity remains a national problem. Junk food diets, high fat and high sugar content foods, and inattention to the impact of what we eat or don’t eat have made a society-wide impact. Some recent reports place the percentage of obese people in America as high as 60 percent. This trend is widely noticeable among ministers. Since ministers are called with the rest of the church to be good stewards of our bodies, gluttony detracts from our public and private witness to the Gospel. Unhealthy eating habits negatively affect ministers’ general health, as well as health care and insurance costs. Proverbs 23:1-2 graphically draws our attention to the need to monitor what and how we eat.

Our Mind-  
Style  
Lifestyle shapes  
our

## What about Rest, Recreation, and Exercise?

Medical research demonstrates that sleep deprivation—low quality sleep or lack of sleep—negatively affects health. Many ministers tend to over work, without sufficient recognition of the Sabbath principle for their lives. Sabbath, instituted in creation (Gen. 2:2) and articulated in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 8-10), stands as a guideline for all Christians. For their own sakes and as a model for their congregants, ministers need to implement a Sabbath pattern of re-creation. A certain egocentrism can develop as ministers come to believe that the work of God's Kingdom depends solely on human effort.

What applies to all of creation clearly applies to ministers; *all of us* need to take a deliberative approach to the rest-work cycle. Observing the Sabbath principle positively impacts every level of existence—physical, emotional, and spiritual.

The pace of contemporary life for many ministers tends to impede getting enough physical exercise. Stress-induced conditions, fatigue, and even mild depression can be alleviated or minimized through regular, individually appropriate exercise. Abundant resources are readily available for ministers to establish exercise regimens which fit their needs.

## To What Am I Addicted?

Addictive patterns of life are not limited to drug abuse and other kinds of substance abuse. In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster advises Christians to refrain from *anything* which leads to addictive patterns in our lives. As important as the work of professional ministers may be to the Kingdom God, ministerial duties can lapse into “workaholism.” As nurturing as family relationships are to all of us, even our families can become too much the focus of our lives. As necessary as food and recreation are to our health, these too can become inappropriately important. Whatever is becoming an idol, i.e., the controlling center of our lives other than God in Christ, should be resisted.

## When Was My Last Medical Checkup?

Getting regular medical check-ups is an important act of stewardship of ministers' health. Heart disease, strokes, and cancer rank at the top of physical maladies which plague American society, and many of these conditions can be prevented and/or effectively treated by regular visits with a physician. Since vocational ministry can be highly stressful and stress tends to aggravate health problems, it is especially important for ministers to practice preventative medicine.

## Conclusion

Ministers may say, “There is so much to do, and I don't have time to implement the health practices suggested here.” The appropriate response is that ministers do not have time *not* to implement these suggestions. Some of the finest years of ministry should come in the fifties, sixties, and beyond when experience, wisdom, and years of having walked with God bear abundant fruit. Yet, physical problems that could have been prevented with preemptive and preventative care rob many ministers of their most productive decades of life. Inherent within the calling to vocational ministry is a stewardship of the totality of life with which God has gifted us. Faithful stewardship in this regard enhances the authenticity and integrity of our lives.

### For the minister:

- ❑ I will recognize the interdependence of my mind and body and God's calling, offering the totality of my being "*as a living sacrifice. . . to God*" (Rom. 12:1-2).
- ❑ I will be both accountable and faithful to God regarding my stewardship of the good gift of health.
- ❑ I will make a serious commitment toward the disciplines of spiritual and physical formation, including appropriate physical exercise.
- ❑ I will honestly face the question, "Does my mind-style and lifestyle reflect the integrity of the Gospel at work in my personality and life?"

### For the church:

- ❑ We will recognize our own and our ministers' needs for spiritual formation and physical well being.
- ❑ We will commit ourselves to mutual accountability before God regarding spiritual and physical development.
- ❑ We will involve ourselves in witnessing to a holistic Gospel in which our whole selves are undergoing redemption.



