

Taking It Back

Talking With Your Community about Healthy Boundaries

Includes Facilitator's Guide and Two-Page Participant Handout

© 2017 FaithTrust Institute. Revised 2021. All Rights Reserved.

Permission to copy *PARTICIPANT HANDOUT "What I Expect From My Faith Leader"* is granted for training purposes.

Reproduction of other content in any form is prohibited without the written consent of the publisher. www.FaithTrustInstitute.org

The Taking It Back curriculum is designed as a first step to foster conversations about healthy boundaries with the members of a local spiritual community or congregation.

This facilitator's guide is written for a local religious leader to talk with and educate their congregation about healthy boundaries as a faith community value. The local pastor/faith leader may receive their boundaries training as a part of their affiliated regional training or certification and then take this educational material back to their individual congregation/faith community.

We believe strongly that conversations about healthy boundaries with laity support the efforts of a pastor/spiritual teacher to maintain a healthy ministry. Open dialogue about the roles and responsibilities of the faith leader, as well as the expectations of the local congregation/members for their pastor/leader, is a proactive way to minimize potential boundary violations. Faith communities can help ministers/leaders as they strive for a balanced life, avoiding burnout caused by the lack of self-care that is so prevalent amongst spiritual leaders. Understanding healthy boundaries is a cornerstone for a healthy spiritual community.

Facilitator's Guide

TAKING IT BACK – Talking with your Community about Healthy Boundaries

Objectives

As a result of this session, a faith leader will be able to communicate the following to their faith community:

- The definition of boundaries
- What the faith leader has learned through boundaries training
- The importance of boundaries in healthy ministry
- Understandings of power and vulnerability
- The importance of self-care for the faith leader

Activity 1—Discussion: Why Are We Here?

The Nature of Boundaries – 15 minutes

In many denominations or communities, best practice for faith leaders requires completion of healthy boundaries training in order to maintain good standing and to minimize the risk of doing harm to others. Some faith communities do not require healthy boundaries training, in which case it is up to the individual leader to seek out opportunities for training and continuing education. *Note: Take a moment here to explain the training requirements set forth in your faith community.*

Let's first begin with a DEFINITION: Boundaries are guidelines that help us maintain our integrity within relationships with others. We maintain boundaries because they keeps people safe.

This session is a conversation facilitated by a faith leader or spiritual teacher, designed to help lay people understand the importance of their faith leader's boundaries and to begin conversations about the norms, expectations, and behaviors that are needed from each member of the community in order to create a healthy environment for all people.

There will be an analysis of power and vulnerability that will establish a common language that all members of the community can use to take account of their relationship with their faith leader and with one another.

Session Scheduling Information

(Adapt to fit your time frame.)

Activity 1—15 minutes

Activity 2—15 minutes

Activity 3—15 minutes

Activity 4—15 minutes

Activity 5—5 minutes

Activity 6—20 minutes

Closing Summary—5 minutes

Total—90 minutes

Exercise:

“God Marked a Line and Told the Sea” Hymn by Thomas Troeger 1989 © Oxford University Press

Discussion: How do you feel about boundaries? What comes to mind when you hear the word *boundary*? How do you think boundaries are helpful or unhelpful? Why?

Exercise: Fences, Walls, and Gates



Use three pictures to help participants reflect on the nature of boundaries. As you show each image, ask participants to name what each image brings to mind in the context of boundaries. The first image is of a lone person in the middle of a field with no boundaries which is at once inviting (wide open space and freedom) and unnerving (lost and alone). Contrast this with the second image of a fence (open and porous but still a boundary) and the third image of a solid wall (not porous at all). Help participants to name the benefits and limitations presented in each image.

Exercise:

“The Mending Wall” by Robert Frost

Discussion: What is Frost’s resistance to the wall? Do his sentiments reflect your own feelings about boundaries? Why or why not?

Frost uses the low, hand-built rock wall common in New England fields to discuss his resistance to boundaries. This wall he is walking and repairing with his neighbor is permeable, impermanent and in need of attention; it is more the notion of a boundary than a real wall. His neighbor refers to it as “a good fence.” It is voluntarily built and maintained by neighbors, not adversaries. It is not imposed from without.

Boundaries create space for relationship, from the most intimate to the most casual. And occasionally they need to be tended, renewed, and clarified or renegotiated and changed. In this process of attending to boundaries, trust grows and also a particular kind of intimacy.

Activity 2—Discussion: Boundaries are a Gift & Boundary Crossing vs. Boundary Violation—15 minutes

Belonging to a faith community means being in relationship with other people. Sometimes, boundaries are viewed as barriers to authentic relationships when, in fact, boundaries can help define and strengthen relationships in ways that are appropriate and safe.

