2026

COMPREHENSIVE CODE OF ETHICS AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

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ARTICLE 1 — PREAMBLE

The Global Association of Certified Pastoral Counselors recognizes pastoral counseling and chaplaincy as sacred responsibilities involving trust, spiritual care, emotional support, professional judgment, and service to individuals, families, churches, institutions, and communities.

GAOCPC members and certified practitioners are entrusted with access to people during times of grief, crisis, illness, conflict, trauma, spiritual struggle, family difficulty, personal transition, and emotional vulnerability. Because of this position of trust, members must conduct themselves with integrity, competence, compassion, accountability, humility, and respect for human dignity.

This Code of Ethics establishes the minimum ethical and professional standards expected of all GAOCPC members, certificants, candidates, supervisors, educators, examiners, officers, volunteers, and representatives.

The Code is intended to:

1. Protect clients, care recipients, families, churches, institutions, and the public.
2. Guide members in ethical decision-making.
3. Promote competent and responsible pastoral counseling and chaplaincy.
4. Define acceptable professional conduct.
5. Protect the integrity and reputation of GAOCPC credentials.
6. Provide standards for reviewing complaints and alleged misconduct.
7. Encourage accountability, correction, restoration, and professional growth.
8. Prevent spiritual, emotional, financial, sexual, professional, and institutional abuse.

Membership or certification with GAOCPC represents an agreement to comply with this Code.

ARTICLE 2 — PURPOSE AND APPLICATION

2.1 Persons Governed by the Code

This Code applies to:

- Certified pastoral counselors.
- Certified chaplains.
- Christian counselors and care providers certified by GAOCPC.
- Certification candidates.
- Supervisors and practicum coordinators.
- Educators and trainers representing GAOCPC.
- Members of certification, examination, ethics, appeals, and disciplinary committees.
- GAOCPC officers, directors, staff members, volunteers, and authorized representatives.
- Any person using a GAOCPC credential, designation, logo, certificate, membership status, or professional affiliation.

2.2 Activities Governed by the Code

This Code applies to conduct involving:

- Pastoral counseling.
- Spiritual care.
- Chaplaincy.
- Crisis intervention.
- Grief and bereavement support.
- Marriage and family ministry.
- Church-based counseling.
- Hospital, correctional, military, workplace, educational, community, and institutional chaplaincy.
- Teaching, supervision, mentorship, and consultation.
- Online, telephone, video, text-based, and electronic counseling.

- Public speaking, preaching, publishing, advertising, and social media activity.
- Certification examinations and credentialing processes.
- Administrative, governance, investigative, and disciplinary responsibilities.

2.3 Minimum Standard

This Code establishes minimum professional expectations. Members must also comply with applicable laws, regulations, institutional policies, denominational requirements, professional standards, and court orders.

Where this Code establishes a higher ethical standard than a local custom or institutional practice, members should follow the higher ethical standard unless prohibited by law.

2.4 Distinctive Pastoral Context

Pastoral counseling and chaplaincy often take place within churches, ministries, families, institutions, and close-knit communities. A member may therefore know a client as a parishioner, colleague, volunteer, neighbour, community member, or participant in the same faith community. This relational context differs from many regulated clinical settings, but it does not reduce the member's duties concerning confidentiality, competence, informed consent, boundaries, documentation, referral, and protection from exploitation.

2.5 Certification and Legal Authority

GAOCPC certification is a professional credential and does not, by itself, constitute government licensure or authorization to perform regulated psychotherapy, psychology, medicine, social work, or another controlled or protected activity. Members shall comply with the laws and professional requirements of every jurisdiction in which they and their clients are located.

ARTICLE 3 — DEFINITIONS

For purposes of this Code:

3.1 Client

A client is any person, couple, family, group, congregation, organization, institution, or community receiving pastoral counseling, chaplaincy, consultation, supervision, education, spiritual care, or related professional services.

3.2 Care Recipient

A care recipient is any person receiving spiritual, emotional, pastoral, crisis, grief, or chaplaincy support, whether or not a formal counseling relationship has been established.

3.3 Member

A member is any person holding active membership, candidacy, certification, designation, office, appointment, or authorized affiliation with GAOCPC.

3.4 Pastoral Counseling

Pastoral counseling is the provision of spiritually integrated support, guidance, education, encouragement, crisis care, and counseling within the member's competence and legal scope.

3.5 Chaplaincy

Chaplaincy is spiritual and pastoral care provided within churches, hospitals, long-term care facilities, correctional institutions, military settings, workplaces, educational institutions, community organizations, emergency services, or other settings.

3.6 Clinical Treatment

Clinical treatment includes diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders, psychotherapy, medical treatment, psychiatric intervention, and other regulated health services requiring specific statutory authorization or professional licensure.

GAOCPC certification does not automatically authorize a member to perform regulated clinical activities.

3.7 Dual or Multiple Relationship

A dual or multiple relationship exists when a member has more than one relationship with a client, such as counselor and employer, pastor and business partner, chaplain and landlord, supervisor and family friend, or counselor and romantic partner.

3.8 Vulnerable Person

A vulnerable person includes a child, dependent adult, elderly person, person with a disability, person experiencing cognitive impairment, person in crisis, person under institutional control, person with limited decision-making capacity, or anyone whose circumstances increase the risk of manipulation, coercion, exploitation, or abuse.

3.9 Confidential Information

Confidential information includes verbal, written, electronic, visual, financial, spiritual, medical, counseling, family, and personal information obtained through a professional or ministry relationship.

3.10 Informed Consent

Informed consent is a voluntary agreement made after the client has received understandable information about the nature, purpose, limitations, risks, benefits, fees, confidentiality, and boundaries of the service.

3.11 Minor or Child

A minor or child is a person who has not reached the age of majority or legal adulthood in the jurisdiction where that person is located. When legal definitions differ or are uncertain, members shall use the more protective safeguarding approach and obtain qualified legal, institutional, or child-protection guidance.

ARTICLE 4 — FOUNDATIONAL ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

GAOCPC members shall be guided by the following ethical foundations.

4.1 Godliness

Members shall demonstrate Christian character through humility, compassion, truthfulness, prayerfulness, patience, self-control, mercy, justice, and love.

