Code of Ethics

2025

THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

CODE OF ETHICS AND MINISTRY PRACTICE

FOR MINISTERS IN THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

(WHETHER IN APPROVED PLACEMENTS OR NOT)
APPROVED BY THE TWELFTH ASSEMBLY JULY 2009
UPDATED BY ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE MAY 2025

In this Code, "Minister" refers to Candidates, Community Ministers, Deacons, Deaconesses, Interns, Lay Pastors, Ministers of the Word, Pastors, Youth Workers and Ministers from another denomination serving in an approved placement (Reg 2.9.5).

This Code is to be applied within the faith and unity of the church as described in the Basis of Union and the context of the Constitution and Regulations of the Church which state the Church's requirements in relation to the conduct and accountability of its Ministers.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Christian community is called into being by God through the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. As the Basis of Union says:

> "The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because its Lord comes, addresses and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work." (paragraph 4).

The church is sustained by Christ through baptism, the Eucharist and preaching of the Word. Its life and fellowship is derived from the fact that the Church is the Body of Christ, the presence of Christ in the world. We are united in a fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy through our shared

faith in Christ. We worship, pray, give our witness, study Scripture and other sources of faith, offer pastoral care to each other, develop deep friendships, and seek to be mutually accountable. We are, for this reason, a deeply intimate community.

1.2 Ministers have a particular place within that community. They touch people's lives at many points of joy, pain, celebration, grief and vulnerability. They are responsible for providing leadership in the community's task of worshipping, proclaiming the good news of Jesus, providing pastoral care, standing with those who suffer, and working for justice and peace. They minister within a pastoral relationship in which they seek to enable other people to focus on God as the source of healing, restoration and wholeness.

As part of their responsibility to promote and maintain the Church as a missional community Ministers may occupy ministry positions in any of the Councils of the Church. This may mean that they will give more emphasis to some parts of their ministry than they would in a congregational placement. This form of ministry carries particular responsibilities in regard to other staff in the organization.

1.3 The pastoral relationship occurs within a faith community whose life and relationships are established by Jesus Christ. The pastoral relationship has its meaning, and is established and maintained, as the church enables others to meet Jesus who nourishes our lives. The pastoral relationship is part of the way the church is nourished and built up as the Body of Christ, and nurtures life in the world. As a result of this context, ministers also have relationships and responsibilities within the broader community which are based on their responsibilities within the faith community.

1.4 It is the seriousness of the pastoral relationship, and the vulnerability of people in that relationship, which make it necessary for Ministers to appreciate their unique position and the way they touch people's lives. They exercise considerable influence and power. It is essential that each individual Minister recognises the power they have and understands the boundaries that the church requires to be observed within their ministry.

1.5 Because the pastoral relationship occurs in a deeply intimate community, friendships will develop. These will, at times, challenge the capacity of Ministers to provide the pastoral care that belongs to their role as Minister. Ministers have responsibility to distinguish times when objective pastoral care is required. They have the responsibility to discern the boundaries of the pastoral relationship, to offer professional pastoral care when it is required, and to discern when their relationships overstep the appropriate level of friendship and intimacy, or when they are exercising power inappropriately in relation to others in the pastoral relationship.

1.6 The Uniting Church understands that as Ministers live out God's call to ministry, all relationships shall be characterised by the love, care and compassion that was embodied in Jesus Christ. The requirement is that Ministers will exhibit a mature Christian faith in all their relationships and in particular embody integrity, trust and compassion.

1.7 People enter ministry as a response to a call from God and the Church. It is this call that requires that all Ministers carry out their ministry in a professional and accountable manner

1.8 The Uniting Church is a multi-cultural church and as such is made up of faith communities from across many different cultural backgrounds. Each culture has its own unique expression of community and relationships which need to be borne in mind when overseeing the behaviour of ministers. In ministry with people from diverse cultural backgrounds these unique expressions form an important part of the intimate community which is formed and inform how Ministers express their ministry.

1.9 It is recognised that rural and isolated communities present particular difficulties in term of professional/personal relationship; availability of supervision and access to support. This intensifies the responsibilities of presbyteries for care of such persons, and in assisting Ministers to fulfil the Code of Ethics.

