

CHAPTER 1

The Number One Ministry Problem

PROFESSIONALS WHO WORK WITH CLERGY AND MINISTRY workers say, hands down, that the main problem these professionals face—regardless of their age, denomination, church size, type of organization, socioeconomic status, or theology—is setting and maintaining boundaries.

This is backed up by a number of leaders in the Field Education Department of Fuller Theological Seminary (one of the largest seminaries in the world) who have found that a lack of boundaries is one of the biggest problems that clergy face.

My own experience as a pastor, and as one who has counseled scores of clergy and other ministry workers, underlines the critical importance of creating and enforcing boundaries in one's work and personal life.

The key boundary-struggle areas for most religious professionals revolve around:

- ministry areas, such as job description, work hours, staff issues, and expectations that others have for you and your work; and
- non-ministry areas, such as marriage, parenting, relatives, friends, personal finances, and social obligations.

MINISTRY CAN BE A FRIENDLY MONSTER

People-helping can eat away at your personal and family time so subtly that you barely notice its effects until it's too late and you have no life apart from the ministry. Slowly but surely, your whole existence is taken over by good and noble causes. All this comes at the cost of neglecting your loved ones and yourself.

Your ministry can be like a loveable, seemingly harmless puppy that grows into a hungry wolf whose ferocious appetite is never fully satisfied. The same goes for people-helping—it can grow until it devours every area of your life.

PGA (Professional Golfers' Association) caddie John "Cubby" Burke made a shrewd observation about how golf hooks many pro golfers. He said that after a while they come "under the influence of golf." By this, he meant that their obsession with golf ends up being the only thing left in their lives.

Ministry workers face a similar problem. Tragically, local churches and ministry organizations are littered with the skeletal remains of pastors and other ministry professionals who didn't set good boundaries and simply couldn't say no. Unfortunately, they sacrificed their family life and personal time to do whatever it took to "become all things to all people."

Recently, I saw a T-shirt that perfectly describes the life of a vast number of religious professionals:

LET ME DROP EVERYTHING
& WORK ON YOUR PROBLEM!

Like most ministers, my time was largely taken up by what one of my peers jokingly referred to as “the pastor’s three main duties”: hatch ‘em, match ‘em, and dispatch ‘em (baptize, marry, and bury them).

During the first twenty years of my ministry, I worked an average of more than seventy hours a week. It was a hectic schedule jammed with meetings, counseling, preaching, speaking, staff issues, hospital visitations, weddings, funerals, and a slew of other responsibilities. There was little time left over for my family, let alone my own needs.

Some anonymous wag described what it feels like to be a religious leader, “Being a pastor or ministry worker is like being a stray dog at a whistler’s convention.”

I certainly echo the sad truth that a Christian college professor lamented to his class: “Busyness is the only sin that is *applauded* by the Church!” I don’t know if you’ve ever been praised for your long work hours, but I have. Sadly, this motivated me to work even more.

BOUNDARIES IN THE BIBLE

Boundaries, both physical and emotional, play key roles in the Bible. For example, the Lord said to Moses:

Command the Israelites and say to them: “When you enter Canaan, the land that will be allotted to you as an inheritance is to have these boundaries” . . . This will be your land, with its boundaries on every side.¹

Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan who helped an injured man who’d been robbed and beaten? This story

is a great illustration of boundary setting. The traveling Samaritan came upon an injured man. He could have gone on, but he stopped, applied emergency first aid, and paid all the bills for the man's recovery. Then he took the fellow to a local inn and left him in the care of the innkeeper, promising to pay any future expenses.

But the Samaritan didn't allow this to delay his trip. While he chose to allow an unexpected interruption, he guarded his time and stayed on schedule. He maintained boundaries that limited *how* he used his time.

Jesus clearly used boundaries in his life and ministry. Whereas many people are tempted to please everyone, Jesus stuck to his limits and didn't try to meet everyone's needs or agendas.

For example, even when facing multitudes of people needing his help, Jesus took time off for strategic rest and prayer:

Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. ²

How often do you get away from your ministry pressures to find refreshment and renewal? In what ways can you do this in the midst of dealing with needy people and programs?

BOUNDARY PROBLEMS IN THE MODERN CHURCH

There is an interesting parallel between professional football and full-time Christian work. Like other large

corporations, the NFL (National Football League) is a big-time profit machine. The sole, driving purpose of its coaches and office staff is to win football games. To do this, some teams' management will ignore a player's injuries and long-term health. They will use players until they are absolutely drained or are severely, sometimes irreparably, injured.

Unfortunately, like the NFL, many churches and religious organizations also exploit their leaders, saddling them with unrealistic demands that disregard their leader's personal well-being.

