Creating Safe and Faithful Communities: Boundary Training Is a Constitutional Responsibility

Healthy boundaries are part of faithful ministry. They help us honor the sacred trust placed in those who serve the church, protect children and adults who may be vulnerable, recognize the power that accompanies positions of leadership, and create communities in which people can participate in the life of the church with confidence and safety.
For Presbyterians, this responsibility is not simply a recommended best practice. It is part of our Constitution.

The *Book of Order*, G-3.0106, requires **all councils of the church**, including every session, to adopt and implement four policies:

- a **sexual misconduct policy**;
- a **harassment policy**;
- a **child, youth, and adults with vulnerabilities protection policy**; and
- an **antiracism policy**.

The Constitution further requires each council's policies to include **boundary training addressing sexual misconduct and child sexual abuse prevention for its members at least every thirty-six months**.

For a congregation, this means that the session has a constitutional responsibility both to have these policies and to implement them. Having an old policy somewhere in a church file is not sufficient. Sessions should periodically review their policies, make certain they reflect current ministry practices, and ensure that members of session receive the required training at least once every three years.

The Presbytery of Milwaukee's Ethical Conduct and Boundaries Policy does not replace the policies that each session is constitutionally required to adopt for its own congregation. The Presbytery's policy governs ministers of the Word and Sacrament; commissioned ruling elders serving under Presbytery jurisdiction; Presbytery officers and staff; persons elected or appointed to Presbytery service; inquirers and candidates; and others specified by the policy. Each session remains responsible for the policies governing its congregation's life and ministries.

Sessions do not, however, have to undertake this work alone.
Congregations may contact the Presbytery for assistance in reviewing their requirements, developing appropriate training practices, and coordinating boundary training. Sessions may also arrange through the Presbytery to use the Presbytery's approved service provider, **Safe Gatherings**, with the applicable cost borne by the congregation. This can provide sessions with a practical and consistent means of fulfilling their constitutional training responsibilities while benefiting from the resources already used by the Presbytery.

For Ministers of the Word and Sacrament
Ministers of the Word and Sacrament are members of the presbytery and are accountable to the presbytery for their exercise of ordered ministry. The Presbytery of Milwaukee's **Ethical Conduct and Boundaries Policy** requires those governed by the policy to complete Presbytery-approved boundary training every three years.

The Presbytery uses **Safe Gatherings** for this training. Ministers should select the **Clergy Ethics** training.

The Presbytery policy also requires persons governed by it to complete **Wisconsin Mandatory Reporter Training**. Ministers are also expected to review and sign the appropriate **Life Together in the Community of Faith: Standards of Ethical Conduct** covenant. These standards call those exercising ordered ministry to honor the sacred trust of relationships within the covenant community, observe appropriate boundaries, exercise power responsibly, avoid exploitation, and refrain from sexual harassment and misconduct.

Resources are available on the Presbytery's **Commission on Pastoral Ministries** webpage.

Mandatory Reporting Is Also Part of Our Constitutional Responsibility

Boundary training should also remind us that preventing misconduct and responding appropriately when harm is suspected are connected responsibilities.

The *Book of Order*, G-4.0302, requires members of the church engaged in ordered ministry, as well as certified Christian educators employed by the church or its congregations, to report to appropriate **ecclesiastical and civil legal authorities** knowledge of harm or risk of harm involving physical abuse, neglect, or sexual molestation or abuse of a minor or an adult who lacks mental capacity, subject to the Constitution's provisions concerning confidential and privileged communications.

Wisconsin law establishes additional responsibilities for mandated reporters. For this reason, the Presbytery requires Wisconsin Mandatory Reporter Training for those governed by its Ethical Conduct and Boundaries Policy.

More Than Compliance

It can be tempting to regard boundary training as another certificate to complete or another requirement to place on a session checklist. The deeper purpose is the health of the covenant community.

Our ministries create relationships of trust. Pastors, ruling elders, deacons, educators, staff members, volunteers, and others may be granted access to deeply personal and vulnerable parts of people's lives. With that trust comes responsibility. Christian leadership does not use authority for personal gratification or control. It seeks the good of the other and exercises power in ways consistent with the ministry of Jesus Christ.

The Presbytery's *Life Together* standards describe this well: those entrusted with leadership are called to honor relationships within the covenant community, observe appropriate boundaries, exercise the power of their positions judiciously, and refrain from exploiting relationships for personal gain or gratification.

Boundary training therefore belongs to our understanding of ordered ministry and Christian discipleship. It helps us recognize unhealthy patterns before they become harmful, strengthens our ability to respond appropriately when concerns arise, and reminds us that accountability is part of our life together in Christ.

A Reminder to Sessions and Ministers

Sessions: Please review your congregation's policies. Make certain your session has adopted and is implementing the sexual misconduct, harassment, child, youth, and adults with vulnerabilities protection, and antiracism policies required by G-3.0106. Make certain your current session members have received the required boundary and abuse-prevention training within the past thirty-six months. If your session needs assistance, contact the Presbytery. Congregations may work with the Presbytery and may use the Presbytery's Safe Gatherings service provider at the congregation's cost.

Ministers of the Word and Sacrament and others governed by the Presbytery policy: Please make certain that your Presbytery-required training is current, that you have completed Wisconsin Mandatory Reporter Training, and that your appropriate *Life Together* covenant is on file.

The Presbytery provides links to **Safe Gatherings**, **Wisconsin Mandatory Reporter Training**, the **Ethical Conduct and Boundaries Policy**, and the **Life Together** covenants through the Commission on Pastoral Ministries webpage:

Commission on Pastoral Ministries
https://www.pbymilwaukee.org/commission-on-pastoral-ministries.html

Safe Gatherings
https://safegatherings.com/

Creating safe communities is work we share. It is part of our constitutional responsibility, our accountability to one another, and our calling to tend faithfully the people Christ has entrusted to our care.