2. THE PASTORAL RELATIONSHIP

(N.B. Ministers should note the relationship between this section and Section 4: Particular relationships)

2.1 Recognising that all relationships in the Christian community are intended to nurture the church and people's relationship with Christ who is Lord of the Church, in the context of this Code of Ethics, the pastoral relationship means the relationship between a Minister and another person:

(a) "in which the Minister is providing spiritual care for the person; or
(b) where the person has looked to the Minister for guidance, protection or care; or
(c) where the person has made contact with the Minister in their responsibility or function as Minister" (Reg 5.6.2).

Ministers are in a pastoral relationship with all members and adherents of a Congregation through the commitments they make at their induction, commissioning or other service of recognition. Where Ministers are in a non-Congregational placement, they are in pastoral relationship with those persons they come in contact with by virtue of their placement. Where Ministers are not in, or are yet to commence, a placement they are in a pastoral relationship with those persons they come in contact with by virtue of their role as a Minister. Ministers may form pastoral relationships in a variety of contexts. Where Ministers form

relationships through the internet and other technology any pastoral relationships they form are to be conducted in a manner consistent with the Code.

2.2 The pastoral relationship is concerned for maturity in Christian life, and for fullness of life for all people, regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, economic circumstances or other personal characteristics. It is a relationship in which Ministers seeks to express an ethic of care, which includes nurturing the other person's power over their own life as they relate to others and to God.

2.3 The pastoral relationship is nurtured and guided through the commitments of commissioning, ordination or other service of recognition. These commitments reflect the intention of Ministers to exercise their ministry:

(a) through faith in Jesus Christ and relying on the power of the Holy Spirit;
(b) within the faith of the church, guided by the Basis of Union;
(c) by being nourished and guided by the study of Scripture;
(d) through announcing the Good News in Christ to those outside the community of faith;
(e) through faithful affirmation of, and celebration of sacraments;
(f) in a mutual manner, offering pastoral care and nurturing people in faith, recognising and valuing other peoples gifts, training them for ministry and working cooperatively with their ministry;
(g) through working for justice and peace;
(h) by striving for peace and unity among all Christian people;
(i) by engaging in ongoing study;
(j) by respecting the guidance and decisions of the councils of the church;
(k) within the discipline of the church.

2.4 Ministers shall exercise their ministry in a manner that expresses:

(a) commitment to God;
(b) inclusiveness of the Gospel;
(c) accountability;
(d) commitment to the call of the church to ministry;
(e) the professional nature of the relationship, and ensures:
    (i) that Ministers do not seek to meet their personal needs through the pastoral relationship;
    (ii) that clear boundaries are recognised and observed (ie. the relationship and behaviour are appropriate to the pastoral relationship);
    (iii) respect, sensitivity and reverence for others;
    (iv) confidentiality;
    (v) non-abusive use of power;
    (vi) commitment to justice.

3. PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

3.1 RELATIONSHIPS WITH COLLEAGUES

(a) Ministers shall work within the polity of the Uniting Church as guided by the Basis of Union and defined in the Constitution and Regulations, respecting the rights and responsibilities of those who share leadership in the Uniting Church, both lay and ordained.

(b) Ministers shall respect the call and placement of other Ministers. They shall recognise those people who are colleagues, or those with whom they are in team ministry, as equals in standing and responsibility in the fulfillment of their duties as a Minister in that placement as outlined in the Regulations (2.2.1 and 2.11.2–3).

(c) Ministers have particular authority in relation to other Ministers and lay staff and shall:
  (i) Be guided by the principles of collegiate ministry (Reg 2.11.2);
  (ii) Exercise their power justly and in a clearly accountable manner;

(d) Ministers who are under the particular authority of other Ministers or lay staff shall accept the guidance and direction of those who have been given authority over them by the Church.

(e) Ministers shall:
  (i) accept the theological validity of the ordination of both women and men for ministry in Christ's church as a Minister;
  (ii) be willing to work with and support women and men as colleagues in the ordained ministries; and
  (iii) be willing to encourage, equip and support both women and men in all forms of ministry in the Church and to teach the Church's position in this regard (ASC minute 92.61.5).

(f) Ministers shall respect the professional expertise of members of other disciplines/professions with whom they work in the Church or other institutions.

(g) Retired Ministers and Ministers in non-congregational placements shall recognise the inherent power they have in the congregations in which they are members. In seeking to express the principles of collegiality they:
  (i) shall respect the call and placement of those in ministry;
  (ii) may support and encourage those in ministry if asked to do so;
  (iii) shall not encourage discontent about or seek to interfere with the ministry of a Minister (whether in their own congregation or elsewhere);
  (iv) may express leadership within the congregation of which they are a member when invited to do so by the Minister in placement.

