



The Code of Ethics and ethical decision making

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The Uniting Church in Australia
QUEENSLAND SYNOD

The Code of Ethics and ethical decision making

The Uniting Church in Australia seeks to be a Christian community which develops its life around worship, prayer, witness, biblical study, pastoral care, deep friendships and mutual accountability.¹

Ministers have a particular place in the Christian community. They touch people's lives at many points of joy, pain, celebration, grief and vulnerability. They are responsible for providing leadership in the community's task of worshipping, proclaiming the good news of Jesus, providing pastoral care, standing with those who suffer, and working for justice and peace. They minister within a pastoral relationship in which they seek to enable other people to focus on God as the source of healing, restoration and wholeness.²

The Uniting Church in Australia has developed a Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice (the Code of Ethics) that outlines the behaviour that the church and ministers themselves accept as necessary for those who carry out ministry, whether in an approved placement or not. This enables the church to clarify what behaviour members and those who have contact with the church can expect from a minister.³ As ministers live out their call to ministry, all of their relationships are to be characterised by the love, care and compassion that was embodied in Jesus Christ.⁴

The Code of Ethics provides guidelines for the way that ministers are to relate to those in their care.⁵ It does not mean that ministers are not already fulfilling these expectations, rather that the Code of Ethics should support existing good practice and encourage all to act in this way.⁶

A code of ethics covers many topics. The range of ethical issues, situations and circumstances that a minister might confront within their life and ministry is however wider than can be covered in a code of ethics.⁷ When faced with issues not expressly referred to the document, ministers can use the code as a guide as they respond to such situations and circumstances.

Ministers are accountable for how they live their lives, how they exercise their ministry and for the decisions that they make.⁸ Being able to identify and explain the process used for making an ethical decision is an important part of that accountability.

This resource seeks to encourage ministers to reflect on values, principles and ethics, to explore how they make ethical decisions and to consider how to foster and grow ethical maturity.

- 1 Ethical guidelines for members and adherents of the Uniting Church in Australia June 1999 p. 1
- 2 The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice for ministers in the Uniting Church in Australia (whether in approved placement or not). Approved by the 12th Assembly July 2009, updated effective 1 January 2010. Hereafter referred to as the Code of Ethics. section 1.6
- 3 The Uniting Church in Australia Support document for the interim code of ethics 1997 p. 2
- 4 The Code of Ethics section 1.6
- 5 The Uniting Church in Australia Support document for the interim code of ethics 1997 p. 2
- 6 The Uniting Church in Australia Support document for the interim code of ethics 1997 p. 2
- 7 The Uniting Church in Australia Support document for the interim code of ethics 1997 p. 13
- 8 The Code of Ethics sections 2.3, 2.4, 3.1a

Ethics

The word "ethics" comes from the Greek *ethike*, which pertains to morals.⁹ Ethics has to do with deciding what is right and wrong, good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate.¹⁰ Ethics are the moral principles that govern a person's behaviour or how an activity is conducted.¹¹ Our morality informs the rules and principles to which we adhere, our convictions about right and wrong, the values and goals by which we live our lives. Ethics is the thinking through of our often assumed morality. Principles are the rules or beliefs that govern a person's behaviour.¹²

Below is a list of universal ethical principles:¹³

Autonomy – we should help people make informed decisions for themselves

Justice – we should provide equal opportunities for all people regardless of differences

Fidelity – we should make honest promises and honour these commitments

Veracity – we should be truthful

Non-maleficence – we should not harm other people

Beneficence – we should promote good for other people.

Ethical thinking enables people to critically reflect on issues, situations and circumstances; analysing moral rules and principles and working out criteria for making judgements about right and wrong.¹⁴

The Christian faith is as much concerned with how we live our lives as with what we believe. It involves discipleship and participation in God's mission as members of the community of faith. Believing, belonging and behaving are interrelated in Christianity and provide the environment in which moral discernment and a Christian ethic take place.¹⁵ Christians are called to live a life that is consistent with the Christian faith. We are called to consider what sort of people and communities we ought to be, to look at the choices we make, the habits we develop and the people we follow. Christian ethics demand that we attend to the life of Jesus, and out of our believing and belonging to God make decisions about how to behave.¹⁶

