

Life Together in the Community of Faith

Standards of Ethical Conduct

A Study Guide for the Committees on Preparation for Ministry,

a companion piece to, and adapted from,
A Study Guide for use by Sessions and Congregations published by
Curriculum Publishing in 1999

The 210th General Assembly (1998) approved a report submitted by the Special Committee on a Professional Code of Ethics. The report, as approved, is titled: **Life Together in the Community of Faith:**

Standards of Ethical Conduct for **Members** of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Standards of Ethical Conducts for **Employees and Volunteers** of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Standards of Ethical Conducts for **Ordained officers** of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

The Committee that produced this report was given the task of providing a resource that can help the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) prevent harm to individuals and the community of faith and provide an example of ethical conduct in the world. In this vein, the General Assembly recommended that these Standards be studied and used in congregations, sessions, new member classes, adult education classes, personnel committees, judicatory committees (local, presbytery, synod, and general assembly), seminaries and in all places where the church is seeking to be a community of God's people.

For this particular Study Guide, the Resources you will need are:

1. Standards of Ethical Conduct (PDS #OGA-98-009 -- \$3.00)
2. Life Together in the Community of Faith -- Standards of Ethical Conduct -- A Study Guide (Curriculum Publishing #095203 -- \$1.25)

Both of these can be ordered from Presbyterian Distribution Service (PDS) by calling 1-800-524-2612 or from Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Web site at www.pcusa.org

Questions and Answers about the Guidelines

For use by Committees on Preparation for Ministry

1. What are the Standards of Ethical Conduct and how did they come about?

Life Together in the Community of Faith: Standards of Ethical Conduct is a response to Overture 95-68 from the Presbytery of the Western Reserve and the requests of many church leaders across the denomination for guidance with the ethical complexities and uncertainties of ministry in our postmodern world. Some of our difficulties arise when personalities and temperaments differ, role definitions are unclear, popular culture and customs prevail, emotions take charge, self-preservation dominates: In other words, ethical conduct suffers when we lose sight of whom we serve.

The Confession of 1967 warns that the church “comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection...when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together, or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time” (C-9.47d). Although one of the great ends of the church is to be an “exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world” (G-1.0200), many churches have experienced alienation, fragmentation, and exploitation when someone, or some group, has forgotten to treat another as a beloved child of God. Realizing that we are each and all created in God’s image, yet knowing we are disciples who are not perfect and who are greatly in need of God’s forgiveness and grace, **Life Together in the Community of Faith: Standards of Ethical Conduct** can serve as an educational piece, helping congregations and other entities live into Christ’s call: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34).

While it is true that Presbyterians have Scripture, the Book of Confession, and the Book of Order as sources for guidance for ethical conduct, the ability to make practical connections between these sources and the complexities of contemporary life and ministry can be obscure. These Standards are provided to help bridge the gap, to serve as the touchstones on which surer footing can be attained, and to bring us closer to living together faithfully even as we struggle with the inevitable questions of morality, justice, and compassion.

2. What is the biblical basis for the Standards?

The Bible contains the saga of **Life Together in the Community of Faith**, for in the Scriptures are many stories rich in pathos and detail, dealing with ethical behavior and decisions in the lives of those who journeyed before us. Many of the stories tell of immorality, deception, oppression, and general malice. Many stories tell also of prophets attempting to lead the people along the path of righteousness, holding them accountable for their words and deeds. And always, the Bible tells us of God’s grace, the gifts of forgiveness and reconciliation that are God’s gifts to us, gifts we can share with others.

- Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. (Ex. 20:16; 1 Peter 2:1)
- Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit. (Ex. 20:15; Phil. 2:3)
- It is better to suffer for doing good...than to suffer for doing evil. (1 Peter 3:17-18)
- Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 2:5)
- Do not be conformed to this world...so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:2)
- Do everything for the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31)
- Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. (Phil. 1:27)
- Speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another (Ex. 20:16; Eph. 4:15, paraphrased)
- Treat all persons with respect and concern as beloved children of God. (Ex. 23:9; Matt. 25:37-40, paraphrased)
- Judge fairly, showing no partiality. (Lev. 19:15; Matt. 25:40; Acts 10:34-35, paraphrased)
- Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. (2 Samuel 2-3; 1 Cor. 4:1-2)

3. Why should your Committee on Preparation for Ministry agree to use the Standards?

The on-going work of the Committees on Preparation for Ministry (CPMs) is filled with ethical decision making:

- a. Should the moderator or a member of the CPM share, with her/his family, confidential information about an inquirer or candidate?
- b. Should a family member of an inquirer or candidate who serves on CPM excuse oneself when the CPM meets with the inquirer or candidate?
- c. Should an inquirer or candidate be treated differently by the CPM because the theological perspective of his/her home church is perceived as different from most of the CPM members?
- d. Should the moderator or a member of the CPM date an inquirer or candidate?
- e. Should the CPM acknowledge to an inquirer or candidate their mistakes due to CPM’s lack of experience and knowledge of the Book of Order, which causes injury to the inquirer or candidate?

