

**AAPC CODE OF ETHICS**  
**AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF PASTORAL COUNSELORS**  
(Amended April, 2010)

## **PRINCIPLE I - PROLOGUE**

1 The AAPC Code of Ethics may be reproduced only after contacting the AAPC Association Office to insure that the most current copy of the Code can be provided.

2 The use of “member”, “we”, “us”, and “our” refers to and is binding upon all levels of individual and institutional membership and affiliation of AAPC.

### **PRINCIPLE I – PROLOGUE**

As members<sup>2</sup> of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors, we are respectful of the various theologies, traditions, and values of our faith communities and committed to the dignity and worth of each individual. We are dedicated to advancing the welfare of those who seek our assistance and to the maintenance of high standards of professional conduct and competence. As pastoral counselors and pastoral counseling students we are accountable for our work regardless of our professional functions, the settings in which we work, or the populations which we serve. This accountability is expressed in our conduct of relationships with clients, colleagues, students, our faith communities, and through the acceptance and practice of the principles and procedures of this Code of Ethics. The Code articulates standards that the Association will use to determine whether pastoral counselors have engaged in unethical conduct. In subscribing to this Code, pastoral counselors are required to be knowledgeable of these standards, cooperate with association procedures for responding to complaints of ethical misconduct, participate in AAPC adjudication proceedings, and abide by any AAPC disciplinary rulings or sanctions. The Ethics Code is not intended to be a basis of civil liability. Whether a pastoral counselor has violated the Ethics Code standards does not by itself determine whether the pastoral counselor is legally liable in a court action, whether a contract is enforceable, or whether other legal consequences occur.

- A. To affirm the importance of being both spiritually grounded and psychologically informed.
- B. To maintain responsible association with the faith group with which we identify and in which we may have ecclesiastical standing.
- C. To avoid discriminating against or refusing employment, educational opportunity or professional assistance to anyone on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, health status, age, disabilities or national origin; provided that nothing herein shall limit a member or center from utilizing religious requirements or exercising a religious preference in employment decisions.
- D. As members of AAPC we recognize our responsibility to stay current with research that affects our understanding of clinical issues and the conduct of our practice. We agree at all levels of membership to continuing education and professional growth including supervision, consultation, and active participation in the meetings and affairs of the Association.

- E. To seek out and engage in collegial relationships, recognizing that isolation can lead to a loss of perspective and judgment.
- F. To manage our personal lives in a healthful fashion and to seek appropriate assistance for our own personal problems or conflicts
- G. To assess/evaluate, diagnose or provide treatment only for those problems or issues that are within the reasonable boundaries of our competence.
- H. To establish and maintain appropriate professional relationship boundaries. We will make every effort to be transparent with congregations and other public constituencies about the boundaries we hold.
- I. To remain abreast of and to comply with appropriate regulatory statute that governs our pastoral counseling activities. Whenever the AAPC Code differs with legal mandates, pastoral counseling licensure laws, or with ecclesiastical policies, the more stringent of the two applies.
- J. To promote racial justice and develop multicultural competence as part of our practice.

## **PRINCIPLE II - PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES**

In all professional matters members of AAPC maintain practices that protect the public and advance the profession.

- A. We use our knowledge and professional associations for the benefit of the people we serve and not to secure unfair personal advantage.
- B. We clearly represent our level of membership and limit our practice to that level. Publication of practice or agency material clearly explains the levels of membership that apply to individuals.
- C. Fees and financial arrangements, as with all contractual matters, are always discussed without hesitation or equivocation at the onset and are established in a straightforward, professional manner.
- D. We are prepared to render service to individuals and communities in crisis without regard to financial remuneration when necessary.
- E. We neither receive nor pay a commission for referral of a client.
- F. We conduct our practice, agency, regional and association fiscal affairs with due regard to recognized business and accounting procedures. We respect the prerogatives and obligations of the institutions, agencies, or organizations by whom we are employed or with which we associate.

- G. Upon the transfer of a pastoral counseling practice or the sale of real, personal, tangible or intangible property or assets used in such practice, the privacy and well being of the client shall be of primary concern.
  - a. Client names and records shall be excluded from the transfer or sale.
  - b. Any fees paid shall be for services rendered, consultation, equipment, real estate, and the name and logo of the counseling agency.
  - c. We provide recent and current clients information regarding the closing or transferring of our practice and assure the confidentiality of their records.
- H. We are careful to represent facts truthfully to clients, referral sources, and third party payers regarding credentials and services rendered. We shall correct any misrepresentation of our professional qualifications or affiliations.
- I. We do not malign other professionals, nor do we plagiarize or otherwise present, distribute, or publish another's work as our own.

