

Ministerial Ethics

A Guideline for Cascades Classis
Reformed Church in America
[*Courtesy of Holland Classis*]

Preamble

Ministers of Word and Sacrament (hereafter "ministers") in the Reformed Church in America promise to walk in the Spirit of Christ, in love and fellowship with the church, seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace (Formulary #3 Declaration for Ministers of Word and Sacrament). In making this promise they place themselves in the context of a covenant relationship with God who calls them into ministry together with members of Christ's church. The nature of ministry, as well as its accompanying tasks and demands, requires that; ministers abide not only by the moral requirements of the gospel expected of all Christians but that they also demonstrate the highest integrity of character in carrying out their profession and calling. A statement of ethics can never fully define the moral requirements of this important calling. However, it can provide some specific guidelines that outline the shape and spirit of the character of Christian ministry and of the persons who fill this role.

Purpose

These guidelines for ministerial ethics are intended to be used by individuals, congregations, and the classis for the following purposes:

- **Education:** A statement of ethics functions as a training tool for the classis in several ways. In their mentoring role with students under the care of classis, classis members can use such a statement to make students aware of what the classis expects of persons serving in the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament. New members of the classis can be provided with a copy of the guidelines. Through occasional educational events and ongoing dialogue within the classis, discussion of the statement will contribute to growth in our corporate understanding of the meaning of moral integrity in the life of God's servants.

- **Self-evaluation:** A statement of clergy ethics provides a touchstone for the moral requirements of ministers as they carry out their professional responsibilities in congregations or in other Christian ministry settings. Ministers are largely self-directed in carrying out their ministries, and must continually evaluate the appropriateness of their ministerial activity.

- **Classis accountability:** Ministers are supervised and supported by the classis. These guidelines state clear expectations that provide a standard for accountability within the classis.

The Minister's Personal Conduct

Christian discipleship calls for the highest levels of personal integrity as a witness to Jesus Christ. As public representatives of Christ's church and as teachers within it, ministers are responsible intentionally to nurture qualities of character and personal integrity that model the way of Christ. In all areas of life the minister will strive to be an example of holy living.

This principle is illustrated in the following types of conduct:

In speech and conduct, ministers will pattern themselves after Paul's counsel to think about whatever is honorable, pure, lovely, gracious, excellent, and worthy of praise. He/she should always speak the truth in love, with understanding, tact, and discretion, respecting all people, always desiring to build up the body of Christ. The minister will be intellectually honest and have a high regard for truthfulness. In relationships with family, ministers will honor their commitments to covenant relationships and the responsibilities that derive from these.

Fidelity in personal relationships reflects God's faithfulness. In the arena of sexual life, the minister will abide by the tradition of fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness. (See MGS 1995, pp289-293) The minister's sexual life will model the highest levels of integrity.

Ministers will not neglect their own spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical well-being, but will nurture and care for themselves as they nurture and care for others. Their self care is an expression of self love that acknowledges God's love for them and better enables them to love others.

In financial affairs ministers will strive to demonstrate the highest standards of integrity, characterized by generosity rather than acquisitiveness and by simplicity rather than extravagance. The minister will model a standard of financial stewardship that reflects the gospel's teaching.

Having promised to submit himself/herself to the counsel and admonition of the classis, the minister will be accountable to consistory and open to the counsel of colleagues, accountability partners, and others who seek to nurture ongoing faithfulness to the gospel in the life of fellow Christians. The minister will seek to model biblical forms of mutual accountability within the community of Christ's church.

The Minister's Relationship to the Congregation

The minister is called by God and the church to use his/her gifts to build up and equip the church for mission in the world, and to seek the things that make for unity, purity, and peace.

This principle is illustrated in the following types of conduct:

As leaders, ministers will strive to exercise Christ-like leadership respecting God's gifts as they are manifested in the whole life of the congregation and through the work of those ordained to the offices of minister, elder and deacon. Recognizing that Christ is head of the church, ministers will subject themselves to Christ's authority.

As they exercise the legitimate authority of their office, ministers will combine leadership with humility, demonstrating above all that loving obedience to God and compassion for God's people furthers the mission of the church.

Pastoral relationships will be carried out with prudent safeguards and will always be characterized by discretion and the deepest respect for all people. As pastors, ministers will exercise careful discretion in order to respect the sensitive nature of pastoral concerns shared by those for whom the minister cares, and will

hold confidential the content of all pastoral counseling unless permission is granted for selective disclosure. Ministers will respect emotional boundaries as they provide professional pastoral care. Ministers will avoid sexual misconduct with parishioners, including inappropriate emotional involvement, flirtation and other activities that may transgress professional boundaries.

When conflicts arise between a minister and church member, the minister will seek to resolve the conflict according to biblical guidelines and principles of conflict resolution, seeking both to build up the church and to restore a relationship of Christian love between him/herself and the church member(s). The minister will refrain from using his/her position or authority to coerce or discredit others and will be careful to refrain from demeaning language to or about those with whom he/she is in conflict.

The Minister's Relationship to Colleagues

Recognizing that God is at work through the ministry of other servants, ministers will be especially vigilant in seeking to support other ministers through encouragement and prayer. The minister respects pastoral colleagues and strives always to strengthen these ministers in the work to which God has called them. Ministers will strive to maintain the unity, purity, and peace of the church in their private and public comments about other ministers and ministries of the classis.