## VI. Economic Responsibilities

Ministers are called to engage the full expanse of human relationships and responsibilities, including the critically important area of economic life. The significance of economic responsibility is underwritten by two realities. First is the central place of economic responsibility in scripture. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), Jesus teaches his followers to not “*store up treasures on earth*” (Matt. 6:19) and that no one can serve two masters: “*you cannot serve God and wealth*” (Matt. 6:24). He teaches his followers first to seek God’s Kingdom and righteousness “*and all these things will be given you as well*” (Matt. 6:33). 1 Timothy 6:7-10 warns Christians concerning the dangers of money and possessions with the admonition that “*those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction*” (1 Tim. 6: 9). The love of wealth is one of the most frequently identified spiritual dangers in scripture.

Second is the reality of contemporary clergy living and ministering within a materialistic and consumer-driven culture. Caught between these two realities, ministers find themselves trying to cope with cultural influences while proclaiming in word and deed the dangers of one of culture’s most obvious idolatries.

### The Failure of Economic Responsibility

Plenty of evidence demonstrates how religious leaders have failed at this task by engaging in manipulation and misrepresentation to advance their financial interests. Some of the more common and well-documented economic frauds perpetrated by some religious leaders include embezzlements, investment scams, misappropriation of funds, and income-tax evasion.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, ministers need to be good stewards of their personal financial resources as well as the church’s wealth.

Less-documented, but equally destructive, are several other issues regarding economic ethics. Conflicts of interest can arise when ministers become financially indebted to church members or others in their communities. Some clergy are tempted to maintain lifestyles for themselves and their families that mirror the lifestyles of affluent members of their congregations. In other cases, poor financial planning can lead to indebtedness that is both a burden and a poor example of Christian stewardship. In this context it is important to acknowledge that not every incident of crushing debt is the result of poor planning. Even one health crisis can lead to mounting debt, and any number of other crises can and do financially impact ministers’ lives. Like other professionals whose careers entail various levels of higher education, ministers often finish their formal training with the burden of large student loans.

Another important issue is how much ministers should give to the church and other worthy causes. Some excuse minimal offerings by claiming that they are giving their entire lives to the church. While many variables influence how much ministers can and should give, the point remains that ministers should be generous stewards of financial and other resources.

The temptation for religious leaders to use their power and influence to secure wealth is an ancient problem. In 1 Samuel the story of the sons of Eli begins, “*Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels*” (1 Sam. 2:12). The narrative clarifies this judgment by explaining that the priests (i.e., the sons of Eli) would send their servants to take, by force if necessary, meat that had been offered as a sacrifice to God for the priests’ own consumption. The gravity of this offense is made clear by describing how the priests were satisfying their greed by grasping for that which was being presented to God: “*they treated the offerings of the Lord with contempt*” (1 Sam. 12:17). They were stealing from God and from the faithful who had given to God.

You  
cannot  
serve  
God  
and  
Wealth

<sup>6</sup> Shupe, Anson, ed. *Wolves Within the Fold*, Rutgers University Press, 1998, pp. 51-7.

## Vows of Poverty?

At the other end of the spectrum are ministers who, along with their families, suffer from inadequate income. Recent studies reveal that this problem is quite common, especially in denominations with congregational-style organizations.<sup>7</sup> A 2003 survey conducted by Duke University's Divinity School reveals that the median annual pay (including the value of any free housing) for Protestant ministers is \$40,000. However, 60 percent of Protestant pastors serving small churches with congregational governments receive a median income of \$22,300. A co-director of the survey concluded, "Protestants' free-market approach forces clergy to compete for bigger, higher-paying congregations, turning the ministry from a 'calling' into a mere 'career.'" <sup>8</sup> In these cases, churches that can afford to provide adequate compensation to their ministers need to be challenged to meet their responsibility. If paying adequate wages is not possible because of a church's size or financial status, ministers and churches should consider the move toward bi-vocational ministry. Part of ministers' and churches' success in making this transition involves affirming the status of bi-vocational ministry as both competent and faithful.

