Beyond Fear to Confidence

Developing Boundaries as a Skill and Norm in Ministry

Donald R. McCrabb

Boundary setting or establishing clear limits is a vitally necessary skill for a minister today. Limits are important in a variety of ways including the practical, personal, interpersonal and religious dimensions of ministry. By his concise description of these boundaries and by explaining how boundaries provide norms for ministry the author invites the reader to make an assessment of professional responsibility.

Boundary violations within Church and society prompt ministers to take a critical look at their pastoral practice for all suffer by the misconduct of even a few ministers. Dioceses, religious orders, and parishes around the country are doing continuing education on the ethics of pastoral ministry. These efforts are raising the ethical standards for ministry in an era when right and wrong frequently become questions of image and liability.

In this article I argue the Church's institutional response to boundary violations must be balanced with an educational one. Borrowing insights from pastoral counseling, I identify twelve boundaries in ministry. Identifying, setting, and maintaining boundaries becomes a ministerial skill. I offer two cases to illustrate the skill. I further argue that setting just and faithful boundaries is a norm for ministry. I conclude with practical applications in the areas of theological reflection, ministerial formation, and professional development.

Donald R. McCrabb, D.Min., *an ecclesial lay minister, is the assistant director of pastoral field education at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C., and the former executive director of the Catholic Campus Ministry Association.*

Developing Boundaries as a Skill in Ministry

A boundary, in common usage, evokes the spatial image of a line; it sets a limit. When applied to people, it outlines the self within a relationship. People need a sense of where they end and another begins to establish a strong sense of self, develop a personal identity, and feel secure and confident in interpersonal exchanges. A boundary is a point of departure between the self and the other (Heagle, 10–16).

The helping professions have identified key boundaries which, when intentionally set and kept, become a skill. Professions are frequently characterized by a particular skill—nurses have a highly developed sense of touch, lawyers precision in language, and therapists an ability to listen.

In the counseling process a contract between the counselor and client sets boundaries that the counselor uses in the therapeutic process. Place, the duration of the session, payment, confidentiality, and termination procedures are boundaries counselors strictly adhere to so the focus of the relationship is therapeutic (Drummond). While this type of boundary setting is appropriate in some ministerial settings, it is simply unrealistic for most ministers who find themselves in multiple roles. The couple seeing the minister for premarriage counseling on Tuesday night might be in the lector training workshop on Saturday morning. Ministers need a more fluid set of boundaries than counselors.

[M]inistry is a public activity of a disciple of Jesus Christ . . .

Thomas F. O'Meara, O.P., defines ministry as "the public activity of a baptized follower of Jesus Christ flowing from the Spirit's charism and an individual personality on behalf of a Christian community to proclaim, serve, and realize the kingdom of God" (O'Meara, 150). While there are limitations to this definition, it makes three essential points: ministry is a public activity of a disciple of Jesus Christ, this activity is done on behalf of the Christian community, and this activity is in service to the Kingdom of God.

Setting a boundary in ministry establishes the relationship as ministerial; there is a theological purpose and a public promise governed by faith in Jesus Christ. Ministers, as representatives of the Church, must be clear about their identity and parishioners, as members, need this security. Finally, boundaries focus the ministerial objective and suggest a pastoral plan within the context of the community and its mission. The first step is the identification and setting of a boundary.

Poor boundary setting confuses the relationship, obscures the ministerial objective, may exploit the parishioner while putting the minister at risk, and dilutes ministerial identity. In this sense, boundaries are frequently broken—a slip of the tongue, some confidential information shared, a knee touched, an assumption left unchecked.

When is a boundary violated? When serious harm is done to the parishioner. What is serious harm? When the outcome diminishes the parishioner or the mission of the Church. The goal for counseling is healing and insight, not a romantic relationship. Even if the romantic relationship is consensual there is still serious harm since the ministerial relationship is undermined. Everyone ends up wounded.

Poor boundary setting confuses the relationship, obscures the ministerial objective . . .

It is understandable that boundary violations are viewed through a juridical lens—seeing them as "stepping out of bounds." The Church has responded with strong policies when a minister violates a boundary—especially in ministry with and to children (Archdiocese of Washington). This is an appropriate institutional response to a serious problem. Unfortunately, this approach is not formative. Using it in the formation of ministers may create what the Church abhors—a ministerial life characterized by isolation, self-deception, minimalism, and fear.

Viewing boundary setting as a skill can enrich and expand the Church's understanding of ministry. Typical boundaries in helping relationships are: touch, self-disclosure, use of language, place of meeting, time, presents, lending or borrowing, business, and socializing (Hofstee-Milgrom, 20–25). I believe ministry has twelve essential boundaries: place, touch, time, emotion, personality, sexuality, language, position, social, community, spirituality and vocation. They can be clustered under four subheadings: practical, personal, interpersonal, and religious. Below I describe the positive expression of the boundary, how it can be poorly set, and when it is violated.

