

# **Behavior You Can Expect From Your Pastoral Leader: Letters to American Baptists Concerning the Ministerial Covenant and Code of Ethics of the ABC-USA**

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## **LETTER ONE – Introduction to the ABC Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders**

Dear American Baptists:

I am writing primarily to those among us who are not ordained, to the “Lay Folk” who sustain our churches and our ministries. But I want to talk about “The Ordained,” those frequently called “Ministers.” I want to talk about your pastor and the others who serve Christ and you through the agencies of the church.

Ministers, you are more than welcome to read these short letters because I will be talking about you, and you may want to improve or correct the things that I say. Please feel free. ([joe.kutter@abccr.org](mailto:joe.kutter@abccr.org)) Actually, as you may know, I’ll be talking about us since I am a member of the cohort of the ordained.

About what will we be talking? I want to introduce you, the Lay Folks, to a short document called, “The Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches.” (With that title, it should be a best seller!)

Now some lay person is asking, “Why? Isn’t that a boring paper for ministers? What does it have to do with me? The short answer is, “Yes, it is for ministers, and it has everything to do with you!” It describes the behavior that you can expect from your pastoral leader as she or he relates to you, to your church, and to your community. It describes the standards to which we aspire. It describes your minister at his or her very best.

Spoiler Alert: You may be surprised to learn that our ethical standards are a bit at variance from what you may expect.

This is a “Code of Ethics,” not a statement of faith. We will talk more about behavior and less about belief, though the two are intimately connected. We will talk about ethics rather than theology.

Why write this series? I have served Christ and Church as an ordained minister since 1971, 39 years as a pastor and four years as the Executive Director of the American Baptist Ministers Council. I am proud of my colleagues in ministry. I am proud of the standards to which we aspire. When one of us slips up, the rumor mills run wild. In some cases, the headlines scream in deafening decibels, and they probably should. In recent decades, a number of tragic scandals have caused immeasurable harm to thousands of people, and the reputation of all clergy persons has been stained. Too many of you wonder if the ordained among us can be trusted.

My first response is this. The overwhelming majority of our ordained colleagues are women and men of irreproachable integrity. They seek to do the right things in the right ways at the right times.

It is true, we have been disappointed from time to time to learn of a leader who violated our trust and the standards of behavior to which we hold ourselves accountable. That tragic reality acknowledged, most of our ordained leaders engage ministry with honor and integrity, and I want you to know the basic standards that form the foundation of our ethical lives.

So, with the next letter, I'll begin to walk you through our code of ethics. I want you to share my pride and trust in our ordained leaders.

## LETTER TWO – Introductory Paragraphs

Dear American Baptists,

With this letter, we'll begin our exploration of "The Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches." If you want to see the document as a whole, (which I heartedly recommend), go to the website of the Ministers Council or ask your pastor.

The Code of Ethics begins with these introductory paragraphs. Note that it is in the voice of the minister who is making these solemn promises.

**Having accepted God's call to leadership in Christ's church, I covenant with God to serve Christ and the Church and with the help of the Holy Spirit, to deepen my obedience to the Two Great Commandments: to love the Lord our God with all of my heart, soul, mind and strength and to love my neighbor as myself.**

**In affirmation of this commitment, I will abide by the Code of Ethics of the Ministers Council of the American Baptist Churches, and I will faithfully support its purposes and ideals. As further affirmation of my commitment, I covenant with my colleagues in ministry that we will hold one another accountable for the fulfillment of all public actions set forth in our Code of Ethics.**

The ordained leaders of whom I am one, who sign on to the Code, begin by affirming our **vocational identity**. We believe we have been called by God into the ministry of the church. Each one has a story to tell about the way that God touched his or her heart and summoned them into this ministry. Your ministers are a community of "The Called."

Your ministers have been called into ministry within the context of the American Baptist Churches. They covenant before God to honor this context for ministry by faithfully supporting our denomination's purposes and ideals.

The Code is primarily a document of behavior rather than theology. The **core behavior**, from which all other activities grow is this, your ministers promise to "deepen our obedience to the Two Great Commandments." How? "With the help of the Holy Spirit" which declares an eternal commitment to nurture an ongoing relationship with our God.

