

ASCENSION ALLIANCE

Ethics Policy

I. Introduction

Clergy, professed religious, and lay leaders are called to be spiritual leaders and are expected to embody the highest ethical standards in both their pastoral and personal lives.

It is vital that spiritual leaders, whether ordained or not, conduct themselves with honesty, morality, and integrity in all dealings with those whose lives they touch.

While there are differences between the roles of lay leaders and ordained clergy, between those who receive fees for their spiritual leadership and those who volunteer, between those who act as sole leader of a community and those who are part of a cadre of volunteers, certain basic ethical principles apply.

Therefore, all spiritual leaders of ASCENSION communities are expected to make a commitment to ethical professional conduct.

In areas of conduct where a particular behavior may not on its face be unethical yet may raise serious concerns, this policy requires caution and care. While those sections of the policy do not explicitly prohibit such behaviors, all leaders, lay and ordained, are asked to exhibit the same level of caution and care.

II. General Guidelines

1. All spiritual leaders of ASCENSION communities shall place special emphasis on creating safe environments in all our activities, institutions, and communities, ensuring the equality of men and women in all aspects of communal spiritual life.
2. All spiritual leaders of ASCENSION communities shall be scrupulous in their financial dealings and shall be held fully accountable for all monies, other than their own private resources, over which they have access to and/or control as a spiritual leader, in accordance with the highest values of ethical heritage.
3. Members shall conduct their interpersonal relations in accordance with the following principles:
 - Love one another
 - You shall not steal
 - You shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another
 - Do not pervert justice
 - When arbitrating a conflict do not give special consideration to anyone because of their status or position
4. Grounds for removal from ASCENSION membership include: misuse of one's position for illicit sexual, financial, or other personal advantage; conviction of a felony involving moral turpitude; fraudulent misrepresentation of professional credentials; or failure to fulfill contractual obligations in the absence of mitigating circumstances.

III. Professional Boundaries

1. Spiritual leaders' behavior toward congregants that is intended to communicate caring can, on occasion, be misinterpreted by congregants as inappropriate blurring of clergy-congregant boundaries.

Such behavior can significantly impair spiritual leader-congregant relations and should be avoided where possible.

Spiritual leaders are obliged to be especially sensitive to the danger of such misperception and to avoid behavior that could reasonably be misconstrued by a congregant.

In particular, spiritual leaders should be sensitive to appropriate locations and hours for meetings, as well as appropriate and inappropriate physical contact and comments.

2. In the event that a congregant misinterprets a spiritual leader's concern as a romantic or sexual interest, it is the spiritual leader's responsibility to state unequivocally that such a relationship is not appropriate. In such a situation, the spiritual leaders is strongly urged to seek advice from colleagues and/or other professionals.

IV. Breach of Trust

1. It is unethical to use funds of the congregation for personal financial gain without the knowledge and consent of the congregation. It is unethical to exploit a spiritual leader's relationship with a congregant, staff member, or colleague for personal financial gain.
2. It is unethical to misrepresent one's professional education, experience, or credentials.
3. As suggested by Section A, there can be other breaches of professional trust that are not enumerated in this resolution.

V. Sexual Ethics

1. Sexual Harassment. It is unethical to engage in sexual or other harassment of a congregant, staff member, student, colleague or other person with whom a spiritual leader deals professionally.

Sexual harassment is defined as, but not limited to, deliberate or repeated seductive speech, sexual comments, gestures, physical contacts, and inappropriate visual attention such as leering. It may include unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.

2. Unethical Sexual Activity. It is unethical for a spiritual leader to engage in, or attempt to engage in, sexual activity with a minor, an unwilling adult, a married or partnered congregant, or a congregant or other person whom a spiritual leader is counseling or aiding in life cycle events, conversion, or other pastoral situations.

It is also unethical for a spiritual leader to engage in, or attempt to engage in, sexual activity with anyone who is similarly dependent on the spiritual leader. Such sexual relationships are unethical even if suggested or welcomed by the congregant. It is the responsibility of spiritual leaders to maintain appropriate boundaries. Sexual activity may include intimate or unwanted physical contact as well as intercourse.

3. Single spiritual Leaders and congregants. Although not automatically unethical, any sexual relationship between a single spiritual leader and a single congregant is fraught with risks for both parties and is illegal in some states.