Members shall not use claims of divine revelation, prophecy, spiritual authority, anointing, deliverance, healing, or ecclesiastical office to control, frighten, exploit, shame, or manipulate another person.

4.2 Integrity

Members shall conduct themselves honestly and transparently.

Members shall not:

- Misrepresent qualifications, education, credentials, experience, or authority.
- Falsify records, applications, reports, supervision hours, practicum hours, continuing education, or examination information.
- Make misleading claims about guaranteed results.
- Conceal material conflicts of interest.
- Engage in fraud, deception, plagiarism, or dishonest business practices.

4.3 Competence

Members shall provide only those services for which they have appropriate education, supervised experience, training, certification, and legal authority.

Members shall maintain competence through:

- Continuing education.
- Professional reading.
- Supervision or consultation.
- Skills development.
- Ethical training.
- Self-evaluation.
- Familiarity with current laws and professional standards.

4.4 Responsibility

Members shall accept responsibility for their decisions, conduct, documentation, referrals, communications, supervision, and professional services.

Members shall cooperate with legitimate ethics reviews, investigations, corrective measures, and disciplinary processes.

4.5 Cultural Sensitivity

Members shall respect differences in culture, race, ethnicity, nationality, language, disability, age, sex, family background, economic status, religious tradition, church affiliation, and personal experience.

Members shall not demean, humiliate, discriminate against, or refuse reasonable care to a person solely because of difference.

Members may practice within a clearly defined Christian framework, but they must communicate that framework respectfully and without coercion.

4.6 Responsible Spiritual Authority

Members shall use spiritual authority for service, protection, encouragement, accountability, and care.

Members shall not:

- Demand unquestioning personal loyalty.
- Present personal opinions as unquestionable divine commands.
- Threaten spiritual punishment to control a client.
- Require money, gifts, labor, sexual access, or personal service as proof of faith or obedience.
- Use confidential information in sermons, prophecies, public prayer, discipline, or church politics.
- Pressure clients into religious experiences, confessions, rituals, or financial commitments.
- Claim that disagreement with the member is rebellion against God.

No ministerial title, ecclesiastical office, apostolic claim, prophetic gift, spiritual covering, anointing, organizational rank, or claim of divine appointment places a member above accountability under this Code.

Members shall exercise authority as servants. They shall not establish or reinforce systems of compulsory submission, unquestioning personal loyalty, fear, dependency, isolation, or control. Reasonable questions, requests for accountability, second opinions, or refusal of a member’s personal demands shall not be characterized as rebellion against God.

ARTICLE 5 — RESPECT FOR HUMAN DIGNITY

5.1 Equal Worth

Members shall treat every person as possessing inherent dignity and worth.

5.2 Freedom from Abuse

Members shall not engage in:

- Physical abuse.
- Sexual abuse.
- Emotional abuse.
- Verbal abuse.
- Spiritual abuse.
- Financial exploitation.
- Harassment.
- Stalking.
- Bullying.
- Threats.
- Intimidation.
- Coercive control.
- Retaliation.

5.3 Non-Degrading Practices

Members shall not intentionally shame, ridicule, humiliate, insult, curse, publicly expose, or degrade a client.

Confrontation, correction, or spiritual guidance must be delivered respectfully and for a legitimate care purpose.

5.4 Client Autonomy

Members shall respect the client's right to make informed decisions.

Members may provide pastoral teaching, ethical guidance, biblical principles, and professional recommendations, but shall not unlawfully control a client's decisions regarding marriage, family, education, employment, finances, medical care, legal representation, relocation, or church membership.

ARTICLE 6 — SCOPE OF PRACTICE

6.1 Practice Within Competence

Members shall work only within their demonstrated competence.

A member shall not provide specialized treatment solely because the individual holds a GAOCPC certificate.

6.2 Regulated Professional Titles

Members shall not use protected or regulated titles unless legally authorized.

This may include titles such as:

- Psychologist.
- Psychiatrist.
- Psychotherapist.
- Social worker.
- Marriage and family therapist.
- Clinical counselor.
- Medical doctor.
- Registered nurse.
- Addiction specialist.
- Other titles protected by local law.

6.3 Diagnosis and Treatment

Members shall not diagnose or treat a mental disorder unless independently licensed or legally authorized to do so.

Members may provide pastoral observations, spiritual assessments, supportive counseling, psychoeducation, crisis support, referrals, and non-clinical care within their competence.

6.4 Referrals

Members shall make timely referrals when a client requires services beyond the member’s training or authority.

Appropriate referrals may include:

- Physicians.

- Psychiatrists.
- Psychologists.
- Registered psychotherapists.
- Social workers.
- Addiction treatment providers.
- Domestic violence services.
- Child protection authorities.
- Emergency services.
- Legal counsel.
- Financial professionals.
- Licensed marriage and family therapists.
- Specialized trauma professionals.

6.5 Emergency Situations

When a client presents an immediate danger to self or others, members shall take reasonable protective action consistent with law, training, institutional policy, and the circumstances.

ARTICLE 7 — INFORMED CONSENT

7.1 Consent Before Service

Members shall obtain informed consent before beginning an ongoing counseling or chaplaincy relationship, except in emergencies or brief informal encounters where obtaining formal consent is impracticable.

7.2 Information to Be Disclosed

The client should receive clear information regarding:

- The member's name and role.
- Education, training, certification, and licensure status.
- The nature and purpose of the service.
- Whether the service is pastoral, spiritual, educational, supportive, clinical, or non-clinical.
- The member's theoretical or faith-based approach.
- Expected benefits and possible limitations.
- Confidentiality and its exceptions.
- Fees and payment policies.
- Cancellation and missed appointment policies.
- Recordkeeping practices.
- Electronic communication risks.
- Emergency procedures.
- The client's right to ask questions.
- The client's right to discontinue services.
- Complaint procedures.
- Referral options.

7.3 Plain Language

Consent information shall be communicated in language the client can reasonably understand.

Where necessary, interpretation, translation, visual aids, or other accommodations should be provided.