- 9 The Uniting Church in Australia Making up our Mind: Moral Discernment in the UCA 2013 p. 3
- 10 Plain English paraphrase of the Code of Ethics for ministers and pastors of the Northern Regional Council of the Uniting Church Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (hereafter referred to as the 'Plain English paraphrase'), written by Tim Bose while at Nungalinga college (draft dated 2010 p. 7)
- 11 Chenoweth and McAuliffe 2008 The road to social work and human service practice 2nd ed Cengage Learning Australia p. 56
- 12 The Uniting Church in Australia Making up our Mind: Moral Discernment in the UCA 2013 p. 3
- 13 Cleak and Wilson 2nd ed 2007 Making the most of field placement Nelson Australia pp. 163-164
- 14 The Uniting Church in Australia Making up our Mind: Moral Discernment in the UCA 2013 p. 3
- 15 The Uniting Church in Australia Making up our Mind: Moral Discernment in the UCA 2013 p. 1
- 16 The Uniting Church in Australia Making up our Mind: Moral Discernment in the UCA 2013 p. 6

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Throughout their lives, ministers exercise moral discernment and the making of ethical choices.¹⁷ Ministers need to recognise the principles and values that underlie the Code of Ethics, and be guided by these principles and values as they make decisions about how to behave and how to act. Ministers need to recognise the principles and values that they bring from their cultural background and traditions into their life and ministry in the Uniting Church.

Questions for reflection

Read the Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice.
What values and principles underlie the document?

What values and principles do you take into consideration when making a decision about how to act ethically?

Decision making

Making decisions is a part of everyday life. While some decisions are made quickly and without conscious thought, other decisions emerge through a process of consideration, discussion, reflection and discernment.

Questions for reflection

Think about a recent significant decision that you made in your life:

- What decision did you need to make?
- What issues did you consider in making that decision?
- Did you talk to or consult with anyone?
- Was there only one direction/choice you could take in relation to that decision, or were there a number of options you could take?
- If multiple options, how did you decide on one option?
- After you decided on an option, what happened next?
- Did you reflect on the decision after it was made?
- Were there any unforeseen consequences?

Looking at your responses to the questions above, identify the steps you took to make that significant decision.

¹⁷ The Uniting Church in Australia Making up our Mind: Moral Discernment in the UCA 2013 p.2

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Process of ethical decision making

Ethical decisions are those that involve consideration of what is right and what is wrong. Ethical decisions can emerge from problems or dilemmas.¹⁸ Ethical problems involve a decision about what is right and wrong, and the decision needed is clear. Ethical dilemmas involve a decision about what is right and wrong, but there is more than one alternative way forward and the choice is not clear.¹⁹

Similar to everyday life decisions, ethical decision making involves steps or a process of movement from identifying what is the problem or dilemma, to naming and exploring the possible issues that need to be considered, through to making and implementing the ethical decision.

Ministers are encouraged to seek the wisdom and guidance of others in coming to an understanding of how to respond to an ethical dilemma.

Ministers are encouraged to continually reflect as they make ethical decisions. This continual reflection might include considering issues of consultation, accountability, cultural sensitivity, critical reflection²⁰, mature faith and integrity and process.

Accountability

What guidance is offered by the Code of Ethics, the *Basis of Union*, the Constitution, the Regulations, policies and procedures? Are there any legal requirements? Are there reporting requirements, for example to Synod via the general secretary, presbytery via the presbytery minister or presbytery chairperson, church council chairperson, agency line-management, police? On what basis am I making my decision, and how will I explain my decision to others?

Consultation

Who do I need to discuss this with, and who might offer information, resources, support, advice, wisdom, and alternative thinking or ideas? Who might challenge my assumptions and judgement? Have I consulted all stakeholders; is there someone who could help me see something I have missed?

18 Chenoweth and McAuliffe 2008 *The road to social work and human service practice* 2nd ed Cengage Learning Australia p. 64

19 Banks 2006 *Ethics and Values in Social Work* 3rd ed BASW, Basingstoke p. 12

20 The framework of continually considering the four dimensions of accountability, consultation, cultural sensitivity and critical reflection at every aspect of ethical decision making is part of the inclusive model of ethical decision making developed by Chenoweth and McAuliffe 2008 *The road to social work and human service practice* 2nd ed Cengage Learning Australia pp. 97-109. Mature faith and integrity and process have been added alongside these four dimensions

Cultural sensitivity

What cultural traditions or practices need to be considered? Do I have the knowledge I need, and am I sensitive and responsive to the individuals involved? How does this decision fit alongside and within the culture and processes of the Uniting Church?

