



## A Set of Ethical Guidelines for Teaching Elders

The Pittsburgh Presbytery

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## A SET OF ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR TEACHING ELDERS IN PITTSBURGH PRESBYTERY

(Adopted April 3, 1995, revised 2008)

### PREAMBLE

All Presbyterian teaching elders are committed, by their ordination vows, to trust Jesus Christ as Savior, to acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the church, and to believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; to accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ; and to be led by the confessions of the church. Each teaching elder has also promised to be governed by this church's polity, to abide by its discipline, to be a friend among all colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit. Every time a teaching elder is installed in a new position, these same commitments are reaffirmed. Every ministry shall be carried on in accountability for its character and conduct to the Presbytery.

Two additional ordination vows suggest that the teaching elder's personal life is also a concern of the church. All teaching elders have agreed in their own lives to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love their neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world. They also have promised to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church, and to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.

There are, therefore, two aspects to ministerial ethics -- the professional code and the personal code. Both aspects are, to some degree and at some times, concerns for the whole church. The maintenance of high standards of professional competence is an ethical concern and is a responsibility shared by all teaching elders. All ordained persons will work toward the improvement and refinement of the practice of the ministerial calling.

While teaching elders are directly accountable to the Presbytery to which they belong or where they labor with permission, they also bear accountability to their employing body. In the realm of ethics there is a larger accountability

to the religious community as a whole and to the general public. People expect high standards of teaching elders, and to deny or ignore this is unrealistic and irresponsible.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) in all its expressions, the ecumenical religious community, and the general public expect and deserve the highest standards of conduct from teaching elders. When even one teaching elder denies, ignores, or flouts the ethical demands, irreparable damage is done to the individuals and to all parts of the communities affected. Therefore, teaching elders are called to the highest standards of conduct for the good of all and in service of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is the intention of Pittsburgh Presbytery to set forth the basic standards that must guide the practice of teaching elders. Also, we intend for these standards to evoke a vigorous discussion of the issues; and to challenge all ordained clergy as they search their own consciences and review their own past practices of ministry; look seriously at current practice, and anticipate their own ongoing ministry.

We acknowledge that we cannot cover every possible issue or anticipate every question that may arise. Therefore, if these guidelines are silent on a given issue, it is the professional responsibility of the teaching elder to return to the basics of Scripture, the polity of the church, and consultation with colleagues in ministry and other professionals to arrive at an ethically acceptable way to proceed for the ongoing practice of ministry.

## PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES

In all professional matters teaching elders, also referred to as ministers of Word and Sacrament, maintain practices that:

- § give glory to Christ
- § advance the goals of the church
- § nurture and protect the welfare of church members, parishioners, clients, and the public, challenging them in their endeavors to lead a Christian life

Teaching elders are energetic about their devotion to duty. Their practice of the profession will also seek to advance the profession itself, and include, but not be limited to, the following practices:

1. Teaching elders shall accurately represent their professional qualifications, education, training, and experience in all contacts with the church or the public. Personal Information Forms (PIF's), announcements of professional services, and other kinds of publicity are to be accurate, objective, dignified, and within the standards of generally accepted good taste. Teaching elders are themselves responsible for correcting any misrepresentation.
2. Teaching elders shall use their knowledge, skill, experience and professional relationships for the benefit of the people and the institutions they serve and not to secure unfair personal advantage.
3. Teaching elders shall limit their pastoral counseling to those circumstances for which they are qualified, and shall seek consultation from, or make referrals to, other professionals, such as physicians, psychotherapists, attorneys, or accountants, when needed.
4. a) Teaching elders who provide professional counseling services shall do so following the professional standards of their discipline.  
  
b) Teaching elders are expected to offer their services to members of their own congregations without charge or honoraria. Clergy stand ready to render appropriate services to individuals and communities in crisis without regard to financial remuneration. While fees for the use of the church facilities are set by the Session, honoraria or fees for the teaching elder's services to non-members can be set by the teaching elder or by the Session.

5. All teaching elders shall be honest, truthful, and trustworthy. They shall not violate confidences, break promises, or plagiarize.

a) Teaching elders may be confronted with conflicts between the obligation to maintain confidentiality and a legal or moral responsibility to disclose confidentially acquired knowledge, abuse of children or others, or the commission of crimes to appropriate secular authorities.

b) It is the teaching elder's responsibility to determine whether the law requires the reporting of a particular incident.

c) Teaching elders are encouraged to contact the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery to obtain current additional information.

d) These conflicts shall be resolved through informed, thoughtful consideration and with guidance through prayer.

6. Teaching elders shall refrain from the disparagement of any person, particularly of colleagues and other professionals.

7. Teaching elders should not be the financial or legal agents, that is, Executor of Wills or Powers of Attorney, for members of their congregations. They should avoid conflicts of interests. They should avoid the appearance of impropriety.

8. Teaching elders shall maintain professional competency throughout their careers. This shall be aided through continuing education and professional reading.

**ETHICAL PRINCIPLES: The Teaching Elder's Responsibility Toward God:**

**Spiritual Competence and Integrity**

Teaching Elders are responsible for the recognition of and care for their humanity. Such responsibility makes necessary an active relationship between creature and Creator.

