

A CONGREGATIONAL LEADERSHIP RESOURCE
A PASTORAL RELATIONSHIP RESOURCE

Healthy Boundaries

*Creating Space for Faithful Ministry,
Healthy Relationships, and Sustained Resilience*

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Creating a Healthy Pastoral Relationship

Practicing Shared Responsibility for Faithful Ministry

A Congregational Leadership Resource

A Pastoral Relationship Resource

Beginning Here

A congregation calls a pastor.

That call creates responsibilities for the pastor. It also creates responsibilities for the congregation.

The pastoral relationship is not something a pastor provides and a congregation receives. It is a relationship pastor and people create together for the sake of the ministry they share.

That means church leaders need to ask more than:

What should we expect from our pastor?

They also need to ask:

What does healthy ministry require of us?

That is different from asking, *What does our pastor need from us?*

Pastors certainly need encouragement, appropriate compensation, rest, opportunities for growth, and relationships in which they are known as human beings rather than only as pastors.

But this resource is not primarily about taking care of your pastor.

It is about taking responsibility for your part in creating a healthy ministry.

A congregation cannot ask its pastor to practice healthy ministry while maintaining a culture that rewards unhealthy ministry.

If leaders expect the pastor to be constantly available, a healthy day off becomes difficult to maintain.

If every significant decision eventually migrates to the pastor, church leaders gradually surrender their responsibility for governing.

If pastoral care becomes the responsibility of one person, the congregation can forget how to care for one another.

If committees routinely ask the pastor to rescue them when their work becomes difficult, the pastor may overfunction while leaders underfunction.

And if every ministry depends upon the pastor's presence, approval, or leadership, the congregation can slowly become dependent upon the very person who was called to equip it for ministry.

Healthy ministry requires something different.

It requires pastors who understand their responsibilities and limits.

It requires church leaders who understand theirs.

And it requires both to recognize the ministry they share.

The questions, then, are mutual:

What does faithful ministry require of our pastor?

What does faithful ministry require of us?

What responsibilities do we share?

What belongs to someone else?

What kind of relationship will help all of us remain faithful to what God has given us to do?

Those are the questions we will practice together.

A Pastoral Relationship Is a Ministry Relationship

There are employment dimensions to the pastoral relationship.

Compensation matters. Personnel policies matter. Accountability matters. Expectations should be clear.

But the pastoral relationship is larger than employment.

It is vocational.

A congregation has discerned that a particular person possesses gifts that can serve its ministry.
A pastor has discerned a call to offer those gifts among a particular people.

Together they enter a relationship for the sake of participating in God's ministry.

The congregation has not simply hired someone to do ministry for it.

The pastor has been called to ministry **with** the congregation.

The New Testament image of the church as the Body of Christ helps us understand why this matters.

Not every member performs the same function. Not every person carries the same authority or responsibility. The gifts differ. The responsibilities differ.

But the ministry belongs to the whole Body.

Healthy pastoral relationships honor those distinctions.

Pastors should not take over responsibilities that properly belong to church leaders.

Church leaders should not hand pastors responsibilities that properly belong to them.

Neither should use the other to avoid difficult work.

The goal is not to divide ministry into rigid territories.

It is to become clearer about how our different responsibilities and gifts serve a common vocation.

A healthy pastoral relationship allows pastor and people to become more fully what each has been called to be.

Shared Ministry Requires Shared Responsibility

Mutual responsibility does not mean identical responsibility.

Pastor and congregation have different roles.

There are things a congregation should reasonably expect from its pastor.

There are responsibilities church leaders must carry themselves.

There are responsibilities pastor and leaders share.

And there are needs neither should attempt to carry alone.

Confusion begins when those distinctions disappear.

A committee faces a difficult decision and says:

Let's ask the pastor what we should do.

Perhaps pastoral wisdom is exactly what is needed.

But perhaps the committee is asking the pastor to make the decision because its members do not want to make it.

A member is angry with another member and says:

Pastor, you need to talk to her.

Perhaps pastoral intervention is appropriate.

But perhaps the healthier response is:

Have you talked with her?

A ministry is struggling and leaders say:

Pastor, we need you to fix this.

Perhaps the pastor has an important role.

But first ask:

Whose ministry is this? Whose work is required?

