

Ministerial Accountability

BACKGROUND: FITNESS FOR MINISTRY

“Fitness for Ministry” in the United Church of Christ presupposes that a minister is

1. **Prepared** for Authorized Ministry through:
 - a. a call to ministry from God;
 - b. education;
 - c. a combination of gifts, talents, and traits of personality to allow for the gracious and trustworthy performance of ministry.
2. **Accountable** to the United Church of Christ through:
 - a. Local Church membership;
 - b. a 3-Way or 4-Way Covenant, or Retired or Leave of Absence status, or License
 - c. modes of connection to the United Church of Christ, as described below, including regular contact with and response to communication from Section A or Section B of the Committee on the Ministry, regarding such issues as maintenance of ministerial standing, life-long learning requirements, etc.
 - d. adherence to ministerial ethics.

To maintain one’s ministerial standing, an authorized minister must continue to be “fit for ministry” in the United Church of Christ.

A. MAINTAINING CONNECTION TO THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

1. Each Authorized Minister with standing in the Northern California Nevada Conference must be a member of a Local Church located within the Northern California Nevada Conference.
 - a. A pastor’s church membership is in the Local Church which he or she serves, whether that church is a UCC congregation or not.
 - b. A minister who is not serving as pastor of a Local Church must maintain membership in a UCC congregation, unless exception is made by the Committee on the Ministry.
2. Authorized Ministers who are not retired or on leave of absence must maintain a current 3- or 4-Way Covenant, carrying out the tasks of ministry to which they have been called. (For the pastor of a local church, the Call Agreement serves as the written form of 3-Way Covenant).
3. When seeking a called position or an interim ministry position, Authorized Ministers and those seeking authorization must follow the procedures established by the Conference, consulting with the Conference staff as needed in order to become familiar with the procedures.
4. Ordained and Commissioned Ministers will participate in Periodic Support Consultations with the Committee on the Ministry, Section B; respond to requests for information or consultation from Section B; and provide information as requested by Section B or the Conference Office.

5. Licensed Ministers will maintain contact with Section A; respond to requests for information or consultation from Section A; and provide information as requested by Section A or the Conference Office.
6. Authorized Ministers will engage in processes for continued theological, spiritual and professional growth in order that the tasks of ministry may be more adequately performed.
7. All authorized Ministers will participate in the life of the Association and Conference, as noted by the Board of Directors, 1969,
“An [authorized] minister of the United Church of Christ shall remain in communication not only with those he or she is called to serve but also with the ministers and representative laity of his/her Association and the Conference, that the work she or he may do shall bear the stamp not only of his or her own individuality but also the mark of the Fellowship. Discipline for the Authorized Minister shall mean a ready and voluntary sharing of the life of faith and the life of service, that the Church may both support and be supported by the ministers of the Church.”
8. When authorization for ministry is no longer required, or the Authorized Minister no longer maintains the above connections, the Authorized Minister will request leave of absence or retirement status from Committee on the Ministry, Section B, or resign her/his standing.

(See MOMSA Section I for description of ministerial standing).

B. MINISTERIAL ETHICS—GENERAL EXPECTATIONS

Ordained, Commissioned, and Licensed Ministers, as well as Persons-in-Care and ministers seeking standing in NCNC are expected to abide by the Code of Ethics for their form of authorized ministry, as found in the *UCC Manual on Ministry*, 1986 1 volume edition, pages 20-21, 22-23, and 24-25, respectively, and in Section 3, Section 6, and Section 7 of the multi-booklet notebook edition as well as by the expectations included in this document.

It is expected that Authorized Ministers who are actively serving have a primary responsibility to their covenantal partners, which is expressed through the Authorized Minister’s care for the well-being and health of the calling body, Local Church, and Association. Thus, the Authorized Minister will do no damage to the covenantal partners and will place the good of the covenantal partners above the personal concerns and needs of the Authorized Minister. Similarly, Authorized Ministers who are retired or on leave of absence will, in maintaining their ministerial standing, keep foremost the good of their congregations and of the wider church.

STATEMENT ON MINISTERIAL LEADERSHIP ADOPTED BY ANNUAL MEETING, 1989:

“I shall share leadership with others selected for this purpose and shall honor the democratic process in administering our common life.

I shall risk well-being and shall stand with those who also risk personal well-being because of actions taken in response to Christian convictions.

I shall strive to protect my colleagues from prejudicial discrimination on the basis of gender, race, age, physical impairment, marital status, or sexual orientation.

I shall, upon my termination and departure as pastor, teacher, or in other authorized capacity sever my pastoral/ministerial relations with a congregation or community I have served, recognizing that all future pastoral/ministerial functions shall be fulfilled by my successors.

