

Connecting the Code of Ethics



to the church as a safe place

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The Uniting Church in Australia
QUEENSLAND SYNOD

Connecting the Code of Ethics to the church as a safe place

The Uniting Church in Australia seeks to be a Christian community which develops its life around worship, prayer, witness, biblical study, pastoral care, deep friendships and mutual accountability¹. The Uniting Church in Australia believes that all people are made in the image of God and as such we accept every individual regardless of race, age, creed or gender.

As a Christian community we believe that God reaches out to us in love and acceptance and that our relationships with each other should express love and respect. As a community of faith we are committed to providing a place in society where human beings can explore what it means to be made in the image of God. As an expression of this commitment the Uniting Church in Australia recognises its responsibility to provide worshipping and pastoral communities that are free from abuse and that provide safe environments for all people to explore and express their faith in the Gospel².

The Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice³ is a document that outlines the behaviours that the church and ministers themselves accept as necessary for those who fulfil a ministry. This means that the church wants to clarify for its members, and for those people who have contact with the church, what behaviour they can expect from a minister. A Code of Ethics provides guidelines for the way that ministers relate to those in their care. It does not mean that ministers are not already fulfilling these expectations, rather the Code should support existing good practice and encourage all to act in this way⁴. When understood clearly and adhered to, it is a tool for enabling ministers to be accountable for their practice in any setting: congregation, institution, or general community⁵.

This resource focuses on connecting the Code of Ethics to the church as a safe place. It seeks to raise awareness about the professional and accountable conduct expected of ministers⁶. It explores sexual misconduct and abuse by ministers and includes a detailed section on grooming. Discussing sexual abuse is difficult in most cultures. For those ministers using this resource who have been victims of abuse, or are family members and friends of people who have experienced abuse, please ensure that you seek out appropriate support as you read through and reflect on this material.

Ministers are encouraged to use this resource for their own reflection and with church councils, congregations and agencies/institutions where they are in placement. Ministers and those whom they serve can together explore how to provide worshipping and pastoral communities that are free from abuse and that provide safe environments for all people to explore and express their faith in the Gospel⁷.

Information is presented under the following headings:

The Christian community

The pastoral relationship

Personal needs

Particular relationships and boundaries

Sexual misconduct and abuse by ministers

1 Ethical Guidelines for members and adherents of the Uniting Church in Australia June 1999 p1

2 The Uniting Church in Australia Safe Place Position Statement 1997 Commission on Women and Men

3 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice for ministers in the Uniting Church in Australia (whether in approved placement or not). Approved by the 12th Assembly July 2009, updated effective 1 January 2010. Hereafter referred to as The Code of Ethics

4 The Uniting Church in Australia support document for the Interim Code of Ethics 1997 p2

5 The Uniting Church in Australia Orientation to the Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice in the Uniting Church in Australia: a resource for pastors and other ministers Sydney 2000 p11

6 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice section 1.7

7 The Uniting Church in Australia Safe Place Position Statement 1997 Commission on Women and Men

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The Christian community⁸

The church is a community united in a fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy through our shared faith in Christ. We worship, pray, 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 community⁹.

Ministers have a particular place within that community¹⁰. That place will be influenced by the cultural context of the minister and the cultural context of the community in which they serve¹¹. Ministers 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 peace and justice¹².

Because of this role, ministers are given easy and ready access to intimate settings in profoundly intimate circumstances¹³. Ministers are not only invited but they are welcomed into the most vulnerable moments of people's lives. Ministers are granted immediate intimacy not normally granted to others. People open their arms, hearts, homes and families to ministers. Ministers are given access to people's souls¹⁴.

Ministers need to recognise the power they have because they are the minister. They need to help other people understand the power they have and use it in appropriate ways¹⁵. Ministers are not to use their power to gain financially, to harass or intimidate other people including ministers, and are not to exploit or abuse other people physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually or financially¹⁶. Ministers are not to manipulate, exploit or abuse people sexually¹⁷.

