



Leading with Integrity

A Guide to the Code of Conduct



The Joy and Responsibility of Ministry

Serving in ministry, whether as a volunteer in a youth ministry, an elder or a deacon on a council, a Sunday School teacher, or a pastor, is a sacred calling. God calls and the church recognizes the calling and gifts of its members to serve in various ministry roles that build up the body of Christ. This service is a blessing to the church and often a joy to the ministry leader.

In addition to being a blessing and a joy, serving as a ministry leader is a significant responsibility. Ministry leaders are given the profound privilege and unique opportunity to care for the spiritual life of others, to come alongside and support others in their faith journey, and to be the presence of Christ to them. People look to and invite ministry leaders to guide and instruct them in matters of faith and life.

In the context of this pastoral relationship, ministry leaders have significant influence over those to whom they are ministering. Such influence can be used for great good in ways that lead to the flourishing of others. It can also be used, intentionally or unintentionally, in ways that bring harm.

In order to encourage ministry leaders to be intentional in using their influence for good, and to clarify expectations for Christlike behavior, the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America adopted the Code of Conduct for ministry leaders. The Code functions to educate and remind ministry leaders of how to conduct themselves in ministry in ways that are

faithful to their calling and role and bring flourishing and shalom to others. When implemented well, the Code of Conduct can help to shape the culture of a congregation, nurturing a community of respect, hospitality, and care.

Why This Resource and How to Use

This resource was designed to orient ministry leaders to the Code of Conduct. It consists of seven sessions, following the outline of the Code of Conduct, that invite participants to reflect on the Code in light of Scripture. By the end of the seven sessions, participants will have a clear understanding of the expectations for conduct set out by the Code, their Biblical basis, and how best to live out the Code in the context of their own ministry.

Wondering how your church can make use of this resource? Consider using it for:

- devotional material at the beginning of seven council or staff team meetings
- discussion material for a leadership retreat
- conversation topics for mentoring relationships between ministry leaders
- a resource for personal devotions and reflection.

Our hope and prayer is that this material will deepen the collective commitment of churches and ministry leaders in the Christian Reformed Church to use their influence for good and to do all that they can to resist the misuse of power that leads to harm.

Preamble

Mark 10:35-45 displays two very different approaches to the use of power. The disciples are exposed as being power hungry and vulnerable to a worldly expression of power. Jesus intervened by clarifying that a worldly view of power “lord[s] it over” those whom it influences. Jesus proclaimed, “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (v. 43). Jesus displays that power and influence are not negative in themselves but are a gift of God for good. However, Jesus also insists that a misuse of power is not acceptable for leaders in his kingdom. Rather, he demands that they lead as humble servants for the glory of God and the thriving of others. After all, they follow the one who “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (v. 45).

All of us who are united to Christ by faith and who serve in the life of the church are called, in this passage and others (Phil. 2:1-10), to this way of being. Jesus himself, in response to the desire for power expressed by his disciples, called them (and us) to use power to bring glory to God and serve people—a way of holding power that confronts and contrasts with the ways that the world uses power.

Not only do we have this call from Christ, but we actually have Jesus living and growing within us (Gal. 2:20). As a result, we find ourselves being transformed into the kind of people who hold and use power in a Christlike way.

Scripture

[Mark 10:35-45](#)

That being said, until Christ returns and brings us to perfection, we will continue to wrestle with the urge to misuse power and abuse others. Ugly realities such as verbal, emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, and spiritual abuse are found among us. The power that we hold by virtue of our person or our position can always be twisted into the project of building up ourselves and our own kingdoms at the expense of others. This is true for pastors, lay ministry leaders, and church members alike.

In awareness of these ugly realities and in the beautiful hope of Christ’s transforming work, the following code of conduct is offered for ministry leaders. It is shaped by Scripture and by commitments found in our confessional statements and contemporary testimonies. (See Belgic Confession, Article 28; Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A’s 55, 107, 111.) It emerges out of a response by Synod 2018 to patterns of abuse that had been brought to its attention and is aimed at preventing such abuse in the future. May God’s peace be among us.

