

Code of Ethics for Youth Ministry The United Church of Canada

Preamble

This Code of Ethics and the accompanying commentary provide a standard for people involved in youth ministry leadership within The United Church of Canada. It may be used as a guide for education, training, screening and accountability for paid staff, volunteers, and those responsible for oversight of youth ministry.

Youth ministry is the process by which God, working through the faith community, immerses youth in God's Story and vision for creation. It includes all of the ways the church and its leaders encourage youth to participate in Christian practices of faith in action. The hope of Youth Ministry is that youth will embrace a lifelong commitment to the way of Jesus and make a spirit filled difference in the world.

1. Faithful to the Call

- a) As a person called into ministry with youth, I serve God in a role that demands my competent practice.
 - i) Seeking to be a responsible person, I will be aware of my own gifts and abilities, recognize the limits of my competence and work within those limits.
 - ii) Seeking to be a humble person, I will learn from others, seek feedback about my work, and participate in educational and training programs to develop my knowledge and skills relating to youth ministry.

- b) The ministry I undertake with youth will require much from me. To continue to offer effective ministry I will need to attend to my own health - mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually.
 - i) Seeking to be a wise and self-aware person, I will strive for balance in my use of time, money, and personal energy to care for myself and others.

- c) My ministry within the church also takes place within a wider society to which I am accountable and within which I am a decision-shaping participant.
 - i) Seeking to be an obedient and courageous person, I will comply with the legal obligations related to my ministry even when such actions conflict with my wishes or the wishes of those with whom I serve.
 - ii) Seeking to be an obedient and courageous person, I will work with others to effect legal or social change that moves toward God's vision of justice.

2. Ministry in Community

- a) As a leader within The United Church of Canada, I serve a diverse community of faith, bound together by common convictions and traditions.
 - i) Seeking to be a loyal person, I will respond and contribute to this community of faith and to the wider work and purpose of God.
 - ii) Seeking to be a collaborative person, I will work with volunteers and staff in ways that are respectful, reconciling and assertive.

- b) I am a steward of a ministry which belongs to God, Christ and the Church.
 - i) Seeking to be an accountable person, I will work under the oversight and discipline of The United Church of Canada and in harmony with its statements of theology and polity.
- c) I am in communion with a diverse group of people engaged in diverse youth ministries across The United Church of Canada.
 - i) Seeking to be a respectful person, I will support colleagues in youth ministry.
 - ii) Seeking to be a principled person, I will encourage colleagues to exercise their leadership in harmony with this code and with statements of theology and polity of The United Church of Canada.

3. Stewardship of Power

- a) Youth leadership involves positions of authority that give moral, spiritual, and social power in relation to young people. I am entrusted with that power by the faith community, youth and their families.
 - i) Seeking to be a good steward, I will neither neglect nor abuse the power entrusted to me.
 - ii) Seeking to be a just person, I will create through my ministry a safe environment where all God's people, regardless of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, faith expression or family background, are welcomed and equipped to share their gifts and their experiences.
 - iii) Seeking to be a trustworthy person, I will respect the confidentiality of personal information shared with me, respecting as well the necessity of selectively disclosing confidential information when absolutely necessary to protect the well being of a person in my care or when required by law.
 - iv) Seeking to be a person of integrity, I will develop boundaries that are sensitive to how power might influence the relationship between myself and those in my charge.
 - v) Seeking to be an honourable person, I will not engage in romantic relationships or sexual behaviour with those in my care.

Commitment

As a person seeking to be a faithful disciple of Jesus, I am called to a standard of character and practice that reflects that discipleship. I commit myself to this code of ethical standards and recognize that God's challenging call and limitless grace is always present in my ministry.

As a sign of my intent to uphold this code and my willingness to be held accountable to it, I affix my signature here.

_____ Date: _____

Code of Ethics for Youth Ministry Commentary

(words or phrases in italics are taken directly from the code)

Preamble

While much of this code and commentary applies to ministry with both youth and young adults, the focus here is on ministry with youth because of the extra legal and moral responsibilities that come from working with minors.