These risks include ambiguities about the perceived power of the clergy, the spiritual leader's ability to provide future pastoral care for the congregant, and the future of both parties in the congregation. A sexual relationship effectively ends the clergy-congregant or clergy-constituent relationship between the parties, and the spiritual leader is responsible in assisting the congregant/constituent in obtaining appropriate support, if necessary.

Spiritual leaders in small or isolated communities should be especially aware that a problematic relationship may make it difficult for the congregant to stay in the community and could result in the congregant's loss of a significant spiritual connection. A sexual relationship between a single spiritual leader and a single congregant is potentially an ethical violation, and to be avoided where possible. Spiritual leaders are strongly urged to seek guidance from colleagues or other professionals before beginning such a relationship.

4. It is assumed to be unethical to engage in sexual activity with an adult that is prohibited in paragraph 2, above, within one year of the termination of a pastoral or other professional clerical relationship.

There must be a full termination of the professional relationship to help break any power imbalance and thus allow for a healthy, mutual, personal relationship to grow.

This does not mean that any relationship after one year is automatically ethical, but that it should be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Some states and professional organizations prohibit relationships for longer periods following the termination of a professional relationship.

VI. Ethics Committee

1. The purpose of ethics procedures under this resolution is to determine whether a member has acted unethically in his/her professional role. If so, the next question become, what steps should be taken to respond to the situation?
2. These procedures are based on a concern with fairness and with the protection of the clergy person, the complainant, the congregation, as well as the ASCENSION organization and its members. Respect for all parties shall be shown.
3. Hearings and investigations are not criminal proceedings. They shall operate on principles of fairness, but are not bound by rules of criminal or civil courts. They may be decided on the basis of the "preponderance of the evidence."

4. The confidentiality of all parties shall be preserved throughout the process unless the parties request otherwise, except as specifically provided below.
5. The Chair of the Ethics Committee shall see that written records are kept at all stages of the proceedings.
6. Since the inquiry concerns the ethical and professional integrity of a spiritual leader and by implication ASCENSION, proceedings shall not be vacated on the basis of the a spiritual leader resigning his/her position, reaching a financial settlement, or resignation from ASCENSION.
7. No member of the Ethics Committee, or the Council of ASCENSION on appeal, shall participate in any case in which she/he has a close relationship with one of the parties or other potential conflict of interest.
8. If the spiritual leader against whom a complaint has been brought refuses to respond or cooperate, any Hearing Committee appointed by the Ethics Committee will still proceed, bearing in mind the presumption of innocence and the other general principles in this section.

VII. Formal Procedures

1. **Central Contact Person.** The Office of the Presiding Bishop, or Chair of the Ethics Committee, if a separate one has been established, is the central contact person to receive complaints or initiate action under this resolution. The Ethics Committee shall designate a vice-Chair or an alternate in case the Chair of the Ethics Committee is unavailable, or excuses him/herself due to conflict of interest or other extenuating circumstances.
2. **Who may File.** The Ethics Committee may receive complaints from a congregant, congregational officer, clergy person, affected party, other lay person, or colleague. Any member of the Ethics Committee may file a complaint, stating the reasonable grounds for further inquiry.
3. **Receiving Complaints.** To be accepted by the Ethics Committee for investigation, a complaint must contain specific information about the approximate dates, location, and type of alleged misconduct. It is the responsibility of the Chair of the Ethics Committee to inform the complainant of the procedures and that the accused clergy person will be informed of the substance of the complaint.
4. **Assistance of Chair.** The Chair of the Ethics Committee will assist any potential complainant in filing a complaint promptly. While there is no explicit time limit, the interests of fairness are better served when a complaint is presented within six months of an alleged violation.
5. **Determining Reasonable Grounds.** The Chair, after consultation with at least one member of the Ethics Committee, will submit to the committee, in writing, his/her consideration whether there is a sufficient cause to investigate the complaint in more detail. This shall be submitted within two weeks of the complaint. If the Chair determines that the case does not merit an inquiry, the other committee members will have two weeks to agree with this determination by a simple majority or if there is a majority disagreement, the committee shall proceed with a formal inquiry of the complaint. If it is determined that there is not sufficient cause the complainant shall

be notified in writing.