Critical reflection

Can I draw on previous experience (mine and/or others) in response to this decision? Have I understood the context, consulted appropriately, considered culture and tradition, explored options and their implications? Is my response consistent with my values, principles and beliefs? How do I feel about the decision I have reached? Have I documented and recorded my process of decision making, and what will I do with that record? What have I learnt?

Mature faith and integrity

Does my decision making reflect my belief and my faith; is it informed by scripture, and have I taken time in prayer? Do my decisions reflect grace and compassion, and the love of Christ?

Process

What church processes, policies and procedures relate to this decision, and am I following them?

Below is a model of ethical decision making that demonstrates a collaborative process.²¹ At each step consideration is given to accountability, consultation, cultural sensitivity, critical reflection²², mature faith and integrity and process. This model or framework moves from understanding to affirming to evaluating to commitment to action.

1. UNDERSTANDING

- Identify the ethical problem or dilemma
- What is the story?
- What is the context?
- What are the issues involved?
- Who are the stakeholders?
- Where is power?
- Who needs to be consulted?

21 This collaborative model of ethical decision making is based on the work of Isaacs and Massey developed for the Centre for Applied Ethics, School of Humanities, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane and further explored by Bob Harriman 2004 in *A Framework for Ethical Decision Making* (unpublished paper). For detail about the model of Isaacs and Massey refer to Reinders ed 2011 *Authenticity and Community*, Garant, Antwerp

22 Chenoweth and McAuliffe 2008 *The road to social work and human service practice* 2nd ed Cengage Learning Australia pp. 97-109

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2. AFFIRMING with the other person

- Look at the ethical problem or dilemma together
- Do we have a common or different understanding?
- Can we work together on this – who else is needed?

3. EVALUATING

- What are possible responses?
- Identify the possible consequences of different responses
- How do the possible responses relate to what we believe and value?
- Decide what needs to happen now.

4. COMMITMENT TO ACTION

- Identify steps needed to implement the decision
- Implement the decision
- Document the decision
- Review and reflect on the process of ethical decision making.