### **PRINCIPLE III - CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS**

It is the responsibility of members of AAPC to maintain relationships with clients on a professional basis. We take all reasonable steps to avoid harming our clients and to safeguard the welfare of those with whom we work.

- A. We do not abandon or neglect clients. We make reasonable efforts to ensure continuity of services in the event that services are interrupted by factors such as unavailability, relocation, illness, or disability. If we are unwilling for appropriate reasons, to provide professional help or continue a professional relationship, every reasonable effort is made to arrange for continuation of treatment with another professional. Prior to leaving an agency or practice we complete all files and paper work is documented and signed.
- B. We make only realistic statements regarding the pastoral counseling process and its outcome. We inform our clients of the purpose of the counseling, risks related to counseling, possible limits to the services because of third party payer limits, reasonable alternatives, clients rights to refuse or withdraw consent, and the time frame covered by the consent. We take reasonable steps to make sure the client understands the counseling process and has the opportunity to ask questions.
- C. We show sensitive regard for the moral, social, and religious values and beliefs of clients and communities. We avoid imposing our beliefs on others, although we may express them when appropriate in the pastoral counseling process.
- D. Counseling relationships are continued only so long as it is reasonably clear that the clients are benefiting from the relationship.

- E. We recognize the trust placed in and unique power of the therapeutic relationship. While acknowledging the complexity of some pastoral relationships, we avoid exploiting the trust and dependency of clients. We avoid those dual or multiple relationships with clients which could impair our professional judgment, compromise the integrity of the treatment, and/or use the relationship for our own gain. A multiple relationship occurs when a pastoral counselor is in a professional role with a person and 1) at the same time is in another role with the same person, 2) at the same time is in a relationship with a person closely associated with or related to the person with whom the pastoral counselor has the professional relationship, or 3) promises to enter into another relationship in the future with the person or a person closely associated with or related to the person. In instances when dual or multiple relationships are unavoidable, particularly within congregations or in family or couples counseling, we take reasonable steps to protect the clients and are responsible for setting clear and appropriate boundaries.
- F. We do not engage in harassment, abusive words or actions, or exploitative coercion of clients or former clients.
- G. All forms of sexual behavior or harassment with clients are unethical, even when a client invites or consents to such behavior or involvement. Sexual behavior is defined as, but not limited to, all forms of overt and covert seductive speech, gestures, written communication, and behavior as well as physical contact of a sexual nature; harassment is defined as but not limited to, repeated comments, gestures, written communication, or physical contacts of a sexual nature.
- H. We recognize that the therapist/client relationship involves a power imbalance, the residual effects of which are operative following the termination of the therapy relationship. Therefore, all sexual behavior or harassment as defined in Principle III G, with former clients is unethical.

Interactive long-distance counseling delivery, when the client resides in one location and the pastoral counselor in another, may be utilized to supplement but not to completely replace face-to-face therapy. We take all reasonable steps to ensure that the client understands the limits of long-distance therapy, the computer application, what it is used for, and its possible effects.

## **PRINCIPLE IV - CONFIDENTIALITY**

As members of AAPC we respect the integrity and protect the welfare of all persons with whom we are working and have an obligation to safeguard information about them that has been obtained in the course of the counseling process. We have a responsibility to know and understand civil laws and administrative rules that govern confidentiality requirements of our profession in the setting of our work.

- A. All records kept on a client are stored under lock and key and are disposed of in a manner that assures security and confidentiality. Records should be maintained for the number of years required appropriate government regulatory statutes.