7.4 Consent Is Ongoing

Informed consent is not a one-time form. Members shall revisit consent when:

- The nature of the service changes.
- A new risk emerges.
- Another person becomes involved.
- Technology is introduced.
- Fees change.
- Supervision or consultation becomes necessary.
- The member proposes recording a session.
- The relationship changes substantially.

7.5 Minors and Persons with Limited Capacity

When working with a minor or person with limited decision-making capacity, members shall obtain consent from a legally authorized person where required and obtain the client's assent whenever possible.

The member shall explain confidentiality and its limitations to both the client and the authorized decision-maker.

ARTICLE 8 — CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY

8.1 Duty of Confidentiality

Members shall protect information obtained through counseling, chaplaincy, supervision, consultation, education, assessment, certification, or ministry service.

8.2 Limits of Confidentiality

Members shall explain that confidentiality may be limited when:

- Disclosure is required by law.
- There is suspected abuse or neglect of a child or vulnerable person.
- There is a serious and imminent risk of harm.
- A court issues a valid order.
- The client provides written authorization.
- Information is needed for professional consultation, supervision, billing, or institutional care, subject to appropriate safeguards.
- The member must defend against a formal complaint or legal claim.
- Institutional policies lawfully require limited information sharing.

8.3 Minimum Necessary Disclosure

When disclosure is required, members shall disclose only the information reasonably necessary for the lawful or protective purpose.

8.4 Family, Couple, and Group Counseling

Before beginning couple, family, or group counseling, members shall explain:

- Who is considered the client.
- How information will be shared.
- Whether secrets between participants will be maintained.
- The limits of confidentiality among group members.
- How records will be managed.
- What happens if one participant requests access to information.

8.5 Consultation and Supervision

When consulting with another professional, members shall protect the client's identity whenever possible.

Identifying details shall be shared only when necessary and authorized or legally permitted.

8.6 Public Prayer and Testimony

Members shall not reveal confidential client information through:

- Sermons.
- Public prayers.
- Prophetic statements.
- Testimonies.
- Fundraising appeals.
- Social media.
- Publications.
- Teaching illustrations.
- Conference presentations.

Client information may be used only with valid written authorization or after thorough de-identification that prevents reasonable recognition.

8.7 Deceased Clients

The duty of confidentiality generally continues after the client's death, subject to applicable law.

ARTICLE 9 — PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

9.1 Boundary Responsibility

The member bears primary responsibility for maintaining appropriate professional boundaries.

9.2 Dual Relationships

Pastoral and chaplaincy relationships may occur within congregational and community settings where a pre-existing or incidental dual relationship is difficult or impossible to avoid. A dual relationship is not automatically unethical; however, members shall avoid any dual relationship that is exploitative, materially impairs professional judgment, compromises confidentiality, creates favoritism or dependency, or presents an unreasonable risk of harm.

Where a dual relationship cannot reasonably be avoided, the member shall:

1. Consider the risks.
2. Discuss the relationship with the client.
3. Seek supervision or consultation.
4. Establish clear boundaries.
5. Document the decision.
6. Refer the client when necessary.

Members shall discuss foreseeable encounters outside the counseling setting, including how both parties will handle greetings, confidentiality, social events, church activities, social media, and requests for pastoral services.

Information learned in counseling shall not be used in sermons, leadership appointments, church discipline, employment decisions, ministry politics, or congregational disputes unless the client has given valid authorization or disclosure is required by law.

9.3 Bartering

Bartering should ordinarily be avoided because it creates a financial dual relationship and may increase dependency, conflict of interest, and exploitation. It may be considered only in exceptional circumstances when:

- It is not prohibited by law.
- It is not exploitative.

- The client requests or freely agrees to it.
- The value is fair and documented.
- The arrangement will not impair professional judgment.
- Appropriate consultation has occurred when necessary.

No reasonable sliding-scale, reduced-fee, pro bono, or alternative payment arrangement is available.

9.4 Gifts

Members shall carefully evaluate gifts from clients.

Members shall consider:

- The value of the gift.
- Cultural and spiritual meaning.
- The client's motivation.
- The member's motivation.
- The possibility of obligation or favoritism.
- The effect on the professional relationship.

Substantial gifts, property transfers, inheritances, loans, or financial arrangements with clients are strongly prohibited or restricted.

9.5 Social Relationships

Members shall not initiate social relationships with current clients when the relationship could create confusion, dependency, favoritism, exploitation, or impaired judgment.

9.6 Business Relationships

Members shall not enter business partnerships, investment arrangements, loans, employment agreements, or sales relationships with current clients when there is a risk of exploitation or conflict of interest.

ARTICLE 10 — SEXUAL AND ROMANTIC MISCONDUCT

10.1 Absolute Prohibition with Current Clients

Members shall not engage in sexual contact, romantic relationships, sexually suggestive communication, sexualized behavior, or dating relationships with current clients.

Client consent does not remove the ethical violation because of the inherent power imbalance.

10.2 Sexual Harassment

Members shall not engage in:

- Sexual comments.
- Requests for sexual favors.
- Unwanted touching.
- Sexual jokes.
- Inappropriate discussion of the member's sexual life.
- Sexualized prayer or ritual.
- Romantic pressure.
- Requests for intimate photographs.
- Sexually suggestive electronic communication.
- Retaliation after rejection.

10.3 Former Clients

Members shall not engage in sexual or romantic conduct with a former client for at least five years after the professional relationship has fully ended, or for any longer period required by applicable law or professional regulation.

Even after the minimum period, such relationships may remain unethical where there is:

- Continuing emotional dependency.
- Prior trauma.
- Significant power imbalance.
- Exploitation.
- A likelihood of harm.

- A continuing pastoral or spiritual authority relationship.
- Reasonable evidence that the relationship began during counseling.

The passage of five years does not create automatic permission. Such a relationship remains prohibited whenever a power imbalance, continuing pastoral or spiritual authority, dependency, vulnerability, confidential knowledge, risk of exploitation, or foreseeable harm continues. GAOCPC strongly advises members not to pursue romantic or sexual relationships with former clients.

