

Maintaining professional boundaries creates a healthy and ethical environment in which vocation ministry can thrive.

Establishing and honoring boundaries in vocation ministry

BY CHRISTY SCHILLER

FOR TWO DECADES, Praesidium has worked with a wide range of organizations that serve children and vulnerable adults to help them minimize the risk of sexual abuse or exploitation of those in their care by a staff member, a volunteer, or a peer. In recent years, we have witnessed a specific, growing need for education among professionals who work with adults on how to keep these relationships safe from abuse or the perception of abuse. Indeed, we have received more and more phone calls from organizations seeking consultation on allegations and incidents of sexual exploitation between staff/volunteers/ministers and adults being served in their programs or ministries. The goal of this article is to share some of our observations and experiences in this realm and help apply both particularly to vocation ministry.

Perhaps one of the most poignant lessons that Praesidium has learned in this work is the significance of healthy boundaries as a means to prevent abuse in all of its forms: physical, emotional and sexual. Individuals who abuse adults can be predators who consciously try to break down boundaries, but they can also be unhealthy or even naïve individuals who do not acknowledge their own lack

of professionalism. For example, a vocation minister who is conscious of professional boundaries and has a solid foundation in ethics is far less likely to find himself or herself in an unhealthy relationship with a candidate. A vocation minister who is less experienced may not recognize when he or she is really more of a spiritual director, therapist, or even friend to a candidate than someone who is helping him or her discern religious life in a given community.

When we see boundary violations, it is an opportunity to interrupt an inappropriate relationship and potentially prevent abuse or exploitation. This article explores the boundary issues that are unique to vocation ministry, outlines safeguards that vocation ministers can implement to minimize risk, and highlights specific boundary violations to avoid.

Issues unique to vocation ministry

While many of the points in this article may be generalized across ministries with adults, it is important to recognize boundary issues and other risks unique to vocation ministry. Four key aspects of vocation ministry create unique risks: 1) non-mutual self-disclosure, 2) candidate's infatuation with religious life, 3) minister's natural tendency toward advocacy for the candidate and 4) communication barriers.

Non-mutual self-disclosure Chances are the vocation minister has access to a great deal of extremely sensitive information about the candidates he or she works with. Vocation ministers may review a candidate's medical records, psychological evaluations, sexual history and may have even interviewed a candidate's family members. Similar to the dynamic seen in spiritual direction or professional counseling, access to such very personal data gives the vocation minister

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a great deal of power in the relationship—power that can be used to exploit an individual. Though the minister may not always be conscious of this power, it is very real and can purposefully or inadvertently lead to exploitation.

On the other hand, some vocation ministers may find this seemingly one-sided relationship awkward and feel compelled to share personal information about themselves to create a sense of balance. Unfortunately in doing so the minister is crossing a professional boundary by losing sight of his or her responsibility to familiarize the candidate with the community, not with the minister personally.

Candidate's infatuation with religious life Some candidates may have a fascination with or over-romanticized image of religious life. Though the discernment process should help the candidate develop a healthier or more reasonable understanding of religious life and living the vows, a vocation minister is inherently placed in a position to represent not only his or her own community, but often the entirety of religious life, and even the church. Once again, this creates a vulnerability that can be exploited.

Minister's natural tendency toward advocacy for the candidate Many ministers, by their pastoral nature, are quick to see all of the good in a candidate. He or she may personally like a candidate, and the minister may want to mentor the candidate through discernment—even though the candidate may **not** necessarily be the best fit for the community. A vocation minister may also have real or perceived pressure to develop candidates in order to avoid an empty formation class.

The more familiar the minister becomes with the candidate, often the harder it is to see the writing on the wall that he or she is either not a good fit for the community or is simply not ready for religious life. This phenomenon is similar to what is referred to as “transference” and “counter-transference” in a professional therapy setting. Transference is when a client projects aspects of other relationships in his or her life on to the therapist. For example, he or she may see the therapist as a paternal figure or as someone with “guru” status on whom they become extremely dependent. Counter-transference occurs when the therapist becomes emotionally entangled with the client and may play in to the client's transference. Indeed, this is a very human response but one ministers should strive to remain conscious of and try to avoid.

Regardless, vocation ministry is about finding a good fit for the community, not pounding a square peg into a round hole. Professional boundaries can get sloppy if ministers do

not keep this in the forefront of their analysis of the data they collect about the candidate, and not maintaining boundaries can be a disservice to the community and the candidate.

Communication barriers This aspect of the ministry is perhaps the most tangible presentation of the power differential. Candidates recognize that the vocation minister's role is to evaluate him or her on a number of levels, which can create a barrier that prevents a candidate from coming forward with concerns about the conduct of the vocation minister or other community members to whom they have been introduced.

A candidate (or a novice; we have also seen this phenomenon in formation programs) may not feel he or she has a right to say they have been made to feel uncomfortable or even exploited and may even fear rejection if they do. Here again, the disproportionate power dynamic between minister (or the community in general) and candidate is amplified, creating increased risk for exploitation or abuse.

Keeping your vocation ministry safe

All of the factors described above add up to a great deal of power on the part of the vocation minister. As uncomfortable as it may seem, this differential must be recognized for appropriate boundaries to be established and maintained. Vocation ministers can do at least four things to minimize the risk of this power differential leading to actual or perceived abuse or exploitation.

