

## **The Covenant and Code of Ethics**

### **For Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches**

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The Covenant and Code of Ethics is an agreement among American Baptist pastoral leaders that guides us as we do ministry.

It begins: *“Having accepted God’s call to leadership in Christ’s Church, I covenant with God to serve Christ and the Church with God’s help, to deepen my obedience to the Two Great Commandments: to love the Lord our God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love my neighbor as myself.”*

There are several important affirmations here:

- Pastoral leadership is in response to the call of God. In the process of searching for a new pastor, churches are seeking to discern God’s will for leadership for the congregation. It is not a matter of looking for a pastor with all the right skills, who will work for the budgeted amount of money but of figuring out who God is calling to serve.
- The Church belongs to Christ: It is important for us to remember that the church doesn’t belong to us. Christ is the head.
- The agreement to serve a church is a covenant between God and the pastor. It’s much like a marriage covenant. The pastor is accountable to God to be faithful in his or her ministry to the church, just as a couple is called to be faithful to their marriage vows.
- The call is not static. It is not the case that the church is calling someone who “has it all together.” Instead the pastor is called to grow in love for God and for God’s people.

So the covenant and code of ethics is designed to help pastors who have been called by God to serve Christ’s church. These pastors are accountable to God for their service, and are primarily called to deepen their love for God and for the people God has entrusted to them.

An Opportunity for Laity to Take a Look At: The Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches (part 2)

The second paragraph of the covenant reads as follows: *“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 fulfillment of all the public actions set forth in our Code of Ethics.”*

The paragraph begins by affirming that the minister intends to be faithful to follow the twelve affirmations in the paragraphs that follow. What is indicated here is not a wooden compliance with the affirmations, but an approach that is thoughtful and adaptive, looking to the purposes behind the affirmations and supportive of the goals of the affirmations. (This will be easier to understand in future columns when we look at the affirmations themselves.)

The paragraph goes on to talk about accountability. Pastors are mutually accountable. There is no such thing as a “lone ranger.” Given our strong belief in local church autonomy, we could expect to hear, “I am the pastor here. It’s none of their (other regional pastors) business what I do.” But in fact it is our business what our colleagues do. What happens in one church affects us all. What happened in the past affects us now. What happens in the present affects the future.

So we take a thoughtful and adaptive approach to the affirmations of the covenant and we are called to hold each other accountable.

Next time we will look at the first affirmation.

An Opportunity for Laity to Take a Look At the Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches (part 3)

The first affirmation reads as follows: *“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.”*

An American Baptist pastor will hold to the following traditions and practices:

- American Baptists believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, and that the Bible is the divinely inspired word of God that serves as the final written authority for living out the Christian faith.
- The local church is the fundamental unit of mission. This means local church autonomy.
- American Baptists partake of two ordinances: believer's baptism and the Lord's Supper.
- American Baptists believe that the committed individual Christian can and should approach God directly, and that individual gifts of ministry should be shared.
- American Baptists take seriously the call to evangelism and missionary work.
- American Baptists support religious freedom and respect the expressions of faith others.
- American Baptists acknowledge that God's family extends beyond our local churches, and that God calls us to cooperative ministries.
- American Baptists have been called to be Christ's witnesses for justice and wholeness within a broken society.
- American Baptists celebrate the racial, cultural, and theological diversity represented within its membership.

Pastors that accept a call to one of our ABC-Nebraska churches can be assumed to be in agreement with these traditions and practices.

Pastors agree not to do anything to influence their people to move away from their participation or support of the ABC-USA or ABC-Nebraska.

And pastors agree to resign their position and leave that congregation if their convictions change.

This affirmation is particularly important at this time in the life of our denomination. There are some executive ministers (fortunately not here) who would make each church in their region a cookie cutter clone of each other church, paying attention to only their top "performing" churches and seeking to make their other congregations just like them if they can (and ignoring them if they can't) in this way undermining the idea of local church autonomy. These

executives should reexamine their positions, realign with American Baptist tradition and practice, or resign their positions of leadership.

Likewise, there are some regional executives (again not here) that would force their own theological position (be it extreme left or extreme right) on their churches and on the entire denomination. Although it may drive us just a little bit nuts at times, we are called to celebrate the racial, cultural, and theological diversity represented within our American Baptist family. Again the covenant and code of ethics issues the invitation to reexamine, realign or remove themselves from their position of leadership.