10.4 Clients' Relatives and Significant Others

Members shall not engage in sexual or romantic relationships with a client's spouse, partner, family member, or closely connected person when the relationship could harm the client or compromise professional integrity.

10.5 Students and Supervisees

Members shall not engage in sexual or romantic relationships with current students, interns, candidates, supervisees, employees, or persons over whom they exercise evaluative or credentialing authority.

ARTICLE 11 — SPIRITUAL CARE AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

11.1 Respectful Spiritual Integration

Members may integrate Scripture, prayer, worship, spiritual disciplines, Christian teaching, and pastoral guidance when these practices are appropriate to the service and consistent with informed consent.

11.2 Freedom of Conscience

Members shall not force clients to:

- Convert.
- Join a church.
- Leave a church.
- Give money.
- Speak in tongues.
- Participate in deliverance.
- Confess publicly.
- Accept a prophecy.
- Submit to a particular leader.
- End lawful medical or mental health treatment.
- Reject prescribed medication.
- Make major decisions solely on the member's claimed revelation.

11.3 Prayer

Prayer shall be offered respectfully, sensitively, and with consideration of the client's wishes, culture, faith, and emotional condition.

11.4 Prophecy and Spiritual Impressions

Members who share spiritual impressions shall do so humbly and without presenting personal impressions as infallible.

Members shall not use prophecy to dictate marriage, divorce, financial giving, relocation, medical decisions, employment, or submission to the member.

11.5 Deliverance and Exorcism Practices

Members shall not use physically dangerous, degrading, coercive, or abusive practices in the name of deliverance.

Prohibited practices include:

- Striking.
- Choking.
- Restriction of breathing.
- Forced fasting.
- Deprivation of sleep.
- Forced restraint without lawful authority.
- Withholding medication.
- Public humiliation.
- Threats.
- Invasive touching.
- Sexualized rituals.
- Denial of emergency care.
- Repeated shouting intended to overpower or break the person.

Where a person may be experiencing a medical or psychiatric emergency, the member shall seek appropriate professional assistance.

11.6 Financial Giving

Members shall not pressure clients to make donations, sow financial seeds, purchase products, fund the member's ministry, or transfer property as a condition of counseling, prayer, healing, prophecy, deliverance, certification, or spiritual acceptance.

ARTICLE 12 — COMPETENCE AND CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT

12.1 Continuing Education

Members shall complete continuing education required by GAOCPC and any applicable regulator or employer.

12.2 Supervision and Consultation

Members shall seek supervision or consultation when:

- Encountering unfamiliar issues.
- Working with complex trauma.
- Managing high-risk situations.
- Experiencing strong emotional reactions.
- Facing an ethical dilemma.
- Working beyond usual competence.
- Experiencing conflict with a client.
- Considering termination or referral.
- Responding to allegations or complaints.

12.3 New Areas of Practice

Members entering a new practice area shall obtain appropriate education, supervision, and experience before offering independent services.

12.4 Impairment

Members shall not practice while impaired by:

- Physical illness.
- Mental or emotional distress.
- Substance use.
- Medication effects.
- Fatigue.
- Burnout.
- Grief.
- Personal crisis.

- Cognitive decline.
- Any condition that materially reduces safe professional functioning.

Members shall seek assistance, reduce duties, obtain supervision, or temporarily withdraw from practice when necessary.

ARTICLE 13 — ASSESSMENT, TESTING, AND PROFESSIONAL OPINIONS

13.1 Appropriate Use

Members shall use only assessments for which they are trained and legally authorized.

13.2 No Unsupported Diagnosis

Members shall not make clinical diagnoses based solely on prayer, prophecy, intuition, spiritual impressions, informal questionnaires, or limited observation.

13.3 Interpretation

Assessment results shall be interpreted accurately, cautiously, and within the limitations of the instrument.

13.4 Third-Party Reports

Members shall prepare reports honestly and distinguish among:

- Client statements.
- Member observations.
- Professional conclusions.
- Spiritual impressions.
- Verified facts.
- Unverified allegations.

13.5 Court and Legal Matters

Members shall not provide expert opinions in legal proceedings unless qualified and authorized to do so.

ARTICLE 14 — RECORDS AND DOCUMENTATION

14.1 Accurate Records

Members shall maintain timely, accurate, objective, and professional records appropriate to the setting.

Records may include:

- Dates and duration of contact.
- Nature of service.
- Informed consent.
- Presenting concerns.
- Relevant observations.
- Interventions.
- Referrals.
- Risk assessments.
- Consultation.
- Disclosures.
- Safety actions.
- Fees and payments.
- Termination or transfer.

14.2 Record Security

Records shall be protected against unauthorized access, loss, theft, alteration, or destruction.

Members shall use reasonable security measures for:

- Paper records.
- Computers.
- Mobile devices.
- Cloud storage.
- Email.
- Video platforms.

- Electronic health or case-management systems.

14.3 Record Retention

Records shall be retained for the period required by law, regulation, institutional policy, insurance, contract, or GAOCPC standard. Where no binding period applies, GAOCPC recommends retaining adult client records for at least ten years after the last professional contact and records concerning minors for at least ten years after the client reaches the age of majority, subject to secure storage and lawful disposal.

14.4 Client Access

Members shall respond to requests for access to records according to applicable law and institutional policy.

14.5 Record Correction

Members shall not erase or falsify records to conceal an error.

Corrections shall be dated, identifiable, and preserve the original entry where required.

14.6 Disposal

Records shall be destroyed securely when the retention period ends.

ARTICLE 15 — FEES AND FINANCIAL PRACTICES

15.1 Fee Disclosure

Members shall disclose fees before services begin.

Disclosure should include:

- Session fees.
- Assessment fees.
- Administrative charges.
- Report-writing fees.
- Cancellation fees.
- Late payment policies.
- Refund policies.
- Insurance or third-party billing limitations.

Any block-fee or prepaid-service arrangement, including the services covered, total amount, payment schedule, and refund procedure.

15.2 Fairness

Fees shall be reasonable and consistent with the service provided, the member's qualifications, the setting, and local standards.

15.3 No Exploitation

Members shall not exploit a client's distress, faith, dependency, illness, grief, or vulnerability for financial gain.