Questions for reflection

What would you say to others to explain the church as a safe place?

How does the church being an intimate community make people vulnerable?

How might the church being an intimate community lead to the church not being a safe place?

How do you ensure you use your ministry power appropriately and safely?

The pastoral relationship¹⁸

The Code of Ethics says that ministers are not to seek to have their personal needs met through the pastoral relationship¹⁹.

The pastoral relationship means the relationship between the minister and another person:

- in which the minister is providing spiritual care for the person; or
- where the person has looked to the minister for guidance, protection or care; or
- where the person has made contact with the minister in their responsibility or function as minister (Reg 5.6.2)²⁰.

Ministers are in 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 with whom they come in contact by virtue of their placement. Where ministers are not in or are yet to commence a placement, they are in 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 are to be conducted in a manner consistent with the Code²¹.

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 seek 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 God²².

Questions for reflection

What would you say to others to explain what is meant by the pastoral relationship?

With whom are you in a pastoral relationship?

What might an unsafe pastoral relationship look like?

8 Refer section 1 of The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice

9 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 1.1

10 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 1.2

11 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 1.8

12 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice section 1.2

13 Garland 2006 When Wolves Wear Shepherd's Clothing: helping women survive clergy sexual abuse Social Work and Christianity spring 2006 vol 33

14 Garland 2006 When Wolves Wear Shepherd's Clothing: helping women survive clergy sexual abuse Social Work and Christianity spring 2006 vol 33

15 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.6b

16 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.6

17 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.5b

18 Refer to The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 2

19 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 2.4e1

20 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 2.1

21 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 2.1

22 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 2.2

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Personal needs

The Code of Ethics says that ministers shall exercise their ministry in a manner that expresses commitment to God, inclusiveness of the Gospel, accountability, commitment to the call of the church to ministry and the professional nature of the relationship²³. The professional nature of the relationship ensures that ministers do not seek to meet their personal needs through the pastoral relationship. It also ensures that clear boundaries are recognised and observed (i.e. the relationship and behaviour are appropriate to the pastoral relationship), that there is respect, sensitivity and reverence for others, confidentiality, non-abusive use of power and commitment to justice²⁴.

The demands of ministry make ministers vulnerable and ministers need to be alert to and aware of their own vulnerability²⁵. There are a number of traits that increase the likelihood of ministers behaving in ways that are not safe for themselves or others. These traits include being stressed and overworked, being isolated from supports, having broken personal relationships that lead to aloneness, and having access to vulnerable people. A further trait is that which most ministers seek to have—being caring, a good communicator, charismatic, someone to whom others are drawn²⁶.

The Code of Ethics encourages ministers to take responsibility for their own self-care. This includes caring for one's physical, spiritual, mental and emotional health needs, and where appropriate, to seek assistance from a qualified professional²⁷. It is also important for ministers to take responsibility to care for their own sexual needs²⁸ and their financial needs²⁹.

As part of caring for their own personal needs, ministers need to give adequate priority to their relationship with their family. Ministers need to nurture relationships which assist them in their wholeness, and to take appropriate and regular leave and time off for recreational activity. Ministers also are to participate in professional supervision³⁰.

Questions for reflection

How would ministers seeking to have their own needs met through the pastoral relationship make ministry unsafe for those whom they are serving?

How might ignoring one's personal needs lead to unsafe ministry practice?

Particular relationships and boundaries

The Code of Ethics distinguishes between pastoral relationships and particular relationships. A particular relationship refers to a close personal relationship between a minister and another person such as a very close personal friendship, a close family relationship, a marriage, or a relationship which is becoming romanticised³¹.

Ministers need to ensure that if they have a particular relationship with a person then they are not their sole provider of pastoral care³². This can be especially challenging in rural and isolated placement, and in multicultural contexts. At times ministers may need to cease a pastoral relationship because they are entering into a particular relationship. At other times ministers might need to end the pastoral relationship when it is not beneficial for the other person or where the help needed is outside their pastoral competence³³.