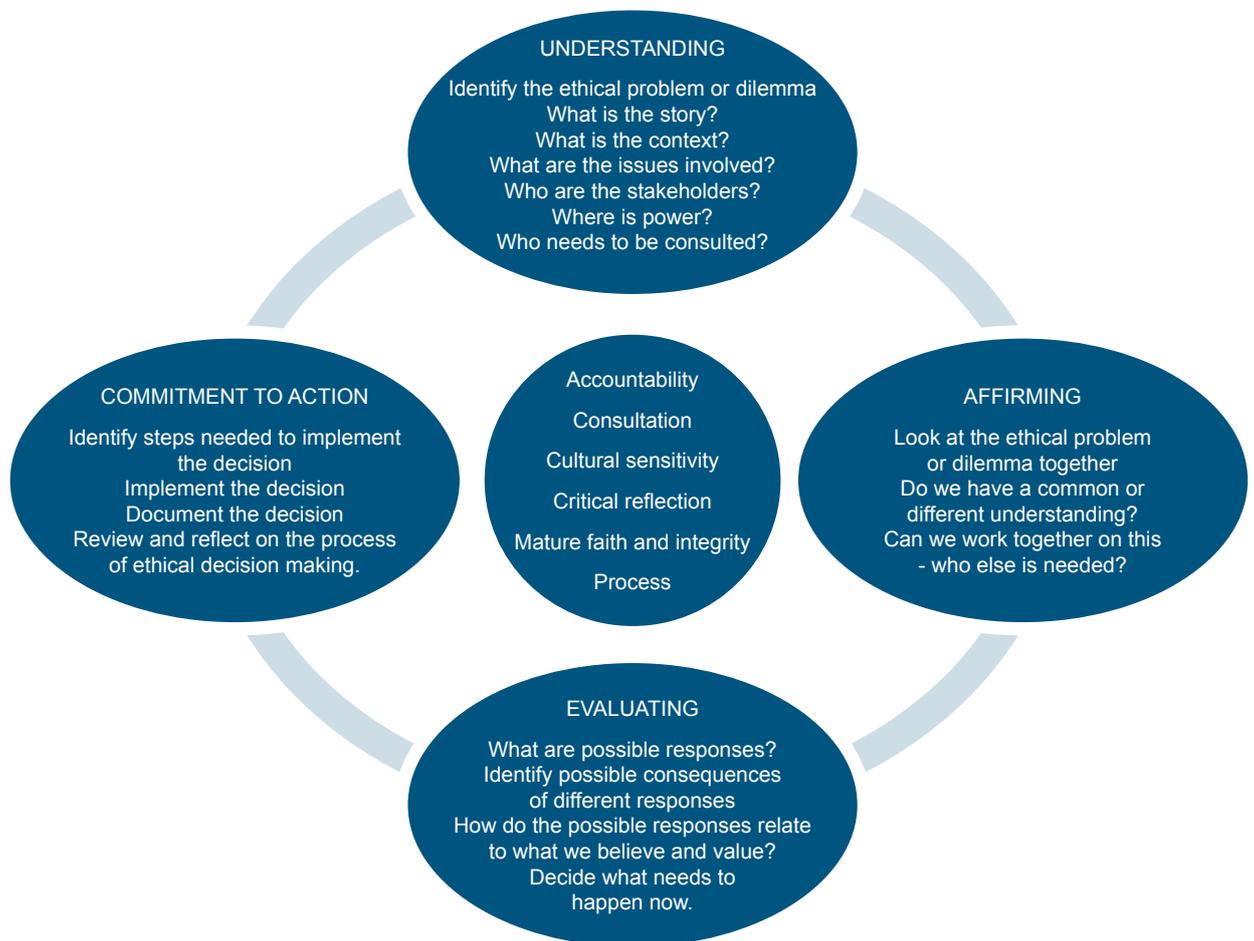


Diagram of a model of ethical decision making that incorporates the work of Isaac and Massey (2011) and Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2008)²³

²³ Isaacs and Massey refer to Reinders ed 2011 Authenticity and Community, Garant, Antwerp and Chenoweth and McAuliffe 2008 The road to social work and human service practice 2nd ed Cengage Learning Australia pp. 97-109

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Questions for reflection

Identify an ethical problem or dilemma that you have faced in ministry.

What steps or process did you use in responding to that ethical problem or dilemma?

How is your process for ethical decision making the same as or different from the process outlined above?

How might you enhance your process for ethical decision making?

Ethical maturity

The Uniting Church in Australia requires that ministers exhibit a mature Christian faith in all their relationships and in particular embody integrity, trust and compassion.²⁴ The decisions that a minister makes about their behaviour and their actions need to be consistent with what they believe and to whom they belong i.e. to be congruent with their faith.²⁵

Ministers are encouraged to grow their sensitivity and awareness to ethical issues, problems and dilemmas, and to make considered intentional ethical decisions. As our Christian character develops, so we will more readily make ethical choices in line with our faith in Christ.²⁶ Carroll and Shaw²⁷ suggest that in order to build a moral compass and to foster ethical sensitivity we should:

- be aware of our values and principles
- know why we do what we do
- understand how we tend to use power
- take care of ourselves physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually
- recognise and accept our own limitations
- reflect deeply and honestly
- stay in relationship with others (rather than just 'relate to' others)
- develop and utilise our capacity to imagine and empathise with the experience of others
- actively listen to ourselves and others
- recognise our emotions and feelings
- become aware of the difference between intention and action
- develop compassion
- reflect on our actions in order to learn from them
- identify our ethical responsibility and accountability.

To this list, ministers might add: recognise our responsibility to the Christian community.

Question for reflection:

Considering the points above, how might you grow your ethical awareness and sensitivity?

²⁴ The Code of Ethics section 1.6

²⁵ The Uniting Church in Australia Making up our Mind: Moral Discernment in the UCA p. 2

²⁶ The Uniting Church in Australia Making up our Mind: Moral Discernment in the UCA p. 6

²⁷ Carroll and Shaw 2012 Ethical Maturity in the Helping professions Psychoz, Australia pp. 151-153

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A final note

Research into the literature on ethics reveals that, in general, it is not a lack of knowledge about rules that leads to ethical transgressions, but other personal failings or contextual influences. It is not sufficient to look at what a person ought to do, but also to look at who a person ought to be.²⁸ Our decisions and actions say something about who we are and who we choose to be.²⁹

28 Carroll and Shaw 2012 Ethical Maturity in the Helping professions Psychoz, Australia pp. 285-6

29 Carroll and Shaw 2012 Ethical Maturity in the Helping professions Psychoz, Australia p. 252

