

COMPASSION MINISTRY RESOURCES

Healthy Boundaries in Compassion Ministry

A practical guide for leaders and volunteers serving through any type of compassion ministry

Care deeply. Serve wisely. Keep healthy limits.

www.compassionministryresources.com



Purpose of This Guide

Compassion ministry brings people close to real needs. That closeness is one of its strengths, but it also creates situations in which roles can become unclear, volunteers can feel responsible for more than they can safely carry, and people being served may receive different answers from different helpers. Healthy boundaries help a ministry remain compassionate, fair, safe, and sustainable.

This guide is designed for churches, nonprofits, ministry teams, leaders, and volunteers serving through any type of compassion ministry. It can be used in food and clothing ministries, benevolence, recovery and reentry, prison ministry, mentoring, transportation, senior care, homelessness outreach, family support, education, job readiness, ESL, grief care, resource distribution, home visitation, childcare, and other ministries of practical care.

Biblical Foundation

Healthy boundaries are consistent with biblical compassion. Scripture calls believers to carry one another's burdens while also recognizing personal responsibility, wisdom, stewardship, truth, and appropriate limits. Useful passages for prayer and discussion include Proverbs 4:23, Galatians 6:2-5, Mark 1:35-38, James 1:19, and Ephesians 4:15.

A Helpful Definition

A healthy ministry boundary is a clear limit that protects people, relationships, responsibilities, safety, fairness, and the mission of the ministry. Boundaries do not mean caring less. They help care remain honest and dependable.

How to Use This Guide

- ☐ Review the guide with ministry leaders before training volunteers.
- ☐ Use the worksheets to identify boundary risks that are specific to your ministry.
- ☐ Adapt examples to your ministry setting without weakening safety or accountability.
- ☐ Make sure volunteers know who provides supervision and who makes decisions when a boundary question arises.
- ☐ Connect this guide to your church or organization's policies, insurance requirements, safety procedures, and referral process.
- ☐ Review boundaries at least annually and whenever the ministry changes.

1. Compassion, Rescuing, and Over-Involvement

Compassion notices suffering and responds with love, truth, practical help, and dignity. Rescuing occurs when a helper repeatedly takes over responsibilities that belong to another person, removes every consequence, makes promises the ministry cannot sustain, or becomes the main solution to problems that require broader support.

Response	What It Looks Like	Likely Result
Compassion	Listens, offers appropriate help, explains limits, encourages strengths and next steps.	Support with dignity and clarity.
Rescuing	Takes over, repeatedly fixes, gives beyond policy, or assumes responsibility for another adult's choices.	Dependence, confusion, unfairness, burnout.
Over-involvement	Becomes constantly available, personally entangled, secretive, or emotionally responsible for outcomes.	Blurred roles and increased risk.
Avoidance	Uses 'boundaries' as a reason not to listen, explain, refer, or respond within the ministry's role.	People may feel dismissed or unsupported.

Questions for the Ministry Team

- ☐ Where are volunteers most likely to feel pressure to do more than the ministry is designed to provide?
- ☐ What kinds of requests make our team feel guilty for saying no?
- ☐ Are some participants receiving exceptions that others would not receive?
- ☐ Do volunteers know the difference between helping someone take a next step and taking over the next step?

Our most common rescuing or over-involvement risks are:

2. Role Clarity: Know What Belongs to the Ministry

Boundaries become easier when the ministry has a clearly defined scope. Volunteers should know what the ministry offers, what it does not offer, what requires leader approval, and what must be referred to someone else.

We provide	
We do not provide	
Requires leader approval	
Requires referral	
Emergency / safety response	

A simple rule:

If a volunteer is being asked to act outside the written role, make a policy exception, handle a serious safety concern, provide professional advice, or become the only person responsible for someone's crisis, the volunteer should pause and involve leadership.

Access Is Also a Boundary

Not every ministry relationship should include the same access. Decide in advance when and how volunteers may be contacted, where meetings may occur, whether personal contact information is shared, and how after-hours concerns are handled.

- ☐ Approved ministry hours are clear.
- ☐ Approved communication methods are clear.
- ☐ After-hours expectations are clear.
- ☐ Private meetings and one-on-one contact follow ministry policy.
- ☐ Volunteers have a backup contact when the primary leader is unavailable.
- ☐ Participants know how to request help without depending on one particular volunteer.

3. Common Boundary Areas

Every ministry will emphasize different areas, but the following boundary categories should be discussed before volunteers begin serving.

Boundary Area	Questions to Decide Before Serving
Time & Availability	When are volunteers available? What happens after hours? How are cancellations and repeated no-shows handled?
Money & Gifts	Can volunteers give personal money or gifts? Can participants give gifts to volunteers? Who approves financial help or exceptions?
Transportation	Does the ministry provide rides? Who may drive? What insurance, vehicle, child-passenger, or two-adult rules apply?
Home Visits	Are home visits allowed? Who approves them? May a volunteer go alone? How are safety and confidentiality protected?
Digital Communication	May volunteers text, message, email, or connect on social media? Which accounts or systems should be used?
Photos & Stories	Who may take or share photos, testimonies, prayer requests, or participant stories? What permission is required?
Physical Space	What touching, personal space, privacy, and facility-access expectations apply?
Emotional Support	How much personal sharing is appropriate? When should repeated crisis conversations move to a leader or referral?
Spiritual Care	How are prayer, Scripture, invitation, and spiritual conversation offered without pressure or manipulation?
Professional Scope	What counseling, legal, medical, financial, mental-health, immigration, or case-management issues are outside the volunteer's role?