Because the pastoral relationship occurs in a deeply intimate community, friendships will develop³⁴. Ministers are to exhibit a mature Christian faith in all their relationships and in particular embody integrity, trust and compassion³⁵. Ministers have the responsibility to discern the boundaries of the pastoral relationship and to discern when their relationships overstep the appropriate level of friendship and intimacy³⁶.

Boundaries exist in all relationships. Boundaries help people understand the nature and limits of relationships. Appropriate boundaries keep people safe as they guide and give shape to relationships³⁷. Ministers provide support to vulnerable people³⁸. Ministers need to ensure that the support they provide keeps people safe and nurtures the other person's power over their own life as they relate to others and to God³⁹. Ministers need to assist the people they serve to understand the power that they have as a minister and the boundaries that they must maintain⁴⁰.

If a minister is concerned that a person with whom they are in pastoral relationship has developed romantic feelings for them (has fallen in love with the person who has cared for them—the minister) and is trying to create an inappropriate particular relationship, then the minister must act to keep the person safe⁴¹.

23 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 2.4
24 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 2.4e
25 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.9a
26 The Uniting Church in Australia Orientation to the Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice in the Uniting Church in Australia: a resource for pastors and other ministers Sydney 2000 p20
27 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.8a
28 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.5b
29 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.6ai
30 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.8b-e

31 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 4.1
32 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 4.2-4.4
33 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.4e
34 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 1.5
35 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 1.6
36 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 1.5
37 Fortune 2012 Healthy Boundaries: teacher's guide Faith Trust Institute p7
38 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 1.2
39 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 2.2
40 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.6b
41 The Uniting Church in Australia Orientation to the Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice in the Uniting Church in Australia: a resource for pastors and other ministers Sydney 2000 p20

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Ministers must ensure that if they develop feelings of sexual attraction for a person they are ministering to, that they similarly seek support (for example through professional supervision⁴²) to ensure the boundaries of the pastoral relationship are not violated. Ministers who fail to maintain appropriate boundaries cause harm to others.

Questions for reflection:

With whom are you in particular relationship?

When might you need to end a pastoral relationship?

How do you ensure that you maintain appropriate and safe boundaries for yourself and others?

Sexual misconduct and abuse by ministers

The Code of Ethics says that ministers shall not engage in sexual relationships with people in their professional care⁴³. Ministers are to exercise their ministry with respect, sensitivity and reverence for others⁴⁴. Ministers are to be sensitive to the needs and vulnerability of children and young people, ensuring the professional nature of the relationship is made clear in an appropriate way^{45 46}. Ministers are to deal appropriately with emotional and spiritual needs⁴⁷.

Sexual misconduct by ministers is an abuse of power and trust. It is never acceptable and never able to be excused or justified. Sexual misconduct includes sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual conduct prohibited by law and sexualisation of the pastoral relationship⁴⁸. Some examples of sexual conduct prohibited by law include sexual offences against a child including grooming of children (for example physical acts to a child, exposing a child to sexual images, procuring a child through the internet), rape, sexual assault and production and distribution of sexual images. A consensual sexual relationship between a minister and an adult with whom they are in a pastoral relationship is never acceptable⁴⁹. This is sexualising the pastoral relationship. It causes damage and harm and is an abuse of power and a betrayal of trust.

It is important for ministers and the communities in which they serve to understand sexual misconduct and abuse and to be alert to signs that could indicate that abuse is taking place. It is important that all people are committed to ensuring that worshipping and pastoral communities are free from abuse, and to providing safe environments for all people to explore and express their faith in the Gospel⁵⁰. There are limitations to confidentiality in ministry. If ministers are aware that someone is being harmed or is at risk of being harmed they must act to ensure the person is safe⁵¹. Ministers have a responsibility to determine if a situation needs to be reported to the police. Ministers can seek advice from the presbytery minister, moderator, associate general secretary, general secretary and from their professional supervisor. Ministers who are in non-congregational placements should consult with their line manager within an institution/agency.