Code of Conduct

“Ministry leaders” are all officebearers (ordained ministers, commissioned pastors, elders, and deacons), CRCNA staff members, and members of the Council of Delegates. Local church councils are also encouraged to regard all church staff (whether or not they are ordained) and volunteers who are providing leadership in the church as ministry leaders. Ministry leaders have been empowered by God and the church to serve the body of Christ for good. They are called to resist all temptations to abuse their power through the misuse of position, authority, or influence.

Abuse of power is often defined as misusing power to harm another person or using power and influence to take unjust advantage of another person. All abuse by ministry leaders within the church is also spiritual abuse and has spiritual impacts that often heighten the harm caused to individuals and to the family of God. For more on the use and misuse of power, see the [“Addressing Abuse of Power Report”](#) (Acts of Synod 2019, pp. 587-615).

Discussion

1. Power and influence are neither good nor bad but are a gift from God that can be used for the flourishing of others or to bring harm. Each position of ministry leadership comes with power and influence. When you think about those who serve in the role of a ministry leader, for instance, a pastor, an elder, a youth leader, or volunteer, in what ways do they have influence? Where have you, as a ministry leader, noticed that people look up to you and give you influence over them?
2. People who participate in various ministries come with an assumption and posture of trust toward those who are ministry leaders. How can ministry leaders steward that trust in a Christlike way?
3. What do you hear in Mark 10:35-45 that helps us understand how to steward our power and influence well?
4. What are the spiritual practices that can help you be intentional about using your influence for the flourishing of others? How can you develop these spiritual muscles?

SESSION 2: RELATIONSHIPS



As a ministry leader, I will, to the best of my ability, commit to the following:

Relationships

1. I will speak and act, in all my personal and professional relations, in ways that follow the pattern of Christ, who used his power to serve.
2. I will respect, love, and treat with integrity and truthfulness people of every position, status, race, ethnicity, gender, age, or ability.
3. I will maintain appropriate emotional, physical, and sexual boundaries in all relationships.
4. I will keep all my relationships free from inappropriate, unwanted physical contact, emotional or sexual intimacy, sexual comments, gestures, or jokes.

Scripture

[Genesis 1:26-27](#)

Discussion

1. What does it mean to respect, love, and treat all people with integrity?
2. In Genesis 1:26-27, the Bible teaches that every human being is created in the image of God. How should this impact the way that we treat others?
3. How do we help each other do this? How can we nurture a culture in our communities that resists mistreatment of others?

SESSION 3: SAFETY



Scripture

[Isaiah 25:1-4a](#)

Safety

1. I will actively promote a welcoming and respectful environment where all persons are treated with dignity and value, and where any form of abuse, bullying, or harassment is neither tolerated nor allowed to take place.
2. I will report known or suspected cases of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect of minors or vulnerable adults to the proper authorities.
3. I will support those who disclose physical, sexual, or emotional abuse in a way that empowers the person who has been victimized to seek out justice and healing.

Discussion

1. In her book, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, Diane Langberg notes that trauma is the greatest mission-field of the 21st century. A growing number of people in and outside of our congregations have experienced significant trauma from which they are trying to heal. Such healing can only take place when people feel physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe. What would it take for people to feel safe at your church?
2. God is a refuge for the poor, needy, and distressed, a hiding place from the storm. How can the church reflect God's character by being a place of refuge?
3. If someone discloses abuse, what would you do?

SESSION 4: PASTORAL LEADERSHIP



Scripture

[1 Peter 5:1-4](#)

Pastoral Leadership

1. I will promote truthfulness, transparency, and honesty in all of my work.
2. I will use my power, authority, and position to build up the community of believers and seek first the kingdom of God.
3. I will work within my trained competence, especially in counseling situations, and I will refer individuals to other professionals as appropriate.
4. I will preach, teach, admonish, or discipline in ways that are biblical and Christlike, promoting the shalom and flourishing of those to whom I am ministering (2 Tim. 3:16).
5. I will refrain in my pastoral care and counseling from using references to Scripture or God to manipulate, coerce, or threaten another person.
6. I will disclose any perceived or actual conflict of interest.

Discussion

1. According to 1 Peter 5:1-4, what are the marks of a good shepherd?
2. What is the difference between church discipline and spiritual abuse?
3. When you reflect on the role of an elder, deacon, pastor, or ministry leader, what falls within the scope of the role? What is beyond the role? What is theirs to do? What is not theirs to do? In what situations should a person be referred?



Scripture

[Proverbs 11:13](#)

Confidentiality

1. I will maintain and uphold confidentiality appropriately, which means I will hold in confidence whatever information is not mine to share.
2. I will not use information shared with me in confidence in order to elevate my position or to depreciate that of others.

Discussion

1. Consider what it felt like when you found out that someone shared something you told them in confidence with others. What was the hardest thing for you?
2. What is the connection between confidentiality and trust?
3. What kinds of information should be kept confidential and when do you need to disclose it to others? What principles and questions might guide your discernment?



Scripture

[2 Corinthians 8:18-21](#)

Finances

1. I will ensure that funds for which I am responsible or which are under my control are used for their intended ministry purposes.
2. In all financial matters, including the acceptance of gifts, I will act with scrupulous honesty, transparency, and appropriate accountability.
3. I will appropriately use and encourage accepted accounting practices and regular reviews and/or audits of ministry funds.

Discussion

1. Paul talks about taking pains to ensure that he and the apostles are above reproach in the handling of money. In what ways are you “taking pains” in all financial matters to ensure that you are doing what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but in the eyes of people? What kinds of checks and balances do you have in your church regarding accountability with finances?
2. What more could you do to ensure good financial practices and accountability?



Discussion

1. Read through the whole Code of Conduct again, starting with the preamble. In your particular context, what stands out for you as areas of strength and areas of growth?
2. What next steps will you take to live into and implement the Code of Conduct in your context?
3. What measures will you set in place to hold each other mutually accountable to the Code of Conduct?

Additional Resources

Crouch, Andy. [Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power](#). (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013).

Langberg, Diane. [Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church](#). (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020).

Langberg, Diane. [Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores](#). (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015).

McKnight, Scot and Laura Barringer. [A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture that Resists Abuse and Promotes Healing](#). (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale), 2020.

CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders

Background

A code of conduct provides clarity about attitudes, behavior, and accountability that can be expected of church leaders in the practice of a healthy and safe ministry.

The CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders resulted from the direction of Synod 2019. Synod 2018 had instructed the Council of Delegates to appoint a team to bring recommendations “regarding how the CRCNA can address patterns of abuse of power at all levels of the denomination” (Acts of Synod 2018, p. 523), and that team presented recommendations that were adopted by Synod 2019. One of those recommendations was to produce a code of conduct, and a draft copy of such a code was presented to Synod 2022 and was referred to the churches for feedback. A revised version of the code then came to Synod 2023, which adopted the document along with further revisions recommended by its advisory committee.

The approved final version of the Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders is presented on the following pages.

When it approved the Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders, Synod 2023 also recommended that the code be included in Church Order Supplement, Article 5, and that a change be made to Church Order Article 5, requiring that “all officebearers shall uphold the standards of behavior summarized in the CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders.” In line with Church Order Article 47 and its Supplement, which states that proposed changes to the Church Order must be adopted by a following synod, the recommended changes are now proposed for adoption by Synod 2024.

Since the code of conduct has already been adopted by Synod 2023, however, churches may begin implementing it at any time.

Synod also encouraged councils and classes to implement the code of conduct for all staff (nonordained as well as ordained) and for volunteers who provide leadership in the church or classis, and synod mandated the general secretary to oversee the development of training modules that orient ministry leaders to the code of conduct.

Introduction

Congregations and ministry leaders are both well served by clearly identifying expectations for Christlike

behavior. A code of conduct enables churches to be proactive in educating staff and volunteers about expectations rather than reactive when unspoken expectations are not met.

When implemented well, a code of conduct helps to shape the culture of a congregation, particularly with respect to how people are treated, fostering a culture in our churches where the value of every person is protected and where everyone is free to worship God and grow in faith free from harm.

Key to cultivating a culture of dignity and respect in the church is creating safe and receptive avenues for reporting abuse or misconduct. Those who have been harmed need to be heard and cared for by the church. This posture, however, does not assume the guilt of the accused. Allegations of violations should be examined and assessed through a fair process. The local church council is responsible for deciding the best way to follow up on the allegations.

Ministry leaders have a significant amount of authority and spiritual influence over the people who participate in the ministries of the church. People extend a great deal of trust to ministry leaders, inviting them into their lives at times and on occasions of significant vulnerability: birth, death, sickness, times of fear, doubt, joy, and suffering. It is a rare privilege to come alongside and support someone in their faith journey, being the presence of Christ to them. The stewardship of such power is a great responsibility—responsibility to use this power in ways that lead to shalom.

Typically, ministry leaders are mature Christians who exemplify good character and integrity, exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Still, like all human beings, they are prone to sin, and they make mistakes. Stress, anxiety, burnout, and disappointment may lead them to act out of their old selves rather than their new life in Christ. As a result, they may fail to use their authority in redeeming ways and instead use it in a way that brings about harm. When this happens, the congregation’s flourishing and the integrity of the church’s gospel witness are affected. For this reason, it is crucial that the church put in place tools and measures of accountability that help ministry leaders use their authority and influence responsibly in order to build up the people to whom they are ministering.

The implementation of the Code of Conduct is the responsibility of the local council that holds the membership or credentials of the ministry leader. A classis has responsibility to implement the Code of Conduct for classical ministry leaders and employees. For CRCNA staff members, this oversight is shared with the Human Resource departments for denominational staff.

The assembly that implements the Code of Conduct is also responsible for determining how to enforce the Code of Conduct and the ramifications for people who violate it based on the gravity of the offense and the harm done. Safe Church coordinators, denominational Safe Church staff, and the Dignity Team are available for consultation and advice as needed.

The Bible is our guide for faith and life. The confessions are systematic summaries and interpretations of the Bible around which we are united as a denomination and which we confess to be faithful and true to the teachings of Scripture. The Code of Conduct is a document that establishes Biblical standards of behavior and practices for contemporary realities, addressing appropriate interpersonal relationships, confidentiality, financial integrity, pastoral leadership, and mandatory reporting. It is a summary of Christian standards for contemporary ministry leadership. It clarifies for ministry leaders what is required for healthy and safe ministry, and it communicates to parishioners what they can expect from ministry leadership.

Preamble

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by his disciples, called them (and us) to use power to bring glory to God and serve people—a way of holding power that confronts and contrasts with the ways that the world uses power.

Not only do we have this call from Christ, but we actually have Jesus living and growing within us (Gal. 2:20). As a result, we find ourselves being transformed into the kind of people who hold and use power in a Christlike way.

That being said, until Christ returns and brings us to perfection, we will continue to wrestle with the urge to misuse power and abuse others. Ugly realities such as verbal, emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, and spiritual abuse are found among us. The power that we hold by virtue of our person or our position can always be twisted into the project of building up ourselves and our own kingdoms at the expense of others. This is true for pastors, lay ministry leaders, and church members alike.

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As a ministry leader, I will, to the best of my ability, commit to the following:

Relationships

1. I will speak and act, in all my personal and professional relations, in ways that follow the pattern of Christ, who used his power to serve (1 Pet. 5; Mark 10; Phil. 2; 2 Tim. 4:2).
2. I will respect, love, and treat with integrity and truthfulness people of every position, status, race, ethnicity, gender, age, or ability.
3. I will maintain appropriate emotional, physical, and sexual boundaries in all relationships.
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Safety

1. I will actively promote a welcoming and respectful environment where all persons are treated with dignity and value, and where any form of abuse, bullying, or harassment is neither tolerated nor allowed to take place.
2. I will report known or suspected cases of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect of minors or vulnerable adults to the proper authorities.
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2. In all financial matters, including the acceptance of gifts, I will act with scrupulous honesty, transparency, and appropriate accountability.
3. I will appropriately use and encourage accepted accounting practices and regular reviews and/or audits of ministry funds.

In the event that I misuse my power, either intentionally or unintentionally, in my dealings with others, in word or deed—if I fail “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly” (Mic. 6:8) as outlined in the Scriptures and our confessions—I will acknowledge the harm that has been caused and the trust that has been broken, and I will actively seek restoration with justice, compassion, truth, and grace. I will humbly submit to the insight and accountability of the body that implements this Code of Conduct to ensure that I use any power entrusted to me fully in service to Christ.

In the beautiful hope of Christ’s transforming work, in all I do, I will seek to use my position, power, and authority prudently and humbly to support and encourage all the members of his body in my care.