Your ministers affirm that they are in ministry together. They have entered into a **community of sacred relationships**. In the first paragraph, they decide that this is a

covenant with God. “I covenant with my colleagues in ministry...” Within the context of our American Baptist family, they make a solemn and holy agreement with their brothers and sisters in ministry. They affirm, even celebrate, that no pastor is ever alone in the ministerial journey but each agrees to share the journey with colleagues who have heard and answered the call.

Finally, your ministers affirm that they are in a community of **mutual accountability**. “We will hold one another accountable for fulfillment of all the public actions set forth in our Code of Ethics.” Each one agrees to be accountable to the standards which are set forth in our code.

***How do pastors in Mission Northwest live out this agreed to value of mutual accountability?*** First, all pastors who come to our churches through the Mission Northwest search process have indicated their agreement with and support of this Code of Ethics. Second, we ask and urge all pastors to be a part of a Leadership Learning Community (LLC) in which pastors not only support and pray for each other, but in which they hold each other accountable for their leadership of the churches they serve. These LLC groups also are places where pastors encourage each other to grow and maintain their relationship with Christ. In essence, when at their best these groups are “sacred communities” where pastors bear each other burdens and celebrate each other’s victories. ~ M/NW Staff

## LETTER THREE – Statements 1 through 3

Dear American Baptists,

This is the third article describing the “Code of Ethics,” the standards by which your Pastor, and all ordained American Baptist Ministers agree to live as they serve the people and congregations of the American Baptist Churches USA. In this article, we’ll begin to look at the first three of the fourteen statements that summarize the ethical commitments by which our ordained leaders agree to serve and live.

**1. I will hold in trust the traditions and practices of our American Baptist Churches; I will not accept a position in the American Baptist family unless I am in accord with those traditions and practices; nor will I use my influence to alienate my congregation/constituents or any part thereof from its relationship and support of the denomination. If my convictions change, I will resign my position.**

In agreeing to serve as a pastoral leader within the family of ABC congregations, your pastor agrees to be a good steward of (to hold in trust) those things that give us a distinctive witness within the Christian family, i.e. our traditions and practices. In our ABC tradition, nobody who knows our tradition expects that everybody will agree on everything. We don’t do that! So, when your pastor finds himself or herself holding a minority position, when there is disagreement with the direction our denomination seems to be taking, our leaders agree to disagree and even protest in a manner that honors our core traditions. Even in seasons of profound disagreement, your pastoral leaders will refuse to lead the people and churches within their care to disengage from the family of ABC churches. Before your pastor seeks to take the church out of the denomination, he or she will resign!

*Living out this value also has a practical side. It means a pastor will not seek to take any of the church body with him/her in leaving the church. The pastor will not encourage people to quit the fellowship out of friendship or loyalty to the pastor. History and experience has demonstrated that seldom do churches thrive if they started out as a plant birthed in conflict. ~ M/NW Staff*

**2. I will respect and recognize the variety of calls to ministry among my American Baptist colleagues, and other Christians.**

The Apostle Paul reminds us that there are a variety of calls and a variety of gifts. This is clearly true within the sphere of ordained ministry. Not all are called to be preaching pastors! Educators, counselors, administrators, pastoral care givers, denominational leaders, social justice leaders — different gifts for different ministries and all are honored within the community of ministers as persons called by God to serve as

ministers of the Gospel.

*In respecting and recognizing the variety of ministry gifts, pastors also recognize the gifts have something in common at their core: all gifts are for the building up the body of Christ—the church—and for advancing God’s kingdom on earth. ~ M/NW Staff*

**3. I will seek to support all colleagues in ministry by building constructive relationships wherever I serve, both with the staff where I work and with colleagues in neighboring churches.**

The Apostle Paul wrote about the body of Christ within which every member needs every other member to thrive and, for the body to thrive, every member needs to make his or her own unique contribution. This is true both for congregations, for denominations, and in special ways for the community of Ordained Ministers. The evidence is clear that ordained leaders are both personally healthier and vocationally more effective when they intentionally build constructive relationships with colleagues in ministry. Lay leaders provide valuable support to their pastors as they offer both encouragement and time for their pastors to form these collegial relationships.