SOBERING CLERGY STATISTICS

Consider the findings below, quoted from "Statistics in Ministry," a 2015 study by The Fuller Institute, George Barna, and Pastoral Care, Inc.:

- 70 percent of pastors constantly fight depression.
- 50 percent of pastors feel so discouraged that they would leave the ministry if they could, but have no other way of making a living.
- 50 percent of ministers starting out will not last five years.
- One out of every ten ministers will actually retire as a minister in some form.
- 80 percent believe pastoral ministry has negatively affected their families. Many pastors' children do not attend church because of what the church has done to their parents.
- 30 percent state that being in the ministry is an outright hazard to their family.

- 80 percent of pastors' spouses wish their spouse could choose a different profession.
- Over 1,700 pastors left the ministry every month last year.
- Over 1,300 pastors were terminated by the local church each month, many without cause.
- The number one reason pastors leave the ministry? Church people are not willing to go the same direction and follow the goals of the pastor. Pastors believe God wants them to go in one direction but the people are not willing to follow or change.³

This study underscores previous research into the alarming state of clergy. In his book *The Crucifixion of Ministry*, Andrew Purves, a professor of Pastoral Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, writes, “National figures show that around one-third of ordained persons leave the ministry after five years, never to return.”⁴

In the October 1998 edition of *The Clergy Journal*, Dr. Robert R. Kopp, pastor of Center Presbyterian Church in McMurray, Pennsylvania, wrote a sobering article titled “Poison in the Pews and Pulpits.” He revealed that 75 percent of American clergy would relocate tomorrow if offered the opportunity.⁵

There is a close relationship between burnout—often caused by weak, vague, or non-existent boundaries—and clergy who exit from their ministerial calling.

In *Theology News and Notes*, Dr. David G. Congo penned an eye-opening article, titled “What Causes Burnout?” Congo surveyed ministers in thirty-two denominations to discover the significant factors in ministry burnout. Here

are a few of the eye-opening results he got from the pastors he surveyed:

- 70 percent worked more than sixty hours per week.
- 85 percent spent two or less evenings at home per week.
- 75 percent spent less than one evening a month purely for social time with their wives or other couples.⁶

However, we who are overworked clergy or Christian workers can't totally blame our workplace. Often, the villain is not our place of service—it is *us*. We can be our own worst enemy when it comes to our priorities and time use.

DEALING WITH A "MESSIAH COMPLEX"

Many religious professionals live with a "Messiah Complex," believing they are the single most important link in the chain of their church's effectiveness.

Sure, intellectually they believe it is God's work and he will take care of it. But in practice, these ministry workers act as though their congregation's or organization's success depends primarily on their personal actions. Despite their biblical beliefs that God is in charge of their church, their actions flesh out, "If I don't do it, it won't get done."

I labored under this Messiah Complex for a long time. Now I can joke about my foolishness:

Question: Do you know what the difference is between God and Jim Stout?

Answer: God doesn't think he's Jim Stout!

With such hectic schedules, it's no wonder that clergy and ministry workers "grow weary in well-doing" and experience burnout. How about you? Do you feel overworked or overcommitted?

CHAPTER 2

Types of Boundary Problems

HOW IS IT POSSIBLE TO BUILD A HAPPY, BALANCED HOME LIFE when you are always gone? If you say yes to too many work-related requests, your family and personal life will suffer.

Obviously, some hard questions need to be raised: What does your job description say about your overtime work or involvement with social groups? Do you have the courage to bring up with your leaders the tension between your job description's use of time and your *actual* use of time? What kind of boundaries can you set to protect yourself from exceeding reasonable work hours?

What is meant by a “boundary”? *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines it as, “Any line or thing marking a limit.”¹

It is also important to clarify the difference between a goal and a boundary. A *goal* describes a desired accomplishment. A *boundary* is a limit—a barrier that is used to protect, improve, or enhance goals. Clear, firm, and enforced boundaries are critical prerequisites for goal achievement, whether in work, personal, or family areas.

BOUNDARY TYPES

Most boundaries are physical or emotional. They mark what you will and will not tolerate from others. They also

serve to protect you from your own potentially destructive words or actions.

Physical boundaries can be barriers like fences, walls, hedges, doors, and gates. They are used to keep people and things in or out—such as thieves, bad weather, pets, or insects.

But physical boundaries also include limits on work or other activities. This can mean abiding by written or verbal contracts, or avoiding situations that can physically hurt you or others, like reckless driving or physical abuse. Good physical boundaries can also be applied to control job descriptions, days off, exercise times, or even time limits for phone calls.

Emotional boundaries are usually used to manage the harmful words and deeds of others. These boundaries often limit their verbal abuse like shouting, threatening, cursing, belittling, or bullying.

Emotional boundaries can also apply to you, personally, when your own words or actions could have harmful effects on you, your family, or others. Self-set emotional boundaries can include taking a walk before you explode in anger, making time for regular peer support, going on a vacation when you're feeling overwhelmed at work, getting therapy for yourself, or limiting your own negative self-talk.