In his sermon, *The Use of Money*, John Wesley contended that Christians should "gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can." Wesley thus avoids both the view that money is inherently evil and the correlative notion that a vow of poverty is an essential part of the minister's call. He goes on to warn that in gaining wealth, Christians should neither harm one's neighbor nor one's own spiritual integrity. The charge to save all you can reminds us that we are not to spend all we can. Wesley contends that Christians should be frugal and consume only what "plain nature" requires. At the same time, we should be especially alert to the reality that being appropriately satisfied can overcome inordinate desires.

The call to give all we can explains the reason for gaining and saving. This call is a reminder that we are not *proprietors but stewards*. Responsible ministers should commit their wealth to meeting the needs of those for whom they are immediately responsible (1 Tim. 5:8) and then, as resources and opportunities allow, the needs of humanity. Along with every other member of the congregation, ministers bear the responsibility to financially support the ministries of the church with their tithes and offerings. In so giving, ministers can bear witness to a responsible stewardship of wealth.

John Richard Neuhaus reminds ministers that

*. . . most do not "sell out" by making crooked deals, or even by consciously compromising principle in order not to compromise financial security; we pay our tribute to Mammon in the minutes and hours spent in worrying about money and the things that money can get. . . . [T]he question of money and the dangers it poses should be kept under the closest scrutiny. Otherwise the desire ineluctably grows, avarice feeds upon itself, and one ends up as the victim of an appetite that is in fact insatiable and consumes by worry, guilt, and discontent the hours and days that were once consecrated to ministry.*<sup>9</sup>

John Wesley's attempt to strike a balance between avarice and austerity suggests a practical and positive pattern for contemporary ministerial ethics. Ministers should remember that obsession with money, whether in grasping for too much or worrying about too little, can become a corrosive spiritual poison. As Proverbs teaches,

*Remove far from me falsehood and lying;  
give me neither poverty nor riches;  
feed me with the food that I need,  
or I shall be full, and deny you,  
and say, "Who is the LORD?"  
or I shall be poor, and steal,  
and profane the name of my God. (Prov. 30:8-9)*

<sup>7</sup> "Clergy Salaries," *Congregations*, September/October, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> "Study: Clergy salaries up but still not great for many," <http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/salary.html/> Viewed August 15, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Neuhaus, Richard, *Freedom for Ministry*, Harper and Row, 1979, pp. 191-92.

### For the minister:

- ❑ I will be honest in my stewardship of money.
- ❑ I will live within my income and not become hampered by unpaid debts.
- ❑ I will exercise a lifestyle consistent with the life and teachings of Christ.
- ❑ I will not seek special gratuities, privileges, bequests, or loans because of my role as minister.
- ❑ I will not become involved in funeral or marriage schemes (or any other schemes) that seek to profit from the performance of my ministerial duties.
- ❑ I will advocate adequate financial compensation for my profession including the entire church staff.
- ❑ I will be generous in my stewardship of money, contributing to the ministries of the church and the needs of humanity with my tithes and offerings.

### For the church:

- ❑ We will practice good stewardship in a spirit of kindness and generosity.
- ❑ We understand that workers are “worthy of their hire” and will compensate with fairness and generosity.
- ❑ We will stay aware of rising costs for insurance and other living expenses in our culture and plan our compensation accordingly.
- ❑ We will not become “enablers” of a minister’s poor habits or poor discipline by making loans or gifts beyond reason or extenuating circumstances.
- ❑ We will also offer help by way of financial counseling and mentoring if needed, but will not pry into the private matters of our ministers.



## VII. Sexual Conduct

One of the most destructive moral failures by clergy is sexual misconduct. The damage caused by this failure spreads like a virus throughout the church, devastating families and individuals.