6. Reporting to Legal Authorities. In any case involving alleged abuse of a minor, the Chair shall immediately report the matter to the appropriate legal authorities.
7. Appointment of Hearing Committee. If there is sufficient cause to investigate the complaint in more detail, within one month of the decision to investigate, the Chair of the Ethics Committee shall appoint a Hearing Committee of at least three to hear the allegation in person. At least one member of the committee shall be an ASCENSION Council member. In allegations of sexual misconduct, at least one member shall be of each gender.
8. Appointing a Supporter. The Chair of the Ethics Committee shall offer to assist in finding a supporter or mentor to help the person and/or institution understand the procedure and offer support through the process. These supporters or mentors should be made available to the alleged victim(s), congregation/institution, and support staff. A supporter or mentor may not be a member of the Ethics Committee or a member of ASCENSION's Council. It is not intended that the supporter or mentor play an active role in the proceedings. In order to preclude this from occurring, the supporter or mentor will be asked not to speak during the proceedings.
9. Notifying Accused. As soon as possible, and no later than the appointment of a Hearing Committee, the accused spiritual leader shall be notified by certified mail of the complaint and asked to submit a written reply to the allegation. If the spiritual leader fails to respond within thirty days, the investigation will still continue.
10. Notifying Chartered Ministry. Subsequent to notifying the accused spiritual leader, but before convening a hearing, the Chair of the Ethics Committee shall notify another officer of the chartered ministry (or other institution where the accused serves as spiritual leader or is otherwise employed) of the allegations, without revealing names given in confidence. With the spiritual leader's consent, the substance of his/her written response will also be shared. The Ethics Committee Chair shall share information with the President on Ethics Committee time lines and procedures, including a copy of this document. The Ethics Chair shall also share information on resources available to the congregation for dealing with this matter. The accused spiritual leader shall be informed of this notification. The Ethics Chair will emphasize to the President the desirability of confidentiality, when appropriate.
11. Placement. ASCENSION does not have a placement service or a staff person to provide assistance with spiritual leaders' placement.
12. Communication Regarding a Pending Complaint. Immediately upon receipt of an ethics complaint, the Chair of the Ethics Committee shall inform the Chair of the ASCENSION Board of the name of the accused. The Chair shall immediately inform the full Council that an ethics complaint has been received and shall invite all of ASCENSION's divisions and constituent organizations to discuss with the Presiding Bishop the names of any candidates it or its constituents may be intending to hire. Without providing any substantive information regarding the ethics investigation, the Chair shall advise such persons if an investigation is underway.
13. Leave of Absence. Depending on the nature of the complaint, the Ethics Committee Chair may recommend that any complainant in a position of authority in a

congregation or ministry, and whose work involves the spiritual leader take a leave of absence until the matter is resolved.

14. Hearing Committee:
 - a. Depending on the nature of the complaint, the Ethics Committee Chair may recommend that a Hearing Committee meet with the complainant and hear the details of her/his complaint. Then the committee will inform the complainant of the substance of the written response of the accused. The complainant may recommend other individuals to be interviewed by the committee.
 - b. The Hearing Committee will meet with the accused spiritual leader and present the complaint, and hear further details of her/his response. The spiritual leader may recommend other individuals to be interviewed by the committee.
 - c. The Hearing Committee may hold a number of sessions. In consultation with the Chair of the Ethics Committee, they may solicit testimony from others who have direct knowledge or professional expertise relevant to the complaint.
 - d. The Hearing Committee may recommend that the accused spiritual leader meet with a mental health professional with experience in this field, chosen by the Ethics Committee for a professional assessment to be communicated to the committee.
 - e. Within five weeks of appointment (seven weeks from the filing of a written complaint) the Hearing Committee shall present a written report to the Ethics Committee, with findings of fact regarding the merit of the complaint.
15. Ethics Committee Determination. The Ethics Committee shall meet within four weeks of the written report (eleven weeks from the written complaint). A quorum of three members who were not part of the Hearing Committee is necessary for this meeting that may be held electronically. In addition to the report of the Hearing Committee, the Ethics Committee (or subcommittee) may receive additional written statements from the complainant, the accused or their advocates.
16. Ethics Committee Actions. The Ethics Committee may recommend a number of actions, including but not limited to:
 - a. No Cause for Action
 - b. Advisory. This is an educational message to the spiritual leader for an inadvertent or minor violation. It may include recommendations.
 - c. Reprimand. This action is a significant reproof or rebuke of a spiritual leader. It is based upon an assessment that the reprimand is adequate to ensure that the unethical or inappropriate actions will not recur and where the committee feels that the individual can continue to function as a spiritual leader. A reprimand may include probation.
 - d. Expulsion from ASCENSION. This is subject to approval of ASCENSION's Council and Presiding Bishop. This step is recommended when in the judgment of the Ethics Committee, the spiritual leader cannot continue to function as a member of ASCENSION. It may also be taken based on a criminal conviction (felony involving moral turpitude or serious misdemeanor involving moral turpitude) in a court of law, related to a member's functioning as a spiritual leader. The accused spiritual leader