“I think boundaries are a gift. I think that boundaries are the thing that give shape to our relationships--all of our relationships. And there are different boundaries that are appropriate in different kinds of relationships.” -Rev. Marie M. Fortune

“One of the difficulties in ministry is that we misunderstand boundary setting with not being nice. A lot of people believe boundary setting is a rude experience.” -Rev. Luis Carriere

Take a moment to reflect:

- We each perform many roles (spouse, parent, professional, etc.). What are some boundaries you keep in your daily life? How do these boundaries help you?
- What kinds of boundaries have you witnessed or observed in our faith community? (Examples: doors are locked after certain hours; children are accompanied by two adults to the restrooms; the clergy person sets a time limit for their open office hours every week.)
 - What purpose do these boundaries serve?
- Do you agree or disagree that boundaries are a gift? Why or why not?

Ultimately, we want our faith community to be a place where boundaries help facilitate relationships and keep us safe. We want this to be a place where your vulnerabilities can be expressed with the possibility of healing, not further harm.

What can possibly go wrong in a faith community?

Consider these scenarios:

- The youth pastor takes a 15-year-old boy aside and offers him alcohol, shows him porn, then sexually assaults him.
- The rabbi sets up a webcam in the synagogue's ritual bath in order to video record women congregants as they bathe.
- The pastor, recently divorced, becomes romantically involved with two congregants at the same time, both of whom she has been counseling.
- The Chair of the Board of Trustees who is also a large donor comes on sexually to the new, young Associate Pastor.
- The pastor is viewing pornography on the office computer.
- The treasurer uses the church credit card to purchase landscaping materials for the church and includes extra materials for her home.
- A lay church leader is sexting a new church member.

These are all true stories. And they have wreaked havoc in the communities where they took place. Even though these stories are difficult to face, they highlight the importance of healthy boundaries training not only for faith leaders, but for lay people as well. This is why it is important for faith leaders and lay people to be in conversation about healthy boundaries in their community.

Boundary Crossing vs. Boundary Violation

Boundary *crossings* are a fact of life and simply part of the human experience. They are neutral activities that are a necessary part of a faith leader's role in connecting with other people. Communication, touch, and emotional intimacy are all boundary crossings. For example, a faith leader may need to call a congregant on the phone (communication), may shake hands with a congregant (touch), or may join a congregant in expressing sadness about the death of a congregant's loved one (emotional intimacy).

Boundary crossings are a necessary part of a minister's role as they connect with others, participate in meetings, offer a healing touch, etc. When a faith leader is considering crossing a boundary, it should be in the best interest of the congregant. These have a positive or neutral impact on the other person.

Boundary violations occur when the boundary crossing is not in the best interest of the other and results in harm. These have a negative impact on the other person.

The activity may be the same: for example, a phone call. Someone may call you to inform you of a meeting, which is a boundary crossing. Or someone might call to sexually harass you, which is a boundary violation.

When someone violates boundaries, and when these violations are ignored, a community fosters a culture that allows the victimization and exploitation of the vulnerable, breeds mistrust and secrecy, erodes faith, and ignores the foundational principles of the faith community.

When clergy, congregants, and lay leaders share responsibility for faithful, appropriate relationships, faith communities are better equipped to be places of safety, accountability, trust, and meaning. Healthy faith communities are capable of being the places their members desire them to be.

Activity 3—Discussion: Power and Vulnerability—15 minutes

Understanding the reality of power and vulnerability is fundamental to addressing healthy boundaries between faith leaders and members of the congregation. Without a clear analysis of these issues, it can be difficult for a community to identify and name a problem for what it really is: a misuse or abuse of power.

Power and vulnerability are relative and contextual realities in our lives. To speak of a person "having power" or "being vulnerable" in a vacuum is a misconception. A person has power *in relation to* another person in a given situation; a person is vulnerable *in relation to* another person in a given situation.

“Being powerful or having power is not about feelings. It’s about resources; and either we have resources or we don’t have resources...” -Rev. Marie M. Fortune

Power is not by definition abusive or harmful. It is a neutral reality in which we all share to a greater or lesser degree depending on socially constructed reality and circumstances. As individuals, we function in various roles invested with different levels of power: pastor-congregant, teacher-student, doctor-patient, employer-employee, parent-child, etc.

“The concept of power is not a negative word. It’s like fire. You can either use it to cook a meal or burn a house down...power is simply influence and the ability to influence others.” -Rev. Jimmy Herd

Activity 4—Discussion: What I’ve Learned about Boundaries—15 minutes

Below are some key points that senior leaders have offered upon reflecting on the nature of boundaries within the ministerial/teaching relationship.