*Lay leaders and congregations can do a great deal to foster these relationships by encouraging their pastors to be regular participants in one of our Leadership Learning Communities (LLCs). Providing the time is important; providing some monetary resources for travel and to purchase study materials is important as well. The cost for materials averages \$50 to \$75 a year. If your congregation does not have budget line items for these expenses he or she can receive grant monies from Mission Northwest. ~ M/NW Staff*

In closing, allow me to offer this never-ending reminder: Prayers for your pastor are always needed and appreciated.

## LETTER FOUR – Statements 4 through 5

Dear American Baptists:

This is the fourth article describing, “The Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches.” Following the two introductory paragraphs, there are 14 bullet points that describe key provisions of the ethical code by which your pastor has agreed to live and serve. Today, we start with the fourth bullet point.

**4. I will advocate adequate compensation for my profession. I will help lay persons and colleagues understand that ministerial leaders should not expect or require fees for pastoral services from constituents they serve, when these constituents are helping pay their salaries.**

Scripture declares that the worker is worthy of his hire! Ethically, advocacy for “adequate compensation” is grounded in both the human value of the individual and the worthiness of the pastor’s work. As a human being, she or he needs and deserves to be able to provide the necessities of life for both himself or herself and the family that God has entrusted into their care. Food, clothing, shelter, education and safety for children, the essentials for participating in the broader community within which they serve; it is simply the right thing to do to both advocate for “adequate compensation” and for the church or agency to provide it.

Secondly, the work offered in service to Christ and Church is of enormous value within the economy of God’s Kingdom. To short-change the compensation, because the pastor is called by God and willing to “work cheap,” is to declare that the work of ministry is of little value. We assert the value of both the worker and the work.

The second part of this statement declares those who pay the pastor through their tithes and offerings ought to expect that the pastor will provide the full range of pastoral services without expectation of an additional “tip.” Extra fees for weddings and funerals are not acceptable conditions for providing normal pastoral services.

That said, many, perhaps most, folks are eager to express their gratitude for special services rendered. Pastors may accept these expressions of gratitude, but they are never to be an expectation or condition of service.

An observation: In the changing landscape of today’s culture and given the realities of church life, the hard fact is that more and more clergy are engaging the work of the Church and Kingdom with weaker guarantees for meeting the financial necessities of life. There is an emerging missionary spirit, which I applaud. It is a good thing except when others, especially those within the church, see this spirit and attempt to take advantage of it.

**5. I will not seek personal favors or discounts on the basis of my ministerial status.**

In the spirit of the “Servant Leadership” model of Jesus, neither ordination nor the title of “Reverend” is ever to be used as a ticket for self-service or personal privilege. Asking for the “clergy discount” is simply contrary to the spirit of service that the ministerial community of American Baptist leaders choose to embrace.

Are some folks generous to their pastors? Absolutely! But, from your pastor’s point of view, that generosity must spring from the heart and initiative of the other person and never from a pastor who wants to use his position for personal advantage.

*Further, the Code of Ethics talks about seeking financial support outside of the church (see #7 below). While most pastors tread lightly when discussing their compensation packages, church leaders and people of influence are in ideal positions to advocate for their pastor rather than assuming that his/her needs are being met. Churches tend to err on the side of conservatism when it comes to fair compensation. In effect, some churches expect their pastor to work for a discounted wage. It is better, and far more biblical, to compensate the pastor fairly. Churches that are generous with their pastor seem to be blessed in turn by our generous God. Region staff is available to coach your board in thinking through what is compensation for your pastor in your particular context. ~  
M/NW Staff*



## LETTER FIVE – Statements 6 and 7

Dear American Baptists:

Your pastor has personally embraced a variety of disciplines, each of which contributes both to personal vitality and vocational integrity. This is the sixth point in “The Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches.”

***6. I will maintain a disciplined ministry in such ways as keeping hours of prayers and devotion, endeavoring to maintain wholesome family relationships, sexual integrity, financial responsibility, regularly engaging in educational and recreational activities for ministerial and personal development. I will maintain good health habits.***

“Hours of prayers and devotion”: Your pastor has made a sacred promise to sustain an ongoing personal relationship with God.

“Wholesome family relationships”: Family relationships require both time and attention, and your pastor has promised never to neglect this vital dimension of life.