I shall interpret to those I serve my need for adequate time for physical and spiritual renewal, recreation, and vacation.

On leaving a parish or other setting for authorized ministry, I shall leave the property and office in clean and good condition with all records intact and available for my successor.

In accepting Ministerial Standing in the Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ, I bind myself to accept both the criteria for maintaining standing in this Conference, and these guidelines and the ethical Codes from the *UCC Manual on the Ministry* as the standards of ministerial ethics.

I consent to abide by the procedures for review and discipline as set forth in the *Manual on the Ministry* and in the Northern California Nevada Conference 'Manual on the Ministry, Supplements and Appendices.'"

C. CONFIDENTIALITY

The Ordained Minister's Code in the United Church of Christ Manual on Ministry states, "I will honor all confidences shared with me." This professional ethic ensures that those with whom an Authorized Minister is in a professional relationship can share their concerns, questions, and burdens without fear of disclosure. Confidentiality is often essential to creating a relationship of respect and trust within which help may be sought and can be provided. This ethical principle generally applies even if a specific request for confidentiality has not been made.

The Ninth General Synod of the United Church of Christ affirmed this ethical principle on June 26, 1973, by adopting the following as the official policy of the General Synod: "Pastoral communications made to a duly ordained minister or accredited lay pastor of the United Church of Christ acting as a minister in his or her professional character are confidential and privileged." This policy was adopted with the understanding that legislative support for such privileged communication is determined separately by each state. The General Synod further urged each Conference Committee on the Ministry to develop statements, consistent with their state statutes, requiring that such pastoral communications be confidential.

Consistent with California statutes, it is important to distinguish between confidentiality and secrecy. A commitment to secrecy is a commitment never, under any circumstances, to share the information in question, as in the case of a priest in sacramental confession. A commitment to confidentiality, on the other hand, refers to a commitment to hold information in trust and to share it only with the person's permission or when it is essential to protect that person or others from harm. Confidentiality is intended to assist people in getting help; it should neither prevent a person from being held accountable for harmful actions, nor prevent a person from getting help he/she needs. Therefore, there are both legal and ethical limits to confidentiality.

The following are some suggested guidelines to help Authorized Ministers both honor confidences and also clarify for themselves and others the limits of confidentiality.

1. Try to clarify whether or not a person wants the information shared to be held in confidence. All information received during pastoral counseling is presumed confidential. However, pastoral care is rendered in many other settings and circumstances. A person may request information be shared for such purposes as prayer and other support from the faith community.
2. Discuss with the person the meaning, intent and limits of confidentiality before confidences are shared:
 - a. Explain that confidential information will not be shared without the person's express permission, except as legally or ethically mandated.
 - b. Explain the necessary ethical and legal exceptions to confidentiality and any required actions:
 - Suspected child neglect or abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional): There are ethical and legal obligations to report to the proper authorities. Reporting forms should be kept on hand and can be obtained from county welfare Child Protective Services. Suspected abuse must be reported immediately by phone and in writing within 36 hours.
 - Suspected elder abuse: There are ethical and legal obligations to report to the proper authorities. Reporting forms should be kept on hand and can be obtained from Adult Protective Services. Suspected abuse must be reported immediately by phone and in writing within two working days.
 - Spouse/partner abuse: Ethically, confidentiality may be broken if necessary to protect the person from imminent harm (e.g. calling 911).
 - When the person who has confided is perceived to intend great harm to self or others. There are ethical and legal obligations to break confidentiality and take specific steps when necessary to protect the public safety (e.g. notifying appropriate professionals, family, or friends in the case of the potential for suicide, and warning intended victims and calling police in the case of serious threat of bodily harm to another).
 - To otherwise seek consultation with other professionals in order to protect the safety and welfare of the confidant.
3. Prepare a standard statement which is made regularly whenever entering into a counseling relationship or other confidential communication. For example: "All information shared with me in this context will be held confidential and not shared with anyone else without your permission. However, there are some circumstances under which I am ethically and legally obligated to break confidentiality. Some of those circumstances are: when I hear of or suspect child abuse or elder abuse, when I believe someone intends to harm themselves or others, or when I need to do so to otherwise protect your safety."
4. Especially in counseling relationships, be aware of and acknowledge the limits of your competency, and get permission to consult with other professionals when it is in the person's best interest to do so. Get that permission in writing if possible. Maintain a current list of consultation and referral resources for your community.