(h) Retired Ministers and Ministers in non-congregational placements:
  (i) shall not normally worship in a congregation where they have previously served in a ministry placement; but
  (ii) if they wish to worship in such a congregation, they shall first consult with the Presbytery and any Minister in placement in the congregation.

(i) Subject to (h), Retired Ministers and Ministers in non-congregational placements may express leadership within the congregation where they worship when invited to do so by the Minister in placement or upon approval by the Presbytery.

3.2 RELATIONSHIPS WITH COUNCILS OF THE CHURCH

(a) Ministers shall be aware of and respect the guidance and decisions of the councils of the Church, and maintain accountability within the discipline of the Church.

(b) Ministers have a responsibility to participate fully in their local church councils, Presbytery, and in the wider work of the church.

(c) Ministers may not use their preaching role to inflame conflict within the Congregation, or between the congregation and other councils of the church. Processes and decisions of councils of the Church should be reported accurately and fairly. Disagreements need to be conducted within the framework of principles provided by A Manual for Meetings, (ie. in a way that expresses Christian community and commitment to rational debate based on evidence and argument, not personal attacks and mere assertion of opinion).

3.3 TEACHING

Ministers have a responsibility to represent accurately the teachings of the Scriptures and of the Church. When teaching, preaching or leading worship, Ministers have an obligation to present the gospel of Jesus Christ, guided by the witness to Christ in the Scripture, to take seriously the tradition of faith and worship of the church catholic; and to share that faith in the language and forms of the particular worshipping community and to address its issues.

In particular, Ministers shall:

(a) live out the vision of the Basis of Union;

(b) faithfully represent the meanings of biblical passages;

(c) accurately represent the degree to which experts in a discipline support their views;

(d) accurately represent opposing views;

(e) uphold the theological and liturgical tradition of the Church;

(f) be guided by the decisions of the Assembly;

(g) be open to challenge and correction from colleagues.

3.4 COMPETENCE

(a) Ministers have a responsibility to maintain high standards of knowledge and skills in all the areas of ministry relevant to their placement. This responsibility requires that Ministers undertake continuing education appropriate to this ministry.

(b) Ministers shall not misrepresent their competence, qualifications, training or experience.

(c) Ministers shall refrain from offering to undertake and / or engage in work beyond their level of competence; and shall make appropriate referrals. Referrals are appropriate when a person does not have the required:
  (i) professional competence or expertise;
  (ii) pastoral competence;
  (iii) cultural competence or experience;

(d) Where Ministers are forced by circumstances to provide care beyond their normal level of competence they shall:
  (i) discuss this with their supervisor;
  (ii) seek guidance from a person with appropriate competence;
  (iii) where warranted, seek opportunities to develop the appropriate skills.

(e) Ministers shall end a pastoral relationship when it is not beneficial for the other person or where the help needed is outside their pastoral competence.

3.5 PROFESSIONALISM

(a) Ministers shall exercise their ministry to the other person in the pastoral relationship in a professional manner. This includes, but is not limited to:
  (i) offering the best quality care, leadership of worship and preaching of which they are capable;
  (ii) offering appropriate Christian teaching;
  (iii) appropriately dealing with emotional and spiritual needs;
  (iv) being sensitive to people's different social contexts;
  (v) following recognised and acknowledged modes of working in specialist areas such as bereavement, trauma and suicide;
  (vi) being sensitive to the needs and vulnerability of the children and young people with whom they work, ensuring that the professional nature of the relationship is made clear in an appropriate way;
  (vii) being sensitive to the needs of, and ways of relating to, people from any different cultures with whom they have contact including being aware of one's own inherent cultural bias.

(b) Ministers shall not engage in sexual relationships with people in their professional pastoral care.

(c) Ministers have a responsibility to provide unbiased pastoral care to those with whom they disagree, and to consult their supervisor in relation to the situation.

(d) Where there is an actual or potential conflict of interest in matters affecting Ministers, their family or their financial interests, the Ministers shall absent themselves from discussion and decision, except in the case of deliberations by Presbyteries, Synods and Assembly and their agencies on ministerial stipends and entitlements.

3.6 POWER

(a) Ministers shall recognise the power that is inherent in their role and shall not use this power in a manner which is abusive or unprofessional. In particular, they shall not use their power to:
   (i) gain personal or financial advantage for themselves or family members;
   (ii) harass or intimidate other people including other ministers;
   (iii) exploit or abuse other people physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually or financially.

