

Partners in Ministry - An Overview

Ethical Conduct Principles for Congregations & Church Workers

by Peter Larsen

In addition to theological standards and laws, every profession has a need to discipline itself with *principles* of conduct. These principles become the manner in which professionals and those in a professional relationship discipline themselves. They become the ethical guidelines, mutually agreed upon, by which professionals covenant together both to treat each other and to conduct themselves personally. Thus the Michigan District has taken the lead in our Synod by developing two standards: "Ethical Conduct for Congregations" and "Ethical Conduct for Professional Church Workers."

While it is impossible to give a complete overview of these two documents, our purpose is to simply give a sampling which, we hope, will wet your appetite to study both guides.

"Ethical Conduct for Congregations"

Remembering Whose we are and why we are here as redeemed, baptized, and commissioned members of "the body of Christ," we look first at the guidelines for congregations in relationship to its workers and to each other. Here we see thoughts regarding *Seeking a Worker, Caring for Workers, Supporting Workers, Dealing with a Worker Leaving, and Relating to District and Synod*. The purpose of this document is to give clear, specific thoughts about proper conduct. An example for congregations relating to their workers contains this thought:

"Congregations will prepare specific position descriptions which fully and completely explain the position, qualifications required and expected results ... to whom the worker reports and details about salary and benefits."

Or consider this thought about how congregations should relate to other congrega-

tions in the matter of calling a worker:

"Congregations are mindful of the effects of calling a worker from another congregation regarding geographical proximity or timing."

One of the matters which often upsets a worker is the violation of Matthew 18 in which members of a church talk about their workers behind their backs. The guidelines address this by saying:

"(Congregational members) absolutely avoid holding secret meetings or telephone or anonymous letter writing and petition campaigns against workers."

In the unity of the Body of Christ, it is vital that churches treat each other as fellow saints, not as competing entities seeking only their own interest. To address this, the guidelines counsel churches that they:

"Do not pursue members from sister congregations and do consider the impact and use caution before granting or accepting transfers."

"Ethical Conduct for Professional Church Workers"

While church workers are held to high theological standards, the principles of conduct also addresses professional behavior. Take, for example, this thought which addresses the potential danger of workers interfering in the ministry of those called to another congregation:

"The professional church worker recognizes that he/she is called to his/her congregation...and will not counsel members of other churches without their pastor's permission, perform pastoral functions for them, or criticize their congregation or staff."

Sometimes issues involving conduct by church workers do not involve either theological or Synodical boundaries but behavior. The

guidelines address this with the thought that:

“The professional church worker recognizes that there are times when (they) may engage in behavior that, although not sin, may cause offense to (others) or misunderstanding ...helshe is aware that his/her public behavior is representative of the Office of Public Ministry and that helshe is never a ‘private citizen’.”

The guidelines even get so practical as to hold workers to high standards regarding - repaying personal obligations and debts; borrowing from church members and/or returning items borrowed from church, and honoring copyright laws.

In their relationships with one another, church workers understand the impact disagreement between workers can have on congregations. This counsel from the guidelines is most helpful:

“Disagreements among professional church workers are resolved in a manner that demonstrates an understanding of Confession and Absolution as a model for reconciliation in the Body of Christ.”

In an age where sexual behavior is so exploited and dangerous, the professional church worker is counseled to:

“Avoid pornography and impure speech and refrain from inappropriate physical contact.”

Public ministry is “public” so the guidelines even address this thought for workers:

“The professional church worker seeks to practice proper hygiene and wear proper attire that does not give offense in the specific context of ministry.”

Because professional growth is critical both for the worker and the church he/she serves, this encouragement is given:

“The professional church worker welcomes the evaluation of his/her ministry. Helshe asks for help in evaluation from his/her peers, selected members of his/her congregation, and the District President or staff.”

Finally, one’s dedication to ministry does not injure the worker’s primary responsibility to family, the guidelines counsel:

“The (worker) avoids becoming a ‘workaholic’. Helshe schedules time with family for vaca-

tions, for physical exercise, for hobbies and avocations.”

Accompanying the Ethics Documents mailed to your church, is a wonderful [Study Guide](#). Its purpose is to open dialogue between churches and their workers in order to discuss expectations of one another. Like the Ethics Documents themselves, they are designed to be *influencers* of behavior by creating positive, proactive discussions by which ministry in the Name and for the honor of our Lord Jesus is moved forward.

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