42 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.8b and 3.9

43 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.5b

44 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 2.4eiii

45 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.5avi

46 It is important for ministers to be aware of and to implement Synod child safe policies

47 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.5aiii

48 See Uniting Church in Australia Regulations for definitions of sexual misconduct

49 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.5b

50 The Uniting Church in Australia Safe Place Position Statement 1997 Commission on Women and Men

51 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.7d

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Ministers also can seek advice from the police. Ministers need to maintain their awareness of policies and procedures of the Synod to keep children and young people safe (such as child safe church). Ministers must actively respond to situations of harm or suspected harm.

Ministers are placed by the church to serve God and the community in congregations and agencies/institutions. Through a process of discernment and call, ministers are invited to join in the witness and work of the people of God. From first contact and introduction ministers are greeted with respect and trust and are intrinsically believed. They are looked up to and listened to. They are given power because they are the minister⁵². Ministers represent God; they are guardians of sacred rites and sacraments and they interpret the scriptures⁵³. Ministers have been set apart by ordination and other services of induction and commissioning⁵⁴.

Ministers are greeted, welcomed and re-welcomed—actively drawn into engagement and conversation to get to know, understand and embrace the people of God and the work and life of God’s people. Ministers are given access and opportunity. People bring their needs to ministers. At moments of great crisis and vulnerability ministers touch people’s lives⁵⁵. They are given space at the most intimate times in peoples’ lives⁵⁶. This makes people vulnerable to ministers who misuse ministry, and this makes ministers vulnerable to misusing ministry.

Ministers who abuse the trust they have been given could be called wolves in shepherd’s clothing⁵⁷. Rather than nurture and nourish⁵⁸ they hurt and harm.

Children and adults can be the victims of ministry abuse. Ministers who abuse may be drawn to a child or an adult to meet their own emotional needs, or because of vulnerabilities in the other person (loneliness, emotional neediness, problems with others, isolation, low confidence, low self-esteem)⁵⁹. Ministers who abuse can be predators or wanderers⁶⁰. Predators actively seek opportunities to abuse others with little or no sense of moral restrictions. They are predatory and lack conscience. Wanderers under normal circumstances would never contemplate a sexual liaison but something happens that leads them over a boundary. Wanderers lack awareness and judgement.

All ministers who abuse violate their call to ministry and their commitment to providing safe environments for all people to explore and express their faith in the Gospel⁶¹.

Ministers who abuse are highly skilled at manipulation. They engage their victim in a process that is gradual in nature. This is called grooming. Grooming is subtle and can be ambiguous. Groomers use their position and power to establish a special trusting friendship for the purpose of engaging in sexual activity⁶². The grooming of a child is a preparatory act to the subsequent sexual abuse of a child. Grooming a child is an offence. Sexual abuse of a child is an offence. Ministers who groom will groom children, parents, congregations, colleagues and the church as a whole.

Grooming is a gradual process that lowers a person’s defences. Groomers seek out vulnerable children and adults. Groomers can be single, married and have children themselves. Groomers thrive on others feeling shame. Groomers become skilled in creating opportunities and avoiding detection⁶³.

Groomers⁶⁴:

- create relationships with children, and condition the parents and other adults and leaders to consider the relationship with the child to be “normal”
- work hard at being liked and accepted
- seek to isolate a child or groups of children from others
- pay special attention to a particular child to make them feel special, establishing an emotional connection to lower the child’s inhibitions in preparation for sexual activity with the child
- bring children gifts (and give gifts to other family members) and take children on outings
- ask children to keep secrets from parents, siblings, friends and other adults
- may make bribes or threats—such as this will break up your family, no one will believe you, I will go to jail⁶⁵.

Grooming behaviour with a child might include giving special attention, having special games of touch and tickle, sitting on laps, drawing children aside in private, overly affectionate hugs, giving alcohol and cigarettes and pornography, brushing and touching of body parts.