15.4 Financial Conflicts

Members shall disclose financial interests in programs, products, institutions, or professionals to whom they refer clients.

15.5 Collection of Debts

Members shall use lawful and respectful methods when collecting unpaid fees.

Members shall not sell or assign a counseling debt in a manner that unnecessarily exposes confidential information. Before ending services for nonpayment, members shall provide reasonable notice and, when client welfare requires, information about accessible alternative services.

Members shall not publicly shame clients, disclose confidential information, threaten spiritual consequences, or use church discipline solely to collect a counseling debt.

15.6 Scholarships and Reduced Fees

Where reduced-fee or charitable services are offered, eligibility criteria should be applied fairly.

ARTICLE 16 — ADVERTISING AND PUBLIC REPRESENTATION

16.1 Truthful Advertising

Members shall ensure that websites, brochures, business cards, social media profiles, biographies, advertisements, and public statements are accurate.

16.2 Credentials

Members shall identify credentials exactly as awarded.

Members shall not:

- Alter a designation.
- Claim a higher credential than awarded.
- Present honorary degrees as earned academic degrees.
- Imply government licensure where none exists.
- Claim accreditation that has not been granted.
- Use expired, suspended, or revoked credentials.

16.3 Guarantees

Members shall not guarantee healing, reconciliation, freedom from mental illness, restoration of marriage, deliverance, employment, financial success, or any other result.

16.4 Testimonials

Testimonials shall not be fabricated, misleading, coercively obtained, or used in a manner that violates confidentiality.

16.5 GAOCPC Name and Logo

Members may use the GAOCPC name, logo, seal, credential, or designation only according to authorization and brand standards.

ARTICLE 17 — TECHNOLOGY, ONLINE COUNSELING, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

17.1 Competence with Technology

Members providing remote services shall be competent in the technology used and understand its limitations.

17.2 Client Information

Before providing online services, members should explain:

- Technology risks.
- Privacy limitations.
- Emergency procedures.
- Jurisdictional limits.
- Identity verification.
- Backup communication plans.
- Recording restrictions.
- Platform security.

The jurisdictions in which both the member and client are physically located.

Whether the member's professional liability insurance covers electronic or cross-border services.

How treatment-related text messages, emails, and written electronic communications will be retained in the client record.

A plan for technological failure and an emergency contact or local crisis resource.

17.3 Emergency Location

For remote counseling, members should obtain the client's current location and emergency contact information when risk is reasonably foreseeable.

17.4 Social Media Boundaries

Members shall maintain appropriate boundaries on social media.

Members should consider separate professional and personal accounts.

17.5 Client Information Online

Members shall not post information, images, recordings, prayer requests, testimonies, or indirect descriptions that could identify a client without valid authorization.

17.6 Electronic Communication

Members shall use reasonable caution when communicating by email, text message, social media, or messaging applications.

Sensitive matters should be discussed through secure methods whenever reasonably possible.

Members shall provide electronic services from a private and professional setting, take reasonable steps to verify the client's identity and location, and use platforms appropriate to the sensitivity of the information.

Members shall not rely on computer-generated assessments, artificial intelligence outputs, automated reports, or digital summaries without applying independent professional judgment and verifying material accuracy.

17.7 Artificial Intelligence and Automated Tools

Members using artificial intelligence, transcription systems, automated assessment tools, or digital documentation services shall:

- Protect confidentiality.
- Avoid entering identifiable client information into unauthorized systems.
- Verify accuracy.
- Exercise independent professional judgment.
- Disclose significant use when appropriate.
- Ensure technology does not replace responsible human care.
- Comply with applicable privacy and data-protection laws.

ARTICLE 18 — WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND VULNERABLE PERSONS

18.1 Heightened Duty of Care

Members shall exercise heightened care when working with children and vulnerable persons.

18.2 Safeguarding

Members shall follow lawful safeguarding procedures and institutional child-protection policies.

Cultural custom, religious claim, family approval, political position, or local social acceptance shall never be used by a member to justify grooming, sexual exploitation, trafficking, forced marriage, abuse, or harmful conduct involving a child.

18.3 Mandatory Reporting

Members shall periodically review and comply with the mandatory reporting and protective-disclosure obligations that apply in the jurisdictions where they and their clients are located. These may include child abuse or neglect, abuse of vulnerable adults, sexual abuse by a regulated professional, imminent risk of serious harm, human trafficking, court orders, and other legally reportable circumstances.

Members shall document the facts considered, consultations obtained, decision made, report submitted or not submitted, information disclosed, and follow-up action. Reports shall be based on reasonable grounds rather than rumour, bias, retaliation, or speculation.

Where legally permissible and safe, members should explain to the client that a report or protective disclosure is being made. Only the information reasonably necessary for the report shall be disclosed.

18.4 Physical Contact

Physical contact shall be appropriate, non-sexual, non-coercive, culturally sensitive, and consistent with the care setting.

18.5 Private Meetings

Members shall use appropriate safety measures when meeting privately with minors or vulnerable persons.

Such measures may include:

- Visible meeting spaces.
- Open-door or window policies.

- Approved facilities.
- Parental or institutional consent.
- Documented appointment times.
- Safeguarding protocols.

18.6 No Grooming

Members shall not engage in grooming behavior, secret communication, favoritism, special gifts, isolation, or relationship-building intended to create improper dependency or access.

ARTICLE 19 — FAMILY, COUPLE, AND GROUP SERVICES

19.1 Identification of the Client

Members shall clarify whether the client is:

- One individual.
- The couple.
- The family.
- The group.
- The referring institution.

19.2 Conflicts of Interest

Members shall not provide individual counseling to opposing parties when doing so would impair neutrality or create a harmful conflict.

19.3 Secrets Policies

Before couple or family counseling begins, the member shall explain the policy regarding information privately disclosed by one participant.

19.4 Domestic Violence

Members shall assess for coercive control, violence, intimidation, and safety risks.

Couple counseling may be inappropriate where one party is afraid to speak freely or where participation could increase danger.

19.5 Group Confidentiality

Members shall explain that they cannot guarantee that group participants will maintain confidentiality.

