

GUIDELINES FOR CONFIDENTIAL COMMUNICATION

When you come to this congregation to receive pastoral care, participate in small groups, or have prayer, it is understood that you may share personal stories with the pastoral staff. These disclosures will be handled with the utmost care and with consideration for your right to control their dissemination.

When you receive pastoral counseling, the pastor will consider what is shared to be a sacred trust. This information will remain confidential with a few legal and ethical exceptions. These exceptions are determined by State and Federal laws and the ethics codes of clergy in each denomination.

If you disclose to a pastor, lay minister, group leader, or other mandated reporter that a child (someone under the age of 18) has been harmed or is at risk of being harmed, or that an elderly person or disabled person has been harmed or is at risk of being harmed, the information necessary to protect individuals from such harm will be forwarded to protective services.

If you tell a member of the pastoral staff that you are in danger of harming yourself, being harmed, or harming someone else, the information shared with our staff may no longer be considered confidential and may be forwarded to protective services or state law enforcement agencies. If the disclosure falls under state or federal law as a mandated report, it will be disclosed according to those laws.

Although there are circumstances under which some state laws may protect a one-on-one “privileged” conversation between a clergyperson and a parishioner from disclosure, this only happens in very limited situations, such as a confessional booth with a priest or the confession of an incarcerated person facing execution. In the daily practice of ministry where counseling is provided, children and adults are offered prayer, and education or supervision is provided, this information is likely not “privileged.” *Disclosures made to members of the clergy while passing in the hallway of a church, at a church function, or where others are present are not likely “privileged” under the law.* When parishioners turn to ministers for guidance these conversations are not protected from disclosure if harm has occurred or would likely occur if such disclosure is not forthcoming.

As a Christian fellowship we are called to create an atmosphere of personal respect and safety. We intend to be a congregation that is free of rumors or gossip. When you share your store with pastoral staff or lay members in the congregation we recognize that you are entrusting us with your personal and spiritual information, and we will do all we can to honor that trust. Pastoral confidences will be honored within the limits of these legal and ethical guidelines regarding the reporting of harm to others. When harm is not of concern, pastoral confidences are held in sacred trust, and as such will not be passed to anyone else in the congregation or outside of the congregation without your documented verbal permission or written permission. We believe that with these guidelines in place, and regular evaluation of these guidelines, we create and maintain a congregation of safety and respect.

(McClintock, 2009)