

Setting Limits in Ministry

By Dr. David S. Apple, ACTS Ministries Director

The Importance of Boundaries

For those of us who work with at-risk people, setting safe boundaries is a priority. Otherwise we will burn out. We must learn how to fulfill our needs on a daily basis through a healthy balance of giving to others while also receiving affirmation and support from others and from God. People who are involved in mercy ministry make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes. Personally, I've made some blunders. I saw myself as a rescuer, I succumbed to the tyranny of the urgent, and I had no safe boundaries to protect myself.

If we want to serve wisely, then we must learn to understand and respect our limitations. In order to love ourselves, we must set up reasonable boundaries. Our Lord tells us to do our best and to serve in a way that is pleasing to Him (1 Cor. 10:31). And that means being realistic and having common sense.

Learning from Our Mistakes

In 1970, the first year of my diaconal career, I thought I knew what I was doing. However, sometimes I provided assistance out of feelings of guilt. Many times I did not establish proper limits. The truth was, I did not know what I was doing. I am reminded of an incident that now seems absurd, yet it happened. I was benevolence treasurer. One night, I received a telephone request from a stranger who needed help in paying his rent. The caller told me he was referred by my pastor, and stated "I have to have the money by six o'clock tonight or I'll be evicted." He sounded desperate. After a few unsuccessful calls to verify his referral from my pastor—and not knowing I was being manipulated—I agreed to help him. I told him I could write out a church check to his landlord, but he said that his landlord only accepted cash. I told him that giving cash was not possible. He repeated his landlord's need for cash only until I gave in. I did not want to disappoint this person, this stranger, so I agreed to give him cash. And, not only did I agree to give him cash, I agreed to leave it in an envelope for him at a downtown bar! My desire to please overshadowed the need for common sense and wisdom. What I did, essentially, was feed the requester's heroin habit.

At that time, deaconing meant giving. I did not consider or question the responsibility of the requester, nor did I think about how the money would be used. Giving made me feel good. I didn't know then about being "wise as serpents and as gentle as doves" (Matt.10:16, KJV). Today, I have learned to follow Jesus wisely, and not be manipulated by guilt or the tyranny of the urgent. I have learned that *not everything that cries the loudest is the most urgent.*

Setting Boundaries

How do we balance the need presented with the need to evaluate the request? Is the need an interruption to our own agendas or an opportunity to serve in the name of Jesus? When do we say "yes," and when do we say "no?" How can we be most loving at this moment? How can we love ourselves and our neighbors at the same time? Where do we set the boundaries?

Listen to this heartbreaking story of a young woman who in the beginning thought service meant accepting any and all demands on her time and energy. Her tale describes how people were always dropping in and staying into the wee hours of the morning. Her relationship with her husband and children suffered because she was always physically and emotionally exhausted. She admits: I became the dumping place for preschoolers until I was just about berserk from the responsibility. I became the maker of clothes for many of the women who were working outside the home and simply did not

have enough time to sew. I became the “listener” who spent so much time on the phone that there were many days when my children’s lunches were fixed from things I could reach from the phone and my housework was untouched due to serving others. And on and on it went until I finally cracked, put my foot down and learned to say “no.”¹

In *Ordering Your Private World* there is a similar story describing a phone call from a stranger. The caller told author Gordon McDonald, “I’ve got to see you right away.” Remembering how, years ago, he would have responded immediately to her sense of emergency, he asked her why it was important to visit right now. Her answer was, “Oh, I had some free time this afternoon and just thought it might be a good time to get together with you.”² McDowell arranged to speak with her at another time and so protected his time from the “tyranny of the urgent.”

Do Not Be Taken In by the Con Artist

Many people come to me for help in my capacity as ACTS Ministries Director. Ninety-five percent of these men and women I have never seen before (and I have had contact with thousands of homeless and addicted men and women). In the past the word “on the street” was that Tenth Presbyterian Church was an easy mark. Most requests are tyranny of the urgent cries which sound like, “You are my last hope. If you don’t help me I’m going to die.” Some people use “shock” value to turn us to helping them (one person dropped his pants to show me an area which needed medical attention). My job is to discern which needs are legitimate and which are “con jobs.”

Over the ten years I have served at Tenth Presbyterian Church’s mercy ministry—and years prior to that—I have been “taken” and “conned” by some very good actors and manipulative persons. Because of that I have developed, with the help of others, a list of do’s and don’ts:

1. Do not give money.
2. Do not give money.

As a former Tenth Church staff member said, “No list of precautions is ever going to replace the element of compassion and judgment which must enter into every decision.”³ I offer my precautions with the hope that my experience might be helpful to others. Be wary of people whose “stories” exhibit the following:

- Volunteering irrelevant information (e.g., hotel receipts, bus ticket stubs, applications, etc.) in order to bolster a story and create an aura of credibility.
- Offering an abundance of details, not necessarily related to the main thrust of the story.
- Name dropping. Seeming familiarity with highly regarded persons, or with persons remotely known to you.
- Forgetting, or being otherwise unable to produce a “key” fact, the missing link necessary to corroborate their story.
- Placing blocks inhibiting the verification of their story (e.g., “This must be dealt with in absolute confidentiality,” or “Don’t say anything to this person”).
- Partially answers questions. Attempts to shift the subject. Seems not to hear key questions.