ARTICLE 20 — TERMINATION, INTERRUPTION, AND REFERRAL

20.1 Appropriate Termination

Members shall end services when:

- Goals have been substantially achieved.
- The service is no longer beneficial.
- The client requests termination.
- The member lacks competence.
- A conflict of interest arises.
- The member becomes impaired.
- The relationship becomes unsafe.
- Continued service would violate law or ethics.
- The client requires a different level of care.

20.2 No Abandonment

Members shall not abruptly abandon a client who requires continuing care.

Reasonable notice, referral, crisis information, and transition assistance should be provided when appropriate.

20.3 Nonpayment

Services may be terminated for nonpayment if:

- The financial policy was disclosed.
- The client is not in immediate danger.
- The member provides reasonable notice.
- Appropriate referral information is offered.

20.4 Member Absence

Members shall make reasonable arrangements for client care during illness, vacation, relocation, suspension, retirement, or death.

ARTICLE 21 — PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND REFERRALS

21.1 Respect for Colleagues

Members shall communicate respectfully about colleagues and other professions.

21.2 No False Allegations

Members shall not knowingly make false, malicious, or reckless accusations against another professional.

21.3 Ethical Concerns

When a member has credible information that another practitioner may be harming clients, the member shall take reasonable action consistent with law, confidentiality, and public protection.

21.4 Referral Payments

Members shall not accept or pay improper commissions, kickbacks, or secret referral fees.

21.5 Collaboration

Members shall cooperate with other care providers when authorized by the client and when collaboration benefits the client.

ARTICLE 22 — SUPERVISION, EDUCATION, AND TRAINING

22.1 Supervisor Responsibility

Supervisors shall:

- Be qualified for the supervision provided.
- Establish clear expectations.
- Provide timely feedback.
- Monitor client safety.
- Maintain appropriate boundaries.
- Evaluate supervisees fairly.
- Document supervision.
- Address impairment or incompetence.
- Protect confidential information.

Establish a written or clearly documented supervision agreement addressing responsibilities, frequency, confidentiality, recordkeeping, emergency consultation, fees where applicable, evaluation, and termination.

Avoid supervising where a personal, financial, pastoral, academic, or organizational conflict would materially impair objectivity or place clients or supervisees at risk.

22.2 No Exploitation

Supervisors and educators shall not exploit students, interns, candidates, or supervisees for personal, financial, domestic, ministry, or institutional labor unrelated to legitimate training.

22.3 Evaluation

Evaluation shall be based on disclosed standards and relevant performance.

22.4 Remediation

When deficiencies are identified, supervisors should provide clear feedback and reasonable remediation where appropriate.

22.5 Gatekeeping

Supervisors and educators have a responsibility to prevent persons who are unsafe, unethical, impaired, or substantially incompetent from receiving unrestricted professional endorsement.

22.6 Student Clients

Students and supervisees shall be informed that their work may be reviewed for training and evaluation purposes.

ARTICLE 23 — RESEARCH, PUBLICATION, AND TEACHING

23.1 Ethical Research

Members conducting research shall protect participants, obtain appropriate consent, and comply with applicable research standards.

23.2 Confidentiality

Client information shall not be used in research, teaching, publication, or presentations without authorization or effective de-identification.

23.3 Plagiarism

Members shall not plagiarize.

Sources, quotations, ideas, and contributions shall be acknowledged appropriately.

23.4 Authorship

Authorship credit shall reflect actual contribution.

23.5 Accurate Reporting

Members shall not fabricate, falsify, or deliberately misrepresent research findings, statistics, case outcomes, or program results.

ARTICLE 24 — CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

24.1 Disclosure

Members shall identify and disclose conflicts that could influence professional judgment.

24.2 Recusal

Members serving on certification, examination, ethics, or appeals committees shall recuse themselves when they have:

- A personal relationship with a party.
- A financial interest.
- Prior involvement in the matter.
- A supervisory relationship.
- A significant institutional conflict.
- Personal bias that may prevent fair judgment.

24.3 Organizational Interests

A member's duty to protect a client shall not be improperly subordinated to the financial, political, reputational, or institutional interests of a church, employer, school, ministry, or organization.

ARTICLE 25 — CERTIFICATION AND EXAMINATION INTEGRITY

25.1 Honest Applications

Applicants shall provide truthful information regarding:

- Identity.
- Education.
- Practicum hours.
- Supervision.
- Employment.
- Professional discipline.
- Criminal findings where disclosure is required.
- Continuing education.
- References.
- Prior credentials.

25.2 Examination Security

Candidates shall not:

- Copy examination questions.
- Share restricted examination content.
- Use unauthorized assistance.
- Impersonate another candidate.
- Receive answers from another person.
- Use prohibited devices or materials.
- Attempt to compromise examination systems.
- Distribute examination content after testing.

25.3 Credential Misuse

A person shall not:

- Alter a certificate.
- Forge a credential.

- Use another person’s credential.
- Continue using a suspended or revoked designation.
- Misrepresent membership status.
- Permit another person to use the member’s designation.

25.4 Duty to Report Changes

Members shall promptly notify GAOCPC of significant matters affecting credential eligibility, including professional discipline, legal restrictions on practice, or findings involving fraud, abuse, exploitation, or serious misconduct.

ARTICLE 26 — PUBLIC SAFETY AND DUTY TO REPORT

26.1 Serious Risk

Members shall take reasonable action when they become aware of a serious and credible risk to a client or the public.

26.2 Reporting Another Member

A member who has credible evidence of serious ethical misconduct by another GAOCPC member should report the concern to the appropriate authority or GAOCPC ethics body, subject to legal and confidentiality obligations.

26.3 Good-Faith Reporting

No member shall retaliate against a person who makes a good-faith complaint, participates in an investigation, provides evidence, or raises a legitimate safety concern.

26.4 Malicious Complaints

Knowingly false, malicious, or retaliatory complaints may themselves constitute ethical misconduct.

ARTICLE 27 — ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

When facing an ethical dilemma, members should follow this process:

Step 1 — Identify the Issue

Clarify:

- What happened.
- Who is affected.
- What risks exist.
- What information is known.
- What information remains uncertain.