For a statement of the United Church of Canada's vision for youth ministry, see the Vision for Youth and Young Adult Ministry, adopted by the 36th General Council (1997). See *Record of Proceedings*, pp 599ff.

Education, Training Screening and Accountability –This code is not an official policy statement of the United Church of Canada. Individuals, committees and groups with responsibility for implementation and oversight of youth ministry can use this code as a basis for deepening their understanding and for dialogue with others about ethical standards for youth ministry. Where this code has been agreed to by a paid or volunteer youth leader, it can serve as a basis for performance review. Where it has been included as part of the job description or terms of call, or covenanting service of a paid youth leader, then it should serve as a basis for performance review and disciplinary action when necessary. Discipline of youth leaders, on the basis of this code or otherwise, must be done in accordance with other policies and procedures of the United Church of Canada. (e.g. policies set out in the United Church policy on Sexual Abuse must be followed in regard to violations of 3.a.v.)

The Format of the Code

Each of the major sections of the code begins with a descriptive statement about youth ministry, and is followed by clauses that emphasize qualities of character and behavioural commitments that, by God's grace, demonstrate those qualities.

1. Faithful to the Call

1. Call

Each Christian is responding to a call to reflect Jesus' teachings and the ongoing Christian story in all our actions. Individuals involved in youth ministry have also experienced and responded to a specific call to be in relationship with young people on behalf of the United Church. The ethical practice of youth ministry involves being faithful to both of these types of call.

1.a.i. Limits to Competence

Each person practices with a set of knowledge and skills (competencies) that are shaped by a combination of natural ability, education, training and life experience. Appropriate and careful use of these competencies is a critical aspect of successful youth ministry. Conversely, the attempt to practice competencies not held by the individual and that normally require specialized training is unethical and dangerous to the leader and/or participants.

For example, providing Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation, leading whitewater rafting, or offering therapeutic counseling without the appropriate training or certification could lead to serious harm and violates ethical practice.

Competencies can be developed in a setting in which appropriate supervision or teaming ensures that necessary skills are present and risks minimized. When youth ministry leaders encounter a situation which is beyond their competence to respond, they should seek out agencies and resources within their church and community that can provide assistance or referral.

1.a.ii. – *Development in Knowledge and Skills*

The specific skills and knowledge needed by any leader will be dependent on the role and responsibility that person carries. Competencies named by the National Consultation on Youth Ministry Training (2004) are appended for information. This list of competencies will need to be adapted for specific leadership positions. It may be of particular use in developing job descriptions or identifying areas for continuing education and personal growth.

1.c. *Decision-shaping participant*

As members of communities that extend beyond the church, leaders participate in the wider society in numerous ways, from voting in elections, to consumption choices, to daily interactions with other members of the community. Through such participation, leaders can play an active role in establishing the culture, priorities and direction of the society.

1.c.i & 1.c.ii *Obedient and courageous* – These two qualities of character have been combined in both clauses in this section to claim that both upholding and challenging laws requires obedience and courage. We are called to be obedient in relation to both the laws of our community and the greater Christian Story. We are called to be courageous both in risking conflict with those we care about and in challenging unjust authority.

1.c.i. *Legal Obligations*

Leaders should be aware that they are in a position of trust and may be held legally liable for failure to uphold that trust.

Certain laws also have a direct impact on youth ministry. Youth Ministry leaders must be aware of and comply with the obligations set out in those laws. Laws that govern work with children and youth are in provincial jurisdiction, and will vary depending on where a ministry is located. Most Provinces have legislation regarding reporting child abuse, privacy of information, screening of leaders, liability and Duty of Care, food safety, driver safety, etc. Information about provincial legislation and regulation is readily accessible through websites or your elected representative.

1.c.ii. *God's vision of justice*

Responding to both the call to discipleship and the call to youth ministry involves an engagement with the world as it is and in how the world will be. Such interest and engagement must be guided by God's vision of justice--a vision, articulated by Jesus and the prophets, that humans engage with each other and with creation in a spirit of humility, forgiveness/reconciliation, mutuality, respect, and love.

God's vision of justice must inform all aspects of youth ministry, from the interactions with individual youth, to the behavioural norms of groups that are gathered, to the content of the programming itself.

