

GUIDELINES FOR COUNSELLING BY MINISTRY PERSONNEL

Pastoral ministry is a privilege and a responsibility. In pastoral care, a sacred trust is bestowed that invites one into the intimacies and complexities of others' lives. Pastoral care, guidance, and support are integral and regular parts of the work of ministry personnel in the United Church.

From time to time ministry personnel are called into a counselling role that goes beyond regular pastoral care, guidance, and support, and requires a more structured, focused approach.

In these instances, clear boundaries of role and time are essential. Sometimes the minister cannot provide this counsel within the pastoral relationship, or the issue is of such complexity or consequence that specialized training and recognition are required.

Recognizing and respecting the boundary between pastoral care and counselling is critical for ministry personnel and for the well-being of those seeking counsel. Both roles contribute to healing, wholeness, and fullness of life and being.

The following guidelines are meant to assist ministry personnel with discerning how best to proceed in such circumstances.

Companion Documents

These guidelines are recommended to protect vulnerable persons who place their trust in a minister's care, as well as to guide ministry personnel, pastoral charges, and the wider church. In addition, please refer to the Sexual Abuse Prevention and Response Policy, and Ethical Standards and Standards of Practice for Ministry Personnel. These documents are available, in English and French, on www.united-church.ca or from Ministry and Employment, 1-800-268-3781 ext. 3161.

Guidelines

Key to the integrity of the pastoral relationship is clarity regarding one's role as minister. The following are guidelines for ministry personnel, pastoral charge Ministry and Personnel Committees, Conference personnel ministers, presbytery Pastoral Relations Committees, and the wider church on matters related to counselling within the pastoral relationship.

1. Remuneration

It constitutes a violation of ethical boundaries and of the standards of practice of ministry for ministry personnel to enter into a contract to engage someone normally under their pastoral care in "counselling sessions" for remuneration over and above their paid salary.

2. Responsibilities to the Pastoral Charge

Ministry personnel are responsible for informing the pastoral charge Ministry and Personnel Committee of the amount of time and energy used in counselling members of the pastoral charge and community, including the ministry personnel's limits regarding the number of sessions spent with those being counselled. Names and content of sessions are, of necessity, confidential. If counselling grows into a significant part of their ministry, the pastoral charge needs to be fully informed of this development.

3. Assessment

Ministry personnel whose pastoral care may involve some counselling are expected to undertake the following steps:

- a) Make a realistic assessment of their own training and experience, their competence to deal with the specific issues being presented, and the consultation resources that are available. (See Ethical Standards for Ministry Personnel, section 1, Competence.)
- b) Ensure that there is a clear understanding of the nature of the request, the issues involved, the outcomes sought, and the time commitment required.
- c) Appraise the emotional stability and coping resources of the person making the request, their previous counselling involvements, and their ongoing personal support systems to determine if short-term counselling is likely to be productive and helpful.
- d) Assess the degree to which their past or ongoing relationships with the person, at other levels in the pastoral charge and/or in the community, might interfere with either party entering into a responsible counselling relationship.
- e) Clarify, at the outset, the time, duration, and location of counselling sessions. It should also be made clear that either counsellor or counsellee can inform the other that counselling should be terminated, and that either of them can decide to make or seek a referral to another therapist or counsellor.

4. Support Systems

Sometimes, because of isolation or other circumstances, there may be need for more support and guidance than is usually available in most pastoral charges. Ministry personnel in these communities need to develop a variety of ways of enlisting support, consultation, training, and referral, both in and beyond their immediate area.

The United Church's Employee Assistance Program offers individual counselling consultation for ministry personnel who are seeking resources and support for a specific pastoral care counselling issue. This consultation is without charge to the ministry personnel and is conducted on a case-by-case basis with a counsellor. It allows ministry personnel the opportunity to discuss issues they have encountered in specific counselling sessions.