EXAMPLES OF COMMON BOUNDARY ISSUES

Can you relate to any of the following common boundary collisions? Each situation requires making a choice to either surrender your boundary limit or maintain it. How would you respond to these real-life circumstances?

Phone Calls During Mealtimes

The phone rings and you hear a non-urgent voice message. Do you take the call and interrupt your family time or a social event with friends? Or do you observe your “no-phone-call-interruptions-at-mealtimes” boundary and return the call later?

Verbal Abuse from Toxic People

A church or organization member has another temper explosion and starts raising his voice at you with all kinds of accusations and putdowns. Do you silently take the criticisms? Or do you stand up for yourself and say, “I’m sorry you’re so upset, but I won’t tolerate you talking this way. If you continue, I’ll walk out of the room. When you’re able to cool down, call me and we’ll talk again”?

You are invited to a Thanksgiving dinner with your relatives. One uncle has always been toxic toward you by repeatedly criticizing your occupation. Do you decline the invitation? Or do you accept the offer and risk more verbal arrows? If that uncle starts up his criticisms, do you have the courage to say, “I’m sorry you disagree with my career choice, but I refuse to listen to any more of your criticisms. If you continue, I’ll leave”?

Violations of Days Off

Monday is your day off. You receive a call from someone in your church or organization asking you to visit another member who’s been hospitalized for a non-emergency problem. Do you interrupt your family time? Or do you

say, “Thanks for letting me know this. I have other commitments today, but I will see her later this week”?

You are invited to a member’s 60th birthday party on your day off. Do you agree to attend? Or do you say, “I’d love to, but I can’t”?

Violations of Evenings Off

You have saved Thursday evenings for a family movie night. You get a call from a member pleading for an emergency marriage counseling appointment that evening. As you listen, it’s clear that this really isn’t a critical situation that truly needs your immediate presence. Do you give in and rush out to meet with the couple?

Or do you silently reason with yourself that if these people had a non-emergency on a Thursday evening and called a plumber, electrician, or doctor, wouldn’t that professional ask them to call for a regular daytime appointment? Would you then say, “I’m sorry for your difficulty, but I’ve got a commitment this evening and can’t discuss your issue right now. Please call me tomorrow and we’ll set a time to talk”?

Due to evening meetings and other work-related responsibilities, you have only three nights a week at home. Inevitably, something goes wrong at work and you get called in to solve it. Soon, one or two more evenings are eaten up by overseeing these extra meetings, doing emergency “crisis repairs” at the office. Do you continue to let these “emergencies” steal your family time, or do

you say, “I’m sorry, I already have a commitment with my family on those evenings”?

Violations of Personal Limits

You have an established, three-afternoons-a-week routine at the gym. A friend wants you to skip a workout and go to a movie with him. Do you bend your exercise boundary? Or do you say, “No, thanks. I’ve got to stick to my exercise program”?

You’ve started a diet program. At lunch, a friend offers to buy you a piece of apple pie for dessert. Do you give in? Or do you stand up for your diet limits and say, “Thanks, but I’ve got to stick to my food plan”?

Your teenager asks for a loan to buy a stereo system. Do you respond, “Sure, here’s the money. Pay it back whenever you can”? Or do you say, “Sure, but first let’s write up an agreement on when and how you’ll repay me”?

Violations of Professional or Moral Limits

Let’s say you are a male pastor. You have plans to travel alone to a business meeting an hour away, but then a woman in your congregation asks to carpool. Do you encourage her to go with someone else? Or do you take her with you?

A woman in your organization tends to hug you extra long, mixes her hugs with kisses, and makes suggestive comments. Do you back away and avoid future contact?

Or do you rationalize that she is just needy and benefits from a physical connection?

A female staff member invites you to lunch to discuss a work project. Do you accept and sit in an open, visible place? Do you tell your wife or girlfriend ahead of time that you will be having lunch with another woman? Could you invite someone else to join the two of you?

Unclear Job Descriptions

You receive invitations to serve on various committees, boards, and task forces outside of your work. These might include a local hospital, little league, the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, Red Cross, AIDS Foundation, homeless assistance, or domestic violence prevention. Each represents a worthy cause, but all are voluntary. Which should you choose? You can't do them all—something has to give. But where do you start cutting? What do you say to those who desperately insist on your help?

A long-standing couples' social group wants you to regularly attend and occasionally speak at their monthly Friday evening socials. Other groups in your church also insist on having you attend and speak at their monthly functions. Which should you undertake? If you accept only one or two requests, the other unpicked groups' feelings will be hurt, and you simply don't have enough free evenings or weekends each month to accommodate everyone's wishes. What do you tell them?