Step 2 — Review Applicable Standards

Consider:

- This Code.
- Relevant laws.
- Institutional policies.
- Denominational requirements.
- Professional regulations.

The laws and reporting duties of the jurisdictions where the member and client are located.

- Informed consent agreements.

Step 3 — Consider the Client's Welfare

Evaluate the client's safety, dignity, autonomy, vulnerability, and best interests.

Step 4 — Identify Possible Actions

List reasonable options and their likely benefits, risks, and consequences.

Step 5 — Seek Consultation

Consult an appropriate supervisor, attorney, regulator, ethics committee, safeguarding professional, or qualified colleague.

Step 6 — Examine Personal Bias

Consider whether personal beliefs, emotions, loyalties, financial interests, institutional pressure, or spiritual assumptions are influencing the decision.

Step 7 — Decide and Act

Choose the most ethical, lawful, proportionate, and protective course of action.

Step 8 — Document

Document the issue, consultation, decision, rationale, action, and outcome.

Step 9 — Evaluate

Review whether the action protected the client and whether corrective measures are necessary.

ARTICLE 28 — COMPLAINTS AND ETHICS REVIEW

28.1 Right to Submit a Complaint

Clients, former clients, family members, institutions, members of the public, other professionals, GAOCPC members, or authorized representatives may submit an ethics complaint.

28.2 Complaint Requirements

A complaint should ordinarily include:

- The complainant's name and contact information.
- The respondent's name.
- A description of the alleged conduct.
- Relevant dates and locations.
- Supporting documents.
- Names of possible witnesses.
- The outcome or remedy requested.

Anonymous complaints may be reviewed when they contain credible and verifiable evidence of serious risk.

28.3 Preliminary Review

GAOCPC may conduct a preliminary review to determine:

- Whether the respondent is subject to GAOCPC authority.
- Whether the allegation falls within this Code.
- Whether sufficient information exists.
- Whether immediate protective action is necessary.
- Whether the matter should be referred elsewhere.

28.4 Notice to Respondent

The respondent should receive reasonable notice of the allegations and an opportunity to respond, except where disclosure would create a substantial safety risk or violate law.

28.5 Fair Process

Ethics proceedings should be:

- Impartial.
- Timely.
- Confidential to the extent reasonably possible.
- Based on relevant evidence.
- Free from conflicts of interest.
- Consistent with procedural fairness.

28.6 Cooperation

Members shall cooperate honestly with ethics investigations.

Failure to cooperate may constitute a separate ethical violation.

28.7 Interim Measures

Where necessary to protect the public, GAOCPC may impose interim measures pending final determination, including:

- Temporary practice restrictions.
- Suspension of certification.
- Supervision requirements.
- Prohibition on representing GAOCPC.
- Removal from examination, supervision, or governance duties.

An interim measure is protective and does not by itself represent a final finding.

ARTICLE 29 — DISCIPLINARY AND CORRECTIVE ACTIONS

Where an ethical violation is established, GAOCPC may impose one or more of the following:

1. Advisory letter.
2. Educational guidance.
3. Formal warning.
4. Reprimand.
5. Required ethics education.
6. Required supervision.
7. Practice monitoring.
8. Corrective action plan.
9. Restitution or corrective communication where appropriate.
10. Restriction of practice or designation.
11. Probation.
12. Suspension of membership.
13. Suspension of certification.
14. Revocation of certification.
15. Permanent ineligibility for certification.
16. Removal from office, committee, teaching, supervision, or examination duties.
17. Publication of disciplinary status when necessary for public protection.
18. Referral to an employer, institution, professional regulator, law-enforcement agency, child-protection authority, or other appropriate body.

29.1 Factors Considered

GAOCPC may consider:

- Seriousness of harm.
- Intent.
- Pattern of conduct.
- Vulnerability of persons affected.

- Abuse of spiritual or professional authority.
- Prior complaints.
- Honesty during the investigation.
- Acceptance of responsibility.
- Efforts to correct harm.
- Likelihood of recurrence.
- Public safety.
- Rehabilitation potential.

ARTICLE 30 — APPEALS

30.1 Right of Appeal

A respondent may appeal a final disciplinary decision according to GAOCPC procedures.

30.2 Grounds of Appeal

An appeal may be based on:

- Significant procedural unfairness.
- Material conflict of interest.
- New evidence not reasonably available earlier.
- A finding unsupported by the evidence.
- A sanction that is clearly disproportionate.
- Material misapplication of the Code.

30.3 Appeal Review

An appeal is not necessarily a complete rehearing.

The appeals body may:

- Affirm the decision.
- Modify the findings.
- Modify the sanction.
- Return the matter for further review.
- Dismiss the complaint.
- Order a new hearing.

30.4 Finality

The decision of the designated appeals body shall be final within GAOCPC, subject to applicable law.

ARTICLE 31 — REINSTATEMENT

A person whose credential has been suspended or revoked may apply for reinstatement only when permitted by the disciplinary decision.

The applicant may be required to demonstrate:

- Completion of sanctions.
- Remediation.
- Ethics education.
- Supervision.
- Fitness to practice.
- Acceptance of responsibility.
- Evidence of rehabilitation.
- Compliance with legal or regulatory requirements.
- Reduced risk of recurrence.

Reinstatement is not automatic.

GAOCPC may deny reinstatement when public trust, client safety, or professional integrity remains at risk.

ARTICLE 32 — NON-RETALIATION

No member shall retaliate against a person for:

- Declining counseling or spiritual practices.
- Ending services.
- Requesting records.
- Questioning fees.
- Refusing a gift or financial request.
- Reporting abuse.
- Filing a complaint.
- Cooperating with an investigation.
- Seeking another professional opinion.
- Contacting legal, medical, regulatory, or protective authorities.

Retaliation may include threats, public shaming, exclusion, harassment, spiritual condemnation, interference with employment, misuse of confidential information, or pressure through church leadership.

