

# **ETHICAL PRINCIPLES FOR COVENANT MINISTERS**

**ETHICS COMMITTEE  
& BOARD OF THE ORDERED MINISTRY  
THE COVENANT MINISTERIUM**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction . . . . .	3
Foundational Premises . . . . .	4
<b>ETHICAL PRINCIPLES</b>	
<b>Principle 1: Ministerial Competence         and Excellence . . . . .</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Principle 2: The Integrity of the         Ministerial Relationship . . . . .</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Principle 3: Preserving Boundaries in         the Ministerial Relationship . . . . .</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Principle 4: Practicing Integrity in the         Ministerial Role . . . . .</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Principle 5: Confidentiality . . . . .</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Principle 6: Responsibility to         Colleagues . . . . .</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Principle 7: Responsibility to         Congregations . . . . .</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Principle 8: Responsibility to         Parishioners, Students,         Supervisees, and Staff . . . . .</b>	<b>10</b>
Conclusion . . . . .	11

# INTRODUCTION

As members of the Ministerium of the Evangelical Covenant Church we are committed to the lordship of Jesus Christ, the authority of Scripture, and the joint tasks of evangelism and mission. Understanding that ministry belongs to the whole church, we nonetheless recognize that we have been called and gifted through the Holy Spirit to devote ourselves to be servants of the Word, the Sacraments, the congregation, the church at large, and the world in which we live. We are dedicated to maintaining high standards of conduct and competence.

The Evangelical Covenant Church has historically affirmed the Bible as the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct. We are a non-creedal church, believing in the sufficiency of the Scriptures themselves. Creeds and codes beyond the Bible have at times been detrimental rather than helpful in the development of living faith and moral character.

The church takes seriously its teaching office and has from time to time published affirmations and principles concerning doctrine and conduct. We are a non-hierarchical church. Therefore we honor the freedom of the pulpit by exercising jurisdiction only over ministerial standing. While it is the responsibility of the local church or ministry to call, supervise, or dismiss the clergy, in cases where ministers may be guilty of serious misconduct, the denomination actively pursues an investigation after a complaint has been made. Following the investigation, if warranted, appropriate discipline is exercised.

These principles should be distinguished from the Rules of the Ordered Ministry, which list offenses that are the bases for discipline: indiscretion, immorality, doctrinal error, unethical behavior, or disloyalty to the Covenant. The Board of Ministry determines misconduct based upon the Rules of the Ordered Ministry and the application of biblical principles of morality on a case by case basis. These principles are a teaching document, which is meant to alert us to ethical principles that ought to inform our ministerial conduct. Since these principles are ultimately based upon the teaching of Holy Scripture, they must be interpreted in the church in accordance with the principles of Scripture. Nothing in this document is intended to create legal obligations or legal standards or define legal relationships. This document should not be used or interpreted by government or secular authorities for secular or legal purposes. They are affirmed by the Ministerium upon review by the Board of the Ministry.

# FOUNDATIONAL PREMISES

We affirm the following theological and ethical statements as the foundational premises upon which the principles in this document are established:

- A) This world is created, sustained, and loved by the everlasting God who has overcome darkness by the victory of Christ in the Incarnation-Crucifixion-Resurrection event.
- B) We are called by God, through the leading of the Holy Spirit, to be servants of the Word and Sacraments, and to give leadership to the church as the body of Christ with the authority and grace of Christ the Servant.
- C) We hold true to and give instruction in the Bible, the Old and New Testaments, as the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.
- D) Aware that we fall short of the glory of God and only by grace are we saved, we nevertheless recognize the dignity and worth of each individual, grounded in the image of God.
- E) We seek to minister to everyone who comes to us (parishioner). Our calling is the expression of the totality of God's redemptive work in making himself known in Christ through the Holy Spirit, which is attested in Scripture and given narrative in the Church's tradition.
- F) We acknowledge that by virtue of our licensing, ordination, and call to ministry, we take on a responsibility to be trustworthy stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4. 1-2). This means that we view those to whom we minister as a part of a sacred trust from God. It is our responsibility to seek their well being, safeguard their interests, and protect them as we are able from danger and harm, even to the point of sacrificing our own interests. Hence, we act in the best interests of our parishioners, even when this action does not serve our needs or interests.
- G) We understand that as ministers we bring certain essential resources into our ministerial relationships for the purpose of helping the people we serve to know Jesus. These particular resources include seminary education, other supervised ministry training, and continuing access to the wisdom of mentors, teachers and colleagues. In addition, as ministers our call, gifts, and other qualities that enable effective ministry have been affirmed by the church. The church has authorized and credentialed us to carry out ministry on its behalf and with its authority. All these resources give us power and influence for the sake of ministry, in relationship to parishioners and the church at large.
- H) We recognize that the ministerial relationship is not only a personal relationship-- regardless of how much concern we may have for parishioners, how much warmth and sensitivity may characterize our relationships with them, or how close we may feel to them. We maintain a clear internal differentiation between our own emotions and those of our parishioners.
- I) We are called to be "shepherds of God's flock" (1 Peter 5:2-4) and to uphold the biblical standards of leadership (Ezek.34:2) by maintaining appropriate boundaries in all ministerial relationships. Boundaries are limits. We set limits on what we do for people. We set limits on what we will allow people to do for us. The people we serve need to know we have boundaries.
- J) We recognize as ministers that all of us are at risk to inappropriately cross boundaries in our ministerial relationships, thereby failing to uphold God's requirement "to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Ministry has certain characteristics that can blur the line between vocational and personal relationships, thereby increasing the potential for boundary violations.

