



**Christian  
Reformed  
Church**

# **Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders**

**As approved by synod, June 2023**

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## Background

A code of conduct provides clarity about attitudes, behavior, and accountability that can be expected of church leaders in the practice of a healthy and safe ministry.

The CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders resulted from the direction of Synod 2019. Synod 2018 had instructed the Council of Delegates to appoint a team to bring recommendations “regarding how the CRCNA can address patterns of abuse of power at all levels of the denomination” (*Acts of Synod 2018*, p. 523), and that team presented recommendations that were adopted by Synod 2019. One of those recommendations was to produce a code of conduct, and a draft copy of such a code was presented to Synod 2022 and was referred to the churches for feedback. A revised version of the code then came to Synod 2023, which adopted the document along with further revisions recommended by its advisory committee.

The approved final version of the Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders is presented on the following pages.

When it approved the Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders, Synod 2023 also recommended that the code be included in Church Order Supplement, Article 5, and that a change be made to Church Order Article 5, requiring that “all officebearers shall uphold the standards of behavior summarized in the CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders.” In line with Church Order Article 47 and its Supplement, which states that proposed changes to the Church Order must be adopted by a following synod, the recommended changes are now proposed for adoption by Synod 2024.

Since the code of conduct has already been adopted by Synod 2023, however, churches may begin implementing it at any time.

Synod also encouraged councils and classes to implement the code of conduct for all staff (nonordained as well as ordained) and for volunteers who provide leadership in the church or classis, and synod mandated the general secretary to oversee the development of training modules that orient ministry leaders to the code of conduct.

## **Introduction**

Congregations and ministry leaders are both well served by clearly identifying expectations for Christlike behavior. A code of conduct enables churches to be proactive in educating staff and volunteers about expectations rather than reactive when unspoken expectations are not met.

When implemented well, a code of conduct helps to shape the culture of a congregation, particularly with respect to how people are treated, fostering a culture in our churches where the value of every person is protected and where everyone is free to worship God and grow in faith free from harm.

Key to cultivating a culture of dignity and respect in the church is creating safe and receptive avenues for reporting abuse or misconduct. Those who have been harmed need to be heard and cared for by the church. This posture, however, does not assume the guilt of the accused. Allegations of violations should be examined and assessed through a fair process. The local church council is responsible for deciding the best way to follow up on the allegations.

Ministry leaders have a significant amount of authority and spiritual influence over the people who participate in the ministries of the church. People extend a great deal of trust to ministry leaders, inviting them into their lives at times and on occasions of significant vulnerability: birth, death, sickness, times of fear, doubt, joy, and suffering. It is a rare privilege to come alongside and support someone in their faith journey, being the presence of Christ to them. The stewardship of such power is a great responsibility—responsibility to use this power in ways that lead to shalom.

Typically, ministry leaders are mature Christians who exemplify good character and integrity, exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Still, like all human beings, they are prone to sin, and they make mistakes. Stress, anxiety, burnout, and disappointment may lead them to act out of their old selves rather than their new life in Christ. As a result, they may fail to use their authority in redeeming ways and instead use it in a way that brings about harm. When this happens, the congregation's flourishing and the integrity of the church's gospel witness are affected. For this reason, it is crucial that the church put in place tools and measures of accountability that help ministry leaders use their authority and influence responsibly in order to build up the people to whom they are ministering.

The implementation of the Code of Conduct is the responsibility of the local council that holds the membership or credentials of the ministry leader. A classis has responsibility to implement the Code of Conduct for classical ministry leaders and employees. For CRCNA staff members, this oversight is shared with the Human Resource departments for denominational staff.

The assembly that implements the Code of Conduct is also responsible for determining how to enforce the Code of Conduct and the ramifications for people who violate it based on the gravity of the offense and the harm done. Safe Church coordinators, denominational Safe Church staff, and the Dignity Team are available for consultation and advice as needed.

The Bible is our guide for faith and life. The confessions are systematic summaries and interpretations of the Bible around which we are united as a denomination and which we confess to be faithful and true to the teachings of Scripture. The Code of Conduct is a document that establishes Biblical standards of behavior and practices for contemporary realities, addressing appropriate interpersonal relationships, confidentiality, financial integrity, pastoral leadership, and mandatory reporting. It is a summary of Christian standards for contemporary ministry leadership. It clarifies for ministry leaders what is required for healthy and safe ministry, and it communicates to parishioners what they can expect from ministry leadership.

## **Preamble**

Mark 10:35-45 displays two very different approaches to the use of power. The disciples are exposed as being power hungry and vulnerable to a worldly expression of power. Jesus intervened by clarifying that a worldly view of power “lord[s] it over” those whom it influences. Jesus proclaimed, “It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (v. 43, ESV). Jesus displays that power and influence are not negative in themselves but are a gift of God for good. However, Jesus also insists that a misuse of power is not acceptable for leaders in his kingdom. Rather, he demands that they lead as humble servants for the glory of God and the thriving of others. After all, they follow the one who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (v. 45).