Practical Boundaries in Ministry

A. *Location:* All ministry happens "somewhere." Ministers who define the place or places where they will work take command of their service, express their identity, and send a clear message to the people they serve. Confi-

dential conversations need privacy. Committees need rooms with good lighting and tables to meet around. Cluttered offices may work for some ministers but are poor places for counseling. Meeting in private quarters puts too much focus on the minister and distracts from the purpose of the gathering. Entrapment of any kind—locking doors, remote and secluded locations, etc.—violates the location boundary.

B. *Touch:* Physical touch is a powerful way to establish a trusting relationship with another. Healthcare professionals use touch to communicate reassurance, positive regard, and well-being. Touch naturally communicates acceptance and support. In the sacraments, touch is often part of the sacred action. Since touch is such a common "language" for human beings, it is a boundary that is often overlooked or poorly established. Ministers rightfully rely on the context to help them decide how to touch their parishioners; holding someone's hand is comforting in a hospital room but confusing in a counseling session. Touch that lingers makes a claim on another person, making the relationship personal. Unwelcome touch is a boundary violation.

C. *Time:* Time is the minister's most precious resource. It can be understood as *chronos,* which is measured and impersonal, or *kairos,* which is fluid and rich with meaning. The skilled minister recognizes the demands of both. Defining a beginning and ending time focuses everyone's attention on the task at hand. This frees the minister to schedule his or her work and to plan personal time. The more relaxed ministers are about time, the less focused they are on their ministry. They risk meeting their personal needs through their ministry by avoiding the challenges of creating a life outside their ministry. Excessive demands of time upon oneself or another is a boundary violation.

Personal Boundaries in Ministry

A. *Personality:* The skilled minister knows his or her strengths and weaknesses and recognizes the gifts and limitations of others. He or she names and claims gifts and limitations freely; sharing the first and relying on others to help him or her manage the second. Strengths and limitations must be distinguished from preferences. A person could love teaching but not be good at it. Or just because a task requires a lot of effort does not mean it is a limitation. A pastor may dislike finances but is still able to oversee the parish finances with some discipline and effort. Demanding gifts where none exist, ignoring real limitations, or confusing preferences for limitations, violates the personality boundary.

B. *Emotions:* Feeling as an emotion—rather than body sensations—is a psychic reaction to stimuli from the world around us (Baars, 12). The skilled minister is clear about his or her feelings and recognizes the feelings of another. This

gives the minister distance and objectivity. Naming the feelings of another encourages the other's self-acceptance and personal responsibility. Taking on another's feelings is poor boundary setting. Compassion, being with another as they experience deep feelings, does not mean internalizing those feelings. Ignoring feelings, or indulging feelings, inhibits ministry. The self-serving manipulation of another's feelings violates the emotional boundary.

C. *Sexuality:* The full integration of a person's sexuality is a lifelong task. Each minister will celebrate and struggle with his or her sexuality within the context of their vocation. The celebration and integration of sexuality gives ministry energy, generosity, and commitment. Dress, personal grooming, and posture are positive ways to express sexuality. A fragmented and unhealthy sexuality makes a minister needy, repressed, or isolated. Ministers should be extraordinarily aware of their sexual attractions, their sexual energy, and life-giving ways to channel that energy. Ignoring sexual feelings is dangerous. Christians are called to live a chaste life. Anything less is a boundary violation.

Interpersonal Boundaries in Ministry

A. *Language:* Speech, even over the written word, is the greatest tool for ministry. Speech can instruct, inspire, and illuminate. A well-crafted and clearly presented homily brings the gospel to life in a powerful and personal way. The skilled minister knows his or her audience, communicates clearly, and verifies what is heard. Well-governed speech engenders trust and keeps the conversation focused on the ministerial objective. An offhanded comment wounds or misleads. Too much speech overwhelms, too little isolates, and gossip threatens confidentiality. Abusive language is a boundary violation.

B. *Position:* A position is the public role a person fills which includes duties, authority, and privileges. It defines the scope of a person's institutional authority and establishes contractual parameters between the minister and the parishioner. A minister must be willing and able to take on the demands of a position. A pastor (director) holds the chief leadership role. Shouldering that position well gives leadership, direction, organization, and structure to a ministry. A timid or tentative pastor flounders, is unfocused, and is often overwhelmed by the immediate. A domineering pastor is too controlling, does not inspire people to give their best, and is easily burned out. Using one's position for personal gain is a violation of this boundary.

C. *Social:* There will be dual roles within ministry; a confessor is also pastor. The social boundary is a dual role outside of ministry; the parishioner who is also a doctor. Entering into a dual role begins to confuse the relationship and complicate the ministerial objective. Ministers, of course, need a doctor as well as a circle of friends. Healthy relationships are public and clear about vocational

boundaries. The skilled minister develops a social life outside of the ministry, sets parameters, and renegotiates a relationship that becomes personal. Secret relationships are dangerous to the well-being of the minister, the parishioner, and the community. Deception violates the social boundary.