Working towards God's vision of justice is not simply an element of youth ministry, however. It is a practice of Christian life. As mentors to the youth in their care, leaders should strive to model justice making in their daily living, bringing their concerns about unjust laws or social structures to the wider church community and acting courageously to make change.

2. Ministry in Community

2.a. common convictions

The United Church of Canada is a diverse community of people bound together by significant theological beliefs. These beliefs or convictions have developed over time through the faithful leading of the Spirit in our community. Convictions include historic statements as well as current statements of faith, polity, and action. The General Council of the United Church of Canada continually engages in decision making about real and pressing realities of our world. This process is a complex, time-consuming and challenging one that seeks to ensure that our convictions are meaningful, relevant, faithful to God and faithful to our traditions.

Persons in leadership must be in essential agreement with the Doctrine section of the Basis of Union. Strict adherence to doctrine is not a requirement for membership or ministry within the United Church of Canada. Every person retains the right to thoughtful dissent, but as a leader must also exercise her or his ministry with respect for the process and decisions of the General Council.

2.a. traditions

The United Church of Canada came into being by Act of Parliament in 1925, officially joining three partners: the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Methodist Church in Canada, and The Congregationalist Churches of Canada. (The Evangelical United Brethren and The UCC formed a new union in 1968). Through these founding churches, we are connected to the origins of the Protestant tradition which began in the 16th century. This heritage informs our practice today as expressed in our approach to worship, education, mission, justice, governance, and decision making.

A result of the coming together of these particular traditions within The UCC is our bias toward living our faith, ministry and mission within a conciliar system. A conciliar system is built on the interrelationship of groups of people – *councils*- exercising accountability and authority within the church. Decision-making is exercised by committees and clusters of people charged with particular responsibility and authority. In some other denominations authority would be exercised by an individual (e.g. the Bishop). Participation in these councils is a right and a responsibility of leadership within The UCC. Leaders within The UCC enter into a covenant to exercise their ministry under the discipline of the councils of the Church.

Our traditions of accountability, organizational structure, and decision making in the conciliar system are found in the section of The Basis of Union called Polity, and are substantially expanded in the Bylaws of the Church. These documents are found together in *The Manual of The United Church of Canada*.

2.b.i. oversight and discipline

All church employees and volunteers are accountable to a governing body which has the responsibility of giving direction and oversight to the ministry, and holding its employees and volunteers accountable. The nature and context of the ministry will determine the group responsible for discipline and oversight, (Congregational board or council, Presbytery, etc.). A

leader may work under the direction of another member of the team, or work closely with a committee who are responsible for the youth ministry, however, these groups are most likely *not* the court of accountability for employment. For youth leaders in congregationally accountable ministries (CAM), this will be the session, board, or council of the congregation. For youth ministers in Staff Associate Ministries, Designated Lay Ministries (DLM), or Ordered Ministries, this will normally be the presbytery. For Conference and General Council staff this will normally be the General Council. For youth leaders in camp settings it may be the Camp Board or the Presbytery.

2.b.i. Oversight and discipline include actions related to terms of employment such as: hiring, contract and salary standards, performance review, disciplinary action as a result of ineffective or inappropriate behaviour, termination of employment, standing as an ordained or diaconal minister, staff associate or designated lay minister, and eligibility for further employment in the church.

2.b.i. & 2.c.ii. theology

The theology of the United Church is articulated in formal statements of faith such the church, such as the Doctrine section of the Basis of Union and A New Creed. The church has also acknowledged the historic statements of the ecumenical church, including the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. Our theology is tested and restated whenever the church enters into intentional study of particular issues in our current social, political, and organizational context (e.g. *Mending the World*, 1997; *To Seek Justice and Resist Evil*, 2000). Theological conviction in our community is discerned in the interplay between scripture, tradition, reason, and experience (a framework of authority drawn from our Methodist roots and developed in UCC history). For the United Church and its members theology is not only a set of statements; living theology is a practice of continual discernment of God's will within a community faithful to Christ's call.

2.b.i. & 2.c.ii. polity

The polity of the United Church includes all the policies and procedures for accountability, organizational structure, and decision making which are followed in the United Church, as set out in the *Manual* and other church documents.

