



minister

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Come With Me

Linda Hart Green

The church staff on which I currently serve is composed of a team of three professional women. What a gift! How unique and wonderful! To beat that, all three of our husbands are seminary trained and ordained. Mine is Unitarian, but the other two are ABCUSA. We joke about the number of degrees among the 6 of us. We three women share the joy of having partners who support us fully, both professionally and personally. That has made a huge difference for us.

Our ability to live out the Code of Conduct's goals with each other as staff members is enhanced by the fact that our husbands are living them out too. Is our ability to serve together and support each other helped by the fact that the three of us are heterosexuals who are also married? Absolutely. None in our profession can afford to be naïve about how our personal status affects our ability to serve.

My first husband and I separated and then divorced after I had been at this church only two years. I felt then that I had to be spiritually prepared to lose everything I had worked toward for decades. That was a lonely time for me, and I can't really say that my colleagues were a lot of help in getting through it. It was probably my fault as much as theirs; I kept my cards close to my chest and only shared the details of my situation with a small group of trusted friends.

I am saddened by the fact that "sexual orientation" is not on the list of things in our conduct code against which we are not to discriminate. I know many do not share this view. That is why there should come a point in the near future when "theological perspective" should be added to this list in the code.

I worked for nearly 8 years on a region's staff as an area minister. Near the end of my tenure I had the responsibility to guide the region's candidates toward ordination. During those years I was privileged to bear witness to the joys and sufferings of many colleagues in their lives and ministries. I saw collegiality when it worked and when it didn't. I saw the pain in the eyes of our colleagues when exclusion happened for any reason. It hurts worse when it comes from one's own.

My current staff colleagues and I have followed very different paths to this point of working together. One has done both academic and pastoral work. The other had a career in education before fulfilling her life-long dream of ministry. Each of us is committed to working collegially, which we do by giving each other space to "do our thing."

We also help out, offer reflection and cheer each other on. That does not just happen spontaneously or come easily. The environment helps a lot. In the past this church had women associates for many years. In fact, a current member was on staff in an associate role years ago!

But since the mid 1990's our congregation has been committed to ordaining and mentoring leaders, especially women. We have ordained 6 women in recent years and have had others as interns and staff members. I have been the senior pastor for ten years. The congregation has grown to trust our staff. We could have the highest ethical integrity as clergy, but without a congregation that is also living its "congregational code of ethics," we would not have a venue for putting our commitments into practice.

My current understanding of what it means to support one another in ministry started over thirty years ago with a simple invitation: “Come with me.” At the time I was only in my twenties; I was the newly called assistant pastor in a suburban church and was still in my last year of seminary.

Some of my more radically feminist seminary friends were purposefully not taking positions in the church. They saw its patriarchal structures as being beyond redemption. But I felt called and committed to parish work and transformation within the local church setting. I was fortunate that the church to which I was called was active in the region, and so almost immediately I met members of the region staff.

At that time the region had a staff member with a public mission portfolio. The invitation to “come with me” was extended by the woman who held that position at the time. She took me to committee meetings and board meetings. She took me with her to advocate in the state capitol and to the poorest inner city neighborhoods. This was right up my alley, and I was her eager pupil. We talked on the way to places and on the phone.

Through her I met others who became lifelong friends, and whose examples I observed and absorbed. She embodied the meaning of “build constructive relationships” before those words were strung together in a code. It took her only three words: “Come with me.”

Just as we need the word made flesh to know God’s love most completely, so collegial support and advocacy best comes with skin on it. It is helpful to have a handy supply of tissues for those times when ministry hurts or feels overwhelming. Soup and grilled cheese sandwiches also have curative properties.

Don’t get me wrong. I do not have a sentimental view about advocacy and support. I have had hard, head-knocking times with colleagues. I have had to set boundaries and limits. I have had to deliver bad news — very bad news. I have also had the joy of preaching at the ordination of someone for whom I advocated and helped to mentor and I felt so very blessed, and OK, I admit it, proud.

I have had to learn to advocate without taking others’ negativity personally. For instance, when a search committee chairperson looks right at you and says you are fine to work with as a regional consultant but he wouldn’t have you as his pastor, it is really hard not to want to kick him in the shins, and all the while try to keep the conversation going.