One of the most important practices in a healthy pastoral relationship is learning to distinguish between **asking the pastor to help us with our work** and **asking the pastor to do our work for us**.

That distinction will run throughout this resource.

The Practice

For the next month, work with four movements:

Name Our Expectations.

Own What Is Ours.

Create Conditions for Healthy Ministry.

Tend the Relationship Together.

Think of these as practices rather than weekly assignments.

You might spend approximately a week with each one. One conversation may require longer. Something you discover during the third practice may send you back to the first.

Take the time you need.

The purpose is not to produce a perfect pastoral relationship.

There is no such thing.

The purpose is to become more intentional about the relationship through which pastor and congregation share ministry.

Practice One: Name Our Expectations

Every congregation has expectations of its pastor.

Some are written.

A position description may name preaching, pastoral care, administration, leadership, teaching, community engagement, staff supervision, and other responsibilities.

Many expectations, however, are never written down.

They sound like:

The pastor should be at every important church event.

The pastor should visit everyone in the hospital.

The pastor should answer when someone calls.

The pastor should know when someone is upset.

The pastor should attend every committee meeting.

The pastor's spouse should participate.

The pastor should be available when members are available.

The pastor should know what is happening everywhere in the congregation.

Often no one deliberately created these expectations.

They accumulated.

Some came from previous pastors.

Some came from childhood experiences of church.

Some reflect assumptions about what pastors are supposed to do.

Some may have been appropriate for a congregation of another size or another time.

Some may once have served the ministry well but no longer do.

And some contradict one another.

One group wants the pastor in the community.

Another wants the pastor in the office.

One person wants more visitation.

Another wants more strategic leadership.

The congregation wants thoughtful preaching but fills the pastor's week with meetings.

Unexamined expectations can eventually become impossible expectations.

Have the Expectations Conversation

Without the pastor present at first, invite church leaders to complete this sentence:

A good pastor should...

Do it quickly.

Do not debate the answers.

Write them down.

Then look at the list together.

Ask:

Where did these expectations come from?

Which actually belong to the pastor's call?

Which are congregational habits rather than pastoral responsibilities?

Which properly belong to someone else?

Which expectations compete with one another?

Could one human being reasonably fulfill all of them?

Then change the question.

Instead of asking what a good pastor should do, ask:

What does healthy ministry in this congregation require now?

Notice what changes.

Honor the Gifts Actually Among You

A congregation does not call an abstract pastor.

It calls a person.

That person brings particular gifts, experiences, limitations, passions, capacities, and growing edges.

Congregations sometimes call a particular human being and then spend years trying to turn that person into an imagined generic pastor.

A healthier question is:

Who has God actually called among us?

What gifts does this pastor bring?

Where does this pastor's ministry bear particular fruit?

Where does growth need to occur?

What gifts are present among staff, officers, and members that complement the pastor's gifts?

This does not mean pastors only do what they enjoy or avoid areas in which they need to grow.

Every vocation asks us to stretch.

But healthy ministry does not require every pastor to be equally gifted at everything.

The question is not whether the pastor possesses every gift the church needs.

The question is how the gifts God has placed throughout the Body can work together.

Practice Two: Own What Is Ours

This practice may require some courage.

Ask:

Where are we asking the pastor to carry work that belongs to us?

Church leaders sometimes ask pastors to rescue them.

Usually no one calls it rescue.

It sounds like:

Could you just handle this?

Would you talk to them?

Could you make the decision?

Would you take care of the problem?

Could you find someone to do it?

Sometimes those are entirely appropriate requests.

Sometimes they are not.

A committee becomes anxious about a decision and hands it to the pastor.

Two members are in conflict and expect the pastor to resolve it without first speaking to one another.

A ministry needs leadership, so rather than recruit and equip a leader, everyone waits for the pastor to take charge.

A governing board faces an unpopular decision and asks the pastor to announce it, explain it, and absorb the congregation's reaction.

A capable leader encounters a problem and brings it to the pastor rather than exercising the authority already entrusted to them.

In the short term, rescue can feel effective.

The problem gets solved.

Anxiety decreases.

The meeting ends.

But something else may have happened.

Someone who needed to exercise leadership did not.

Someone who needed to have a difficult conversation avoided it.