- K) We are committed to the biblical standard of chastity in singleness and fidelity in marriage, (Exodus 20:14, Eph.5:3). We define marriage as a monogamous, heterosexual relationship. A minister will never engage in sexual activity outside of marriage.
- L) We will not commit acts of sexual misbehavior. We uphold biblical standards of holiness as stated in 1 Thess.4:3-8. The report of the Task Force on Sexual Harassment which was received by the Covenant Annual Meeting in June of 1996 defines **sexual misbehavior** in the following ways:
- Ø **Sexual Insensitivity:** Behavior which, though unintentional by virtue of ignorance or lack of feeling for others, is offensive to the object of such behavior whether based upon gender, marital status, sexual orientation, or any like reason. Insensitivity may be verbal (e.g. jokes, demeaning comments, slurs); physical (e.g., body contact or blocking movements); or visual (e.g., any offensive sights).
  - Ø **Sexual Indiscretion:** Behavior of a sexual nature which is offensive or intimidating by virtue of the perpetrator's poor judgment in conduct or speech and which demonstrates an overt lack of respect for the object of such behavior or disregard for the effects of such behavior on the persons involved. Indiscretion may be verbal (e.g., demeaning comments, jokes, slurs, belligerent or threatening words); physical (e.g., body contact or blocking movements); or visual (e.g., offensive sights of any nature).
  - Ø **Sexual misconduct:** Behavior of a sexual nature which is offensive or intimidating to the object of such behavior and which intentionally disregards that person's directly or indirectly expressed reactions or feelings of discomfort. Previously described behaviors are considered sexual misconduct when the perpetrator knowingly continues offensive behavior. Sexual misconduct can be divided further into:
    - ◆ **Sexual Harassment:** Any form of direct or implied sexual behavior which is unwelcome by the person to whom the behavior is directed or which creates a sexually offensive, hostile or intimidating atmosphere. Sexual harassment may include verbal behaviors (e.g., sexual jokes, innuendoes, or solicitation), physical contact (e.g., touching, hugging, rubbing against, blocking movements), or visual offenses (e.g., ogling, offensive sexually explicit sights, pictures, objects).
    - ◆ **Sexual abuse:** Sexual behavior by any person in a position of authority or responsibility toward another. This includes verbal, physical or visual offenses by which the perpetrator defies the other person's aversion or intentionally violates sexual, ethical, or moral standards in relation to those under their implied or direct authority. Sexual abuse involves the misuse/abuse of trust and power, personal and professional. Such behavior includes the following classifications which are not mutually exclusive:
      - **Sexual exploitation by a person in authority:** any sexual contact between persons in authority and those under their care (e.g., a parent, relative or family friend and a child/youth; a Sunday school teacher and a student; a childcare worker and a child; a youth worker and a youth; a church leader and a parishioner; a therapist/counselor and a client, including pastoral counselors or those acting in a counselor role; an employer and an employee). Such contact may include the use of a deception (representing to the person the person that the sex will be educative, healing or therapeutic).
      - **Child sexual abuse:** any form of direct or implied sexual behavior between an adult and a minor or between an adult and a minor or between an older minor and a younger minor, either within or outside of family relationships.