All of us who are united to Christ by faith and who serve in the life of the church are called, in this passage and others (Phil. 2:1-10), to this way of being. Jesus himself, in response to the desire for power expressed by his disciples, called them (and us) to use power to bring glory to God and serve people—a way of holding power that confronts and contrasts with the ways that the world uses power.

Not only do we have this call from Christ, but we actually have Jesus living and growing within us (Gal. 2:20). As a result, we find ourselves being transformed into the kind of people who hold and use power in a Christlike way.

That being said, until Christ returns and brings us to perfection, we will continue to wrestle with the urge to misuse power and abuse others. Ugly realities such as verbal, emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, and spiritual abuse are found among us. The power that we hold by virtue of our person or our position can always be twisted into the

project of building up ourselves and our own kingdoms at the expense of others. This is true for pastors, lay ministry leaders, and church members alike.

In awareness of these ugly realities and in the beautiful hope of Christ's transforming work, the following code of conduct is offered for ministry leaders. It is shaped by Scripture and by commitments found in our confessional statements and contemporary testimonies. (See Belgic Confession, Article 28; Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A's 55, 107, 111.) It emerges out of a response by Synod 2018 to patterns of abuse that had been brought to its attention and is aimed at preventing such abuse in the future. May God's peace be among us.

### **Code of Conduct**

"Ministry leaders" are all officebearers (ordained ministers, commissioned pastors, elders, and deacons), CRCNA staff members, and members of the Council of Delegates. Local church councils are also encouraged to regard all church staff (whether or not they are ordained) and volunteers who are providing leadership in the church as ministry leaders. Ministry leaders have been empowered by God and the church to serve the body of Christ for good. They are called to resist all temptations to abuse their power through the misuse of position, authority, or influence.

Abuse of power is often defined as misusing power to harm another person or using power and influence to take unjust advantage of another person. All abuse by ministry leaders within the church is also spiritual abuse and has spiritual impacts that often heighten the harm caused to individuals and to the family of God. For more on the use and misuse of power, see the report of the Addressing the Abuse of Power Committee (*Acts of Synod 2019*, pp. 587-615).

As a ministry leader, I will, to the best of my ability, commit to the following:

#### *Relationships*

1. I will speak and act, in all my personal and professional relations, in ways that follow the pattern of Christ, who used his power to serve (1 Pet. 5; Mark 10; Phil. 2; 2 Tim. 4:2).
2. I will respect, love, and treat with integrity and truthfulness people of every position, status, race, ethnicity, gender, age, or ability.
3. I will maintain appropriate emotional, physical, and sexual boundaries in all relationships.
4. I will keep all my relationships free from inappropriate, unwanted physical contact, emotional or sexual intimacy, sexual comments, gestures, or jokes.

### *Safety*

1. I will actively promote a welcoming and respectful environment where all persons are treated with dignity and value, and where any form of abuse, bullying, or harassment is neither tolerated nor allowed to take place.
2. I will report known or suspected cases of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect of minors or vulnerable adults to the proper authorities.
3. I will support those who disclose physical, sexual, or emotional abuse in a way that empowers the person who has been victimized to seek out justice and healing.

### *Pastoral Leadership*

1. I will promote truthfulness, transparency, and honesty in all of my work.
2. I will use my power, authority, and position to build up the community of believers and seek first the kingdom of God.
3. I will work within my trained competence, especially in counseling situations, and I will refer individuals to other professionals as appropriate.
4. I will preach, teach, admonish, or discipline in ways that are biblical and Christlike, promoting the shalom and flourishing of those to whom I am ministering (2 Tim. 3:16).
5. I will refrain in my pastoral care and counseling from using references to Scripture or God to manipulate, coerce, or threaten another person.
6. I will disclose any perceived or actual conflict of interest.

### *Confidentiality*

1. I will maintain and uphold confidentiality appropriately, which means I will hold in confidence whatever information is not mine to share.
2. I will not use information shared with me in confidence in order to elevate my position or to depreciate that of others.

### *Finances*

1. I will ensure that funds for which I am responsible or which are under my control are used for their intended ministry purposes.
2. In all financial matters, including the acceptance of gifts, I will act with scrupulous honesty, transparency, and appropriate accountability.
3. I will appropriately use and encourage accepted accounting practices and regular reviews and/or audits of ministry funds.

In the event that I misuse my power, either intentionally or unintentionally, in my dealings with others, in word or deed—if I fail “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly”

(Mic. 6:8) as outlined in the Scriptures and our confessions—I will acknowledge the harm that has been caused and the trust that has been broken, and I will actively seek restoration with justice, compassion, truth, and grace. I will humbly submit to the insight and accountability of the body that implements this Code of Conduct to ensure that I use any power entrusted to me fully in service to Christ.

In the beautiful hope of Christ's transforming work, in all I do, I will seek to use my position, power, and authority prudently and humbly to support and encourage all the members of his body in my care.