

CODE OF ETHICS AND MINISTRY PRACTICE FOR LAY PREACHERS IN THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Christian community is called into being by God through the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. As the Basis of Union says:

“The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because its Lord comes, addresses and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work.” (paragraph 4).

The church is sustained by Christ through baptism, the Eucharist and preaching of the Word. Its life and fellowship is derived from the fact that the Church is the Body of Christ, the presence of Christ in the world. We are united in a fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy through our shared faith in Christ. We worship, pray, give our witness, study Scripture and other sources of faith, offer pastoral care to each other, develop deep friendships, and seek to be mutually accountable. We are, for this reason, a deeply intimate community.

1.2 Lay Preachers have a particular place within that community. They help people to encounter God in worship and to hear and respond to God’s word.

1.3 In this role, Lay Preachers are in a position to touch people’s lives and exercise considerable influence and power. It is essential that each individual Lay Preacher recognises the power they have, and understands the boundaries that the church requires to be observed within their ministry.

1.4 The Uniting Church understands that, as we are called to live out God’s call to ministry, all relationships shall be characterised by the love, care and compassion that was embodied in Jesus Christ. Lay Preachers are required to act with integrity, under the supervision of their congregational minister or the Presbytery.

1.5 People enter the ministry of Lay Preacher as a response to a call from God and the Church. It is this call that requires that all Lay Preachers carry out their ministry in a professional and accountable manner.

1.6 It is recognised that rural and isolated communities present particular difficulties in terms of ministry oversight and support. This intensifies the responsibilities of presbyteries for care of such persons, and in assisting all Lay Preachers to fulfil the Code of Ethics.

2. AT TIMES LAY PREACHERS WILL FIND THEMSELVES IN A POSITION WHERE ADDITIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES ARE PLACED ON THEM

2.1 Recognising that all relationships in the Christian community are intended to nurture the church and people’s relationship with Christ who is Lord of the Church, in the context of this Code of Ethics, Lay Preachers must conduct themselves in such a way that they honour this relationship with Christ and enable people to experience fullness of life and maturity in Christian life.

2.2 It is expected that Lay Preachers provide leadership:

- (a) in a mutual manner, recognising and valuing other peoples’ gifts, and working cooperatively with their ministry;
- (b) through working for justice and peace;
- (c) by striving for peace and unity among all Christian people;
- (d) by engaging in ongoing study;
- (e) by respecting the guidance and decisions of the councils of the church;
- (f) within the discipline of the church.

2.3 Lay Preachers shall exercise their ministry in a manner that expresses:

- (a) commitment to God;
- (b) inclusiveness of the Gospel;
- (c) accountability;
- (d) commitment to the call of the church to ministry;
- (e) the professional nature of the relationship,

and ensures:

- (i) that Lay Preachers do not seek to meet their personal needs through their ministry;

- (ii) that clear boundaries are recognised and observed (ie. The relationship and behaviour are appropriate);
- (iii) respect, sensitivity and reverence for others;
- (iv) confidentiality
- (v) non-abusive use of power;
- (vi) commitment to justice.

3. PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

3.1 Relationships with others in ministry

- (a) Lay Preachers shall work within the polity of the Uniting Church as guided by the Basis of Union and defined in the Constitution and Regulations, respecting the rights and responsibilities of those who share leadership in the Uniting Church, both lay and ordained;
- (b) Lay Preachers shall respect the call and placement of others with whom they are in ministry. They shall recognise those with whom they are in team ministry;
- (c) Lay Preachers shall:
 - (i) accept the theological validity of both women and men in ministry in Christ's church as a Minister;
 - (ii) be willing to work with and support women and men in ministry;
 - (iii) be willing to encourage, equip and support both women and men in all forms of ministry in the Church and to teach the Church's position in this regard; and
- (d) Lay Preachers shall respect the professional expertise of members of other disciplines/professions with whom they work in the Church or other institutions.

3.2 Teaching

The Basis of Union reminds us that the Uniting Church comes out of a tradition of literary, historical and scientific enquiry, that we don't and never will know all there is to know about God or the scriptures (Para 11). It is, therefore, vital that Lay Preachers continue to seek opportunities to learn and grow in their understanding of the scriptures.