- **Sexual molestation and rape:** any sexual contact (not limited to sexual intercourse) that is achieved by force, coercion, threats, blackmail, manipulation, trickery or deceit. In many states legal definitions include varying degrees or criminal sexual conduct and attempted criminal sexual conduct.
- M) We will not use pornographic material whether video-based, printed, the telephone or electronics including pornographic web sites, web groups and chat rooms.
- N) We understand the need for self-care for the nurturing of our spiritual life through study, meditation, prayer, spiritual direction, and collegial companionship.
- O) We care for our personal and family health by maintaining a proper balance among our personal, family, and vocational responsibilities. We seek appropriate assistance when we are in need.
- P) We seek out and enter into collegial relationships, recognizing that our perspective and judgment can be compromised by isolation.

## **ETHICAL PRINCIPLES**

### **Principle 1: Ministerial Competence and Excellence**

In all matters relating to the ministry, members of the Covenant Ministerium affirm high standards of competence and excellence.

- A) In good faith we do our best in fulfilling the terms of our call to the church or ministry we serve.
- B) We abide by the Rules for the Ordered Ministry and cooperate with the Board of the Ordered Ministry in matters of discipline and care.
- C) We present accurate information and commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in leadership, scholarship, and pastoral care.
- D) We participate in continuing educational activities which include seminars, conferences, classes, and independent readings in the areas of spirituality, pastoral care, church leadership, biblical, ethical and theological studies.
- E) We use our power and influence wisely, especially in making public statements.
- F) We are responsible stewards of our personal finances--wisely and honestly managing our expenditures, debts, and investments, and keeping accurate, timely records. We also follow biblical models of giving.
- G) We do not use any illegal substance nor do we abuse alcohol, drugs or any other substance.
- H) We refrain from sexual misbehavior. (see page 5)
- I) We are aware of our personal limits and seek appropriate professional help for any personal or interpersonal problems that may impair our ministry or judgment.

### **Principle 2: The Integrity of the Ministerial Relationship**

In all matters pertaining to their ministerial relationships, members of the Covenant Ministerium faithfully act in the best interests of those they serve and empower them for ministry.

- A) We offer pastoral care to anyone regardless of race, gender, creed, ethnic origin, socio-economic status, or sexual orientation.
- B) We recognize that ministry frequently places us in relationships that place multiple expectations on us as pastors, family members, confidants, friends, etc. We maintain clarity about these relationships to avoid any situation that will compromise our total

ministry or our obligation to serve all parishioners. We recognize our primary responsibility to serve the interest of the Gospel.

- C) We enter into the pastoral relationship to benefit those we serve, not ourselves.
- D) We respect the right of those we serve to make decisions and assist them in understanding the consequences of their decisions. We will not, however, condone activities which are contrary to biblical teaching.
- E) We advise those we serve to obtain other professional services when they need help that is not within the limits of our competence and training.
- F) We seek additional consultation when it is in the best interest of those we serve and with their permission.
- G) We do not take financial advantage of those we are called to serve, and we exercise caution in accepting gifts from parishioners.

### **Principle 3: Preserving Boundaries in the Ministerial Relationship**

Members of the Covenant Ministerium recognize that it is primarily their responsibility to maintain boundaries in the ministerial relationship.

- A) We maintain a boundary by being clear about our role. We affirm the central importance of pastoral counseling; we are spiritual counselors not therapists. We give pastoral care, not therapy. Our counsel is both broader and narrower than the health care professions. It is broader in that we give guidance to the Christian community in all of life concerning faith, doctrine, and conduct. It is also narrower in that it does not claim the expertise of the psychotherapeutic disciplines. We value the insights of these disciplines and seek to work cooperatively with therapists. Ministers who are licensed counselors or therapists are subject to state regulations.
- B) We recognize the limits of pastoral counseling. We do not attempt to do extended counseling or in-depth therapy without proper training. In cases that are beyond our expertise and training, such as suicidal individuals, survivors of sexual abuse and sexual abusers, we consult with and make referrals to professional therapists who are specially trained in these areas. We also refrain from “counseling” in any setting that might suggest dating or other social interaction.
- C) We carefully monitor any sexual feelings vis-à-vis parishioners and staff. When we have these feelings, we acknowledge them to ourselves, to a supervisor or in a consultation--not to the individual who is the object of these feelings, nor to any other parishioners or staff member. We do not sexualize any ministerial relationship. If a parishioner or staff member engages in sexualized behavior towards us, we do not respond in kind. We maintain our role, reaffirm the ministerial relationship, and consult with a colleague, consultant, or supervisor.
- D) We provide for our own physical, psychological, and spiritual self-care, recreational time, time off to care for ourselves and our family, the nurturing of personal friendships, attendance at retreats, and educational leave.
- E) We are cautious when entering into relationships in which there may be conflicts between our role as ministers and other roles. If such relationships are unavoidable, we seek counsel from a mentor or colleague and then discuss the inherent problems and possible consequences with the individual(s) involved, and establish whatever boundaries we can to limit such conflicts.
- F) We avoid workaholicism and burnout. We are clear about our job descriptions and the accompanying expectations. If our workload seems unreasonable or unmanageable, we discuss this with a supervisor, the pastoral relations committee, or a consultant and see what can be done.

