

# Exploring the Code of Ethics



Growing in knowledge and  
understanding about the Code  
of Ethics and Ministry Practice:

a resource for ministers to  
use with church councils,  
congregations and agencies

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The Uniting Church in Australia  
QUEENSLAND SYNOD

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## What is the Uniting Church Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice (COE)?

- A resource for the whole church
- Guidelines for healthy and effective ministry
- Originally developed in 1996, a revised COE was released effective January 2010

The Uniting Church in Australia believes that all people are made in the image of God and as such we accept every individual regardless of race, creed or gender. As a Christian community we believe that God reaches out to us in love and acceptance, and that our relationships with each other shall express love and commitment and not be abused. As a community of faith we are committed to providing a place in society where human beings can explore what it means to be made in the image of God. As an expression of this commitment, the Uniting Church in Australia recognises its responsibility to provide worshiping and pastoral communities that are free from abuse. We seek to provide a safe environment for all people to explore and express their faith in Jesus Christ. Covenant Statement, *the Uniting Church in Australia Assembly*

The Code of Ethics is to be seen in conjunction with other documents of the Church including Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations.

Read the [Code of Ethics](#) (attached to this PDF)

## Who does this COE apply to?

The COE is for Ministers in the Uniting Church in Australia (whether in approved placement or not). In this Code, “Ministers” refers to Candidates, Community Ministers, Deacons, Deaconesses, Interns, Lay Pastors, Ministers of the Word, Pastors, Youth Workers, and Ministers from another denomination serving in an approved placement (page 1 COE).

The COE is to be applied within the faith and unity of the church as described in the Basis of Union and the context of the Constitution and Regulations of the Uniting Church in Australia, which state the Church’s requirements in relation to the conduct and accountability of its Ministers (page 1 COE).

The COE makes specific reference to retired ministers and ministers in non-congregational placements (section 3.1g and section 7 COE).

## What is the purpose of the COE?

The COE is essential for those engaged in ministry, as it sets out the basic principles for effective and acceptable ministry practice. When it is understood clearly and adhered to, it is also a tool for enabling ministers to be accountable for their practice in any setting, congregation, institution, or general community. (Page 11 Orientation to Code of ethics and ministry practice in the Uniting Church in Australia: a resource for pastors and other ministers, 2008 Media Com)

## What are the key concepts in the COE?

Intimate community – a Christian community is a covenanting community. It is a community that builds its life around worship, prayer, witness, study, pastoral care, deep friendships and mutual accountability (1.1 COE).

Pastoral relationship – Ministers are in a pastoral relationship with people who have made contact with them in their responsibility or function as a minister, such as where people have looked to them to provide guidance, protection or care (2.1 COE).

Boundaries – Ministers have a responsibility to discern the boundaries of the pastoral relationship, to offer professional care when it is required, and to discern when their relationships overstep the appropriate level of friendship and intimacy, or when they are exercising power inappropriately in relation to others in the pastoral relationship (1.5 COE).

Confidentiality – confidentiality is not about secrecy. In the context of a pastoral relationship, it is an assurance that Ministers will not share written or spoken information with other people, or use it for a purpose other than for which it was collected. There are however limitations to confidentiality in ministry (3.7 COE).

Power – Ministers have a unique position in the way they touch people’s lives. Ministers need to recognise the power that is inherent in their role and not use it in a manner which is abusive or unprofessional (3.6 COE).

## What are the sections of the COE?

1. Introduction
2. The Pastoral relationship
3. Professional conduct
4. Particular relationships
5. Gifts and fees
6. Relationship with the law
7. Working within institutions, organisations, the wider Church or other professions
8. Breach of code of ethics

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## What are some topics that the COE covers?