Our traditions and practices define who we are as American Baptists. They are given to our pastors as a trust. May it be that all our ABC-Nebraska pastors will be found faithful to this component of their calling.

An Opportunity for Laity to Take a Look At the Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches (part 4)

Affirmations 2 and 3 read as follows:

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

*“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.”*

Basically these affirmations say that American Baptist clergy will work together cooperatively.

Pastors are called to churches of different sizes, with different local traditions, with different needs and different opportunities. One pastor I met recently is a pastor to young adults (ages 18-35) who spends most of her ministerial time on the Internet ministering to her charges via the web and e-mail. Another very effective pastor I knew spent most of his time in the coffee shop of the small community he pastored. He used this time for evangelism, community ministry and even spontaneous counseling. Since neither of these approaches to

ministry would seem to fit with the “traditional” approach to ministry, one might be tempted to say approaches to ministry like these aren’t “really” ministry. God however calls the clergy to unique ministries. We all do things a little differently. It is important for us to be in the center of God’s will for our ministry, and respectful of those doing things differently because they are in the center of God’s will in their ministry.

Pastors need each other. It is not good for people to be alone. It’s important for pastors to get together from time to time. The York association pastors (Columbus, Norfolk, Albion, Palestine) have gotten together for a clergy and spouse gathering for the last fourteen years. Pastors in Omaha gather regularly. The ministers’ council has sponsored clergy groups in Nebraska over the last several years. These constructive relationships provide a chance for pastors to “talk shop.” The possibility of sage advice and pooled wisdom in the face of issues that faced alone would be overwhelming. They even provide the opportunity to “vent” in a supportive and understanding community.

In the training I’ve taken in support of my staffing of the Department of Professional Ministry, I’ve discovered that the pastors most likely to engage in misconduct are the ones that are all alone.

As American Baptist Ministers we are all in ministry together. It is absolutely vital that we work together cooperatively and supportively.

An Opportunity for Laity to Take a Look at the Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches (part 5)

Affirmations 4 and 5 read as follows:

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

*“I will not seek personal favors or discounts on the basis of my professional status.”*

For many pastors this is the most difficult area in the Covenant and Code of Ethics for them to address. Many pastors feel uncomfortable advocating for their own compensation.

Some pastors believe that someone else will speak up to suggest they be given a raise and are subsequently disappointed when no one does. Other understanding the financial stress that churches sometimes experience decline raises when offered to “help the church.” Churches pastored by clergy with either of these approaches will be shocked by the “sticker price” when the time comes for them to move on and new leadership found.

It was always my practice to advocate for a cost of living adjustment each year and my request to be evaluated for a merit increase every three to five years. I found this easier to do when I considered it as part of my pastoral role to prepare the church for my replacement and to build a strong foundation of stewardship for subsequent pastors. It is part of your pastor’s job to advocate for adequate compensation.

This foundation affects the next two points. When adequately compensated, pastors have no need for fees for services from the constituents they serve. Although it is appropriate for the church or clergy to set fees for pastoral services for people who neither participate in nor support the ministry of the congregation. (Some churches in Nebraska have chosen to offer all of their services with no fees attached in an attempt to be welcoming and encourage the people served to become more a part of the congregation.)

When adequately compensated, pastors have no need to seek personal favors or discounts because they are clergy.

Please encourage your pastor to be an advocate for his/her compensation.

An Opportunity for Laity to Take a Look at the Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches (part 6)

Affirmation 6 reads as follows:

*“I will maintain a disciplined ministry in such ways as keeping hours of prayer and devotion, endeavoring to maintain wholesome family relationships, sexual*

*integrity, financial responsibility, regularly engaging in educational and recreational activities for professional and personal development. I will seek to maintain good health habits.”*

It would be very easy to extend the commentary on this affirmation over the course of six or seven monthly columns. This affirmation is hugely important but I will just comment on the high points.

