

Ministerial Boundaries, Power and Authority

By The VIRTUS Programs

Preview:

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Article:

Our lives are made up of personal and public relationships with the people around us, and boundaries help our relationships and interactions to flourish. Healthy boundaries within healthy relationships contribute to the possibility of living joyful lives. What we do in our personal and public relationships has a significant impact. Your role as an employee or volunteer has inherent within it a tremendous amount of trust and responsibility—especially when interacting with children and youth. Appropriate boundaries help to maintain a safe environment, and they can serve to protect us, the people around us, and the people in our care. Conversely, boundary violations can cause significant harm.

For our own well-being (and for the well-being of those we serve), personal boundaries are critical for every relationship and interaction within our ministries or programs. We set boundaries to protect ourselves—as they impact every area of our lives.

There are different power constructs in relationships; consider bilateral power, where people have an equal amount of perceived and actual power, such as two parish employees with similar authority. Unilateral power means one person has more power over the other, such as between: a bishop and a priest, a priest and an employee; a school principal and a teacher; between a priest and any lay person, or between an employee and a volunteer. Within relationships and interactions in ministerial settings, a power imbalance exists between those serving others, and those receiving care or services. As an employee or volunteer, you have an inherent, perceived power over those you serve.

Because of this inherent position of authority and power, the employee and volunteer's priority should be the best interest of the person to whom they are ministering. Likewise, adults always have authority, and many times power over minors specifically, simply because of the nature of being an adult. When adults use their authority or power to control and manipulate for their own interests, minors and vulnerable adults are at risk. This manipulation could be shown through grooming behaviors, leading to boundary violations, and even abuse.

Because of this inherent authority of those serving within ministry, *it is always the responsibility of the adult employee or volunteer to maintain healthy and appropriate boundaries.*

Employees and volunteers also must take a greater responsibility in *the prevention of boundary violations*, which includes maintaining appropriate and safe ministry practices, following the diocesan or organization's policy and code of conduct, and communicating when there is a concern. Boundary violations, if not addressed, can lead to more severe boundary violations, or



even to actual abuse. This is why it is so critical for inappropriate behavior and boundary violations to be communicated to the appropriate entity—so they can be addressed before they cause further harm.

Building relationships and a good rapport are common and positive goals of ministry. It's the perceived testing or the violation of the rules and prescribed boundaries that alert us to a problem that could involve a person who may have abuse in mind.

Research shows that it is infrequent to have a "one-time" boundary violation—but even if it is just once, it can still be severe enough to cause harm. If the behavior itself is not abusive, it can progressively lead to abuse (sometimes referred to as a "slippery slope"). Boundary violations are frequently a precursor to the harassment of adults or the sexual abuse of minors.

Even when one doesn't *intend* for the boundary-violating behavior to be abusive, it can still condition the receiving child or vulnerable adult to more easily be manipulated or abused by someone else.

Here are some additional items to keep in mind while serving as an employee or volunteer within a diocese or other organization:

- Remember that children and youth are looking to you to help them learn about appropriate boundaries with adults! Don't miss an opportunity to help them learn the type of behavior they should expect from safe adults—whether that means you, or someone outside of the ministry.
- Consider how your behavior and words could impact others. Remember your power differential with those you serve, and consider your actual *impact* more carefully along with your intent.
- It's possible for anyone to violate another's boundaries, which can happen accidentally because of a lack of knowledge, cultural differences, mental illness, immaturity or an intellectual or developmental disability. Always keep in mind, *in a healthy relationship or in the context of a ministerial environment, once an issue or boundary is communicated, the behavior should be changed.*
- If you are unsure if specific behavior you observe, or your own behavior is inappropriate, but it is something of concern to you, it is important to communicate your concerns with leadership or your supervisor.
- Since boundary violations can progressively increase in severity before culminating in abuse, we want to ensure that we are addressing them before they can escalate.
- Any suspicions of abuse should also be elevated to the appropriate child or adult protective services within the state.

Most sexual abuse experienced by minors is committed by an adult who has a position of authority, power and trust. In most of these situations, the abuse was preceded by boundary violations. We all have a responsibility to ensure that our environments are healthy and safe. Each of us brings our own lifetime of experiences, along with the richness of our diversity that form how we think and work, and we each add value to our environments because of these



differences. You are important; your contribution matters, and you can help maintain safe environments for everyone!