Accountability and Ministers  
Boundaries in ministry  
Breaches of the COE  
Bullying  
Church as a Christian community  
Competence and professionalism  
Confidentiality and limitations of confidentiality  
Conflict of interest  
Considering when to accept a gift  
Continuing education  
Dealing with conflict  
Discipline of the Church  
Expectations on Ministers for wider church involvement  
Family time  
Friendships and ministry  
Legal requirements  
Ministers in association  
Ministers who are members of a local congregation  
Pastoral relationships  
Power in ministry  
Preaching  
Professional supervision  
Referral  
Relating to ministry colleagues  
Relationship with councils of the church  
Retired ministers  
Self care  
Sex and the pastoral relationship  
Social media  
Teaching  
Team ministry  
What it means to be a Minister in a Christian community

## What are the “Ministers shall not” in the COE?

The COE uses the language Ministers shall, have, shall not, may not, and should not.

### Ministers shall not

- 3.1g Retired Ministers and Ministers in non-congregational settings ... shall not encourage discontent about or seek to interfere with the ministry of a Minister (whether in their congregation or elsewhere) ...
- 3.4b shall not misrepresent their competence, qualifications, training or experience
- 3.5b shall not engage in sexual relationships with people in their professional pastoral care
- 3.6a shall not use power in a manner which is abusive or unprofessional ...
  - i to gain personal or financial advantage for themselves or family members

- ii harass or intimidate other people including other ministers
- iii exploit or abuse other people physically, mentally, emotionally, spirituality or financially
- 3.6c shall not engage in bullying
- 3.7a shall not breach confidentiality ... Ministers will not share written or spoken information about an individual with other people (except as indicated in d below), or use it for purposes other than for which it was collected
- 3.7f shall not seek to gain sensitive or confidential information to which they are not entitled or which would require another person to breach a confidence
- 5.1 shall not seek financial gain for themselves or their families from a pastoral relationship beyond recognised fees, stipends and entitlements
- 5.4 shall not use their ministry to recruit clients for private practice or commercial interest; ministers in full time ministry shall not use their ministry skills as a basis for significant commercial benefit while in full time ministry with the Church

### Ministers may not

- 3.2c use their preaching to inflame conflict within the congregation, or between the congregation and other councils of the church

### Ministers should not

- 4.2 be the sole provider of pastoral care (where some particular relationships exist within the pastoral community)
- 5.3 seek to use “cultural traditions” as a basis for accepting an otherwise inappropriate gift

### Minister shall refrain

- 3.4c from offering to undertake and/or engage in work beyond their level of competence

There are similar guidelines for members and adherents of the Uniting Church in Australia. These are:

Ethical guidelines for members and adherents of the Uniting Church 1999 – plus accompanying Bible study material

Discipline regulations (Section 5) and reference to members and adherents

Lay preachers code of ethics

Policy re sexual misconduct members and adherents

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## Discussion starters: sharing how I work with the COE

- How do I use the COE within my ministry?
- Where do I keep a copy of the COE?
- Why do I consider it is important that the church council and congregation/agency know about and understand the COE?
- What strategies do I use to stay healthy and effective in ministry?
- What do I understand “maintaining accountability to the discipline of the church” to mean?
- What is the pastoral relationship, and with whom am I in pastoral relationship?
- How do I seek to maintain boundaries in ministry?
- What is my understanding of power and ministry?
- What do I do and say when I am not able to keep something confidential?
- How do I respond when offered gifts and fees?
- How do I ensure I use technology and social media wisely?
- How would I end a pastoral relationship?
- What happens when I need to refer someone to another colleague or professional?
- What happens at professional supervision?
- Where am I vulnerable in ministry?
- What I do when faced with an ethical dilemma?
- What would I expect to happen if someone was concerned that I may have breached the COE?

## Questions for consideration

1. What questions does the COE raise for church councils and congregations/ agencies?
2. How can a church council and congregation/ agency support a minister to maintain accountability within the COE?
3. What cultural traditions and practices might cause tension between the minister and the church council and congregation/ agency as they seek to maintain accountability within the COE?
4. If you were concerned that the behaviour of a minister might be in breach of the COE who would you talk with?
5. What process is followed when a complaint is made against a minister of a (a) sexual nature (b) non sexual nature, and why is confidentiality critical?

For additional resources on the Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice contact your presbytery office.



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