- G) We ask a supervisor or the pastoral relations committee to review our performance periodically and work with us. We take the initiative if our supervisor or the pastoral relations committee does not approach us first.
- H) In order to avoid isolation, we maintain contacts with colleagues and consult with them regularly.

#### **Principle 4: Practicing Integrity in the Ministerial Role**

In all matters relating to the vocation of ministry, members of the Covenant Ministerium maintain integrity in the practice of their ministerial role.

- A) We do not disparage the work of other ministers and members of the helping professions. When we find ourselves in disagreement, we follow the biblical mandate to speak the truth in love.
- B) We respect the congregation of another minister. We guard against all interference with the work of another congregation and render service to another congregation only in an emergency and at the invitation or with the consent of the minister concerned.
- C) We respect our successor's ministry in a former church, and we do not interfere in the ministry of a former church. We may, however, return to assist in pastoral functions on special occasions if requested to do so by the minister currently serving that church. When we retire we recognize that it is in the best interest of our successor and the church that we do not return to a former church. At all times we exercise extreme caution against interference in the ministry of our former churches.
- D) We respect the ministry of other churches in our area, and should not intrude upon those communities by seeking to persuade members of other churches to attend or become members where we serve. Should visitors from another local church attend regularly, efforts are made to understand the situation, and, if possible, enable them to return to their former congregation, striving at all times to build up the whole body of Christ.
- E) We respond to community calls for service or render help to individuals in crisis. We are careful that such service relates to the total context of our ministry, yet does not interfere with responsibilities to one's own congregation.
- F) We strive to keep all official records of the church current.
- G) We seek to have the financial affairs of our congregation administered with due regard to recognized business, legal, and accounting procedures.
- H) We do not engage in ongoing remunerative activities outside the congregation without knowledge of the church's leadership.
- I) We are diligent stewards of our time and effort in carrying out our call.
- J) We will seek to understand the laws of the jurisdiction in which we minister which pertain to clergy.

#### **Principle 5: Confidentiality**

In all matters pertaining to our pastoral relationships, as members of the Covenant Ministerium, we support the policy of the Evangelical Covenant Church "that their pastors shall not divulge any information disclosed to them in confidence during counseling or while giving any person advice, comfort, or guidance in their capacity as ministers; and ... that the Evangelical Covenant Church shall support its clergy in this position..."

## **Resolution on Confidentiality** set forth by Covenant Annual Meeting of June 1975

**WHEREAS**, it has long been recognized that one of the ministries of pastors in our churches is to counsel with persons, and give advice, comfort, and guidance; and

**WHEREAS**, Christian ministers can be singularly effective in witnessing to the gospel of Christ by assisting people with anxieties, guilts, fears, doubts, and despair; and

**WHEREAS**, in some situations Christian ministers can perform unique ministries to groups of people, particularly those with problems of isolation, conflict, oppression, and deprivation; and

**WHEREAS**, the performance of these ministries both to individuals and groups often requires a sense of complete trust that what is said will be kept private and a confidential communication; be it

**Resolved**, that it is the policy of the Evangelical Covenant Church that their pastors shall not divulge any information disclosed to them in confidence during counseling or while giving any person advice, comfort, or guidance in their capacity as ministers; and

**Resolved**, that the Evangelical Covenant Church shall support its clergy in this position; and, further, be it

**Resolved**, that our pastors be encouraged to acquaint themselves with the laws of their respective states and provinces which have to do with the right of confidentiality, so as to be aware of the legal setting under which they minister.

- A) We recognize that the right to confidentiality resides with those whom we serve. The overarching purpose of confidentiality is to protect our parishioners. We must keep this end in view as we apply the principle of confidentiality in real life situations of pastoral care.
- B) Confidentiality simply means to hold information in trust and not to divulge it. Confidential information may be shared with others in the best interests of the person involved. This should be done only with his or her permission, for instance, in order to seek consultation with a professional counselor or in order to protect the individual involved or others from future harm.
- C) The privilege of confidentiality applies to parishioner-minister communications. In cases where a parishioner confesses wrongdoing, it is our obligation to exhort them to work through the process of repentance, confession, restitution, forgiveness and restoration, especially when the person may be in danger of harming someone again.