A committee that needed to make a decision surrendered it.

A congregation that needed to develop capacity remained dependent.

When we ask the pastor to carry work that belongs to us, we do not simply overburden the pastor.

We relinquish part of our own ministry.

Ask Who Owns the Work

Choose several recent situations in which the pastor became involved.

For each one, ask:

What was happening?

Who originally owned the responsibility?

What was the pastor's appropriate role?

What did church leaders need to do?

Did we ask the pastor to help us do our work, or did we ask the pastor to do our work for us?

A pastor can help a committee think through a difficult decision without making the decision.

A pastor can coach someone through conflict without taking over the conflict.

A pastor can help elders discern without relieving them of responsibility for governing.

A pastor can equip people for ministry without performing every ministry.

A pastor can accompany leaders through anxiety without taking responsibility for making the anxiety disappear.

Sometimes one of the healthiest sentences church leaders can say is:

This belongs to us. We will do our work.

Practice the Pause

During this practice, notice when the impulse arises to hand something to the pastor.

Before doing so, pause.

Ask:

Who owns this?

What part belongs to us?

What part appropriately belongs to the pastor?

Are we asking for pastoral leadership, or are we asking for rescue?

What might we need to learn by doing this ourselves?

Then ask the larger question:

What does healthy ministry require of us?

Perhaps the answer is to involve the pastor.

Perhaps it is to seek the pastor's counsel.

Perhaps it is simply to keep the pastor informed.

And perhaps the faithful response is:

This is ours to do.

Practice Three: Create Conditions for Healthy Ministry

Good intentions are not enough to create a healthy ministry culture.

Healthy ministry needs structures, agreements, habits, and expectations that support it.

This practice invites church leaders and pastor to talk concretely about how ministry actually works.

Not how you assume it works.

Not how it worked with the previous pastor.

How it works now.

The following are not rules to adopt. They are conversations worth having.

Time and Availability

Office Hours and Availability

When is the pastor ordinarily available?

What are normal office hours?

What ministry happens outside the office?

Do members understand that study, visitation, community relationships, denominational responsibilities, prayer, sermon preparation, and other ministry may happen somewhere other than the church building?

What response time for calls, texts, and emails is reasonable?

Availability should be understandable without becoming unlimited.

Days Off

What is the pastor's regular day off?

Does the congregation actually honor it?

What constitutes a genuine reason to interrupt it?

Who helps maintain that expectation when someone says, “*It will only take a minute*”?

A day off that is routinely interrupted is not a day off.

Honoring it is not merely something kind the congregation does for the pastor.

Healthy ministry requires rhythms of work and rest.

Emergencies

What constitutes a pastoral emergency?

How does someone reach the pastor in one?

Who provides coverage when the pastor is unavailable?

A death or acute crisis may require immediate pastoral attention.

A scheduling question, building problem, committee disagreement, or request for information may be important without being urgent.

A healthy ministry culture learns the difference.

The Work of Ministry

Study, Prayer, and Preparation

When does the pastor study?

When is worship prepared?

When does sermon preparation happen?

Where is there room for theological reading, prayer, reflection, and discernment?

A congregation cannot reasonably expect thoughtful preaching and spiritually grounded leadership while treating study time as empty space on the calendar.

Study is ministry.

Prayer is ministry.

Preparation is ministry.

Protecting them serves the congregation.

Gifts

What gifts does this pastor bring?

Are those gifts being used?

What gifts are present among staff, officers, and members?

Where might someone else be better equipped to lead?

Where does the pastor need to grow?

Healthy ministry does not ask how everything can be routed through the pastor.

It asks how the gifts of the whole Body can flourish.

Pastoral Care

What pastoral care can reasonably be expected from the pastor?

What care belongs to deacons, elders, care teams, small groups, friends, and other members of the congregation?

When does someone's need exceed what pastoral care can appropriately provide?

When should a therapist, physician, social worker, attorney, financial counselor, addiction specialist, or another professional become involved?

Referring someone to appropriate care is not abandonment.

Sometimes it is the most responsible care the church can offer.

Decision-Making and Authority

Which decisions belong to the pastor?

Which belong to the governing board?

Which belong to committees or staff?

Which require shared discernment?

Are leaders asking the pastor to make decisions they properly own?