### Extent of the Problem

Sexual failures are often headline news, implicating clergy in all religious bodies. Careful studies over several decades have attempted to understand both the causes and extent of the problem. In one study questionnaires were sent to 1000 Baptist pastors in six Southern states. Of those responding, 14.1 percent acknowledged inappropriate sexual contact in their ministries; 70.4 percent said they knew of some other minister's sexual failings; and 24.2 percent reported that they had counseled at least one person who claimed to have had sexual contact with a minister.<sup>10</sup> Other studies indicate similar results among clergy within a wide range of religious groups.<sup>11</sup> **Broken Trust**, a resource for churches dealing with clergy sexual misconduct published by the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, identified four expressions of sexual misconduct by ministers: sexual relations outside of marriage; unwanted or inappropriate physical contact; other sexually oriented or suggestive behaviors, including sexually suggestive speech and gestures; and the use of pornography.<sup>12</sup>

The problem of ministerial sexual misconduct is not just a modern problem, but has plagued the people of God throughout history. Problems with or arising from improper sexual relationships are reflected in the stories of Abraham, Lot, Samson, David, and Solomon. And in this context as well, the sons of Eli are described as "scoundrels" (1 Sam. 2:12):

*Now Eli was very old. He heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. He said to them, "Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people." (1 Sam. 2:22-23)*

### Expression of the Problem

Eli's question continues to haunt us. Recent studies suggest that there are at least four contributing factors.

*Abuse of power* seems to be the most prevalent factor in clergy sexual misconduct.<sup>13</sup> In a culture in which a dominant understanding of sexual relations is conquest, clergy are tempted to use their status and power to conquer sexually.

*Sexual addiction* is increasingly recognized as a factor in inappropriate behaviors of ministers.<sup>14</sup> Compulsive behaviors are often the result of a serious personality disorder in which there is a recurrent failure to control behaviors even in the face of undesirable consequences. One of the deep tragedies of sexual addiction is that many affected ministers seem to have entered the ministry in the attempt to overcome their addictive tendencies.

A third factor is the *misinterpretation of intimate relationships*.<sup>15</sup> Many clergy relationships, especially counseling relationships, involve some degree of intimacy. A recurring temptation is to allow such relationships to extend beyond appropriate boundaries.

Stress or "*burnout*" is a common experience for ministers. Weakened by exhaustion, clergy become more vulnerable to temptation. This causal factor was identified as prevalent in the study of sexual misconduct of Baptist pastors cited above.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Seat, et.al., "The Prevalence and Contributing Factors of Sexual Misconduct among Southern Baptist Pastors in Six Southern States" *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, Winter 1993, Vol. 47, No. 4.

<sup>11</sup> John W. Thoburn and Jack O. Balswick, "Demographic Data on Extra-Marital Sexual Behavior in the Ministry" *Pastoral Psychology*, 1998, Vol. 46, No. 6; "Rabbi's Odyssey Reflects Struggle on Sexual Abuse" *The Washington Post*, February 2, 2003, p. A17.

<sup>12</sup> "Broken Trust: A Covenant of Clergy Sexual Ethics," The Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Flatt, "The Misuse of Power and Sex in Helping Relationships" *Restoration Quarterly*, January, 1993, Vol. 36, pp. 101-110; Pamela Cooper-White, "Soul Stealing: Power Relations in Pastoral Sexual Abuse" *The Christian Century*, Feb. 20, 1991, pp. 196-99; Anson Shupe, ed., *Wolves within the Fold: Religious Leadership and Abuses of Power*, Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> The entire issue of *Pastoral Psychology*, March, 1991, Vol. 39, No. 4 is dedicated to this problem.