... keeping hours of prayer and devotion... We aren't talking about 5 minutes a day with the Secret Place, rather significant chunks of time for prayer and devotional activities that feed the pastor's soul. One of the key indicators that a pastor is about to leave ministry is that times of prayer and devotion drop off his or her schedule. We are rediscovering in Nebraska that time in prayer results in miraculous opportunities and resources for ministry. It's ok to hold your pastor accountable in the area of keeping intentional times of prayer and devotion.

... wholesome family relationships... Often the most neglected parishioners are the pastor's family. I recently charged a Nebraska pastor to "...give a juicy slice of your time to your family... and not merely let them have the crumbs that fall from your time table." Most pastors whose family has left the nest regret that they didn't spend more time with their family. Hold your pastor accountable in this area. (And give them the uninterrupted time and space to pursue wholesome family relationships.

... sexual integrity... This means fidelity in marriage and celibacy if not married.

... financial responsibility... Many churches have stories of pastors that came, ran up debts and then left without paying them. Some pastors (like many others) have gotten over their heads in consumer debt. Neither of these practices is acceptable. Pastors are called to live within their means, provide for their future, and fulfill their responsibilities.

...educational and recreational activities.... In order to stay fresh, pastors need to be constantly challenged by new ideas and approaches. They also need to review some of the learnings they had in their education in light of the experiences they have had in the practice of ministry. In addition there is the saying, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull (preacher)."

... good health habits ... (In light of my recent health issues this one is particularly meaningful to me). Many pastors work in excess of 60 hours a week. For many, exercise is moving from the platform chair to the pulpit. Many pastors are over their ideal weight, and don't care what they eat. Some haven't seen a doctor in years. You can expect your pastor to be an example to you in pursuing good health.

Your pastor has covenanted to maintain a disciplined ministry. It is appropriate for the congregation to hold them accountable to this covenant.

An Opportunity for Laity to Take a Look at the Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches (part 7)

Affirmation 7 reads as follows:

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

Pastors often have all kinds of opportunities. They can preach revivals, do workshops for other churches, support the local and national ministers councils and do their part to further the ministry of their association, region and even the national denomination.

In addition to these normal pastoral extra duties they also have the chance to participate in or serve on the boards of food pantries, clothing closets, community social groups (like rotary etc) and so forth.

There are lots of worthwhile things that pastors can find to do. Many of them may be more personally rewarding or more fun to do than the normal day to day streams of pastoral duties.

This affirmation seeks to establish proper ministry priority. Simply put, the church (or employing agency) comes first. We can expect pastors to put their church first and only engage in professional activities not related to their local ministry if there is enough time and if the local church (or employing agency) approves.

Affirmation 8 reads as follows:

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

It is important for pastors to support the ministry of their colleagues. This is especially true of both public and private support of pastors who are the victims of discrimination.

“But there is no discrimination in Nebraska!” Well actually, there is. The most common areas of discrimination that I see are in the placement process (because this is where I do most of my work). Some churches are likely to disregard people over 55 as possible pastors. Some churches are likely to disregard women as pastors. In an alarming trend, churches are becoming more likely to disregard pastors who have had serious medical problems (or who have family members with such problems) because of the cost of medical insurance.

This kind of discrimination is wrong. All clergy are called by this affirmation to address these issues by supporting all their colleagues who suffer discrimination.

An Opportunity for Laity to Take a Look at the Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches (part 8)

Affirmation 9 reads as follows:

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

This affirmation tends to be very difficult for lay people to understand and for clergy to practice.

When a pastor resigns from a church, effective the date of the resignation, that person is no longer the pastor. The normal pastoral functions; hospital visitation, counseling, preaching, officiating at weddings and funerals are expected to cease. The reason for this is to give the church time to prepare for new leadership.

One of the binds in which pastors find themselves is when a former parishioner calls and requests that the former pastor officiate at a wedding or a funeral. An automatic answer of “no” feels uncaring and insensitive. An answer of “I’ll do it if it’s ok with the present pastor” places the serving pastor in a bind. The serving pastor really has to say yes whether they want to or not.

Well, what’s the big deal? Why does it really matter who performs weddings and funerals? The significant events in the life of the church (weddings, funerals, baptisms etc.) provide an opportunity for the pastor and congregation to bond. When the pastor resigns, the bond between pastor and congregation should begin to weaken to make room for bonding with the new pastor. When a former pastor repeatedly returns, his bond to the congregation is strengthened and the congregation’s bond to the new pastor never has an opportunity to form.