(b) Ministers shall assist people to understand the power they have and to use it in appropriate ways.

(c) Ministers shall not engage in bullying. Bullying is considered repeated unwelcome and unsolicited behaviour towards a person who considers it offensive, intimidating, humiliating or threatening; and which a reasonable person, having regard to all the circumstances, would consider to be offensive, humiliating, intimidating or threatening.

(d) Ministers who believe they are the subject of an abuse of power or bullying should seek to resolve the issue consistent with section 7.4 and section 8 of the Code.

3.7 CONFIDENTIALITY

(a) Ministers shall not breach confidentiality. Confidentiality is not about secrecy. In the context of a pastoral relationship, it is an assurance that Ministers will not share written or spoken information about an individual with other people [except as indicated in (d) below], or use it for a purpose other than for which it was collected.

(b) In the processes of the church, there are also times when, because of its personal nature or its potential for misuse or harm, some information may be designated confidential, and is only intended for a particular audience such as a Synod in closed session, a board or local church council.

(c) In a pastoral relationship Ministers shall take care to discuss the nature and limits of their confidentiality with the other person.

(d) Information received in the context of a pastoral relationship shall remain confidential unless:
   (i) the person gives permission for the particular disclosure; or
   (ii) retaining such information would result in significant physical, emotional or sexual harm to another person or persons; or
   (iii) required by law; or
   (iv) disclosure is necessary to prevent financial loss to some other person due to fraud or other dishonesty or where undue hardship might result. (as stated in the Privacy Act 1988); or
   (v) disclosure is required in accordance with the terms of placement/ employment applicable in a particular appointment.

(e) Ministers should ensure the integrity of any records, particularly electronic records, by putting in place appropriate security procedures.

(f) Confidentiality also requires that Ministers shall not seek to gain sensitive or confidential information to which they are not entitled or which would require another person to breach a confidence.

(g) Ministers shall share with the intended audiences information from Presbytery, Synod and Assembly (and their agencies) that is meant to be disseminated.

3.8 SELF CARE

Ministers shall take responsibility to:

(a) address their physical, spiritual, mental and emotional health needs and, where appropriate, seek assistance from a qualified professional;

(b) participate in supervision;

(c) give adequate priority to their relationship with their family;

(d) nurture personal relationships which assist them in their wholeness;.

(e) take appropriate and regular leave, and time off from work for recreational activity.

3.9 SUPERVISION

(a) Ministers have a responsibility to recognise that they are also vulnerable, requiring them to maintain their professionalism in difficult circumstances.

(b) Ministers shall keep appropriate pastoral records (eg. details of appointments and referrals and a journal of critical incidents).

(c) Professional supervision means the relationship Ministers have with another professional whereby the Minister is assisted to maintain the boundaries of the pastoral relationship and the quality of ministry (as per the definition at the commencement of the Regulations) including competencies, time management, priorities and any difficulties arising in ministry.

(d) Ministers have a responsibility to ensure that they receive regular professional supervision. Such supervision is intended to assist Ministers to maintain the boundaries of the pastoral relationships and quality of ministry.

(e) Ministers shall discuss with their supervisor any ongoing situations of conflict in which they are involved in the course of their work.

(f) Where applicable, Ministers shall maintain membership requirements of any relevant professional association (eg, psychologists or counsellors.)

4. PARTICULAR RELATIONSHIPS

4.1 A particular relationship refers to a close personal relationship between a Minister and another person such as:

(a) a very close personal friendship; or

(b) a close family relationship; or
(c) a marriage; or
(d) a relationship which is becoming romanticised.

4.2 Some particular relationships may exist within the pastoral community. In such circumstances the Minister should not be the sole provider of pastoral care, but steps should be taken to ensure professional pastoral care is available to the other person (eg. the spouse of the Minister, a close friend).

4.3 Ministers shall recognise those situations in which it is inappropriate for them to enter into, or continue in, a pastoral relationship. In such situations Ministers shall ensure that appropriate care is arranged for the other persons involved.