5. Document all actions taken when there is a legal or ethical requirement to report. Keep copies of any written reports.
6. Be vigilant in taking care of your own needs for support and counsel in difficult situations. Because the identity of confidants can easily be disclosed accidentally just by describing a situation to someone in the congregation or community, develop a support network of clergy colleagues and other professionals with a wide geographical base, so that you can consult and get support when needed without breaking confidentiality.
7. Beware some of the common pitfalls which lead to unethical conduct with respect to breaking confidentiality by:
 - never sharing confidential information with your spouse, partner, or other confidants;
 - taking care not to disclose confidential information in worship, openly or inadvertently (e.g. in pastoral prayers or sermons);
 - never sharing confidential information with a confidant's spouse/partner unless permission is granted;
 - whenever possible, providing for a confidential setting, where confidants can meet with you without being seen by others.

D. ETHICAL STANDARDS IN PARTICULAR CIRCUMSTANCES

1. Interim Ministry

The period between installed pastors is a singular time in the life of a congregation. With respect for the specialized ministry required at such a time, an Authorized Minister, Person-in-Care, or minister seeking standing who accepts a position as an Interim Minister of a congregation, shall not become a candidate for the called position there during that search process. The Interim Minister will actively and graciously discourage any overtures from members of the congregation to seek the called position, explaining the importance of the work of the interim, and the need for the Interim Minister to function solely in the role of Interim Ministry, so that the church can complete its work in a state of health. Any difficulties in compliance with this standard should be brought to the attention of the Committee on the Ministry, Section A or B. After completing an interim ministry, the Interim Minister shall not have pastoral contact with members of the congregation, unless called to serve that congregation during a subsequent search, during which the minister in question has not served as the Interim Minister; or engaged as Replacement Minister or Interim Minister once again. The Interim Minister will not worship with the congregation for at least a year after completing the interim.

2. Replacement Ministry

A Replacement Minister does not carry out the same functions as an Interim Minister, but carries out the ministerial duties of a minister who is going on Sabbatical, Parental, Medical or other leave of several months' duration. The Replacement Minister should not in any way disparage the ministry of the minister on leave, nor initiate any changes not discussed with the minister, and should actively discourage mem-

bers of the congregation from making unfavorable comments about the called minister. If concerns surface, the Replacement Minister can relate them to the called minister when the called minister returns, and/or encourage the member to do so. The Replacement Minister will not worship with the congregation for at least one year after her/his departure, nor have pastoral contact with members of the congregation unless called to serve that congregation or engaged as Interim Minister or Replacement Minister once again.

3. In Retirement

- a. Maintenance of standing is essential during retirement for several reasons.
 - i. Ordained ministerial standing provides authorization for performing ministerial functions such as funerals, weddings, short-term pastoral assignments, interims, etc.
 - ii. Maintenance of Ordained or Commissioned Ministerial Standing encourages interaction between and among the retired minister, and the other ministers of the Conference, as well as with the Local Churches of the Conference, providing opportunity for the talent and wisdom of retired minister to continue to enrich the life of the Conference and ongoing enrichment and support for the retired minister. (See p. 5 “The Oversight of Ministries” section [2000] of the *UCC Manual on Ministry*)
- b. Since ordination or commissioning remain intact upon retirement, and the Ordained Ministers’ and Commissioned Ministers’ Codes of Ethics remain the rule for professional conduct during retirement, ordained or commissioned ministerial standing provides a continuing structure of accountability.

4. Upon Departure from a Pastoral Position with a Local Church

Departure from a pastoral position is synonymous with releasing control over the future ministry of that congregation, and with dissolving the pastoral relationship with those who have been members of that local church. Once the decision has been made to end the covenantal relationship between the authorized minister and the congregation, the process of letting go becomes the primary agenda for the authorized minister. For the health and welfare of the local church and the authorized minister a clear boundary needs to be established between past and future.

- a. Therefore, authorized ministers leaving a pastoral ministry with a local church shall refrain from such activities as:
 - engaging in envisioning for the future of the congregation
 - consulting in the selection of an interim pastor
 - engaging in formal or informal conversations concerning the future of the local church, with either individuals or groups from the congregation.
- b. In support of this transition to new ministerial leadership, the authorized minister shall:

- encourage the church leadership to consult with the designated Conference staff regarding helpful boundaries and steps for transition
 - encourage church leaders to follow UCC procedures and recommendations for the interim ministry and search process.
- c. After departing the pastoral position, the authorized minister shall:
- not attend worship services or be involved in other functions of the congregation, except at the specific invitation of the pastor or interim pastor, from the date of departure until at least one year following the arrival of a newly-called pastor. During that time period the former pastor should also stay away from social gatherings with members of the congregation. After that time period the former pastor will assess the impact of her/his presence upon the ministry of the newly-called pastor before accepting invitations to attend worship services or be involved in other functions of the congregation or in social gatherings with members of the congregation, holding as primary concern the well-being of the congregation in establishing its relationship with the newly-called pastor.
 - will not compete with, interfere with, criticize or disparage the interim pastor, subsequent called pastor(s), or any other clergy or lay leaders in the congregation.
 - will be absent so far as pastoral or consultant roles with the congregation and its ministries are concerned.
 - will graciously decline all invitations by members to conduct weddings, baptisms or funerals, visit the sick, do counseling, to offer advice or other services related to end-of-life issue, to conduct classes, hold workshops, etc., and will direct church members to the pastor or interim pastor for provision of such services.
 - will not serve as pastor or teacher for former members of the congregation in the same community or geographic area of the Northern California Nevada Conference from which the authorized minister has just departed, except in those circumstances where the former church itself is in process of establishing a new congregation, to which the departing minister has been called as pastor.
 - will not ask the congregation to serve as a covenantal partner in the future.
- 5. Sexual Conduct/Sexual Harassment**
- a. Policy: The Northern California Nevada Conference of the UCC is committed to supporting its congregations and Authorized Ministers as they seek to create and maintain communities in which all members can work and worship, enjoy fellowship and render ministry together. As Christians and as people living accountably in community we hold up and affirm committed relationships between two people.

To this end, we are committed to an atmosphere free of all forms of inappropriate conduct and harassment, exploitation or intimidation, including sexual. Specifically, every member of the Northern California Nevada Conference shall be aware that the Conference is absolutely opposed to inappropriate sexual conduct, including sexual harassment, and that such behavior is prohibited by Conference policy. Sexual harassment is also prohibited by law. It is the intention of the Conference to take whatever action may be needed to prevent, to correct, and if necessary, to initiate discipline for behavior that violates this policy.

- b. Inappropriate Sexual Conduct includes:
 - i. Any sexual relationship, whether consensual or not, between an Authorized Minister/Person-in-Care/minister seeking standing and a person with whom he/she is in a pastoral/professional relationship, except between married couples or life partners.
 - ii. Rape or other unwanted physical contact by force, threat or intimidation.
 - iii. Any other type of sexual conduct which is harmful to the physical or emotional health of another.
 - iv. Sexual Harassment, which includes unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, sexualizing of the church or work environment by comments, displays of pornographic material, etc., and other verbal or physical conduct. Sexual Harassment occurs when:
 - Submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of instruction, employment, pastoral care or participation in other church activity.
 - Such conduct has the purpose or effect of sexually charging the environment and/or unreasonably interfering with an individual's participation in the life of the community or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive congregational or employment environment.

6. Single Ministers and Amorous Relations

- a. Background: The Church and its Authorized Ministers and Persons-in-Care are caught in a dilemma between honored tradition and the realities of power imbalances between a minister and a person with whom he/she is in a pastoral/professional relationship. On the one hand, there is an historic expectation that Authorized Ministers would do well to find their life partners within their faith tradition. On the other hand, the same kind of power imbalance experienced in other professional fields marks relationships between Authorized Ministers and Congregants/clients/staff, both paid and volunteer.

By its very nature, an amorous relationship between a single Authorized Minister and a Congregant/Staff Person or one over which the minister exercises supervision or oversight jeopardizes their pastoral/professional relationship. While other professions can honor their traditions by prohibiting all

social relationships between professional and client, such restrictions are difficult in the more complex ongoing relationships between Authorized Ministers and Congregants/clients/staff where there are multiple roles and boundaries. There is consensus, however, that the responsibility for the care of Congregants/clients/staff lies with the Authorized Minister.

- b. Policy on Single Ministers in Amorous Relationships: Single ministers will pursue amorous relationships only with single persons. The pastoral/professional relationship with a Congregant/client, Staff Person or one over whom the minister exercises supervision or oversight must first be clearly concluded before an amorous relationship may be pursued. An Authorized Minister, Person-in-Care, or minister seeking standing may not develop an amorous relationship with anyone who has received formal pastoral counseling from him or her in the previous two years.
- c. Procedures for concluding the pastoral/professional relationship are detailed in Appendix 2 of this Section.

7. Use of Entheogens

Entheogens are plants or chemical substances taken to occasion spiritual or mystical experiences. Entheogens are more commonly called hallucinogens or psychedelics. The use of entheogens or the guiding of others in the use of entheogens is considered unethical conduct for Authorized Ministers, Persons-in-Care, and ministers seeking standing in the Northern California Nevada Conference. An exception might be participation in federally approved research on the use of entheogens for spiritual purposes. Consult Committee on the Ministry, Section B with questions.