

Right or Wrong? A covenant of trust

October 4, 2005

Posted: 9/30/05

Right or Wrong: A covenant of trust

We are updating our church bylaws, and we want to include statements that reflect the expected behavior of our pastor, staff and members, too. Is this a good thing to do? What resources are available for developing these statements?

Since this is a column with an ethical intent, let me begin by unequivocally saying that including expected standards of behavior in your church bylaws is possibly a good idea and possibly a bad idea. Generally, bylaws are written to give broad guidelines of governance to your church. But most often, bylaws leave a little wiggle room for peculiar circumstances that occasionally arise in the give-and-take of dealing with people.

[Previous Columns](#)

You may want to place general guidelines in your bylaws, addressing expectations of integrity, honor, kindness, responsibility and so forth. These ideas are clear enough in addressing expectations without being cumbersome or overly specific.

But bylaws are not the place to try to legislate minute, specific staff behaviors. For instance, 20 years ago, if you were attempting to legislate

the behavior of your staff through the bylaws, who would have thought to include a provision limiting the amount of time staff could spend communicating with old friends on Instant Messenger? In my experience as a pastor, I have dealt with staff issues that were not technologically possible even 10 years ago.

Let me suggest a more practical solution. Think about creating a minister/congregation covenant. During last year's Baptist General Convention of Texas annual meeting in San Antonio, the convention received a report from a committee charged with creating a "'Code of Ethics for Baptist Ministers,' which could serve as a model for ministers, churches and Baptist institutions, ... which reflect basic ethical obligations for ministry." The final result is a publication titled Ministerial Ethics: A Covenant of Trust. This covenant is available free of charge from the BGCT Christian Life Commission.

The idea behind this covenant is that ministerial ethics not only concern and benefit the minister, but ministerial ethics benefit the church.

Together, the minister and the church covenant to respect and value the minister's various relationships, use of time, management of health, economic responsibilities, sexual conduct and role within the community. Upon addressing these issues, the minister and the church enter into a covenant in which each recognizes the value and the need for the other. This covenant also allows both parties to clearly understand one another in these sensitive issues.

Rather than waving a set of bylaws in the face of a failed minister, the minister and the church should act proactively to establish expectations and mutual trust from the beginning of a minister's tenure. Within the covenant, the church recognizes the value of time off and adequate compensation that help the minister avoid the pressures that often lead to failure. The minister gains the realization that personal behavior is

genuinely public behavior that has impact upon the church and its reputation. Using the church bylaws to address general expectations is fine. But to encourage a healthy relationship between the minister and the congregation, consider mutually signing a church covenant. It's not only good for the minister; it's good for the church.

Stacy Conner, pastor

First Baptist Church

Muleshoe

Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.