The best way to prevent this bind is for it to be understood that weddings and funerals are to be performed by the serving pastor. In the rare case when there are compelling reasons why a former pastor should serve in this way, the person desiring this should discuss the reasons with the serving pastor and then, if the serving pastor concurs, the serving pastor should be the one to invite the former pastor to officiate.

Another difficulty occurs when a pastor retires in the community where they have served but doesn’t really retire from the church. The retired pastor continues to make the same style of hospital calls that they did when they were serving and provides the same level of spiritual counsel to those who they used to serve. A further difficulty can occur if the spouse of the retired pastor is unwilling to relinquish the role of “first lady” of the church. Either of these situations prevents the congregation from bonding with the new pastor and their family and in a very real way inhibits ministry. This is the reason for the general recommendation (not required by the covenant and code of ethics) that pastors retire to communities where they have not served.

Fortunately, in Nebraska, the majority of retired pastors are extremely sensitive to these issues and have successfully discovered and enjoy their new role as retired clergy.

## An Opportunity for Laity to Take a Look at the Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches (part 9)

Affirmation 10 reads as follows:

*“I will hold in confidence any privileged communication received by me during the conduct of my ministry. I will not disclose confidential communications 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 the parishioner/client will cause imminent, life-threatening or substantial harm to self or others, or unless the privilege is waived by those giving information. “*

Pastors have access to lots of different kinds of information that people don't like or need to have shared. For example: Pastors visit their people in the hospital and in the course of that visit often discover more information about the patient than the patient would be comfortable sharing with the church or community. Pastors, in their work of evaluating the need for couples to seek professional counseling, often are privy to family secrets that don't need to be known by the congregation or the community. Pastors giving spiritual counsel to teens who are struggling with becoming their own person and making the faith of their family into their own faith sometimes share that they have done things or thought about things that would be very troubling to their families.

These are the kinds of things that pastors don't share. It is not appropriate for a pastor to discuss these things with their spouse, or their local church leadership. (It is appropriate for a pastor to share with their clergy support group such situations in a “case study” format, where the goal of sharing is seeking input on a difficult situation or seeking to be accountable to a high standard of ministry. In such sharing care should be taken that the individual(s) in question are not identifiable.)

There is also much information that Pastors deal with that is not confidential. For example things shared in a group are not usually confidential. And sometimes with some people it is hard for the pastor to know what is sharable and what isn't. You can help your pastor by prefacing your sharing with “Pastor I'd like what I share now to be kept confidential.” This clearly indicates your understanding about the communication you are about to share.

There are times when great harm can be done by a pastor not sharing confidential information. “Pastor, don’t tell anyone but I am planning to take my own life.” “Pastor, don’t tell anyone but I beat my sixth grader today.” “Pastor, don’t tell anyone but my husband hits me.” In any case where there is the possibility of life threatening or substantial harm a pastor is obligated to break the confidence and get the person/family appropriate help.

An Opportunity for Laity to Take a Look at the Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches (part 10)

Affirmation 11 reads as follows:

*“I will not proselytize from other Christian churches.”*

Some denominations are known for actively recruiting talent and leadership from community churches. Ethical American Baptist pastors do not engage in this practice. Instead, American Baptists are called to the more difficult task of inviting people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ (evangelism), then training these people to become fully Christian (discipleship) and finally teaching them to be leaders in the church (leadership development).

The final Affirmation reads as follows:

*“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.”*

The phrase “preserve the dignity” evokes for some the image of the “stuffed shirt” formal pastoral style that was perhaps characteristic of previous times. That is not what it is talking about. What it says is that a pastor, working hard and carrying on his/her ministry with integrity is worth of respect (and yes even honor). Pastors are called to deport themselves in a way that is worthy of such respect.

Pastors are also called to lead a life that maintains the discipline that it takes to be effective in ministry. This includes discipline in all the areas of life. (For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-

discipline. 2 Tim 1:7 NIV). Failure in one area ultimately negatively affects all areas.

Finally, we are called to hold each other accountable to the affirmations of the Covenant and Code of ethics. We are also called to hold each other to the highest standards of integrity.