facing expulsion has the right to present testimony to the Council. Expulsion from the organization will be communicated to ASCENSION members.

17. Probation:
 - a. Probation may be required in case of reprimand and will be required in case of suspension. The Ethics Committee shall monitor compliance. The Ethics Committee may require financial restitution, apology, or psychological treatment (inpatient or outpatient) or limitations on employment settings as conditions of probation.
 - b. The key criterion for ending probation will be the Ethics Committee's assessment that it is reasonably sure that the violation will not recur, and that the member's continued service as spiritual leader does not pose a threat to the well-being of the spiritual leader or others.
 - c. The length of the probation may be extended if deemed appropriate by the Ethics Committee. Likewise, at any time during the probationary period the Ethics Committee may require a different action based on new information, a new understanding of previous information, noncompliance with the terms of probation or noncooperation with the Ethics Committee.
 - d. Probation may not extend beyond three years without a review by the Ethics Committee. Probation, an extension of probation, or its conditions, may be appealed by the clergy person under probation to the ASCENSION Council.
18. Recommendations and decision. The final **recommendation** of the Ethics Committee will go to the Council, if a separate body, and the Presiding Bishop. After review, ASCENSION will send personal letters to the complainant, the accused, and the congregational or institutional officer with its **decision**. An advisory or reprimand shall not be publicized to ASCENSION membership, although the general circumstances may be described in the Ethics Committee's annual report. It is at the accused spiritual leader's option as to whether a finding of no cause for action will be publicized to the membership of ASCENSION, which shall convey this information to its divisions and constituents. The Presiding Bishop may also share information regarding suspension or expulsion with any congregational or institutional organization with which the spiritual leader's congregation is affiliated.
19. Appeal. The final decision may be appealed by the accused or the complainant to the Council and Presiding Bishop within thirty days of the decision.
20. Appeal Committee. In the case of an appeal of suspension or expulsion approved by the Council and Presiding Bishop, an appeal committee will be convened, consisting of at least three people who previously have not heard the case. This appeal committee shall deliver its recommendation to the Council and Presiding Bishop, who will render a final decision on the appeal within two months. The Council and Presiding Bishop shall consider any additional information and will render a **final decision** within two months of any appeal.
21. Consultation. The Council and the Chair of the Ethics Committee may seek advice at any stage from professionals and others who have expert knowledge useful in the particular case at hand.
22. Flexibility of Timetables. The timetable above is to provide a prompt and fair inquiry. The Ethics Committee Chair may extend a deadline above if necessary. Any delay or change in the timetable will be communicated in writing by the Ethics Committee to all the affected parties.
22. Inquiries. Confidentiality is crucial. However, when it is deemed to be in the best interest of protecting the public, ASCENSION, and its divisions and constituents,

the Chair of the Ethics Committee, or Presiding Bishop, may respond to inquiries about allegations regarding a specific ASCENSION member. The Chairperson may reveal: a) that an investigation of the alleged violation is underway; b) that the investigation has been resolved but is confidential; or c) that the member has been suspended or expelled. No other details are to be revealed.

VIII. Follow-up

1. ASCENSION undertakes a particular responsibility to a spiritual leader who is the victim of unsubstantiated rumors, and will do everything possible to provide support to the victimized spiritual leader and assist in the healing of the affected community.
2. If there is a finding of unethical behavior by a spiritual leader, ASCENSION recognizes its obligation to offer continuing concern, spiritual advice and support to the victim, the congregation, and support staff even after the conclusion of formal proceedings.

The Presiding Bishop of ASCENSION should consult with the Chair of the Ethics Committee, the Hearing Committee, and the victim's advocate on appropriate ways of offering continued contact and moral support.