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Navigating the Boundary Waters

The boundary waters of northern Minnesota and southern Canada is a one million-acre protected wilderness that is explored by outdoor adventurers of all skill levels every year.

The pristine ancient setting, the beauty of the surroundings, and the peaceful trek by foot or canoe lure families, friends and adventure groups to test their abilities to survive with few modern conveniences.

Though referred to as boundary waters, there is no clear demarcation of one nation from the other that is easily visible at all times. What is clear is that Canada and the United States have different laws and rules that govern their sovereignty and carry great importance to each nation. To coexist peacefully, it is important for each to understand the other. And so it is with church workers and their congregations.

Maintaining healthy boundaries is a challenging but vital task for pastors and other church workers. Without healthy boundaries, workers run the risk of compassion fatigue, interpersonal conflict and role confusion.

Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend in their book "Boundaries" noted:

"Made in the image of God, we were created to take responsibility for certain tasks. Part of taking responsibility, or ownership, is knowing what is our job, and what isn't. Workers who continually take on duties that aren't theirs will eventually burn out. It takes wisdom to know what we should be doing and what we shouldn't. We can't do everything."

Cloud and Townsend go on to describe the following types of boundaries:

- **Physical**, bodily boundaries relate to being touched physically. Handshakes, hugs, pats on the back, fall within this category.
- **Words**, with the most basic boundary-setting word being “no”. The word “no” and other words help to delineate for others where you stand and help to define your personal boundaries in a way that can be clear.
- **Truth**, God’s truth, versus Satan’s truth sets personal boundaries for behavior and thought as a Christian.
- **Geographical distance** may be a necessary move when boundaries are being violated until such time as the issue can be dealt with in a safer manner. This can relate to needing to take time out from a discussion in order to calm down and/or gather thoughts to continue.
- **Time** can be a necessary boundary to assist in defining and strengthening boundaries between people or entities. Taking a break in whatever form can be helpful, especially with *thoughtful purpose* to establish or correct boundary violations.
- **Consequences** are the result of boundaries being violated. The consequences may include difficult conversations to address the violation or possibly a decrease in trust in a relationship for a time.

A useful exercise for pastors and church workers is to do a “boundary check”. Ask yourself questions similar to these.

- Am I feeling uncomfortable with physical touch from someone such as hugs that last too long or personal space encroached?
- Are tasks being given to me or am I volunteering for tasks that don’t fall within my ministry expectations? Tasks that could be done by others? Tasks that I don’t have time to do, that feel burdensome or that I find myself getting angry about?
- Am I being asked to or being nudged in the direction of violating God’s truth for the sake of (you fill in the blank)?
- Is my families’ privacy being compromised? Is my family time being compromised?
- Am I taking on the responsibility to “fix” that which is not mine to fix? Am I absorbing secondary trauma from situations that occur that I have no control over to prevent or solve? Are my moods and emotions being swayed by the moods and emotions of those around me on a regular basis?

Looking at the biblical implications of boundaries, this website <https://www.gotquestions.org/boundaries-biblical.html> offered the following:

“Boundaries teach us to accept one another as being different yet still valuable. God uses boundaries to help us appreciate the differences in people rather than be upset by them. A godly friend tells us what we need to hear, not necessarily what we want to hear (Proverbs 27:6). We are free to be ourselves with others if we control ourselves. Boundaries are not selfish when we use our freedom to serve and love one another because we are keeping our own flesh under control (Galatians 5:13). In a godly relationship, both people are free to love each other and to be themselves because neither is using or manipulating the other.”

Navigating the boundary waters may take an experienced guide or a detailed map. If you are struggling with boundary issues, a Lutheran Family Service counselor can assist with sorting through the wilderness and getting on the right trail. The journey may take some effort, but the end result is worth it for yourself, your family, and your ministry.

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