

PERSONAL BOUNDRIES AS SAFEGUARDS

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Pastors have the opportunity to share in the most intimate occasions of their church member's lives. They are often a part of life's major celebrations – birth, baptism, confirmations, and marriages. And, it is in the sad, sometimes tragic events that people call on their pastor for support, comfort, and knowledge of resources. Pastors are invited into the lives of members of their congregations when they are feeling the most vulnerable in life experiences. This is a privilege that is part of the role of the pastor. In order to honor that privilege and offer spiritual support, it is essential that pastors are trustworthy and provide safe passage for those being pastored. Walking with and supporting people through difficult times in their lives requires that the pastor have clarity around the issues in his or her own live in order to avoid becoming enmeshed in the lives of those being pastored. When people are vulnerable and overcome with stress and grief, personal boundaries become vague and weak. This is true of the pastor as well as the one being pastored. It is the fiduciary responsibility of the pastor as servant to set the limit and keep the lines of the relationship well defined. This provides safety for both sides of the relationship.

A personal boundary may be defined as that which separates one individual from another; the limits that give structure or shape to a relationship. Having clear personal boundaries allows one to offer protection, to give support, to affirm, to mediate, and to empower. When boundaries are unclear, exploitation, abuse, manipulation, and violation may occur. In his book *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, Edwin Friedman emphasizes the importance of self-differentiation of pastors in maintaining a healthy church environment. Pastors who are self differentiated will have fewer problems with boundary violations for themselves or those whom they may pastor who do not have clear personal boundaries.

When there is conflict in a church, it is easy for everyone to lose touch with limits and personal boundaries. Under the stress of conflict, pastors may become vulnerable and those leading the conflict may take advantage of the situation and undermine the authority of the pastor. Unfortunately, it is up to the pastor, regardless of how much he or she is being impacted by the conflict, to maintain the boundaries for everyone; thus, the importance of having a strong network of support. Having someone who is trusted to reflect with, such as a supervisor, mentor, therapist, spiritual director or a peer, increases one's personal awareness of how personal boundaries are being managed. Naming and claiming issues, as well as role clarity in various situations, is helpful when situations may be clouded.

Having clear boundaries provides structure for growth and development of self and other. It is essential in the development of trust and safety in a system. When boundaries are clear and maintained, power is managed in a constructive way and there is safety for those who are vulnerable. It is the key to healthy relationships.