

Guidelines FAQ

Ministers of Word and Sacraments

3c Relationship with elders, members and others

- To observe proper boundaries in relationships and not to enter into a sexual relationship with anyone in their care.

Q: I am a single minister who feels a growing fondness for a member of a congregation I serve and want to ask them out on a 'date', however I am aware of the guidelines and feel this will be seen as inappropriate. What should I do?

A: The drafting of this guideline proved particularly difficult because of an awareness that there are numerous very positive examples of ministers meeting their future spouses amongst the members of their congregation, whilst there is also evidence of the dangers of crossing boundaries in the sphere of pastoral care. Therefore those who find themselves wanting to date a congregational member should:

1. Tell someone (your Synod Moderator, a supervisor or church secretary) that you may be interested in beginning a relationship, so that the person can reflect with you on possible ramifications if the relationship is to succeed or, more importantly, fail, and so that there is transparency and accountability as to your motives.
2. Proceed gently and, when the time is right, speak honestly with your 'date' about the sensitivities involved and how the person may receive pastoral care or spiritual nurture from someone other than you. (Ask them whether they want you to be their minister or their boy/girl friend?)
3. Be aware that you will be held to higher standards than non-ordained people as to your sexual behaviour.

This guideline seems draconian for single ministers particularly in view of the fact that many ministers have met their partners 'on the patch'.

The purpose of the guideline is to alert you to the potential difficulties of dating someone with whom you are in a pastoral relationship and to help you to protect yourself. It is the minister's responsibility to keep healthy boundaries, which includes not entering into a sexual relationship with people in their care. This is a well-established principle in therapeutic (medical and psychological) and teaching fields, and is becoming recognized as an important guideline for ministers.

Relationships between ministers and people in their care are not mutual, but rather are focused on promoting the well-being of the other. Ministers also have power they may not recognize, so that a person may feel a sense of pressure or 'specialness' in being chosen by the minister for a relationship. If you are to date someone in your care, best practice suggests that you ensure that they receive pastoral care or spiritual nurture from someone else so that a mutual relationship may develop.

If an intimate dating relationship goes pear-shaped, be aware that you could be open to an allegation of sexual exploitation as there is a body of literature that says that recipients of pastoral care cannot give informed consent due to the power issues involved. See Liberty,

Patricia “Why It’s Not An Affair”, *Associates in Education and Prevention in Pastoral Practice*, www.aeppp.org.

3a Personal integrity and health

- To refrain from using privilege or power for personal advantage or gain, whether financial, emotional, sexual or material.

Q: Whilst visiting a housebound member of the church she indicated to me that she had recently altered her will and I was now a beneficiary. I was touched that she wanted to provide me with a tangible reminder of her thanks for my ministry, which she always expresses verbally when I visit. However I was shocked when she indicated the nature and size of her bequest which is to be several thousand pounds. I am uncertain what to do now.

The lady in question is wealthy but also generous with her giving to others and to charities. She likes to give and has made it clear to me that she would be very pleased for me to receive this gift. However I am conscious that others may view this with suspicion with the belief amongst some that I have cultivated a relationship for financial reward. Although there are no immediate relatives there are nephews and nieces who do not live locally and who will be unaware of their aunt’s history with the church I minister to.

Should I ask the lady to amend her will or should I say nothing and accept the bequest in due course?

A: There is sometimes a fine line between what is appropriate and what is not. When an individual’s emotions are involved there can be a temptation to view the appropriateness of an action too narrowly, so that in this case the desire not to upset the giver can limit the ability to see how the action will be viewed by those with a wider perspective.

At ordination United Reformed Church ministers promise to seek the well-being, purity and peace of the church, which would include not acting in a manner which would reflect badly on the church or its people. Regardless of how you, or the lady in question, view this bequest, it must be seen in the light of how others may view it. Although the bequest offered by the lady may be understood to be given out of friendship it cannot be avoided that you have come to know this person because you are her minister, and if you were not her minister it is extremely unlikely that you would be in the position you are now in. Therefore aside from any suggestion of inappropriate influence it is true that it is your position as a minister that is bringing you a potential financial gain and to accept such a gift may be seen as a breach of the guidelines.

In guidance given to other professionals where the line between professional and personal can become blurred it is usually made clear that any monetary gain or personal benefit arising from professional-client relationship should be refused. You would seem to have two options: you can refuse the bequest and it will revert to the estate or you can ask that it be donated to a charitable organization.

However recognising the complex nature of such situations and the need for sensitivity towards the feelings of the potential benefactor, the Ministries Committee realises that it can be appropriate to accept ‘token bequests’ and believes the maximum value of any such gift should be 10% of the full-time ministerial stipend. If a bequest/gift above the token amount was being considered or offered the minister should discuss the matter with their synod moderator.

It is worth noting that our ecumenical partners hold similar views and the following guidance is given by the Baptist Union of Great Britain:

- commitment to financial integrity: taking care to exercise transparent good practice, and avoiding every occasion in which ministry might be 'bought' by others who would seek inappropriate dependency; [e.g. ministers need to exercise caution when being offered extravagant gifts from church members, such as the offer of a car. These should be given instead to the church for the use of the minister]

Guide to Pastoral Practice and Ministry

Church Related Community Workers

3c Relationship with elders, members and others

- Not to be alone with a child or children or young people in a place quite separate from others.

Q: My son plays for an under-12s football team. Am I breaching the guidelines if I agree to give him and his best friend a lift to and from a match? His best friend's mum did it last week and now it is my turn.

A: The guideline is not intended to prevent a CRCW or other minister from acting as a parent.

In the situation described above the request to chauffeur the children comes about because of the parental role not the ministerial one and the nature of friendship between the boys and between the parents is the catalyst for the turn-taking in providing lifts. The parents of the other child should treat the CRCW/minister in the same way as they would treat the parents of any other child in the football team, including establishing a relationship which allows them to trust their child to the care of another child's parent.

If the church/project to which you are called as a CRCW runs a football team for children and you are asked, in your role as CRCW, to give a child, or children, a lift to or from a football match, this is a different scenario since it is the CRCW/ministerial role not a parental one that leads to the request. In such a situation parents will not necessarily have established a relationship with you that regards you as a fellow parent who can be trusted with their child, but rather as an authority figure undertaking a role. Best practice here then indicates that you should not be alone with a child who is not your own.

Elders

3b Relationships with ministers

- To regard all persons with equal respect and concern and not discriminate against anyone on the basis of gender, race, age, disability or sexual orientation, including ministers/CRCWs.

Q: Our church is in vacancy and the elders have indicated to the synod moderator that our shared understanding of Scripture means we could not consider a practising homosexual as a candidate for the vacant post. Are we breaching this guideline?

A: The United Reformed Church has recognised that we do not yet have a common understanding over the ordination of practicing gay people. The 2007 General Assembly adopted the Commitment on Human Sexuality which recognised that we have not yet managed to be of one mind on this deeply emotive and potentially divisive issue, acknowledged the diversity of views, and agreed to continue to explore these differences. This guideline is not intended to undermine that or define our church's position on the matter. The elders in their role as the spiritual leaders of the local church should be considering matters of theology and spirituality, therefore for them to make such a decision based on their understanding of Scripture means it is a theological decision not one grounded in an irrational discrimination and does not conflict with this guideline. Nevertheless acts by individuals and groups which dehumanise people because of their sexual orientation are acts that members of the United Reformed Church may be expected to oppose.

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