<sup>15</sup> Ragsdale, Katherine Hancock, *Boundary Wars: Intimacy and Distance in Healing Relationships*, Plymouth, MI: Pilgrim Press, 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Seat, "The Prevalence and Contributing Factors of Sexual Misconduct"

## Dealing with Sexuality

Prevention is the first defense against the damage inflicted by sexual misconduct, and ministers can take several basic steps to enhance prevention:

1. Ministers must understand that they are called to be servants not rulers. Their power is a gift from God to be used in healing, not in conquering.
2. Ministers must nurture and protect their family life. Honest discussions of sexual needs with spouses are essential. Counseling may be needed, and ministers and their spouses should not be stigmatized for availing themselves of therapeutic help.
3. Ministers should observe clearly stated standards regarding boundaries in counseling and other forms of pastoral ministry to minimize misinterpretations and temptations.
4. Ministers must be aware of their own hearts, their own vulnerabilities and their strengths, and must nurture a deep relationship with God. Extra-marital sexual sins are not only against the spouse, the partner, the family, and the church but also violate our relationship with the Lord.
5. Careful attention to the biblical admonitions concerning sexual conduct and misconduct can help ministers through times of weakness and vulnerability. Ministers must not allow rationalizing, denial, compromising, or justifying to cloud their vision of the biblical standard of faithfulness in marriage and celibacy in singleness.
6. Having a trusted friend or mentor with whom confidentiality is assured, truth is forthrightly spoken, and accountability is held high will also help ministers to live faithfully.
7. Ministers should focus not only on sexual sins, but also on the truth that our sexuality is a gift from God. The minister's task is to proclaim by word and deed that we are to be good stewards of this good gift through and within the intimacy of marriage.

Prevention  
is the **First** defense against  
the **Damage**  
inflicted by sexual  
**Misconduct**

### **For the minister:**

- ❑ I will recognize that sexuality is God's gift, which can be used for both good and evil.
- ❑ I will clearly demonstrate a life of sexual fidelity and integrity in all of my relationships and a steadfast commitment to the biblical standard of faithfulness in marriage and celibacy in singleness.
- ❑ I will not allow sexuality to become the driving force of any of my relationships.
- ❑ I will establish and observe appropriate boundaries in pastoral ministry.
- ❑ I will commit myself to constructive counseling in the event that my sexuality is expressed inappropriately.

### **For the church:**

- ❑ We recognize we are sexual beings before God and that our sexuality is an arena for Christian witness and discipleship.
- ❑ We will commit ourselves to exhibiting wholesome sexual relationships among ourselves, within our families, and beyond the church family.
- ❑ We will commit ourselves to forming relationships, time structures, and ministry activities so that our ministers can build wholesome family relationships.



## VIII. The Minister and the Community

Effective, responsible ministers see their churches as integral parts of the community. The false dichotomy of “us” versus “them” between church and community gives way to the realization that “we” are “them.”

Jesus taught his followers to be salt and light in the world: “*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven*” (Matt. 5:16). Implicit in Jesus’ teaching is that the good deeds that bring glory to God should be done in the community. Jesus also told the disciples that others would identify his followers by the love they had for one another. This is to say the central ideas of unity and community were built into the framework of discipleship. Jesus involved himself in the community—at weddings, dinners, healings, feedings, and funerals. The Gospels confirm that Jesus went to these events not to “show off,” but to meet the people’s needs in the very places where they gathered. Effective and ethical ministers will do the same in their own communities both through their personal involvement and through the involvement of their church families.

The apostle Paul encourages community building, involvement, and meeting needs and doing so with the highest of ethical standards (Phil. 4:8-10; Col. 3:5-11). In fact, every Pauline epistle appeals directly or indirectly for conduct befitting the name and nature of Christ. Paul affirms Jesus’ depiction of his followers as “*in the world, but not of the world*” (cf. John 17:15-16) and expresses the communal scope of this image.

Throughout the scope of Christian history, churches have related to their communities in a variety of ways, ranging from total non-involvement to total absorption. Ethical and effective ministers attempt to strike a healthy balance between involvement and distinctiveness by discovering ways of connecting with the world. This balance may include praying and working for the community to adopt more Christ-like attitudes and actions (e.g., regarding race relations, gambling, substance abuse, sexual morality, business ethics, and social justice). Ministers should also relate to people in the community on very human levels (e.g., school plays and concerts, local sports teams, community theatre, local politics).