- B. We take reasonable steps to ensure that documentation in records is accurate and reflects the services provided. Such documentation is intended to facilitate provision of services later by other professionals, meet institutional requirements, ensure accuracy of billing and payments, and ensure compliance with law.
- C. We recognize that confidentiality belongs to the client. We treat all communications from clients with professional confidence and take reasonable precautions to protect confidential information obtained through or stored in any medium. These precautions include an awareness of the limited confidentiality guarantees of electronics communication.
- D. Except in those situations where the identity of the client is necessary to the understanding of the case, we use only the first names of our clients when engaged in supervision or consultation. It is our responsibility to convey the importance of confidentiality to the supervisor/consultant; this is particularly important when the supervision is shared by other professionals, as in a supervisory group.
- E. We do not disclose client confidences to anyone, except: as mandated by law; to prevent a clear and immediate danger to someone; in the course of a civil, criminal or disciplinary action arising from the counseling where the pastoral counselor is a defendant; for purposes of supervision or consultation; or by previously obtained written permission. In cases involving more than one person (as client) written permission must be obtained from all legally accountable persons who have been present during the counseling before any disclosure can be made.
- F. We disclose confidential information for appropriate reasons only with valid written consent from the client or a person legally authorized to consent on behalf of a client. We obtain informed written consent of clients before audio and/or video tape recording or permitting third party observation of their sessions.
- G. We do not use these standards of confidentiality to avoid intervention when it is necessary, e.g., when there is evidence of abuse of minors, the elderly, the disabled, the physically or mentally incompetent.
- H. When current or former clients are referred to in a publication, while teaching or in a public presentation, their identity is thoroughly disguised.
- I. We as members of AAPC agree that as an express condition of our membership in the Association, Association ethics communications, files, investigative reports, and related records are strictly confidential and waive their right to use same in a court of law to advance any claim against another member. Any member seeking such records for such purpose shall be subject to disciplinary action for attempting to violate the confidentiality requirements of the organization. This policy is intended to promote pastoral and confessional communications without legal consequences and to protect potential privacy and confidentiality interests of third parties.

## **PRINCIPLE V - SUPERVISEE, STUDENT & EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIPS**

As members of AAPC we have an ethical concern for the integrity and welfare of our supervisees, students and employees. These relationships are maintained on a professional and confidential basis. We recognize our influential position with regard to both current and former supervisees, students and employees, and avoid exploiting their trust and dependency. We make every effort to avoid dual relationships with such persons that could impair our judgment or increase the risk of personal and/or financial exploitation.

- A. We do not engage in ongoing counseling relationships with current supervisees, students and employees.
- B. We do not engage in sexual or other harassment of supervisees, students, employees, research subjects or colleagues.
- C. All forms of sexual behavior, as defined in Principle III.G, with our supervisees, students, research subjects and employees (except in employee situations involving domestic partners) are unethical.
- D. We advise our students, supervisees, and employees against offering or engaging in, or holding themselves out as competent to engage in, professional services beyond their training, level of experience and competence.
- E. Supervisors have a responsibility to provide timely and fair evaluations of their supervisees and employees.
- F. We do not harass or dismiss an employee who has acted in a reasonable, responsible and ethical manner to protect, or intervene on behalf of, a client or other member of the public or another employee.
- G. To protect the public, employers and supervisors who have dismissed employees and supervisees for ethical cause must report that fact as part of any official report of service or enrollment in a pastoral counseling center or training program.
- H. We are sensitive to the requirements of an organization with which we are affiliated or for whom we are working. In case of conflict with the Code of Ethics and the organization, we clarify the nature of the conflict, make known our commitment to the Code of Ethics, and to the extent feasible, resolve the conflict in a way that permits adherence to the Code.

## **PRINCIPLE VI - INTERPROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

As members of AAPC we relate to and cooperate with other professional persons in our community and beyond. We are part of a network of health care professionals and are expected to develop and maintain interdisciplinary and interprofessional relationships.

- A. We do not offer ongoing clinical services to persons currently receiving treatment from another professional without prior knowledge of and in consultation with the other professional, with the clients' informed consent. Soliciting such clients is unethical.
- B. We exercise care and interprofessional courtesy when approached for services by persons who claim or appear to have inappropriately terminated treatment with another professional.

## **PRINCIPLE VII - ADVERTISING**

Any advertising by or for a member of AAPC, including announcements, public statements and promotional activities, is undertaken with the purpose of helping the public make informed judgments and choices.

- A. We do not misrepresent our professional qualifications, affiliations and functions, or falsely imply sponsorship or certification by any organization.
- B. We may use the following information to describe ourselves and the services we provide: name; highest relevant academic degree earned from an accredited institution; date, type and level of certification or licensure; AAPC membership level, clearly stated; address and telephone number; office hours; a brief review of services offered, e.g., individual, couple and group counseling; fee information; languages spoken; and policy regarding third party payments. Additional relevant information may be provided if it is legitimate, reasonable, free of deception and not otherwise prohibited by these principles. We may not use the initials "AAPC" after our names in the manner of an academic degree.
- C. Announcements and brochures promoting our services describe them with accuracy and dignity, devoid of all claims or evaluation. We may send them to professional persons, religious institutions and other agencies, but to prospective individual clients only in response to inquiries.
- D. We do not make public statements which contain any of the following:
  - 1. A false, fraudulent, misleading, deceptive or unfair statement.
  - 2. A misrepresentation of fact or a statement likely to mislead or deceive because in context it makes only a partial disclosure of relevant facts.
  - 3. A testimonial from a client regarding the quality of services or products.
  - 4. A statement intended or likely to create false or unjustified expectations of favorable results.