1. Recognizing that the ongoing spiritual life of any individual is a matter of personal responsibility, clergy shall actively develop, pursue, and seek to maintain nourishing spiritual practices.
2. Spiritual growth and development for clergy shall be a regular focus of worship, personal devotion, continuing education, and study leave.

## ETHICAL PRINCIPLES: The Teaching Elder's Responsibility Toward the Self:

### Personal Competence and Integrity

The teaching elder has the rights, needs, and gifts of all God's children: privacy, relationships, freedom, rest, meaningful work and recreation. Therefore, clergy need not be guilt-ridden, over-loaded with work, duty-bound, unhappy or obsessed with righteous rage. A proper balance of responsible self-care frees the teaching elder to function effectively and to invest purposefully in the joys and burdens of a ministerial vocation.

1. Clergy shall work toward a balance between time at work and time with family and friends, recognizing the need for healthy interpersonal relationships which include intimacy, interdependence and affirmation.
2. Clergy shall plan for days of respite, study leaves for renewal, vacations for enjoyment and when appropriate the minister shall also seek personal counseling and spiritual direction.
3. Health for all clergy includes an awareness of limitations and the ability to recognize problems and seek therapeutic help and/or spiritual guidance when necessary. This would include but not be limited to family problems, alcoholism, drug addiction, sexual dysfunction, compulsive behaviors, and burnout.
4. While the personal and professional lives of clergy are separable to some extent, both should be consistent with Christian ethics. Unethical behavior can be used to discredit the integrity of the church, the ministry and the cause of Christ.



**ETHICAL PRINCIPLES: The Teaching Elder's Responsibility Toward Those Served and Toward Colleagues: Pastoral Competence and Integrity**

Teaching elders shall respect the integrity and protect the welfare of persons or groups with whom they are working by maintaining high professional standards.

**Pastoral Relationships:**

1. Clergy shall protect the best interests of those they serve and empower them for ministry. They shall be sensitive to the influential position of trust and dependency bestowed upon them, and they shall recognize that the religious/spiritual convictions of individuals have powerful emotional and volitional significance.
2. Given the nature of this trust, dependency, and power, any sexual interaction between a clergy person and person whom they serve is sexual misconduct.
3. Colleagues have the responsibility to report sexual misconduct to the Sexual Misconduct Response Team as set forth in the "Policy and Procedures on Sexual Misconduct" for Pittsburgh Presbytery.
4. Teaching elders should be accessible to the entire constituency. Clergy are encouraged to be aware of the effect that "special friendships" can have within the congregation or work-place. Unmarried clergy who chose to date are encouraged to seek such relationships outside the congregation/work-place.
5. Clergy should seek to be exemplary in the management of personal finances and respect the resources of those they are called to serve.
6. Clergy shall seek to embody the hospitality and grace of the divine relationship and shall not refuse pastoral care to anyone on the basis of age, race, gender, creed, national origin, disability, socio-economic status, or sexual orientation.

**Collegial Relationships:**

Teaching elders maintain a vital association with their ecclesiastical colleagues and with colleagues in related professions--health care, social services, legal

services, and the like. This includes persons in the Presbyterian Church (USA), those in other faith groups, and possibly some without any faith group connection. They communicate regularly with such peers and respect, support, and depend upon them personally and professionally.

1. In ecclesiastical staff relationships, the objective is to work together cooperatively and professionally in order to build up the whole church. To that end, teaching elders who are heads of staff have special authority and responsibility. However, all staff members should be free to express their differences appropriately. Within the context of professional propriety, the head of staff should be especially aware of resources for conflict resolution.

2. The teaching elder's first responsibility is to his/her own parishioners. Ordinarily, a teaching elder should not knowingly call on someone who is a member of another church unless such a call is initiated by the parishioner, family members, or friends. When membership in another church becomes known, there should be communication with that teaching elder if appropriate.

3. When a teaching elder is called upon to officiate at a wedding or funeral for families who are not members of the teaching elder's own congregation, the teaching elder shall determine whether they are members of another church. The teaching elder shall notify the family's pastor. For Baptism, see "Book of Order", e.g. W-2.3014.

4. When the relationship between a pastor and congregation is dissolved, the pastor must announce publicly what that means, calling attention to the fact that there will be another pastor or an interim pastor to whom the people should give their loyalty, and stating clearly that the departing teaching elder will not accept invitations to perform pastoral services or ceremonies except at the invitation of the current pastor. The teaching elder shall not influence the election of the Pastor Nominating Committee or the selection of any successor.

5. Teaching elders who are elected as Pastor Emeritus shall recognize such as an honorary title that carries no job responsibilities or special privileges unless expressly stated by the Session, in consultation with the pastor, and approved by the Presbytery.

6. The purpose of an Interim Pastor is to prepare a particular congregation for the coming of a new pastor. To this end the Interim Pastor will seek to develop loyalties to the office of the pastor and, most of all, loyalties to Christ and to the Church.

7. All teaching elders who are not serving as pastors or associate pastors of a specific congregation shall be active in the life of a particular congregation

but must respect the position of pastors/associate pastors regarding all ministerial functions within the community of faith.

February 1993--Task Force on Ministerial Ethics: Raymond Conaway, Elizabeth Hawkins, Chair, Justin Johnson, Martha Lees, Pamela-Rae Maloney, Carolyn Phillippe, Francis Tennes, Robert A. Veitch, Walter E. Wiest.