Lay Preachers have a responsibility to represent accurately the teachings of the Scriptures and of the Church. When teaching, preaching or leading worship, Lay Preachers have an obligation to present the gospel of Jesus Christ, guided by the witness to Christ in the Scripture, to take seriously the tradition of faith and worship of the church catholic; and to share that faith in the language and forms of the particular worshipping community and to address its issues

In particular, Lay Preachers shall:

- (a) live out the vision of the Basis of Union;
- (b) accurately represent the meanings of biblical passages;
- (c) accurately represent the degree to which experts in a discipline support their views;
- (d) accurately represent opposing views;
- (e) uphold the theological and liturgical tradition of the Church;
- (f) be guided by the decisions of the Assembly; and
- (g) be open to challenge and correction from colleagues.

3.3 Relationships with Church Councils

- (a) Lay Preachers shall respect the guidance and decisions of the councils of the church, and maintain accountability within the discipline of the church; and
- (b) Lay Preachers may not use their preaching role to inflame conflict within the Congregation, or between the congregation and other councils of the church. Processes and decisions of church councils should be reported accurately and fairly.

3.4 Competence

- (a) Lay Preachers have a responsibility to maintain high standards of knowledge and skills in all the areas of ministry relevant to their preaching and worship. This responsibility requires that Lay Preachers undertake continuing education appropriate to this ministry;
- (b) Lay Preachers shall not misrepresent their competence, qualifications, training or experience; and
- (c) Lay Preachers shall refrain from offering to undertake and or engage in work beyond their professional competence; and shall make appropriate referrals.

3.5 Professionalism

- (a) Lay Preachers shall recognise the power that is inherent in their role and shall not use this power in a manner which is abusive or unprofessional;
- (b) Lay Preachers shall exercise their ministry to others in a professional manner. This includes, but is not limited to:

- (i) offering the best quality leadership of worship and preaching
- (ii) offering appropriate Christian teaching;
- (iii) being sensitive to people's different social contexts;
- (iv) being sensitive to the needs and vulnerability of the children and young people with whom they work, ensuring that the professional nature of the relationship is made clear in an appropriate way; and
- (v) being sensitive to the needs of, and ways of relating to, people from any different cultures with whom they have contact.

3.6 **Self care**

Lay Preachers shall take responsibility:

- (a) to maintain their physical, spiritual and emotional health;
- (b) to give adequate priority to their relationship with their family;
- (c) to nurture personal relationships which assist them in their wholeness.

3.7 **Supervision**

- (a) Lay Preachers have a responsibility to recognise that they are also vulnerable, requiring them to maintain their professionalism in difficult circumstances;
- (b) Lay Preachers have a responsibility to ensure that they receive regular supervision from their congregational minister or the Presbytery. This supervision is to ensure that Lay Preachers maintain the quality of their ministry as well as to receive support and guidance.

4. **GIFTS AND FEES**

There may be occasions when a Lay Preacher is offered gifts and fees beyond those recognized by the Church. It is not appropriate for Lay Preachers to seek financial gain for themselves or their families from their ministry beyond recognised fees and travel costs. However, where gifts are accepted to satisfy cultural traditions the Lay Preacher should look at the appropriate use of the gift to benefit the community of faith.

5. **RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LAW**

- 5.1 Lay Preachers shall inform the Synod Secretary of any matter which may lead to legal action against themselves and/or the Church; and
- 5.2 It is unethical for Lay Preachers deliberately to break the law or encourage another to do so. The only exception would be in instances of political resistance or civil disobedience.

6. **BREACH OF CODE OF ETHICS**

- 6.1 Breach of the Code of Ethics refers to any violation of the requirements or principles of the Code by Lay Preachers. It includes any instance where Lay Preachers have deliberately encouraged another to breach the terms of the Code.
- 6.2 When Lay Preachers know of a Code violation by another Lay Preacher, and it seems appropriate, they shall informally attempt to resolve the issue by bringing the matter of concern to the attention of their Minister or a Presbytery officer.
- 6.3 The Minister or Presbytery Officer is required to inform the appropriate council or officer of the Church if the behaviour of any Minister, lay employee or lay appointee could be considered as sexual misconduct (as defined in Regulation 7.7.5).
- 6.4 It is the responsibility of the Presbytery in the first instance to deal with an allegation of a breach of this Code in accordance with the Regulations. An allegation of a sexual misconduct which could amount to a breach of the Code should be forwarded immediately to the chairperson of the Synod Sexual Misconduct Complaints Committee as required under Regulation 7.7.9.

*Approved by the Assembly Standing Committee
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