Ministers who involve themselves and their churches in the community open several doors from which the gospel may move into the life of the community and the community can come into the life of the church. As ministers involve themselves with their communities, they discover issues on the hearts and minds of the people. They also see critical ministries that churches are uniquely positioned to provide (e.g., addiction/recovery groups, clothes closets, food pantries, prison ministries, Habitat for Humanity, business chaplaincy) and community activities that churches may choose to house or sponsor (e.g., civic clubs, sports leagues, community theatre and arts development, PTA groups, cultural activities, and seniors groups).

It is at these levels of connecting with people, their needs, and their interests that the church is most relevant and alive in embodying the love of Christ. Ministers who closely follow the way of Jesus not only acquire skill in preaching, writing, witnessing, planning, and leading, but also connect deeply with the hearts and hurts of broken people in a broken world. Community involvement is an arena in which the skills of preaching, teaching, witnessing, planning and leading are polished with the grit of reality and so reflect brightly the Light of the world.

Let  
your  
light

Shine

&  
give

Glory

to your

Father

in heaven

### **For ministers and churches:**

- ❑ We will value the larger community beyond the reference points of our local congregation, reaching out to people who may never be members of our church and caring about important issues which may not directly impact our church members.
- ❑ We shall endeavor to know and be known in the communities that we serve as witnesses to the love of Christ, who meets physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.
- ❑ We shall look deeply into the communities in which we serve to understand and minister to their needs and concerns and to rejoice in their triumphs.



# Covenant of Ministerial Ethics

## Summation

The Covenant of Ministerial Ethics calls ministers to the life-long commitment of integrity and wholeness in Jesus Christ and to “*live as children of light*” (Eph. 4:8-14) as they serve God and their congregations. The covenant affirms that credibility and effectiveness in ministry is primarily built on the faithfulness and trustworthiness of the minister (2 Timothy 2:15).

The preceding essays on ministerial ethics provide biblical and theological foundations, address crucial areas of ministerial ethics, and offer guidance and direction for coping with the ethical demands of ministry. At the conclusion of the essays addressing specific ethical concerns are covenants of accountability which focus on relevant commitments for ministers and congregations. The essays and covenants provide material for further reflection and can serve as a resource for discussion between ministers and congregations.

The following Covenant of Ministerial Ethics condenses the preceding essays and biblical material into a framework for living and ministering with ethical integrity. We strongly encourage ministers to sign this covenant and use it as a guide for their lives and work. We urge that a signed copy of the covenant be kept by the minister and distributed to church leaders. We suggest that the church publish the covenant as a way of cultivating confidence that the ministers of the church are committed to integrity and accountability in their lives and ministries.

## Theological Foundation

*Berith*, the Hebrew word for covenant, is one of the key words and concepts in scripture. It appears at least 286 times in the Old Testament and is a central unifying theme in the Bible. The basic biblical meaning of covenant is a contract, a pact, a promise, alliance, or agreement which binds together the covenanting parties.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of God in scripture is displayed in the stories of God's determination to enter into covenants with humankind. In Genesis 9, God covenants with Noah (Gen. 9:9-17) with the divine promise never to repeat the flood. A few chapters later, God enters into solemn covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:18; 17:2), promising land, descendants, and a blessing. In the New Testament, Jesus uses the bread and the cup at the last supper as symbols of the new covenant embodied in his life, death, and resurrection.

Covenants always entail responsibilities for at least one of the covenant partners. The people of Israel were called by God in Exodus 19:4-6 to “*obey my voice and keep my covenant.*” Then the people would be “*my treasured possession . . . a priestly kingdom . . . a holy nation.*” Ministers and the congregations they serve accept similar responsibilities of faithfulness and blessings as churches seek to minister in Jesus' name.