“Sexual integrity”: In relationship with all members of the congregation and community, your pastor will conduct himself or herself according to the highest ethical standard. Relationships at home will be marked by fidelity and love.

“Financial Responsibility”: Often, this simply means, “Living within one’s means.” But financial responsibility also means doing, within the structures of integrity, that which is necessary to care for those family members who have been entrusted into the pastor’s care.

“Educational ... activities for ministerial and personal development”: Not only must the pastor be relationally vital with family, congregation and community, in order to faithfully sustain ministry over the span of a life time, your pastor must engage the habits of life-long learning. The first great commandment says that we, including your pastor, are to love God with all of our mind. An intellectually stale pastor will soon become an obsolete pastor. “Recreational activities for ministerial and personal development”: Genesis says that on the seventh day, “God rested.” The practice of a Sabbath, engaging in activities and relationships that renew the soul and body is essential for a strong and wholesome ministry over time.

“I will maintain good health habits.” Too often honored in the breach, your pastor has made a sacred promise to attend to the only body and mind that God has given.

Diet, exercise, appropriate rest — your pastor has promised to sustain the habits that generate health.

**7. I will recognize my primary obligation to the church or employing group to which I have been called, and will accept responsibilities only if they do not interfere with overall effectiveness of my ministry.**

For the person who seeks to serve the Kingdom by making this world a better place, the opportunities for involvement are nearly unlimited. Community organizations and denominational committees can absorb countless hours in the process of doing good work. In affirming the primary obligation to church or employing group, the pastor simply promises to put first things first.

## **LETTER SIX – Statement 8 and 9**

When you think about the standards to which your pastor has made a sacred commitment, it is important to remember that the sacred promises of the “Code of Ethics” assume a community of mutual respect and accountability. This, of course, includes the community called church but more specifically, your pastor's promises are made within the vocational community of men and women called to ministry within the context of the American Baptist Churches. The hard fact that this community is sometimes neglected and all too often fails to function does not negate the simple fact that the “Code of Ethics” assumes a ministerial community of mutual respect and accountability.

Why? When the vocational community, the community of ministerial leaders, functions well, the church is almost always well served. A strong vocational community strengthens all of the members and a weak vocational community leaves every ministerial leader to his or her own devices in seeking to provide ministry and leadership to the congregations.

It is within this context of mutual respect and accountability that the next promise is made.

**8. I will personally and publicly support my colleagues who experience discrimination on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, age, marital status, national origin, physical impairment or disability.**

To say it simply, your pastor and his or her colleagues have promised to “have one another's backs.” We choose to focus on the centrality of the call to ministry and make the assumption that in the work of ministry, God's call is primary and everything else is tertiary. We choose to respect, to honor and to defend the call because it is God's call.

This sense of mutual respect extends to men and women who have answered God's call within the context of other denominations. While we take delight in our Baptist history and identity, we choose to never do so by belittling the Christian identity of sisters and brothers in other denominations. Hence,

**9. I will not proselytize from other Christian churches.**

Our task, in the words of Jesus, is “To go and make disciples of all nations.” Jesus did not call us to turn Presbyterians into Baptists or to turn members of the First Baptist Church into members of “Our Baptist Church”. In this case, church growth and evangelism are not necessarily the same thing.

Here is something that you can do for your pastor that will ultimately bless you and your congregation. Without nagging or scolding, find ways to encourage him or her to engage a community of ministerial leaders. Encourage networks of ministerial friends and groups of mutual ministerial accountability.

*Participating in a Mission Northwest Leadership Learning Community (LLC) is a great starting place for pastors to engage in a constructive manner with other ministerial colleagues as stressed throughout this document. Each LLC seeks to provide a safe place in which ministers may support one another, learn together, problem solve, pursue God-given dreams, hold one another accountable and hold each other up in prayer. Countless studies and voices affirm that the healthiest pastors are those who participate in a peer group that engages in focused learning together. Learn more about LLCs at our website: [www.missionnorthwest.org/llc](http://www.missionnorthwest.org/llc). ~ M/NW Staff*

## LETTER SEVEN – Statement 10

Among both our pastors and our lay persons, there seems to be one sentence within the “Code of Ethics” that draws the most attention and creates the most consternation. It does so because it deals with one of the really difficult experiences in life, the issue of grief and loss. What happens when your pastor is no longer your pastor? Before I quote the sentence, let me remind you of the fundamental assumption that shapes the entire document. The Code assumes and tries to encourage a ministerial community of mutual respect and accountability. In other words, for the pastor, it is never “just about me.” And, it is never “just about me and my church.” It is always about the community of ministers who have answered God's call to serve the community of congregations called American Baptist within that eternal community called “The Church.”