¹. From ACTS Ministries archives, source unknown.

². Gordon McDonald, *Ordering Your Private World* (Nashville: Nelson Publishers, 1985), 78.

³. Scott Campbell, Tenth Presbyterian Church Deacon’s Manual, 51.

- Stresses the urgency of the request, leaves no time to verify the story. “I just must have the money tonight or it will be of no use to me.”
- Always manipulating suggested solutions back to their terms. Usually this means that they must have immediate cash and no other solution will do.
- Attempts to produce a sense of guilt in us for doubting their honesty.
- Appeals to our desire to play an important role in a significant story. People-pleasers will generally want to “help” rather than have the con artist not like them.

Usually people whose needs are legitimate will rarely exhibit any of these characteristics, while con artists will show signs of all or most of them. Ministers and other workers can take some precautions from becoming a victim to the con artist:

- Follow through. Check the story despite the pressures put on you. The honest person will do everything necessary to verify the story.
- Don’t act impulsively. Wait. Don’t do anything without thinking. Delay your response. Think about the story. Is it plausible? Does it sound manipulative to you? Do you feel that the requester has an ulterior motive—another use for the money?
- Don’t give money.
- Determine what the person has done to help him/herself in the last day/week/month. What resources are available? Why did this person come to you? Why at this time?
- Check with other churches in your area. Have they received similar requests? Con artists usually “make the rounds” going from church to church, getting whatever they can from each until someone says “no.”
- “No” is not a dirty word. Most people who come to our church “for help” are drug addicted or need immediate cash for some other illicit purpose. After years of being “soft” we are now upfront with requesters, stating very clearly that we do not give money.
- No local church gives food without a proper referral. We used to give to anyone. The number of people who came was large. We discovered later—not soon enough—that the same people who received our food were selling it to support their drug habits.
- If the need is genuine, pursue every means to avoid using cash. Make prior arrangements with local grocers and other merchants to use pre-paid church “vouchers” or use a check made out to the appropriate vender.
- Be wary of people who want to “get out of town.” Transportation tickets can be exchanged for cash.
- Learn to say “No.” By doing so, you will save yourself time (and if you are dealing with a con artist, s/he will appreciate their time not being wasted, too). If the requester knows that your answer is an emphatic “no,” that person will leave.
- Experience is a great teacher. We want to show compassion. We also want to protect our time, the church’s money and resources, and hold people accountable for their actions.
- Try not to rescue people. The world has a Savior, but he is not any of us.
- Do not take too much responsibility for solving other people’s problems. The Lord has given people a lot of resources to deal with their problem; therefore, explore what resources they have and ask the person what they can do to mobilize those resources. Sometimes people get themselves into problem situations because they are acting irresponsibly and want someone to come in and make everything okay. Your job in these cases is to listen graciously and then insist that the person take responsibility for themselves.

- Remember that you cannot change anyone. That is the business of the Holy Spirit. If your efforts to aid someone appear to be unsuccessful in that he or she has not changed, remember that God calls Christians to be obedient. Whether or not you see the fruit is up to God.

Preserving Our Time

I cannot direct attention enough to that waster of our time, energy, money, and other resources: the tyranny of the urgent. Resist it. Not every interruption needs immediate attention. Not every interruption is an opportunity to help. People in need think that their immediate need is the most important thing in the world. It is not. Some things are important, but not urgent. I have learned to keep my own agenda and to try to fit another person's agenda into mine when possible. Thus, I make an appointment with the requester for a later time. If the need is genuine, the person will usually return at a more appropriate time. Over ninety percent of those who come for help do not return when given an appointment. Their need is not genuine.

The reason we tend to give in to other people's urgent requests is that we want to please them. The idea that "Everyone must like me" is a lie we tell ourselves. Our job is to do the Lord's will, not to win popularity contests. If we think that our job is to rescue people, we will be subject to every urgent appeal for help. Our job is to come alongside of someone in need to encourage them, to pray with them, to point them to the Lord, who is our helper. To resist the tyranny of the urgent, we need to have a good, prayerful sense of where the Lord wants us to focus our energies and attention at any given time.

Here is a brief summary warning I give my volunteers who are working very closely with people in need:

We don't have to do everything. We do need to set boundaries. A boundary is a limit. Only God is infinite. We are finite and need to function within our built-in limits. When people are in distress, they are often completely absorbed by their problems. Sometimes they will try to absorb us in their problems, too. We cannot be effective helpers if we let ourselves become absorbed. One question to ask ourselves is: "Where does my responsibility end and this person's begin?" (and *vice versa!*).

Self preservation goes a long way. Saying "no" and setting other limits will protect us. Again, we are not required to deal with everything that comes our way. Some things are our legitimate responsibility. Other things will just siphon off our energy, use up our time, and leave us too drained to do what we should to be doing. Knowing the signs of people consumers—those people who use, manipulate, and drain us—is a means of self-preservation.

Knowing what resources are available is another help. Do not reinvent the wheel. There are often agencies or ministries that exist to solve the problems that people bring to you. Refer people to the appropriate agency that exists to deal with that very problem. And do not work harder than the person coming to you for help! Denying self does not mean destroying self.