The concept of faithfulness is deeply connected to covenant (Jer. 14:21). The word faithful—which means steadfast, dedicated, dependable, and worthy of trust—is used to describe the relationship between God and Israel (Deut. 7:9): “*God . . . maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments.*” In 1 Corinthians 7:25 Paul offers pastoral counsel to the Corinthian congregation as a “*trustworthy*” minister.

Built upon fidelity, the covenant between ministers and congregations is not a static code, but a living and dynamic relationship. Jeremiah describes the internal nature of such a covenant, which is its heart and soul: “*The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people*” (Jer. 31:31, 33).

A Covenant of Ministerial Ethics moves beyond external restraints like rules posted on the employee bulletin board to the incarnation of ministerial integrity in relationships. Authentic, Christian ministry develops and nurtures healthy relationships between ministers and congregations. The standard by which ministers and congregations should be measured is not secular success, but by faithfulness to the covenant of ministerial ethics and the relationships which are the fruit of covenant fidelity.

## Preamble

As a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, called by God's grace through God's providence and purpose for my life and gifted by the Spirit for equipping the church, I commit myself to incarnate the biblical understanding of ministry and the ethical precepts that are contained in this covenant, in order that my ministry might faithfully reflect Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. As the congregation served by this minister, we commit ourselves to embody the promises contained in this covenant so that we might faithfully reflect the way of Jesus in our ministry to one another and to the world.

### For the minister:

- ❑ I will reflect the integrity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in my ministry by leading the congregation to follow Jesus, so becoming the salt of the earth and the light of the world, loving our enemies, becoming agents of reconciliation, doing justice for “the least of these,” speaking the truth in love, loving God as we love one another, and serving God as we serve one another.
- ❑ I will respond to the call of Christ with faithful obedience and count it a joyful privilege to be asked to serve in ministry.
- ❑ I will be intentional in nurturing relationships with family, friends, colleagues, and members of the congregation. I recognize the importance of building healthy relationships which are both open and honest and free from coercion, deception, manipulation, and the abuse of the power of my position.
- ❑ I will be committed to the faithful stewardship of time. I will be disciplined in my use of time, which includes not wasting time or working at all times. I will take time for spiritual formation, study, prayer, family, and rest.
- ❑ I will develop a healthy lifestyle which includes my spiritual, physical, and emotional health.
- ❑ I will be financially responsible, which responsibility includes paying my bills, avoiding financial favors, living within my salary, contributing to the financial support of my church and other ministries, and adopting a lifestyle consistent with biblical teachings concerning possessions and money.
- ❑ I will clearly demonstrate a life of sexual fidelity and integrity in all of my relationships and a commitment to the biblical standard of faithfulness in marriage and celibacy in singleness.
- ❑ I will participate in the larger community as the context of my ministry. I will be committed to the issues of justice, compassion, reconciliation, and to the marginalized as I value all of God's children.
- ❑ I will be directed in all that I do by Jesus' vision in the model prayer: “*Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” I will be dedicated to God's sovereign role and reign in every area of my life and be faithful in announcing that God's Kingdom has come in Jesus Christ.

### For the church:

- We will honor and respect the call of God in the lives of our ministers and count their service among us as a gift from God.
- We will commit ourselves to forming relationships, time structures, and ministry activities so that our ministers can build wholesome family relationships.
- We will respect our ministers' families and honor them as vital parts of our ministry team.
- We will commit to develop and nurture strong relationships within the congregation and show we are Christians by our love.
- We will recognize our ministers' need for rest and time to be away from work. We will protect their time to have a day off and their family time.
- We will recognize our own and our ministers' needs for spiritual formation and physical well being.
- We understand that workers are "worthy of their hire" and will compensate ministers with fairness and generosity.
- We will commit ourselves to exhibiting faithful and wholesome sexual relationships among ourselves, within our families, and beyond the church family.
- We shall endeavor to know and be known in the communities that we serve as witnesses to the love of Christ, who meets physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

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### Minister

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*name*

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*signature*

*date*

### Church Representative

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*name*

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*signature*

*date*

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