This is what “The Code of Ethics” says.

**10. I will upon my resignation or retirement, sever my ministerial leadership relations with my former constituents, and will not make ministerial contacts in the field of another ministerial leader without his/her request and/or consent.**

Let me put it plainly. When the pastor stops being the pastor, she or he must stop acting like the pastor! He or she must stop doing pastoral things for the members of the church that he or she no longer pastors.

To clear up a common misunderstanding, this is what the Code does not say. It does not say that the former pastor must sever all ties with all people in the former congregation. It does not say that because I am no longer your pastor, I can never see or talk with you again. **But it does say that he or she must stop being your pastor.** Friends, yes! Continuing to serve as your pastor, no! This includes offering any critical input, or listening to negative comments, about the pastor who is now in place.

**Why?** Ask the question, how will the successor become the pastor of the church? It is like this: a pastor becomes the pastor of the church by doing pastoral things. The pastor leads worship, serves communion, preaches the sermons, invests in the equipping of leaders, visits and prays with the members, and officiates at weddings and funerals. That's how the new preacher becomes the beloved and respected pastor.

Now, what happens when the dearly departed pastor returns to do the weddings and funerals and works hard to make the first contact in times of difficulty to pray and declare concern? It delays the process by which new relationships are formed

between the new pastor and the people of the church and that, is bad for both church and pastor.

So what this single sentence does is ask pastors and people dealing with inevitable grief and loss to move forward in ways that serve the long-term health of the church.

**How might that look?** There are lots of ways, when occasions demand, that a predecessor pastor and the successor pastor can work creatively together for the sake of the church that both love. **But it must always begin with the former pastor who is willing to stop being the pastor and it helps to have a congregation that understands.**

*In order to honor the principal of this particular statement both the outgoing pastor and the congregation must exercise self-discipline. When the former pastor declines to conduct a wedding or funeral for a former church member it feels so uncaring. That's why some pastors ignore the wisdom of this principle. In doing so they are showing lack of caring for the new pastor and his or her new role as pastor of the congregation. It's best if the outgoing pastor highlight this part of the Code with the congregation prior to leaving so that there may be mutual agreed-upon expectations that this portion of the Code will not be circumvented. This proactive action helps re-direct requests for weddings, funerals and counseling towards the incoming pastor in advance. ~ M/NW Staff*

## LETTER EIGHT – Statements 11 and 12

One of your pastor's primary roles is to provide a place within which all people can safely explore the deepest and most difficult realities of life. Whether it be the most sensitive relationships or the deep struggles of the solitary soul, the pastor is the one who promises to treat all conversation with honor and respect. The Code of Ethics says:

**11. I will hold in confidence and treat as confidential communication any information provided to me with the expectation of privacy. I will not disclose such information in private or public except when, in my practice of ministry, I am convinced that the sanctity of confidentiality is outweighed by my well-founded belief that life-threatening or substantial harm will be caused.**

This is where our Code of Ethics differs from the traditional confessional. There is one value that outweighs the sanctity of confidentiality and that is the value of life itself. When life is at risk, then the pastor is obligated to protect the life.

This sometimes puts your pastor in difficult positions. When a person is talking about suicide or spousal abuse or a need for lethal revenge, your pastor is required to make a choice, weigh the content and make a judgement about the seriousness of any threat to life that may be present. It can be a tough call, but it can sometimes, thank God not often, be a part of the pastoral vocation.

Other than in those extreme moments, which fortunately happen rarely, your pastor has promised to treat conversations with you as precious and sacred treasures that are to be protected at all costs.

The next item in our Code of Ethics reinforces your pastor's commitment to provide a safe place.