1) Acknowledge the power of your role

Like it or not, vocation ministers have a great deal of power over candidates—who are probably at a very critical moment in their lives. When an individual is discerning vowed life, he or she is emotionally and spiritually exposed. He or she deserves the respect and dignity of anyone who is vulnerable, and acknowledging the power differential is the first thing a vocation minister can do to facilitate that.

Additionally, legal precedent suggests that the person who has more power in a professional relationship is responsible for maintaining the propriety of the relationship because the person with less power is unable to fully consent. We have seen many cases of unethical behavior in ministry when a minister either consciously downplays this dynamic or is simply naïve about its significance.

Many organizations have developed strict professional, ethical guidelines and require professionals to complete



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regular continuing education in this area. Vocation ministers are fortunate to have the NRVC resource, Code of Ethics for Vocation Ministry, (The Code of Ethics is available online at www.nrv.net. See “Public Documents” on the left side of the homepage.) The guidelines set forth in this document provide a framework for defining professional boundaries in this unique ministry, and it is critical that all vocation ministers be familiar with it.

2) Stay healthy

The most common pattern we see of abuse or exploitation of an adult is when a minister is vulnerable to boundary issues due to stress, loneliness, burn-out, or lack of skills to cope when someone pushes their boundaries. Ministers who are not healthy—physically, spiritually, emotionally or otherwise—have diminished ability to honor their duty to maintain professional boundaries.

Make sure you are getting all of your needs met in healthy ways. If you are struggling, seek help. Make time for

yourself, and try to remain self-aware enough to pick up on red flags within yourself, such as seeking friendship from those to whom you minister, or excessively looking forward to meeting—or even fantasizing or daydreaming about—a particular candidate.

3) Articulate systems of support and accountability for your ministry

Strongly articulated systems of support and accountability can provide very useful checks and balances to ensure ministerial relationships are healthy and appropriate. Support can come in the form of adequate time off, professional development, spiritual direction, or simply the ability to bounce ideas off of other community members.

Accountability may be defined as feedback through supervision. Let candidates know that you have a supervisor, and there is always someone they can go to with concerns. Check in with others if you have concerns about boundaries in a particular situation.

Boundary violations: case studies

A candidate visited the community during a discernment weekend. After one of the evening socials, the vocation director asked another community member to share with the candidate how she struggled for years with an eating disorder. The vocation director knew from the psychological evaluation that the candidate was having difficulties in this area and thought it would make her feel better.

A vocation director invited a candidate to stay at the rectory and observe community life over the Easter holiday. One of the elder friars made the candidate extremely uncomfortable by asking him about his sexual history. The candidate was worried that if he told the vocation director he would be labeled as a complainer and not accepted into the postulancy program.

reason will inhibit his or her ability to maintain healthy boundaries. A good rule of thumb is, if it is unclear, bounce it off of others before deciding what to do, and always, always document your interactions.

In general, some behaviors are best to avoid altogether:

- engaging in dual relationships, such as acting as a candidate's spiritual director, confessor or confidante,
- spending a disproportionate amount of time with a particular candidate,
- making inappropriate self-disclosures, such as one's own experience with abuse, difficulties in personal relationships, or spiritual struggles,
- giving and receiving special gifts,
- discussing your sexual fantasies or activities,
- commenting on someone's body, and
- failing to adhere to accepted standards of affection in ministry.

It is quite possible that a vocation minister may himself or herself be made to feel uncomfortable by a candidate. While this may simply reflect the phenomenon of "transference" described earlier, ministers should pay attention if they feel they are being flirted with or being perceived in any way that is less than professional. Here again, document this and talk with others in the community about the best way to proceed. It may indicate a lack of maturity or even some unresolved issues in the candidate—all which are important data as decisions are made.

After two decades of experience researching and investigating cases of institutional abuse, our paradigm at Praesidium that establishing and maintaining healthy professional boundaries is the key to abuse prevention holds strong. This is even more evident when there is an inherent differential of power in a professional relationship.

Because the power differential in a vocation minister/candidate relationship is real, maintaining the professional boundaries in it is up to the minister. Maintaining professional boundaries keeps candidates, vocation ministers and religious institutes safer. Healthy vocation ministry also helps model for candidates how appropriate boundaries in any ministry should look. After all, you want people's first impressions of the community to be of healthy ministers living the Gospel and doing great ministry. ■

4) Document, document, document

Ministers should document regular communications and interactions with candidates, as well as any unusual conversations or circumstances, such as if a candidate is particularly vulnerable or says something inappropriate. Such observations, and how the vocation director responds to them, will help the community make admission decisions.

Behaviors to avoid

There certainly are gray areas where it is not clear where the boundary is. For example, informal get-togethers like meeting up for a drink may be a great way to check in with a candidate. In any ministry, the minister needs to consider his or her own safety during a one-on-one meeting and it is usually best to invite others. Not only will this be more professionally appropriate, but it will give others a chance to get to know the candidate and provide the minister with feedback on his or her observations. The minister is, of course, advised not to drink to excess since having diminished