Ministry abusers who groom adults also engage in a process to lower defences. They identify vulnerable people and seek to make them feel special and appreciated and then isolate them from others. They take spiritual language into an agenda to meet their own needs. “I prayed to God for help and here you are”. Personal warmth is used to obscure their true intention. Hooks are used to draw someone in. The boundaries are slowly nudged to see what will happen.

52 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 3.6a
53 Fortune 2009 Responding to clergy misconduct: a handbook Faith Trust Institute p45
54 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 2.3
55 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 1.2
56 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 1.2
57 Garland 2006 When Wolves Wear Shepherd’s Clothing: helping women survive clergy sexual abuse Social Work and Christianity spring 2006 vol 33
58 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 1.3
59 Smallbone 2014 extract from evidence provided to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse
60 Fortune 2009 Responding to clergy misconduct: a handbook Faith Trust Institute p23
61 The Uniting Church in Australia Safe Place Position Statement 1997 Commission on Women and Men

62 Smallbone 2014 extract from evidence provided to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse
63 Smallbone 2014 extract from evidence provided to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse
64 Smallbone 2014 extract from evidence provided to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse
65 Refer Bravehearts Tip sheet: responding to disclosures of child sexual assault

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Sexual activity is sought⁶⁶. Grooming behaviour of adults might include being overly available, emotional manipulation in prayer, holding hands, warm embraces after pastoral conversations, giving special tasks, inappropriately sharing confidential information, sharing about personal needs, brushing against a person and lingering touches⁶⁷.

If challenged, groomers make excuses or give justifications for their behaviour. Groomers might respond to questions about their behaviour with comments such as “I was just trying to comfort you. This is my pastoral approach to be hands-on and break down the barriers to the love of God. It was a holy kiss. You are oversensitive”. Grooming silences the inner moral compass. The person doubts their reading of a situation. They are embarrassed and berate themselves. Next time the minister’s hands are not challenged⁶⁸.

Congregations struggle with situations where a minister has sexually abused others. Congregations are full of people of good will, who believe in forgiveness. Congregational sympathy can gravitate towards a popular, powerful and charismatic minister. “I know this person. I don’t believe it. Who is saying this?” The victim can be blamed for leading the minister astray. Ministry sexual abuse can be mislabelled as adultery, an affair, an indiscretion, a lapse of judgement, a moment of human weakness⁶⁹. But ministry sexual abuse is an abuse of power and a betrayal of trust.

Congregations need to be enabled to understand that sexual misconduct by ministers is about power and control and a betrayal of trust. Congregations need to be helped to understand that they and the person sexually abused have been groomed by a perpetrator of sexual abuse. Congregations need to be able to grieve.

Colleagues who are groomed can unwittingly aid abuse. They can overlook unusual or concerning information and dismiss concerns⁷⁰. 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 sexual misconduct⁷¹.

Questions for reflection

What would you say to others to explain ministry sexual abuse?

How would you identify signs of grooming?

What strategies have you developed to ensure you exercise ministry safely?

How do limitations of confidentiality in ministry help to keep people safe?

What is there in your ministerial practice that would leave you open to accusations that you were guilty of sexual misconduct?

66 Garland 2006 When Wolves Wear Shepherd’s Clothing: helping women survive clergy sexual abuse Social Work and Christianity spring 2006 vol 33

67 Garland 2006 When Wolves Wear Shepherd’s Clothing: helping women survive clergy sexual abuse Social Work and Christianity spring 2006 vol 33 , no1 and Weber 2008 Understanding the mystery of clergy sexual abuse – extract internet article

68 Garland 2006 When Wolves Wear Shepherd’s Clothing: helping women survive clergy sexual abuse Social Work and Christianity spring 2006 vol 33

69 Fortune 2009 Responding to clergy misconduct: a handbook Faith Trust Institute p29

70 Smallbone 2014 extract from evidence provided to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

71 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice Section 8.3



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