5. Confidentiality

Sessions must occur in a confidential setting where no one else can enter the room or overhear the conversation. Records must be kept of name(s), date, time, and general content of the session, stored in

a safely locked enclosure. All ministry personnel serving a pastoral charge need to be cognizant of all provincial regulations regarding confidentiality.

6. Professional Obligations

Ministry personnel encountering persons who are suicidal or homicidal, who learn of physical, sexual, or any other form of child abuse, or who become aware of domestic violence must be aware of the requirements of current provincial law. Knowledge of the obligation to report such information and the appropriate channels for doing so is mandatory. Familiarity with the Sexual Abuse Prevention and Response Policy of The United Church of Canada is also required.

There is no absolute privilege between ministry personnel and a person being counselled as there is in the case of a lawyer and client. In circumstances other than those described above, ministry personnel are advised not to disclose any information, but to keep it strictly confidential unless

- a) the person gives permission to disclose it,
- b) a civil court orders the disclosure of the information, or
- c) there is immediate serious risk to a person's safety that could be prevented by the disclosure.

7. Liability Insurance

All ministry personnel should be informed of insurance coverage for liability arising out of the practice of counselling by ministry personnel. If the pastoral charge has the United Church group insurance (through HUB International) and the counselling is within the scope of regular pastoral care, there is liability coverage up to \$2,000,000. If the pastoral charge does not participate in the group plan, there may not be coverage for counselling by ministry personnel unless it is specifically included by arrangement with the insurance carrier; it is not normally included in Commercial General Liability insurance.

8. Continuing Education

For ministers, good listening skills are a critical component to all pastoral care. Ministry personnel who engage in counselling as part of their pastoral care must also recognize that ongoing educational events are imperative.

To avoid damaging others and overextending their own personal resources and time, ministers need to have specific knowledge of

- a) addictions and appropriate ways of intervening
- b) the cycles of violence and abuse
- c) the symptoms of mental health issues requiring outside professional help (including suicide intervention)
- d) the effects of racism, poverty, and oppression
- e) cultural differences and diversity

Continuing education in each of these areas is required for effective ongoing pastoral care.

Self-care done in intentional ways, through supervision and consultation with a professionally trained mentor or counsellor, is also integral to maintaining an effective and healthy balance.

9. Power Dynamics

Ministry personnel are in a position of power. Ministry personnel who counsel persons from vulnerable populations need to see themselves as vessels of the Creator's love and energy, not as "superiors" working from an egoist/power state. Special care and attention to the vulnerabilities of another—including information about cultural and spiritual practices, traditions, beliefs, and family systems—must be an integral part of their frame of reference.

A framework of cultural safety may mean assisting the person to obtain services that are culture-specific and will respond to their various needs (for example, sweat lodges, traditional medicines, Elders, mosques, synagogues, temples, and rituals to which the person adheres).

For those engaging in pastoral counselling with people of Aboriginal descent, it is essential to develop a thorough understanding of the historical impacts of trauma resulting from colonization, the residential school legacy, and the role of the church. To identify and assist survivors of residential schools, one must be aware of the resources available for survivors and be open to receiving personal training in multigenerational issues from respected Elders. (The article "Native Ethics and Rules of Behaviour," by Clare C. Brant, M.D. [*Can J Psychiatry* 1990; 35:534–9] is recommended as a foundational reference.)

10. Standards of Practice

Ministry personnel are expected to follow the United Church guidelines in the Ethical Standards and Standards of Practice for Ministry Personnel, especially in relation to counselling, in Ethical Standards, section 6, Relationships with Persons Served:

Ministry personnel are aware of and attentive to the possible impact of their words and actions in caring for the emotional, mental, and spiritual needs of persons who seek their help. In all relationships ministry personnel are called to

- a) uphold the integrity of the ministry relationship in which they serve
- b) honour the dignity, culture, and faith of all persons
- c) respect personal boundaries such as those of space and touch
- d) use the power and influence of their office appropriately
- e) be sensitive to the needs and vulnerabilities of all, while clarifying and maintaining the professional nature of the relationship