Is the pastor taking responsibility for decisions that properly belong to others?

Healthy ministry requires clarity about authority as well as responsibility.

The Pastor as a Person

Family and Private Life

The congregation called the pastor.

It did not call the pastor's spouse.

It did not call the pastor's children.

Family members may participate actively in congregational life. They may also choose not to.

Their participation should not become an unwritten condition of the pastor's call.

The pastor's home is a home.

Family time is family time.

Healthy ministry respects the distinction between the pastoral relationship and the pastor's private relationships.

Personal Health

Pastors have bodies.

They need medical care, exercise, sleep, emotional support, spiritual nurture, recreation, and attention to their own well-being.

But again, the larger question is not simply what the pastor needs.

What does healthy ministry require?

A ministry culture that routinely consumes the physical, emotional, relational, or spiritual health of the people who serve within it is itself unhealthy.

That principle applies not only to pastors.

It applies to staff, officers, volunteers, and members too.

Vacation, Leave, and Continuing Education

Can the pastor actually leave?

Who provides coverage?

Does everyone know what to do when the pastor is away?

Does the congregation contact the pastor during vacation about matters that could wait?

Vacation should not mean performing ministry from another location.

The same principle applies to medical leave, parental leave, bereavement leave, sabbatical, and other appropriate time away.

Continuing education belongs here too.

Pastors need opportunities to learn, encounter new ideas, deepen skills, study, reflect, and grow.

A learning pastor helps cultivate a learning congregation.

The Relationship Itself

Communication

What belongs in a text?

What belongs in email?

What requires a telephone call or face-to-face conversation?

What response time is reasonable?

How will those expectations be communicated beyond the leadership circle?

Many boundary conflicts begin not with ill will but with different assumptions.

Conflict and Concerns

What happens when someone has a concern about the pastor?

What happens when the pastor has a concern about church leaders?

Who talks with whom?

How will concerns be addressed before they become triangulated through other members?

Healthy relationships make room for difficult conversations.

Friendship and Belonging

Pastors need human relationships.

Not every conversation needs to become pastoral care.

Not every friendship needs to become a ministry strategy.

Pastors need places where they can laugh, eat, play, talk, and simply be human.

Church leaders should recognize the complexity of pastoral friendships while resisting the assumption that every relationship the pastor has exists for the congregation's benefit.

One Question Through All of It

You do not need to resolve every one of these matters in a single meeting.

The point is to make them discussable.

As you discuss them, keep returning to one question:

What does healthy ministry require of us?

Practice Four: Tend the Relationship Together

Healthy relationships require attention.

Yet many congregations talk intentionally about the pastoral relationship only when something has gone wrong.

A complaint arises.

Conflict develops.

The annual evaluation arrives.

Someone is unhappy.

Then everyone suddenly begins talking about the relationship.

Healthy pastoral relationships need ordinary conversation before they need crisis intervention.

Have a Pastoral Relationship Conversation

Set aside time for appropriate church leaders and the pastor to talk about the shared ministry.

This is not a performance evaluation.

It is not an opportunity to compile complaints.

It is a conversation about how the relationship is functioning.

Ask one another:

What is giving life in our ministry right now?

What is wearing on us?

Where is the pastor carrying work that belongs to us?

Where might the pastor be holding work that needs to be entrusted to others?

What are we doing well together?

What do we need from one another to do our respective work faithfully?

What gifts are flourishing?

What gifts are being underused?

What expectations have become unclear?

What has changed?

What are we avoiding talking about?

And finally:

What does healthy ministry require of us now?

Listen before solving.

The purpose is not to leave with everything fixed.

The purpose is to keep the relationship speakable.

Keep Talking

Do not wait for an annual review.

A year is a long time to carry a misunderstanding.

A year is a long time for resentment to accumulate.

A year is a long time for an unhealthy pattern to become normal.

Find a rhythm that fits your congregation.

The particular structure matters less than the practice.

Keep talking.

When the Relationship Changes

Pastoral relationships change because ministry changes.

A congregation grows.

A congregation becomes smaller.

Staffing changes.

Family circumstances change.

Health changes.

Community needs change.

A new ministry develops.

A longtime ministry ends.

The congregation enters a season of conflict, grief, growth, transition, or renewal.