Moreover, Presbyterian live, work, study, and play in a world where ethical decision making is a part of daily life:

- a. Should I turn in this wallet to the policy?
- b. Should I let my son keep the gum he stole?
- c. Should I use the office copier for personal copying?
- d. Should I report a cashier's error in my favor?

Where people live and grow close in community, where decisions need to be made, ethical concerns are certain to arise. The church can take the lead in helping people conduct their lives ethically, using Jesus Christ as the pattern for life and ministry. By so doing, the church will truly exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the world; it will become the place where people can come to know God and God's grace, compassion, forgiveness, and will; it will provide the space where people can hear more clearly God's voice amid the many voices of our world.

The Standards offer clear, straightforward suggestions for how we are to conduct ourselves in a community of faith, so that this community becomes a setting where

- a. people feel safe;
- b. boundaries are clear;
- c. differing opinions are welcomed and dissimilar personalities accepted;
- d. concerns are heard;
- e. persons show mutual regard;
- f. honesty and truth are spoken;
- g. repentance, humility, and forgiveness are instinctive;
- h. the will of God is sought.

Use of the Standards will not eliminate ethical dilemmas from occurring, for we have been blessed as co-creators in a world of diversity—even our personal theological understandings of God's expectations of us will differ. However, it is our fervent prayer that, with their study and use, these Standards might create an environment where we are empowered to conduct ourselves faithfully.

4. What are some suggested steps for considering the use of the Standards by our CPM?

- . **Take the lead** – form a task group of three or four members to lead the CPM in a study of the Standards. This can be done as a part of the CPM meeting, perhaps as an opening devotion led by the task group or shared among committee members at each meeting. The CPM might choose to meet at a different time, perhaps a retreat or special study time, to study the Standards. Inform the presbytery at presbytery meeting that the CPM is undertaking this study. Let the presbytery know that the CPM is taking their examination of their own conduct and accountability seriously.

- . **Study the Standards** – Encourage CPM members to stimulate ethical reflection outside of the CPM meeting by using the pieces of the study done with the CPM as a model for use with others in their congregation or at their work place, if appropriate. The CPM moderator may encourage this to the presbytery council or other presbytery committees. Consider leading a study using the “Integrated Version – References and Examples” in Standards of Ethical Conduct (Louisville Office of the General Assembly, 1999).
- . **Covenant to Use the Standards** – Consider using the Standards to inform the life and ministry of the CPM. It is suggested that the CPM consider voting to use the Standards in its own ministry and to encourage the presbytery and help other committees of the presbytery to also use them if the presbytery has not considered using the Standards.

5. How can our CPM actually use the Standards?

Once your CPM has agreed to use the Standards, they can be put to use in the following ways:

- . Encourage all members of the CPM to take responsibility for referring to and using the Standards during the meeting, at other gatherings such as CPM retreats, annual consultations, final assessments, and in informal conversations in the CPM and in the presbytery.
- . Read a prayer together before the CPM meeting begins that asks God to be present in ethical dilemmas. One possible prayer could be the following:

God of integrity and grace, You have called us together to be Your faithful servants in this small portion of Your Creation. Grant that we feel Your Presence among us during this time we have set aside to do Your work. Help us in our deliberations to be unwavering in our determination to regard one another and those inquirers and candidates under our care with respect and compassion, to speak the truth in love, to conduct our speech and actions in a reverent manner, and to seek Your will among us. Help us to listen to one another with Your ears, see each issue through Your eyes, and act on items that come before us with Your sensitive touch. All this we pray in the name of Jesus, the Christ, who came to show us how to live and minister to Your wonderful world. And all Good's people say, Amen.

- . Pray before voting on matters of ethical import, particularly where ethical debate has been passionate, reminding all present that some will be content with the decision and others may feel pain. Ask for God's reconciling presence to provide courage, strength, forgiveness, and spiritual direction.

- . Use the Standards in ways that encourage open, candid, theological reflection. Be alert to possible misuse of the Standards that might suppress the helpful sharing of personal struggles with an issue and distract the CPM from focusing on Jesus Christ as the pattern for our lives and ministry. Be particularly alert to legalistic tendencies that could turn the Standards into a justification for legalistic behavior.
- . Encourage the pastor and staff of the home church of an inquirer and candidate to use the Standards when dealing with persons who have questions about ethical conduct.
- . Display the Standards poster in the rooms where the CPM meets.
- . Review and evaluate the CPM's use of the Standards each year. Help each new class of CPM members understand the Standards and their use.

6. How can the Standards be used in our presbytery?

- . Reproduce the Standards on presbytery web site. Include it in presbytery newsletter from time to time.
- . Display the Standards poster on bulletin boards of presbytery office.
- . Present the Standards to all committees of the presbytery.
- . Invite members of presbytery committees to a training session on the Standards and on ethical issues being debated in the presbytery. Use some of the resources listed above in the training session.
- . Include training on the Standards for all new members of presbytery committees and volunteers.
- . Consider having an evaluation annually at a presbytery meeting or in a separate mailing on how effectively the presbytery has used the Standards. This evaluation might produce suggestions for using them better.