## **Principle 6: Responsibility to Colleagues**

In all matters pertaining to their relationship with other members of the Covenant Ministerium and with other professionals in their community, members of the Covenant Ministerium are respectful and courteous, and maintain collaborative, collegial, mutually supportive, and cooperative relationships.

- A) We strive to maintain mutual accountability with other members of the pastoral community as a safeguard for personal life and ministry. We also seek to maintain peer relationships through faithful participation in district, conference, denominational and ministerial gatherings.
- B) We recognize our loving responsibility to confront each other according to the teaching of Christ in Matthew 18 when we have concern that our colleagues are in serious error.

## **Principle 7: Responsibility to Congregations**

In all matters pertaining to pastoral placement and pastoral relations within the congregations of which they are members of the Covenant Ministerium are honest and conscientious in all self representations.

- A) We accept the pastoral call as a sacred trust and faithfully perform all tasks until our ministry is completed. We recognize our role as pastor to all who participate in our congregation as well as to those who are part of the community.
- B) We acknowledge inquiries from other churches in a timely manner. If we are not interested, we indicate this as soon as our lack of interest is clear to us.
- C) We accurately present our experience, training, and skills when we are candidating.
- D) In making public statements about our ministry, we provide truthful information that will be helpful to persons making informed choices.
- E) We make accurate statements about our qualifications, functions, and affiliations.
- F) We clarify, whenever possible, inaccurate, misleading, or false statements made by others about our qualifications or services.
- G) When entering a congregation, we are respectful toward our predecessors.
- H) We make clear our role within the congregation and the particular contract we have with the congregation.
- I) We do not prolong our relationship with a congregation when it becomes reasonably clear that our relationship is not benefiting the congregation.
- J) Should we decide, for appropriate reasons, to terminate our relationship with a congregation, we communicate this decision to our congregation and to our conference superintendent, and assist the leadership of our congregation in making reasonable arrangements for the continuation of the ministry of the congregation. We should not make recommendations for a successor, nor are we present at a service at which a candidate is involved.
- K) We are respectful toward our successors and sensitive to their pastoral ministry with our former congregation, either by correspondence or by direct conversation. We leave a congregation with courteous finality for the sake of both our successor and our former congregation.
- L) We respect the conference superintendent as the consultant to pastoral search committees. When approached by another congregation for a recommendation for a pastor or pastoral staff, it is appropriate to make our recommendations through the office of the superintendent. If we receive a request for a reference regarding a candidate under consideration, we exercise prudence in responding so as not to subvert the search process.

## **Principle 8: Responsibility to Parishioners, Students, Supervisees, and Staff**

In all matters pertaining to our relationships with parishioners, students, supervisees, and staff, members of the Covenant Ministerium respect their rights and dignity. We are aware of our influential positions in relation to these persons and recognize the responsibility to nurture and empower them in accordance with other appropriate sections of these principles.

- A) We recognize that the minister as a servant of God has power and influence by virtue of his or her ministerial role. With this power and influence comes the responsibility to protect those who are vulnerable, (Romans 15:1, Mark 10:42-45).
- B) We are responsible to use our power and influence to benefit the people who call upon us for service.
- C) We are responsible to maintain appropriate boundaries in the ministerial relationship.

## **CONCLUSION**

The benefits of maintaining the integrity of the ministerial role are profoundly positive. When ministerial boundaries are maintained, the result will be wholeness and well-being for ministers themselves, their parishioners, and congregations.

However, the consequences of abusing the ministerial role are profound. For parishioners the consequences may be anger at the minister, mistrust of the ministry, depression and anxiety, alienation from the church, and a sense of having been betrayed by God. For ministers the consequences of misconduct may be discipline by the Board of the Ministry, the discrediting of his or her calling and office, damage to his or her reputation, violation of the sacred trust of the ministerial role, loss of livelihood, and impact on his or her family. For the congregation, the consequences may be divisiveness and discord, confusion and doubt, and a sense of violation.

Given the above consequences, we are wise to take to heart the ethical principles set forth in this document. For the sake of living godly lives which bear witness to the integrity of the Gospel, let us guard what has been entrusted to our care and faithfully discharge the duties of our ministries (1 Timothy 5. 20, 2 Timothy 4. 5).