3. Stewardship of Power

3. Stewardship

A central Christian conviction is that everything we have is given to us in trust for the common good. We are stewards (or managers), not owners of what we have been given, and we are accountable to God and each other for the way we use what we are given.

3. Power

Whether a youth leader is volunteer or paid, lay or order of ministry, the role of leader brings with it power and influence. Others have power too, but the power of the leader is unique and distinct from the power of others in the community. That power comes from the position of leadership, and it also comes from personal qualities like age, knowledge, experience and charisma. This power can be used subtly or overtly. The leader may not be conscious of his or

her power, but it is still an active part of all relationships, and the leader needs to develop self-awareness and sensitivity to the different ways power influences relationships.

3.a. moral power

Leaders have the ability to influence what is considered right and wrong within the youth ministry context. This influence happens both through how they model moral behaviour, and the explicit standards they set for the group. For example, one leader might encourage open discussion while another might discourage talking about difficult issues. Leaders can encourage or discourage social or service opportunities. They can also tolerate or set limits on inappropriate behaviour like visible displays of affection, ridicule and foul language.

3.a. spiritual power

Leaders have the ability to influence what is considered sacred, holy and godly. Leaders both model and teach spirituality. For example, leaders can help youth see the presence of God in a homeless person, or in a neighbourhood woodlot. They can train youth in spiritual practices and help them to see God's presence in all of life. They can also distort the sacred by emphasizing fear or prejudicial attitudes.

3.a. social power

Leaders have the ability to influence the membership and status of people within the ministry. For example, leaders can both model and shape the way in which youth are welcomed and given the ability to contribute. They can tolerate or challenge the formation of cliques and social hierarchies.

3.a.i. neither neglect nor abuse

Good stewardship means to exercise the authority of leadership in a way that is faithful to the goals of the youth ministry and the wider community of faith.

Leaders neglect power by failing to claim the power of leadership in order to make sure that the goals of the youth ministry are met. They can also neglect power by attempting to share power inappropriately or by assuming that relationships are mutual and equal when there is a power differential. For example: youth leaders can neglect their power by failing to set or hold youth and other leaders to standards of behaviour, failing to adequately prepare for youth activities, failing to share relevant information and resources, assuming that others will do tasks that are part of the responsibility of the leader, expecting others to do tasks for which they have not been adequately trained, or tolerating inappropriate behaviour.

Leaders abuse power by using the power of leadership in ways that violate respect for other people or the goals of the ministry. For example: youth leaders abuse power by failing to encourage the leadership of others, by failing to consult other youth and leaders, by assuming relationships are mutual and equal when there is a power differential, by seeking their own gain at the expense of the ministry, by using language or actions that degrade another person or by words or behaviour which enhance their own self-esteem at the expense of others.

3.a.ii. safe environment

Concern for the safety of participants in youth ministry is grounded in our biblical faith which speaks regularly about God's defense of the vulnerable. Safety has physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions.

Physical dimensions of safety include making sure that hazards in meeting spaces are minimized, and transportation is done in a way that minimizes risk. It also includes careful screening of leaders using the resources and guidelines provided by the church. See for example, *Faithful Footsteps*. In very rare situations, it may involve using the minimum level of physical restraint necessary to prevent harm.

Emotional safety will often require vigilance and sustained attention, because our culture regularly tolerates abusive language and behaviour. Youth ministry in the church needs to model an alternative to the culture of tolerance for degrading language and behaviour. Youth leaders have a serious responsibility to use their power to protect people who may be hurt in this way. Degrading jokes, for example, are very common among youth, and those saying them may or may not be aware of how threatening or hurtful they can be. They may focus on height, weight, or other physical attributes, personal habits, personality, and many other attributes. When degrading language or behaviour focuses on attributes that are associated with groups that experience discrimination in other spheres are particularly threatening to those at whom they are directed. *Gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, faith expression and family background*, are examples of attributes that may raise particular issues of safety. Youth leaders should involve their youth in setting and enforcing clear standards of behaviour that discourage all types of degrading language or behaviour.