Religious Boundaries in Ministry

A. *Community:* The Church confers the authority to serve in its name, provides the context for ministry and holds the minister accountable. Relying on the community for support and challenge, the minister forms intimacy with others in service to the Church's mission. Although the minister will have favorites, he or she must be careful about giving too much attention to some parishioners and avoiding others. Ignoring the community boundary, the minister can easily become a workaholic who creates an unhealthy dependency among some of the community members while alienating others. Claiming authority one does not have, or not holding other ministers accountable to norms, violates the boundary of community.

B. *Spirituality:* The skilled minister draws from his or her own spiritual life in an open and genuine way which respects the spiritual history of another. A personal spirituality, developed through spiritual disciplines, authenticates ministry. Rooted in the traditions of the Church, a minister's spirituality expresses the charisms God has given to the Church over the centuries. Enthusiasm for a particular spirituality must be tempered with sensitivity. To denigrate one type of spirituality over another disrespects the movement of the Holy Spirit in another's life. Demanding a particular spirituality violates this boundary.

C. *Vocation:* One challenge facing the Church is how to create mutually enriching partnerships among clergy, religious and the laity. Understanding and affirming each other's vocation is key. Ministers must name and claim their personal identity as expressed through their vocation. Naming how another's vocation supports and serves the Church personalizes this boundary. The vocational boundary is blurred when ministers act as if they had a different vocation. Ministers can take a *vacation* from their pastoral responsibilities but not their vocation. Living a vocation not their own, even for a short time, is a violation of this boundary.

Two Cases

What follows are two cases drawn from personal observations over twenty-five years of ministry. They further demonstrate the boundaries, the skill

involved in identifying, setting, and holding them and how this skill can serve as a norm in ministry.

1) Diane, twenty-eight years old and married for three years, is a lay minister working at a downtown parish in a small midwestern city. This is her first position after graduate school. She is responsible for religious education, youth ministry, Christian initiation, and the stewardship program. She frequently attends the 7:30 A.M. liturgy and has late night meetings. It is 7:15 P.M. when her husband calls. This is the third time this month she has not come home for dinner.

Time is one boundary Diane has not learned. Another is position. Is it realistic for one person to care for all those responsibilities? The personality boundary suggests that Diane is not clear about her gifts and limitations. Is Diane identifying and calling forth the gifts of the community? Is Diane clear about her vocation? If Diane rooted her spirituality in her marriage, she would develop a prayer life that respected, if not included, her spouse.

As a norm, the minister must be intentional about identifying a boundary, prudent in setting it, and hold it courageously.

2) Anna, thirty-one years old and married, is a religion teacher at a Catholic high school. Father Jim, ordained three years, is the chaplain. Anna and Fr. Jim work closely together on school liturgies, retreats, and service projects. They meet in Fr. Jim's office to plan these events and, lately, after school to debrief from the day. Eventually, Anna shares her unhappiness in her marriage and complains about tension in her neck. One day, Fr. Jim offers to massage her neck which Anna gratefully accepts. They begin to spend a lot of time together—both at work and outside of work. When friends challenge Anna about this relationship, she dismisses it as, "Oh, we are just good friends." When Fr. Jim's conscience bothers him, he assures himself, "Well, its not like we are having sexual intercourse or anything."

According to at least one prominent moral theologian, Fr. Jim abused his power (Gula, 74–85). Position-power is a difficult boundary given the stress on equality and collaboration in the Church today. Father Jim could have avoided this situation had he set location, touch, and vocation boundaries. As a priest and colleague, he should have referred Anna to a counselor. Father Jim denied his sexual feelings. By seeing boundaries as an absolute law, rather than a skill, he set the widest possible margin.

From an institutional perspective, Anna is the victim here since Fr. Jim abused his power. Anna, however, is not innocent. She, too, must abide by ministerial

norms. Turning to Fr. Jim complicated their professional relationship, detracted from her ministry, and threatened her vocation. Had she set emotional and vocational boundaries, she would have been more honest with her friends.

Boundary Setting As a Norm for Ministry

In his or her day-to-day decisions the minister must face the questions, "what should I do and how should I do it?" The word "should" involves thinking normatively. A norm is a rule of conduct (Green, 32). Norms are the standards of a profession and define the parameters of excellence. Standards encompass knowledge, skills, ethics, and character. There is an exactness to a norm; as ballet guru Martha Graham once said, "Either the toe is pointed or it is not." However, a norm ought not be reduced to a law, to do so would rob a profession of ideals and exemplars.