I have had to learn to stand for what I believe without apology. We all know that church people are terminally nice. Sabotage comes much more often in the form of undermining and backbiting than from direct confrontation.

Over the three plus decades of my ministry, my support of and advocacy for my colleagues has morphed into more of a listening presence than a talking one. Early on I often gave feedback that was obvious to me but that others were not ready to hear. That resulted in what one colleague dubbed, “the deer in the headlights look” that I was capable of bringing forth from others. Time and experience have made me gentler.

I know that phrase is calling forth guffaws of laughter from some who know me well. But it is true! Better to lead another to the insight they need to take the next step than to bonk them over the head with it. That’s what is meant by “speaking the truth in love” in Ephesians, isn’t it?

But advocacy means we sometimes *need* to be bonked over the head! Who better to do it than someone who is charged with walking the same walk? Who better to tell us to “get over ourselves” than someone who has had to do it too? Sorry to say it (uh oh, hear I go), but we clergy are notorious for being unable to get out of our own way. We are too conciliatory and too thin skinned. Ministry is hard work. Really hard! Recently the president of a multi-million dollar company confessed to me that he wouldn’t do what I do. Well, the feeling was mutual.

We are some of the last generalists left in today’s highly segregated job market of specialists. What a privilege and burden to have such a varied job description. It is not a profession one can learn from a book. It takes someone who cares, who is willing to invest, who is willing to see potential and who can simply say, “Come with me.” Thanks, Gladys.

Linda Hart Green has been senior pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Ridgewood, NJ since 1999. Rev. Hart Green is married to Rev. Harry C. Green, a retired district executive for the Unitarian Universalist Association who now serves part time as pastor of a congregation in Rockland County, NY.

THE COVENANT AND CODE OF ETHICS

for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches

Having accepted God's call to leadership in Christ's Church, I covenant with God to serve Christ and the Church with, the help of the holy spirit, 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.

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.

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.

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.

I will advocate adequate compensation for my profession. I will help lay persons and colleagues to understand that ministerial leaders should not expect or 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 ministerial status.

I will maintain a disciplined ministry in such ways as keeping hours of prayers and devotion, endeavoring to maintain wholesome family relationships, sexual integrity, financial responsibility, regularly engaging in educational and recreational activities for ministerial and personal development. I will seek to maintain good health habits.

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.

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

I will not proselytize from other Christian churches.

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

I will hold in confidence and treat as confidential communication any information provided to me with the expectation of privacy. I will not disclose such information 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 life-threatening or substantial harm will be caused.

I will not use my ministerial status, position or authority knowingly to abuse, misguide, negatively influence, manipulate, or take advantage of anyone, especially children.

I will report all instances of abuse as required by law to the appropriate agency. In any case involving persons working in ABC ministry, I will also report the circumstances to the appropriate regional and/or national denominational representative.

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.



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The Ministers Council is the professional association of ministerial leaders within the American Baptist Churches USA. We are working together to:

Connect colleagues through Together in Ministry groups and Communities of Practice

- Establish and maintain professional and ethical standards of the Christian ministry
- Give support to the members of this body and be an advocate for them in their professional relations
- Resource ministry through our web site at www.ministerscouncil.org
- Interpret the appropriate roles of professional ministerial leadership to the constituent parts of our denomination, and to our local American Baptist Churches
- Encourage the recruitment and nurture of candidates for the various church vocations
- Provide a means of expression and debate by members of this body on issues that affect the professional ministerial leadership of the American Baptist Churches USA
- Cooperate with the appropriate units of the American Baptist Churches USA in matters of mutual interest and concern, including recruitment, placement, compensation, continuing education, and counseling

ministers council membership

You are eligible for membership if you are either

- ordained
- commissioned • a lay professional or
- a student in seminary
- eligible for inclusion in the

Directory of Professional Church Leaders of the American Baptist Churches USA and serving an American Baptist Church or auxilliary organization

- paying dues through a constituent council or to the National Office of the Ministers Council

Join the Ministers Council through your local constituent council. Contact information is posted on the web at www.ministerscouncil.org under the "Who We Are" link.



Photo Credit: Michael Saylor