- **Expectations**
 - ✓ Expectations are often unspoken, so seek clarity. If I don’t know a congregation’s expectations, I may disappoint without any awareness—particularly in new ministries and with new members coming into the church
 - ✓ The best way to clarify expectations is to discuss them openly. Use the handout “What I Expect from My Faith Leader” to help with this process.
 - ✓ Clarify or negotiate time commitments, communication styles, and access around appointments, invitations, drop-by, open office, and home visits.
- **Interpretations**
 - ✓ Be alert to differing interpretations of the same reality; a congregant may see a relationship with their spiritual leader as a friendship rather than pastoral care.
 - ✓ The personal nature of pastoral relationships can lead to feelings of closeness. When spiritual leaders share their personal experiences with congregants, as a way to express kinship or empathy, the congregant may see this as a special relationship or friendship. This may change the congregant’s expectations.
 - ✓ Maintaining healthy boundaries means being attentive to pastoral relationships with congregants. We don’t always feel the same connections to each individual, but we are always in the position of spiritual leadership. Maintaining that professional role is the responsibility of the spiritual leader.
- **Power Differential/Dual Relationships**
 - ✓ Learn to own and appreciate the power of the pastoral office.
 - ✓ Denying one’s position of power does not diminish that power in the eyes of the community. Rather, it means that you are not able to use the power skillfully and to the benefit of others.

- ✓ The role of spiritual leader is inherently one of greater power. Our congregants, students, or members need us to maintain our professional role, because it serves a special need that is different from friendship.
- **Context**
 - ✓ Boundaries are contextual, based on the social norms and needs of a community.
 - *Examples: In-home visits, social interactions, smaller towns vs. cities, families, retirees:*
 - *A congregation with lots of families will have different needs from one that has mostly retirees.*
 - *The social norms in smaller towns are often different from those in cities.*
 - *An at-home visit to a member who is ill is very different from a conversation with someone you meet in the grocery store.*
 - ✓ Ultimately, I am always the pastor with my congregants.
- **Self-Care**

(See Self-Care description below [Activity 6]. Consider Activity 5, the optional case study, prior to the review on self-care.)

Activity 5—Discussion: Optional Case Studies—5 minutes

Case Study A

Daniel has recently begun coming to church, looking for a new church home. He has found this church very friendly, perhaps too friendly. The pastor and lay people greet him every Sunday with a big hug. Daniel is a little uncomfortable with this affection. He was sexually abused as a young teen by his youth pastor. He is not ready to share his story with this new community. He likes this new pastor and church, but he's not sure it's a good fit.

- What do you think Daniel should do?

Case Study B

Suzanne's father owns a car dealership. Suzanne really likes her spiritual teacher and has noticed that he drives an older model car. She talks her father into giving the teacher a new car. The teacher appreciates her generosity but he declines the gift even though he could use a new car.

- Why do you think the teacher declined Suzanne's gift?
- How would you feel if you were in Suzanne's position?

Activity 6—Discussion: The Importance of Self-Care—20 minutes

We all know that stress has a powerful impact on physical, psychological, and spiritual health. Several recent research studies of clergy have highlighted the high levels of burnout, illness, and challenges to well-being. Self-care does not come naturally to many in ministry; the focus is usually on others. However, research has also demonstrated that lack of self-care has impacts on relationships with others—families, colleagues, and congregants/students. As a spiritual leader to maintain and sustain a long, healthy career means a commitment to self-care:

- ✓ It's my responsibility to sustain boundaries and to find ways to care for myself and my personal life apart from the congregation.
- ✓ I need to attend to my need for friendships, rest, and nurturing my other interests.
- ✓ Naming my needs—like days off and vacation can/will lead to congregation's recognition of those needs as well.
- ✓ I have learned that I need to take time away—to get distance and rest, to entrust the work to others so that the congregation is cared for.

Continue discussion by asking participants: How can you (congregant, student, or member) be supportive?

***Ask Participants to complete the Activity: What I Expect from My Faith Leader.
(Attached Handout)***

Continue discussion by asking participants to share what they think about the list of expectations.

Closing—"The Contract: A Word from the Led" by William Ayot —5 minutes

WHAT I EXPECT FROM MY FAITH LEADER

Directions: Examine the list below. Mark which expectations you have of _____

Be sure to add any others not listed here.

FAITH LEADER NAME

I expect my pastor to:

- Have knowledge of our tradition's sacred texts and teachings
- Be accessible 24/7 for non-emergency situations or questions
- Stay up to date on what we congregants share on our personal social media
- Have consistency between her values and behavior
- Be intuitive when it comes to my emotional needs
- Be available to discuss crises of faith
- Be available to officiate my family's rituals (marriages, baptisms, funerals)
- Become one of my closest friends
- Welcome me into her home if her light is on in the evening and I stop by
- Confide in me about her personal problems
- "Friend" me on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest)
- Keep confidences that I share with her
- Forego her allotted vacation time in order to take care of me and other congregants
- Drive me home from the bar if I drink too much, so I don't get another DUI
- Come to my house for holiday celebrations like Thanksgiving
- Listen to my concerns about our church
- Socialize primarily within our church community
- Take care of herself
- Preach on partisan issues and tell me how to vote
- Visit me in the hospital
- Incorporate her spouse fully into the life of the congregation
- Patronize my business and the businesses of my fellow congregants
- Take her allotted vacation time
- Give me a hug every time we meet

My other expectations of _____
FAITH LEADER NAME

-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-

Discuss:

- Do you think any of your expectations push your faith leader's boundaries?
- What adjustments, if any, do you want to make of your expectations?