This principle is illustrated in the following types of conduct:

As colleagues on staff within a congregation or as ministers in intra-church relationships, ministers will work together in a spirit of cooperation that puts Christ's church first. Relationships to other pastors will be characterized by respect for the other's competencies and position, by constructive words and deeds of support, by a willingness to forgive, by an appreciation of differing styles of ministry, and by tolerance of different opinions whenever it is possible to do so without violating the integrity of the gospel.

When disagreements arise or conflicts develop, those involved should seek, at the earliest possible opportunity, to communicate their concerns to the other party in a direct, honest and open manner. Those uncomfortable doing this alone should seek assistance from an appropriate source. Ministers approach each other in a spirit of Christian love, expecting a response characterized by understanding and a willingness to find a mutually satisfying resolution. They avoid talking to others about their discontent, choosing instead to confront colleagues directly.

In relationships with successor ministers, the minister who retires or moves to another congregation or work will exercise care not to influence by written or spoken word the selection of his or her successor. The minister will assist in the transition to new pastoral leadership by providing pastoral service only at the invitation of the successor (or in the absence of the successor, another appropriate designee).

In relationships with predecessors, a minister will seek to affirm all that was good and will refuse, to initiate or participate in criticism, resisting the temptation to denigrate a colleague in ministry, even when the relationship with the congregation was marked by conflict, stormy relationships, or poor performance.

A minister who remains a member of a congregation after the pastoral relationship has been dissolved must exercise extreme care to insure that his/her continuing presence is supportive of the new pastor and the congregation's ministry and program. Recognizing the difficulties inherent these circumstances, the pastor who remains is always willing to receive counsel, when necessary from church leaders, colleagues, and the classis.

In relationships with pastors of other churches, the minister will seek to work cooperatively in ways that build up the whole church of Jesus Christ. In speaking of other pastors the minister will avoid disparaging words and seek the unity, purity, and peace of the church, striving to manifest faith, hope, and love in all relationships.

A minister will be accountable to colleagues who, in a spirit of Christlike love, call him/her to high standards of moral, intellectual, and professional excellence and who seek to nurture their faithfulness to the call to follow Jesus. Ministers who call others to accountability will be equally diligent in discerning their own motives and in following Jesus' advice to examine their own lives and ministry.

Ministers who have no official pastoral relationship with the congregation in which they worship will honor and support the pastor(s) in all of their ministerial functions within the congregation, and will fulfill pastoral functions only at the invitation of the installed ministers. They will take care, not to exercise undue influence on congregational decisions.

The Minister's Relationships to Other Congregations and to the Ecumenical Church

Christ's people gather in many places as communities who worship and serve God in a variety of ways; moved by God's Spirit. Ministers respect the integrity and diversity of congregations and ministries carried out throughout God's church.

This principle is illustrated in the following types of conduct:

In their relationships with members of other congregations, pastors will refrain from providing pastoral services, except at the invitation of or with the permission of a person's own pastor. When it is appropriate to make pastoral calls due to family connections or personal relationships, ministers will extend the courtesy of informing the person's pastor. A minister will normally make such calls as he or she would deem appropriate for another minister to make on a member of his/her own congregation.

When talking with members from other congregation who are seeking to transfer their membership, ministers will typically engage in a serious pastoral conversation that assists church members to assess their motives and that encourages them, when it seems appropriate, to be actively committed to their present community of faith. Ministers will not seek to increase the membership of churches they serve at the expense of neighboring congregations.

Recognizing that Christ's church is diverse in style, theology, liturgy and mission, ministers will seek the unity of Christ's church through cooperation, mutual support, and ecumenical dialogue with pastors and congregations of other Christian denominations, in accordance with their own ordination vows and the ecumenical policies of the denomination.

The Minister's Witness Beyond the Church

As leaders who call others to follow Jesus in ways of living (acting and speaking) that witness to God's kingdom, ministers strive to model the character of Christian discipleship not only within Christ's church, but in relationship to all God's people and throughout God's whole creation. Spiritual gifts, individual temperament, and formative experience lead each of us to a personal witness that is unique, while at the same time each of our lives reflects the character of Jesus.

This principle is illustrated in the following types of conduct:

Doing justice in the social and political realm, in hopeful anticipation of the well-being (*shalom*) that God intends for all creation.

Making peace wherever they encounter conflict and discord, seeking to love their enemies and to encourage others to do so. As peacemakers, ministers strive to live in ways that reconcile individuals, races, and nations and that create harmony instead of violence, so that all people are safe and secure.

Caring for creation in order to exercise God-given stewardship toward the natural world, to protect it from degradation and to preserve this precious gift.

Demonstrating unconditional love not only to their families and friends, but to those whose ideas and customs are foreign, and whose ways may be threatening.

Exercising good citizenship within community and nation.

Showing hospitality to strangers—especially those whose differences make us uncomfortable—by creating space to listen, understand, and appreciate the other.

Conclusion

Ministers of Word and Sacrament in the Reformed Church in America are encouraged by the Classis of Cascades prayerfully to seek to embody the moral character described within this statement of ministerial ethics. Ministers are guided in their moral lives by Scripture and the discernment of the community of faith, under the ongoing guidance of God's Spirit. In whatever they do, they seek to glorify God. Within that framework these guidelines have sought to describe the moral character of the practice of Christian ministry. It is the goal of this statement to assist members of the classis as they walk in the Spirit of Christ, in love and fellowship with the church, seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace.