

CMSM 2025

Safeguarding Ministry Conference:

Breakout Session- Adult Misconduct

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Adult Misconduct



Importance of
Ministerial
Boundaries



Healthy
Relationships



Power
Differentials



Recognize
Forms of Adult
Misconduct



Causes of
Boundary
Violations



7 ½ Lessons
About the Brain

Boundaries



- ▶ Boundary: limit of a relationship
 - ▶ Vary depending on type of relationship (e.g., parent-child; husband-wife; physician-patient, etc.)
- ▶ Boundaries differentiate types of relationships/interactions one has in life
 - ▶ Ministerial Relationships
 - ▶ Relationships within Community
 - ▶ Family Relationships
 - ▶ Professional Relationships



Ministerial Boundaries



Ethical, professional, and personal limits that define the appropriate conduct and relationships between a minister and those he serves (parishioners, directees, students, etc.),

Ministerial Boundaries lay the framework for healthy relationship between priest-parishioner; teacher-student; supervisor- staff

The ability to set and maintain ministerial boundaries is an essential foundation to feel purposeful in ministry

Ministerial vs. Personal Boundaries



Ministerial Relationship

Unequal power

One-way self disclosure

Meet in defined location

Can not lend money

No sexual contact

Training required

Spiritually oriented

Goal directed

Personal Relationship

Equal power

Mutual self disclosure

Meet anywhere

Can lend money

Sexual contact possible

No training required

Socially oriented

Casual

Healthy Relationships in Ministry



▶ **Respecting Individual Autonomy:**

- ▶ Clear boundaries show respect for personal space and independence, allowing parishioners, students, etc. to engage with ministers without feeling controlled or dependent.

▶ **Trust & Safety:**

- ▶ Maintaining professional boundaries creates a safe environment where individuals feel confident that interactions are based on respect, not manipulation or exploitation.

Healthy Relationships in Ministry

▶ Emotional Well-being:

- ▶ Ministers can offer guidance without becoming enmeshed in personal relationships, allowing for objective, compassionate support without emotional entanglement.

▶ Healthy Boundaries, Healthy Parish, Classroom, etc.:

- ▶ When religious model healthy boundaries, it sets a positive example for the classroom, etc. by promoting respect, accountability, and balanced relationships.



Ministerial Boundaries

- ▶ The ability to set and maintain ministerial boundaries is an essential foundation to feel purposeful in ministry
- ▶ Protect Self and Others
- ▶ Maintenance of Professional Integrity
- ▶ Prevents Conflicts of Interest
- ▶ Promotes Accountability



Power and Vulnerability



- ▶ Ministry carries inherent power and trust
- ▶ Power imbalance is real- even among adults because burden of enforcing the boundary is always on the minister
- ▶ Awareness protects both parties

Power Differentials

- ▶ **Power differentials** occur when one party (e.g., a minister, teacher, or spiritual leader) holds more authority, control, or influence over another (e.g., parishioners, clients, or followers). Ministry carries inherent power and trust
- ▶ This **power imbalance** can be psychological, social, or institutional, with the minister having greater control over aspects of the individual's life, such as spiritual guidance, emotional well-being, and personal decisions.



Power Differentials

- ▶ Healthy ministerial boundaries keep the ministerial relationship a safe one where focus remains on the *spiritual needs of the layperson*
- ▶ Responsibility is **always** on the cleric, teacher, spiritual director, retreat leader, etc. to set and maintain clear, appropriate ministerial boundaries with the people of God



Power Differentials



- ▶ When power is unchecked, ministers or leaders may feel a sense of entitlement or invulnerability, potentially blurring professional and personal boundaries.
- ▶ This can lead to boundary violations, where ministers engage in inappropriate relationships, behavior, or exploitation under the guise of care, authority, or spiritual guidance.
- ▶ A boundary violation is *harmful or potentially harmful*, to the person with whom the priest/brother is ministering □ Adult Misconduct

Power Differentials

- ▶ Factors contribute to power differential between cleric and adult with whom he interacts in role as minister:
 - ▶ Gender, physical size
 - ▶ Emotional needs (e.g., in crisis, depressed, dependent, personality issues, etc.)
 - ▶ Financial- in context of administrative relationships
- ▶ Expectations of ministers (Reimer-Barry 2020) :
 - ▶ Trust in faith leader as respected authority figure
 - ▶ Assume clergy and other ministers are safe people to confide in because of their position (or because of celibacy for Roman Catholics)
 - ▶ Attracted to the minister's sensitivity, caring style, charisma, or power





Protect Vulnerable Adults

- ▶ Clear boundaries ensure that ministers don't exploit these vulnerabilities, helping to protect individuals from emotional or psychological harm.
- ▶ Also protect the minister from becoming over-involved with individuals to his own detriment either emotionally, psychologically, or spiritually
- ▶ This protects both the minister's reputation and the community's trust in the ministerial role.

Protect Vulnerable Adults

- ▶ In the context of adult ministry, vulnerable individuals refer to those who may be at heightened risk of harm, exploitation, or undue influence due to an imbalance of power, resources, or access to support. These individuals are typically more susceptible to harm from abuses of authority or breaches in professional conduct, including violations of ministerial boundaries.
- ▶ People with Disabilities: Individuals with physical, intellectual, or mental disabilities may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation due to limited ability to communicate, assert boundaries, or understand harmful behavior. They often depend on others for assistance and guidance.



Protect Vulnerable Individuals



- ▶ **People in Crisis:** Those experiencing emotional, psychological, or social crises (such as grief, mental illness, addiction, homelessness, or trauma) are at greater risk of being exploited or harmed by ministers who may take advantage of their need for support or guidance.
- ▶ **Women :** In some contexts, women may be disproportionately vulnerable to power imbalances, harassment, or abuse due to societal gender norms or a history of gender-based discrimination.
- ▶ **Members of Marginalized or Disenfranchised Communities:** People from minority ethnic, racial, or socio-economic groups may also be particularly vulnerable in ministerial or religious contexts, as they might face additional barriers to speaking out, receiving justice, or accessing support systems.
- ▶ **People in Dependent Relationships:** Those who rely on ministers or religious leaders for spiritual, emotional, or social support may be vulnerable, particularly if they fear losing that support or are financially or socially dependent on the relationship.

Maintain Professional Integrity

- ▶ Ministers hold positions of trust and authority. Boundaries help to preserve the **professionalism and integrity** of their role.
- ▶ Without clear boundaries, ministers may inadvertently cross lines, leading to ethical dilemmas or abuses of power.
- ▶ Boundaries make ministry different than your personal life.
- ▶ Maintenance of religious vows also contributes to integrity



Prevents Conflicts of Interest

- ▶ Clear boundaries preserve the trust of the community by preventing ministers from using their position for personal or professional advantages, thus upholding ethical conduct.
- ▶ By maintaining professional distance, ministers can avoid conflicts that arise from personal relationships with congregants, directees, students, choir members, etc., ensuring impartiality in decision-making.
- ▶ Boundaries help ministers maintain clear focus rather than make decisions tainted by personal interests, ensuring their actions align with both moral principles and the mission of the religious institute.



Promotes Accountability



- ▶ Boundaries foster trust and respect between religious and those to whom they minister, ensuring that interactions are professional, safe, and supportive.
- ▶ Boundaries provide a framework for ministers to be held accountable for their actions, ensuring that any inappropriate behavior is quickly recognized and addressed.

Adult Misconduct

- ▶ Any exploitation of vulnerability or violation of ministerial boundaries within an adult relationship.
- ▶ Boundary crossings → violations → misconduct
- ▶ Emotional, spiritual, sexual, and/or financial dimensions



Types of Adult Misconduct

- ▶ **Emotional Exploitation:** Overstepping emotional or psychological boundaries, leading to undue influence over personal beliefs or feelings.
- ▶ **Healthy Alternative:** Keeping a non-judgmental distance to avoid personal entanglements or emotional exploitation.



Types of Adult Misconduct



- ▶ **Physical or Sexual Misconduct:** Inappropriate physical touch, advances, or sexual exploitation masked as spiritual guidance or care.
- ▶ **Healthy Alternative:** Ensuring appropriate physical contact and space in all interactions.

Types of Adult Misconduct

- ▶ **Spiritual Exploitation:** Boundary violation that causes long-term negative spiritual harm (Durkin 2025):
 - ▶ Feeling distant from or cut-off completely from God
 - ▶ Being in conflict with God
 - ▶ A belief that God has violated or abandoned the individual who has been abused
 - ▶ Sense that God treated them unfairly by not preventing their suffering
- ▶ **Healthy Alternative:** Following appropriate boundaries and ensuring spiritual guidance is well-grounded. Ask yourself if you would be willing to tell other ministers you behaved in this way?



Types of Adult Misconduct



- ▶ **Financial Exploitation:** Pressuring those whom you minister to for financial support in ways that exploit their trust and dependency.
- ▶ **Healthy Alternative:** Avoiding financial exploitation, such as pressure to donate or offer financial gifts.

Boundary Crossing vs. Boundary Violation



- ▶ A boundary crossing is a deviation from typical ministry activity that is harmless, non-exploitative, and possibly supportive of ministry.
- ▶ Examples:
 - ▶ May have to request penitent to set up a meeting in your office in order to make a referral to a psychologist
 - ▶ When visiting someone homebound, if you have to help them up because they fell in their home

Boundary Crossing vs. Boundary Violation



- ▶ A boundary violation is *harmful or potentially harmful*, to the person with whom the priest/brother is ministering.
- ▶ Constitutes exploitation of that person, **even if initiated by that person**- because clergy have power in this relationship
- ▶ Once the violation occurs have crossed threshold into adult misconduct

Causes of Boundary Violations



- ▶ Usually incremental crossings lead to boundary violations
- ▶ Many boundary violations occur after emotional burnout of Clergy



Causes of Boundary Violations



- ▶ Multiple causes for boundary violations which cannot be identified in any specific, personality profile
- ▶ Individuals that transgress ministerial boundaries do so for complex, diverse reasons
- ▶ Some 'bad seeds,' but less common than most people think

Common Vulnerabilities

- ▶ Loneliness or emotional deprivation
- ▶ Avoidance of conflict in community
- ▶ Idealization of certain relationships
- ▶ Fatigue and poor self-care
- ▶ Living outside of community?



Causes of Boundary Violations



- ▶ Confluence of individual and contextual factors lead a religious to becomes *more concerned about gratifying his own needs than looking after the needs of others in the congregation.*
- ▶ Boundary violating behavior comes down to an internal, emotional cost-benefit analysis

Causes of Boundary Violations

- ▶ Emotional cost-benefit analysis is the combination of motivating psychological factors and disinhibiting factors
- ▶ Motivator: sexual/emotional gratification; relieve loneliness; validation; affirmation, stimulus-seeking, etc.
- ▶ Disinhibiting Factors:
 - ▶ Denial
 - ▶ Justification
 - ▶ Rationalization
 - ▶ Poor empathy and mentalization
 - ▶ Misperceptions
 - ▶ Impulsivity



Red Flags

- ▶ Keeping secrets about relationships
- ▶ Rationalizing exceptions ('This is different...')
- ▶ Emotional preoccupation
- ▶ Neglecting duties or community life
- ▶ Missing community events, prayers, etc.



Example

A brother develops a close friendship with a parish staff member. Over time, communication becomes personal, secretive, and emotionally charged. The staff member begins to behave in ways to other staff suggesting she now has more influence than her colleagues.

Question: What type of boundary violation is this? Is it a problem?



Healthy Boundary Practices



- ▶ Clarity of role and purpose
- ▶ Meet in appropriate spaces and times
- ▶ Maintain visibility and transparency
- ▶ Accountable technology use
- ▶ Regular supervision and spiritual direction



Key Takeaways

- ▶ Boundaries protect freedom and fidelity
- ▶ Misconduct begins in small compromises
- ▶ Healthy ministers serve with integrity and peace



7 1/2 Lessons About the Brain:

Lisa Feldman Barrett, PhD



▶ Your Brain Creates Your Reality

▶ Conscious vs. Unconscious:

- ▶ Most of your brain's activity occurs **unconsciously**—processing millions of bits of information every second without your awareness.
- ▶ Your brain **consciously** interprets and makes sense of a small fraction of this information, which you experience as reality.
- ▶ The brain constructs your perceptions and emotions based on prior knowledge, predictions, and sensory data.

The Brain is a Prediction Machine



- ▶ **Unconscious Prediction:** Much of the brain's activity is unconscious, constantly predicting what will happen next.
 - ▶ These predictions are based on past experiences and sensory input, guiding actions and emotions.
 - ▶ Thus past experiences influence present behavior, including adherence to boundaries
- ▶ **Conscious Awareness:** Conscious awareness occurs when predictions fail (i.e., prediction error) or when conscious attention is required.
 - ▶ This is why unexpected or novel events often feel more intense or bring us into conscious awareness.
 - ▶ Underscores importance of boundary training and conversation □ raise awareness



Emotions Are Made, Not Hardwired



▶ **Unconscious Emotional Processing:**

- ▶ Your brain unconsciously monitors the body (heart rate, breathing, etc.) and makes predictions about how you should feel.
- ▶ This happens so quickly that you may not be aware of the process.

▶ **Conscious Emotional Experience:**

- ▶ The conscious experience of emotion (happiness, fear, sadness) arises when the brain labels and interprets those bodily sensations in a social or contextual framework.
- ▶ You often become aware of emotions after they've already begun to take shape unconsciously.

The Brain Does Not "Feel" Anything, It Makes Feelings



- ▶ Unconscious Sensory Interpretation: Sensations like pain or warmth are not directly perceived but are instead constructed by the brain from sensory input and prior experiences.
 - ▶ This process occurs unconsciously, making it hard for us to distinguish between what's truly happening in the world and what's being predicted by the brain.
- ▶ Conscious Experience: The conscious experience of pain, pleasure, or any sensation is an interpretation, a label given to the unconscious sensory data.
 - ▶ This is why sensations can vary based on context or past experiences (e.g., pain might feel stronger in a stressful situation).

The Brain is a Social Organ



- ▶ **Unconscious Social Brain Functions:** The brain's **unconscious** processing enables you to understand and predict others' behavior through emotional and social cues without conscious thought.
 - ▶ Mirror neurons (though not as exciting as we had hoped) and other mechanisms enable rapid social learning without awareness.
- ▶ **Conscious Social Awareness:** While much of our social cognition happens unconsciously, conscious awareness of emotions and social interactions occurs when we reflect on or become aware of these cues.

Conscious vs. Unconscious Processes:

- ▶ The brain's unconscious processes drive most of your experience, including your perceptions, emotions, and reactions.
 - ▶ People often make up answers they think make sense when asked “why” they did something
- ▶ Conscious awareness, by contrast, is where you become aware of the brain's predictions and constructions, but this only happens after the unconscious processes have already shaped your reality.
 - ▶ The brain is always active, continuously balancing prediction, sensation, and conscious reflection to create the world as you experience it.



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