Richard Gula, reflecting on the moral issues facing ministers today, provides a theological and ethical framework for ministry (Gula). He focuses on the character of the minister, the virtues he or she must cultivate, a clear delineation of duties, and an analysis of power in relationships. The minister enjoys a personal call from God to use his or her talents in service to God's people. Responding to God's call creates a covenant between the minister and the community. The nature and demands of this covenant are a day-to-day imitation of Jesus Christ.

Ministers, like other professionals, labor to learn the rules of conduct appropriate to their profession; they look to other ministers to see how they ought to behave. Thomas F. Green argues a person can comply with, obey, or observe a norm. He believes the skilled person observes a norm. Compliance with a norm demonstrates neither understanding nor intentionality. Just because a person happens to be on time does not mean he is punctual. Obeying a norm does not demonstrate a personal appropriation of the norm's worth. Never telling a lie does not mean a person is truthful. Observance, however, expresses a personal appropriation and internalization of the norm (Green, 33–36).

Boundary setting can be a norm for ministry. As a skill, it requires an ability to identify the boundary, set it in the relationship, and hold it within the fluid context of community. As a norm, the minister must be intentional about identifying a boundary, prudent in setting it, and hold it courageously. In the most difficult cases, the minister must discern between the demands of justice and fidelity. Diane must face the needs of the parish and her marriage. Father Jim has to confront the growing demands of friendship and the expectations of priesthood. A minister observes the norm by holding him- or herself accountable to the norm and calls others to the same standard.

Implications for Ministerial Formation

Boundary setting as a skill in ministry requires awareness, critical reflection, prudence, and supervision. Understanding how a boundary supports ministry promotes a more intentional and critical approach to ministry. Done within the context of peer education, ministers can help each other understand the boundary and refine their skills in setting and holding boundaries.

Ministers need theological reflection to develop their knowledge and skills. Once an experience is described, there must be an analysis of the experience (Kinast). Analysis could include a scan of boundaries. Was there a dual relationship? What's the minister's position? Was the minister intentional about place and time? Was touch involved? How did the parishioner and minister feel? What language was used? What personality traits supported or hindered ministry? What sexual feelings were present? What spiritualities were present? Was the minister expressing her vocation and supporting the other person's? How was the community involved?

Supervision and peer groups should be two safe places for ministerial students to explore boundaries. Every pastoral field education program will have strengths and limitations. Perhaps some boundaries—such as personality, sexuality, spirituality or social differences—will not be adequately explored. Special workshops using guest speakers and case studies can help address these limitations.

The skilled minister will have appropriated this norm for ministry when he or she can critically assess his or her own performance and correct the work of another. The ability to call a fellow minister to a higher standard in a loving and supportive manner is the best way to encourage excellence in ministry and prevent boundary violations. Borrowing a baseball metaphor, boundary setting seen as a "tool of the trade" has team members help each other on how to handle a fast-ball or the occasional curveball. This creates a camaraderie that is healthy and mutually enriching.

Conclusion

In the day-to-day press of ministry, it is hard to get an objective read of one's performance. Unlike other professionals, the minister seems to be constantly "on." Many priest support groups help each other face difficult boundaries. An open process with the parish staff would promote excellence and camaraderie. It gives permission to provide feedback to one another and provides a safe forum for that to happen.

Identifying, setting, and holding boundaries is a skill in the craft of ministry. Ministers can learn this skill and acquire the norm of just and faithful bounda-

ries prudently set and held. This approach to boundaries builds on an ethic for pastoral ministry and underscores the quality of care a disciple of Jesus is called to provide on behalf of the Church in service to the reign of God.

References

Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., "Policy # 2010: Updated Policy of the Archdiocese of Washington Concerning Child Abuse by Archdiocesan Personnel," September 1, 1999.

Baars, Conrad W. *Feeling and Healing Your Emotions.* Plainfield, N.J.: Logos International, 1979.

Drummond, Thomas B. *The Ministerial Counseling Role: Guidelines for Ethical Behavior.* Carson City, Nev.: The Plains Group, Inc., 1996.

Green, Thomas F. *Voices: The Educational Formation of Conscience.* Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999.

Gula, S.S., Richard M. *Ethics in Pastoral Ministry.* New York: Paulist Press, 1996.

Heagle, John L. "Priestly Ministry and Healthy Boundaries," in *Priestly Relationships: Freedom through Boundaries: NOCERCC Resource Guide,* Chicago: The National Organization for Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Clergy, Inc., 1997.

Hofstee-Milgrom, Jeanette. *Boundaries in Professional Relationship: A Training Manual.* Minneapolis: A Walk-In Counseling Center Publication, 1992.

Kinast, Robert L. *Let the Ministry Teach: A Guide to Theological Reflection.* Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996.

O'Meara, O.P., Thomas F. *Theology of Ministry: Completely Revised Edition.* New York: Paulist Press, 1999.