ARTICLE 33 — RESPONSIBILITIES OF GAOCPC LEADERS

GAOCPC directors, officers, ethics committee members, examiners, investigators, and certification personnel shall:

- Act impartially.
- Protect confidential information.
- Avoid conflicts of interest.
- Apply standards consistently.
- Maintain accurate records.
- Provide reasonable procedural fairness.
- Avoid favoritism and discrimination.
- Protect examination integrity.
- Avoid misuse of organizational authority.
- Refrain from accepting improper gifts or payments.
- Place public protection above personal or institutional relationships.

ARTICLE 34 — RELATIONSHIP TO LAW AND OTHER AUTHORITIES

34.1 Compliance with Law

Members shall comply with applicable law.

34.2 Conflict Between Ethics and Law

When a member believes that law, institutional policy, and this Code conflict, the member shall:

1. Identify the conflict.
2. Seek qualified legal or ethical consultation.
3. Protect the client as far as legally possible.
4. Document the decision.
5. Avoid acting solely on personal assumptions about the law.

34.3 Criminal and Regulatory Proceedings

GAOCPC ethics proceedings may proceed independently of criminal, civil, employment, ecclesiastical, or regulatory proceedings.

GAOCPC is not required to reach the same decision as another body because the purposes and standards of proof may differ.

ARTICLE 35 — ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND ATTESTATION

Every GAOCPC member, candidate, certified professional, supervisor, examiner, officer, and representative shall acknowledge the following:

I have read and understand the GAOCPC Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. I agree to uphold its principles, comply with its requirements, protect the dignity and welfare of those I serve, practice within my competence, use spiritual authority responsibly, maintain professional boundaries, protect confidential information, cooperate with legitimate ethics reviews, and accept accountability for violations of this Code.

Name: ____________________________________

GAOCPC Membership or Certification Number: _____________________

Signature: _________________________________

Date: _____________________________________

ARTICLE 36 — PUBLIC NOTICE

GAOCPC certification is a professional certification and does not, by itself, constitute government licensure or authorization to perform regulated clinical services.

Clients and members of the public are encouraged to verify:

- The practitioner’s GAOCPC certification status.
- Any claimed professional licence.
- The practitioner’s education and qualifications.
- The practitioner’s legal scope of practice.
- Applicable complaint procedures.

Questions or ethics concerns may be submitted through the GAOCPC Public Complaints and Ethics Review Process.

ARTICLE 37 — AMENDMENT AND PERIODIC REVIEW

This Code shall be reviewed periodically to reflect:

- Changes in law.
- Developments in technology.
- Emerging ethical risks.
- Changes in professional practice.
- Public protection needs.
- Lessons from complaints and disciplinary cases.
- Developments in pastoral counseling and chaplaincy.

Amendments must be approved by the authorized GAOCPC governing body.

Members shall be notified of material amendments and may be required to confirm renewed acknowledgment.

37.1 External Standards Consulted

In revising this Code, GAOCPC reviewed relevant principles in the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario Professional Practice Standards, including conflict of interest, dual relationships, undue influence and abuse, mandatory reporting, confidentiality, informed consent, electronic practice, supervision, recordkeeping, fees, advertising, and discontinuing services. These materials were used as comparative professional guidance and were adapted for pastoral counseling, chaplaincy, international practice, and GAOCPC's non-governmental certification role. GAOCPC does not represent that its certification is equivalent to CRPO registration or Ontario licensure.

APPENDIX A — PROHIBITED CONDUCT

The following conduct may result in immediate investigation and possible suspension:

- Sexual activity with a current client.
- Sexual abuse or harassment.
- Physical violence.
- Child or vulnerable-person abuse.
- Financial exploitation.
- Spiritual coercion.
- Fraudulent credentials.
- Examination cheating.
- Falsification of practicum or supervision hours.
- Practicing while seriously impaired.
- Knowingly practicing beyond legal authority.
- Breach of confidentiality causing serious harm.
- Retaliation against a complainant.
- Threatening clients with divine punishment for refusing the member's demands.
- Instructing clients to discontinue necessary medical treatment without appropriate authority.
- Concealing credible abuse allegations.
- Using counseling information for blackmail, church politics, fundraising, or public humiliation.
- Continuing to use a suspended or revoked GAOCPC credential.
- Refusing to comply with protective restrictions imposed by GAOCPC.

APPENDIX B — ETHICAL PRACTICE CHECKLIST

Before beginning services, the member should confirm:

- My role is clear.
- My qualifications are represented accurately.
- I am competent to provide this service.
- The client understands the spiritual and professional nature of the service.
- Informed consent has been obtained.
- Fees have been explained.
- Confidentiality and its limitations have been explained.
- Emergency procedures are established.
- Appropriate records will be maintained.
- Technology risks have been addressed.
- Conflicts of interest have been considered.
- Boundaries are clear.
- Referral options are available.
- Safeguarding requirements have been reviewed.
- I am physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually fit to serve.

APPENDIX C — ETHICAL DECISION RECORD

Date: ______________________________________

Member: ___________________________________

Client or Case Reference: _____________________

Ethical Issue Identified:

Persons Potentially Affected:

Relevant Code Provisions:

Applicable Legal or Institutional Requirements:

Consultation Obtained:

Options Considered:

Decision and Rationale:

Actions Taken:

Outcome and Follow-Up:

Member Signature: ____________________________

APPENDIX D — CLIENT RIGHTS

Every client or care recipient has the right to:

1. Be treated with dignity and respect.
2. Receive accurate information about the practitioner's qualifications.
3. Understand the nature and limitations of the service.
4. Ask questions.
5. Know the fees before services begin.
6. Receive an explanation of confidentiality and its exceptions.
7. Participate voluntarily.
8. Decline a spiritual intervention.
9. Request a referral.
10. Discontinue services.
11. Be protected from sexual, financial, emotional, physical, and spiritual exploitation.
12. Receive reasonable privacy and data protection.
13. Raise a concern without retaliation.
14. Submit a complaint to GAOCPC.
15. Contact legal, medical, regulatory, safeguarding, or emergency authorities when necessary.

ADOPTION

This Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct was adopted by the authorized governing body of the Global Association of Certified Pastoral Counselors on:

Date of Adoption: **1st August 2026**

Authorized Officer: **Dr. William Kimando**

Title: **President**

Signature: ____________________________________

Official Seal: ________________________________