Issues of spiritual safety are raised when spiritual power is used in a manipulative or coercive way. Spiritual safety is violated, for example, when youth are required to participate in liturgical actions or to make a profession of faith, when sacred space or process is used to encourage participants to divulge information of a personal nature, or when honest questions of faith are ridiculed or suppressed.

3.a.iii. confidentiality

When youth or family members place their trust in a leader by sharing personal information, the leader is under the most serious obligation to hold that information in confidence. Sharing personal information about another without permission undermines the trust relationship and may seriously impair future ministry. If information is shared in a context in which it is not clear whether the youth wishes it to be confidential, it is best to ask the youth about their wishes. In such cases, it is usually best to err on the side of keeping the confidence.

When a leader is concerned about a case that is beyond his or her expertise or experience, the leader can consult with colleagues or professionals, without divulging names or identifying information.

The situations in which protecting the well being of a person in the leader's care will require sharing confidential information are fairly limited and are often legally defined. Child abuse, the threat of suicide or immediate serious threats to a person's life or health are situations in which leaders must act to ensure that appropriate authorities are informed. In such cases, the leader should, if possible, encourage the at-risk person to report the danger himself or herself, and offer to accompany her or him, in order to maintain trust in the relationship. If that fails then the youth leader has the responsibility to report his or her knowledge to the appropriate authorities.

3.a.iv. boundaries

Boundaries are limits that we place on behaviour and relationships in order to maintain our health and responsibilities. It is very important that leaders observe clear limits on the types of

relationships that are appropriate between people whose relationship is characterized by an imbalance of power. For example, leaders should not look to the youth in their care for emotional support, friendship or pastoral care.

Boundaries can be confused when leaders play other roles in the lives of youth outside the ministry context (e.g. as a parent or teacher). In such cases, it would be advisable to discuss relational and role boundaries with the participant and the leader's supervisor.

3.a.v. romantic relationships or sexual behaviour

Relationships between leaders and youth are sometimes confused by feelings of romantic or sexual attraction. The power imbalance between leader and participant means that intimate relationships between youth and leaders are always wrong. Leaders have the responsibility to resist their own attraction to youth in their care. Leaders also have the responsibility to resist romantic or sexual advances from youth. A leader should not participate in an intimate relationship with a participant until after the leadership relationship has ended and at least six months of complete separation from the youth ministry context has passed. Even then the leader should be extremely cautious about the ways in which persisting power dynamics influence the relationship. A similar power imbalance exists between leaders and their supervisors, and as a result, similar boundaries are important for the protection of leaders.

United Church policy on these issues may be found in the document, *Sexual Abuse (Sexual Harassment, Pastoral Sexual Misconduct, Sexual Assault) and Child Abuse, Official Policy and Procedures Document of the United Church of Canada*. (1992, revised 1997, 2000) – The bibliography in this document lists books, pamphlets, videos and articles on issues of boundaries, power, and safety and sexual abuse.

Commitment

Participants are asked to sign this document as a sign of their commitment to exercise their ministry in accordance with its statements of character and behaviour. Further to this personal commitment, the signature indicates an acceptance that the church community will use this code as a benchmark against which the leader's practice of youth ministry will be examined.

Background:

This code and commentary emerged out of two workshops on Ethics in Youth Ministry that were held as part of the Alberta and Northwest Conference Youth Ministry Training Program (November, 2001) and the Children and Youth Ministry Institute at Naramata Centre (October, 2002). Discussion among participants and leaders in those two events identified issues and began to develop wording for items in the code. A writing team consisting of Allison Rennie, Martin Settle and Ross Smillie then wrote a first draft of the code and commentary. Many individuals provided helpful comments and a further draft was thoroughly reviewed by the National Consultation on Youth Ministry Training in October 2004, which led to the current form of the code and commentary. In addition to offering specific feedback on the language and content of the code, the latter group strongly endorsed the need for such a code, enthusiastically recommended its circulation in youth ministry circles, and urged it to be endorsed by General Council. It is currently in the hands of the Working Group on Standards of Practice and Ethical Standards. Many people have had a hand in contributing to this code or offering valuable feedback, and the writing team would like to express its appreciation to them all.