4.4 In some circumstances it will be appropriate for a Minister to cease a pastoral relationship in order to enter a particular relationship. In the event that a Minister and a person with whom they have been in a pastoral relationship identify a potential particular relationship, the Minister shall:

(a) disengage from the pastoral relationship and arrange alternative pastoral care for the other person;
(b) seek advice on the appropriateness of such a particular relationship, preferably through supervision;
(c) encourage the other person to talk with someone else about the relationship;
(d) disclose the relationship to an appropriate officer of the Church (eg. chairperson of the Church Council, Presbytery Minister or other appropriate person within the appointing body).

5. GIFTS AND FEES

5.1 Ministers shall not seek financial gain for themselves or their families from a pastoral relationship beyond recognised fees, stipends and entitlements.

5.2 Where Ministers receive gifts resulting from the pastoral relationship the Minister shall use discretion concerning the acceptance or return of gifts by considering the intent, value and affordability of the gift and whether there is a risk of the Minister being compromised or losing objectivity. Advice shall be sought from the appropriate Presbytery officer if the Minister is uncertain or others have expressed uncertainty about the appropriateness of a gift.

5.3 Ministers accepting a gift to satisfy cultural traditions should be sensitive and gracious while still considering the appropriateness of gift. Where Ministers do accept the gift they should then look at the appropriate use of the gift to benefit the community of faith. Ministers should not seek to use "cultural traditions" as a basis for accepting an otherwise inappropriate gift.

5.4 Ministers shall not use their ministry to recruit clients for private practice or commercial interests. Ministers in fulltime ministry shall not use their ministry skills as a basis for significant commercial benefit while in fulltime ministry with the Church.

6. RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LAW

6.1 Ministers shall inform the Synod Secretary of any matter which may lead to legal action against the Minister and/or the Church.

6.2 It is unethical for Ministers deliberately to break the law or encourage another to do so. The only exception would be in instances of political resistance or civil disobedience.

7. WORKING WITHIN INSTITUTIONS, ORGANISATIONS, THE WIDER CHURCH OR WITH OTHER PROFESSIONS

(For example Synod or Assembly office, hospital, prison or ecumenical organisations)

7.1 Ministers shall be aware of those Codes of Ethics or similar guidelines in institutions or ministry locations where they may work (eg. hospitals, prisons). Ministers in such ministry locations have a responsibility to abide by those Code of Ethics also.

7.2 Ministers shall acknowledge situations when their ministry takes place in a particular structured work environment. Ministers shall comply with all the relevant standards, policies, procedures, practices, guidelines, governance arrangements and performance management practices that apply to employees, workers and those in ministry within that organisation. Notwithstanding, for ministers in placement the Regulations governing placements will always apply.

7.3 Where the demands of institutions or other organisations conflict with this Code of Ethics, Ministers shall clarify the nature of the conflict between those demands and the principles of this Code. Ministers shall inform all parties of any conflict and seek to resolve it.

7.4 Ministers who exercise ministry in organisations with their own policies and procedures for matters also covered under the Code shall normally seek to resolve issues following the procedures of that organisation.

8. BREACH OF CODE OF ETHICS

8.1 Breach of the Code of Ethics refers to any violation of the requirements or principles of the Code by Ministers. It includes any instance where Ministers have deliberately encouraged another to breach the terms of the Code. It also includes any breach which occurs via the internet or through other technology even in circumstances where those who have been affected cannot be identified.

8.2 When Ministers know of a Code violation by another Minister, and it seems appropriate, they shall informally attempt to resolve the issue by bringing the matter of concern to the attention of that Minister in a constructive manner. If this is not practical, or does not address the issue of concern, the facts shall be reported to the Presbytery or other appointing body.

8.3 Ministers are required to inform the appropriate council or officer of the Church if the behaviour of any Minister, lay employee or lay appointee could be considered as sexual misconduct (as defined in Regulation 5.6.2).

8.4 It is the responsibility of the Presbytery or in certain circumstances the Synod Committee for Counselling in the first instance to deal with an allegation of a breach of this Code in accordance with the Regulations (5.4.1 – 5.5.1) and where appropriate refer to other bodies. An allegation of a sexual misconduct which could amount to a breach of the Code should be forwarded immediately to the chairperson of the Synod Sexual Misconduct Complaints Committee as required under Regulation 5.6.7.

8.5 Where breaches of the Code lead to civil or criminal action prior to the conclusion of dealing with the breach the Presbytery (or other body) should consider the need to suspend action under the Code until the outcome of any action. Nevertheless, all complaints of a breach of the Code should be fully dealt with in as timely a manner as possible.

Effective date: : 1 July 2025