Something that worked five years ago may not work now.

Healthy pastoral relationships are not maintained by preserving every original arrangement.

They are maintained through continuing discernment.

Ask:

What has changed?

What does this season require of our pastor?

What does this season require of us?

What needs to be renegotiated?

Changing an expectation is not necessarily evidence that someone has failed.

Sometimes it is evidence that people are paying attention.

When Something Is Not Healthy

Mutual responsibility should never become an excuse for avoiding accountability.

Pastors can violate boundaries.

Pastors can misuse authority.

Pastors can overfunction in ways that diminish the leadership of others.

Pastors can become controlling, secretive, manipulative, or unwilling to receive feedback.

Church leaders can create unreasonable expectations, ignore appropriate boundaries, triangulate conflict, misuse personnel processes, or allow individual members to behave repeatedly in harmful ways.

Healthy pastoral culture protects both pastor and congregation.

When serious ethical, professional, boundary, financial, legal, or safety concerns arise, ordinary relationship conversations may not be sufficient.

Seek appropriate outside help.

Depending upon the situation and your church's polity, that may include denominational leaders, governing authorities, consultants, mediators, counselors, legal counsel, or other appropriate professionals.

Shared responsibility does not mean handling everything internally.

Sometimes healthy ministry requires knowing when the relationship needs help.

A Pastoral Relationship Covenant Conversation

At the end of your time with these practices, gather the pastor and appropriate church leaders.

Review what you have learned.

Do not try to write an exhaustive policy.

Instead, identify several commitments that will help you practice healthy ministry together.

Complete these sentences:

Healthy ministry requires our pastor to...

Healthy ministry requires us as church leaders to...

Responsibilities we need to stop handing to the pastor include...

Responsibilities the pastor needs to entrust to others include...

Responsibilities we share include...

We will make room for...

When a genuine emergency occurs, we will...

When conflict or concern arises, we will...

When expectations need to change, we will...

To keep tending this relationship, we will talk again...

Keep the commitments realistic.

Five commitments that shape behavior are more useful than twenty-five that are forgotten.

Then revisit them.

A covenant is not simply something we write.

It is something we practice.

Looking Back

What assumptions about pastors did you discover?

Which expectations were inherited rather than consciously chosen?

Where have you been asking the pastor to rescue you from work that belongs to you?

Where might the pastor be carrying responsibilities that need to be returned to others?

What gifts are present in your pastor?

What gifts are present throughout the congregation?

What structures support healthy ministry?

What structures unintentionally undermine it?

Do your practices around days off, study, family, health, vacation, communication, pastoral care, emergencies, and shared responsibility reflect what you say you believe about ministry?

Where does the pastoral relationship need greater clarity?

Where does it need greater trust?

What conversation have you been postponing?

And perhaps most importantly:

What does healthy ministry require of us now?

A Word for the Journey

The church is the Body of Christ.

That image is familiar enough that we can forget how radical it is.

A body does not flourish when one part tries to perform every function.

Nor does it flourish when some parts surrender their functions to another.

The health of the whole depends upon differentiated members remaining connected while offering their particular gifts.

Pastoral ministry belongs within that Body.

Your pastor has work to do.

So do you.

Your pastor has gifts to offer.

So do you.

Your pastor has responsibilities that should not be handed to someone else.

So do you.

The goal of a healthy pastoral relationship is not to make life easier for the pastor.

Nor is it to lower expectations of pastoral leadership.

It is to create a culture in which pastor and people can exercise their respective vocations faithfully.

That means honoring gifts.

Sharing ministry.

Clarifying expectations.

Respecting limits.

Having difficult conversations.

Making room for rest, study, health, and growth.

Taking responsibility.

Giving and receiving feedback.

Offering grace.

And refusing to ask one another to carry what properly belongs to someone else.

Calling a pastor creates responsibilities for the congregation as well as for the pastor.

So keep asking:

What does faithful ministry require of our pastor?

What does faithful ministry require of us?

What belongs to us to do?

Sometimes the answer will be:

We need our pastor.

Sometimes it will be:

We need to do this together.

And sometimes one of the most faithful things church leaders can say is:

This belongs to us. We will do our work.

That is not taking ministry away from the pastor.

It is recovering the ministry of the whole Body of Christ.