**12. I will not use my ministerial status, position or authority knowingly to abuse, misjudge, negatively influence, manipulate or take advantage of anyone, especially children.**

This should be a "No-Brainer" but too often it is not! The headlines of clergy abuse still burn our eyes and the stories cause our stomachs to roll. We know that status and authority can too often be misused in the service of self-aggrandizement, and sometimes worse than that, even by ordained ministers.

Here are some assumptions that undergird this ethical affirmation. For the pastor, as indeed for every Christian, the call to ministry is a call to serve rather than a mandate to rule or control. At the same time, there is genuine power in the role that ministers

play in the life of the church and the lives of the people. To be invited to interpret the “Word of God” is an invitation to give voice to the power of scripture and the reality of God’s power. To be the one who frequently prays for the ill and dedicates the children and speaks the final words over the dead is to be one who has been entrusted with enormous spiritual and emotional power. The power is real! And it is necessary. Your pastor has made a solemn promise to channel the power that has been entrusted into his or her care in ways that serve and empower others rather than seeking to use that power to manipulate others in the service of himself or herself.

*The question that is vital for a congregation is how does it encourage its pastor to maintain these disciplines AND how does It honor the boundaries those disciplines articulate? Maintaining these disciplines happens in an atmosphere where the congregation expects this of their pastor and keeps their expectations of his/her ministry realistic. Maintaining the boundaries happens more easily when the congregation also lifts up and lives within Christ-honoring boundaries. Mission Northwest offers input on these important issues through its ministry ethics conferences, offered to both pastors and congregational leaders. ~ M/NW Staff*



## LETTER NINE – Statements 13 and 14

Dear American Baptist Friend,

We began our last conversation about the “Code of Ethics” by affirming that your pastor has vowed to provide a safe and confidential place within which the deepest issues of life can be explored without fear of exposure. There is, you may remember, an exception to this rule. When the life and safety of others is threatened, your pastor may choose to protect the threatened rather than safeguard the privacy of the conversation. To draw an extreme illustration, if you tell me, as your pastor, that you are planning to kill your business partner and your story rings true, then my commitment to the life of your partner must outweigh my commitment to the privacy of our conversation.

In light of the events of recent decades, including the development of secular law, the Ministers Council chose to strengthen the principle that there are some things, a very few things, that override the principle of confidentiality. Here is what the “Code of Ethics” says.

**13. I will report all instances of abuse as required by law to the appropriate agency. In any case involving persons working in ABC ministry, I will also report the circumstances to the appropriate regional and/or national denominational representative.**

Your ordained minister has taken a solemn oath to protect the vulnerable among us. And he or she has taken an oath to remove the shroud of secrecy that too often protects the abusers even if that abuser is a colleague in ministry.

You may also want to know, though this is beyond the “Code of Ethics,” that every ABC region has a process by which the recognition of ABC ordination can be withdrawn from ordained leaders who are demonstrated to be abusers.

Now we come to the end of our conversation. That last item in the “Code of Ethics” sums up your pastor’s ethical commitment.

**14. I will show my personal love for God as revealed in Jesus Christ in my life and ministry, as I strive together with my colleagues to preserve the dignity, maintain the discipline and promote the integrity of the vocation to which we have been called.**

Please note that this is a solemn personal promise that begins with our love for God as we know God in Jesus Christ.

Note the assumption of ministerial community. Each of us strives “with our colleagues.” The notion of an ordained minister who ministers outside of the community of ministerial leaders is a modern and terribly mistaken idea. Every minister is called to operate within two circles of relationship; the circle of the local congregation and the circle of ministerial community.

Finally note the assumption of “vocation” and the promise to be good stewards of that vocation.

*Again the challenge is directed to congregations and their leaders: how are you making it easier for your pastor to maintain these boundaries and live by this Code of Ethics? The responsibility of the congregation and its leaders is to maintain high expectations for their pastor while keeping these in line with what the pastor can ethically do. ~ M/NW Staff*

I hope that these articles have been helpful. I’ll end where I began. I am extraordinarily proud of the men and women who have accepted the call to ministry within the community of American Baptist Churches. The overwhelming majority of our ordained ministers are men and women of intense integrity who embody this “Code of Ethics” every day of their lives in every circumstance of ministry. Indeed, each in a supremely personal way, loves God with the entirety of his or her being and like Christ lives among us as a servant of the Lord.