5. A statement implying unusual, unique, or one-of-a-kind abilities, including misrepresentation through sensationalism, exaggeration or superficiality.
  6. A statement intended or likely to exploit a client's fears, anxieties or emotions.
  7. A statement concerning the comparative desirability of offered services.
  8. A statement of direct solicitation of individual clients.
- A. We do not compensate in any way a representative of the press, radio, television or other communication medium for the purpose of professional publicity and news items. A paid advertisement must be identified as such, unless it is contextually apparent that it is a paid advertisement. We are responsible for the content of such advertisement. Any advertisement to the public by radio or television is to be pre-recorded, approved by us and a recording of the actual transmission retained in our possession.
  - B. Advertisements, web postings or announcements by us of workshops, clinics, seminars, growth groups or similar services or endeavors, are to give a clear statement of purpose and a clear description of the experiences to be provided. The education, training and experience of the provider(s) involved are to be appropriately specified.

### **PRINCIPLE VIII - RESEARCH**

- A. Pastoral Counselors who are conducting research are responsible for assuring informed consent for all human subjects. Research participants must be informed about:
  1. Purpose and sponsorship of the research, expected duration, expected procedures, and the manner and scope of reporting on the findings of the research.
  2. Their right to withdraw from participation at any time.
  3. Any consequences of withdrawing from a research project.
    4. Any discomfort or adverse effects of research procedures that would influence a subject's willingness to participate.
  5. Any benefits from participating in a research project.
    6. A contact person for questions about the project or participant's rights.
- B. Pastoral Counselors take appropriate measures to protect research subjects who may also be receiving pastoral counseling services in schools, agencies, private practices, or churches in which research is conducted.
 

This includes:

  1. Taking steps to protect client/participants from any adverse consequences of declining or withdrawing a study.
  2. Taking steps to assure clients are not exploited by research-related dual relationships.
  3. Assuring that therapeutic services are not compromised by research procedures or goals.
  4. To the extent that services may be compromised by participation in research, investigators seek the ethical advice of qualified professionals not directly involved in the investigation and observe safeguards to protect the rights of research participants.
- C. Pastoral Counselors guarantee confidentiality of information obtained from a research participant unless confidentiality is waived in writing. When it is possible that information might be

recognized by others (including family members) researchers disclose a plan for protecting confidentiality as part of informed consent.

1. Pastoral Counselors consider the effects of research procedures on communities in which it takes place, and take adequate precautions to protect the integrity of these communities.
2. Pastoral Counselors comply with Federal standards and local institutional review procedures governing human subject research. When AAPC is a principal investigator, the Judicial Ethics Panel of AAPC will act as a review board to ensure compliance.
3. Pastoral Counselors are truthful in reporting research results. Pastoral Counselors:
  - a. Do not plagiarize by presenting another's work or data as one's own;
  - b. Assure that research results are not presented or published in a deceptive or manipulative manner;
  - c. Pastoral counselors do not withhold their research data, methods of analysis, or procedures from other qualified researchers who in good faith wish to replicate or validate research results, to the extent that confidentiality of research subjects can be guaranteed.

## **PRINCIPLE IX – PROCEDURES**

A. The Association will develop and maintain a set of procedures for receiving, investigating and adjudicating complaints of ethical misconduct against a member.

1. AAPC will direct the Executive Director and his/her staff in the association office to receive complaints.

2. AAPC will establish and maintain a Judicial Ethics Panel to investigate and adjudicate complaints.

B. AAPC will take complaints of ethical misconduct with the utmost seriousness and will exercise appropriate care and diligence in responding both to the complainant and the member.

*Please Note: The AAPC Code of Ethics and the Ethics Committee Procedures were separated by action of the AAPC membership on April 17, 1993. The Board of Directors is now authorized to modify ethics committee procedures without further action by the membership. Members should note that the substantive rule from the Code of ethics to be applied to an alleged violation will continue to be determined by the date of the alleged violation and not the date the complaint is received. However, as a result of the action taken, the current procedures in effect will be followed for all complaints brought after April 17, 1993, regardless of the date of alleged violation.*

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