4. Confidentiality, Privacy, and Respectful Information Sharing

Confidentiality is not simply 'keeping secrets.' It means handling information responsibly, limiting access, and explaining when information cannot remain private because of safety, policy, or legal obligations.

- ☐ Collect only information the ministry genuinely needs.
- ☐ Do not discuss participant information casually with other volunteers, family members, friends, prayer groups, or church members.
- ☐ Share information within the ministry only with people who have a legitimate role-based need to know.
- ☐ Protect paper forms, digital files, passwords, photographs, messages, and sign-in records.
- ☐ Do not post participant stories, photographs, prayer requests, or identifying details without appropriate permission.
- ☐ Do not promise absolute secrecy when safety or reporting obligations may require information to be shared.
- ☐ Avoid asking for highly personal details simply because someone is receiving help.

Dignity and Data

A person should not have to surrender unnecessary private information in order to receive ordinary compassion ministry help. Ask only what is needed to serve responsibly, document only what is needed, and explain how information will be used.

Our Confidentiality Plan

Information we collect	_____
Who may access it	_____
Where records are kept	_____
When information must be shared	_____
Who answers privacy questions	_____

5. Digital Boundaries, Texting, Social Media, Photos, and Stories

Digital communication can make a ministry more accessible, but it can also create constant availability, privacy risks, confusion about relationships, and unintended public exposure. Digital boundaries should be written, not assumed.

- ☐ Use ministry-approved accounts or communication channels when possible.
- ☐ Set reasonable hours for texts, calls, and messages.
- ☐ Avoid disappearing-message platforms for important ministry communication when records may be needed.
- ☐ Do not share passwords, account access, private participant information, or screenshots casually.
- ☐ Do not 'friend' or follow participants from personal social-media accounts unless ministry policy clearly permits it.
- ☐ Do not photograph children, vulnerable adults, participants, documents, homes, vehicles, or personal belongings without appropriate permission.
- ☐ Do not use a participant's hardship story for fundraising, publicity, or inspiration without informed permission and ministry approval.
- ☐ Never post in a way that identifies someone receiving assistance unless they have knowingly agreed and it is appropriate under ministry policy.

Digital Boundary Decisions

Area	Our Ministry Standard
Texting / Messaging	
Phone Calls	
Email	
Social Media	
Photos / Video	
Participant Stories	
Group Chats	

Area	Our Ministry Standard
After-Hours Contact	

6. Money, Gifts, Benevolence, and Personal Resources

Money can quickly blur ministry relationships. A volunteer may want to help personally, but private financial arrangements can create pressure, unequal treatment, misunderstandings, dependency, or conflict.

- ☐ Volunteers know whether personal cash gifts are allowed.
- ☐ Volunteers know whether loans are prohibited.
- ☐ Financial assistance follows a consistent ministry process rather than private promises.
- ☐ No volunteer controls ministry money without appropriate accountability.
- ☐ Participants are not pressured to give money, gifts, services, or public testimonies in exchange for help.
- ☐ Gift acceptance rules are clear for both volunteers and participants.
- ☐ Volunteers know what to do when someone repeatedly asks them personally for money, food, lodging, or other resources.

Fairness Matters

Private exceptions can feel compassionate in the moment but may create unfairness, secrecy, and expectations the ministry cannot sustain. When a request falls outside normal practice, involve the designated leader rather than making a private arrangement.

Money and Gift Boundaries for Our Ministry

Personal money	_____
Loans	_____
Participant gifts to volunteers	_____
Volunteer gifts to participants	_____
Benevolence decisions	_____
Exceptions approved by	_____

7. Transportation, Home Visits, and Off-Site Contact

Transportation and home visits can be valuable ministries, but they create additional safety, insurance, privacy, and role-boundary questions. Do not let these practices develop informally.

Transportation Questions

- ☐ Who is approved to drive?
- ☐ What driver, vehicle, insurance, seat-belt, child-passenger, and supervision requirements apply?
- ☐ May volunteers transport a participant alone?
- ☐ May family members or children ride along?
- ☐ Are gas reimbursement, mileage, or personal errands allowed?
- ☐ What happens when a participant asks for transportation outside the ministry's stated purpose?

Home Visit Questions

- ☐ Who approves a home visit?
- ☐ Should two volunteers go together?
- ☐ Are there situations in which a home visit should not occur?
- ☐ What information should be documented before and after the visit?
- ☐ How are children, pets, weapons, substance use, illness, unsafe conditions, or other risks handled?
- ☐ What should a volunteer do if the situation becomes uncomfortable or unsafe?

Do Not Improvise Safety

When a situation feels unsafe, confusing, or outside the ministry's normal practice, volunteers should leave or pause as appropriate, contact the designated leader, and follow established safety or emergency procedures.

8. Children, Youth, and Vulnerable Adults

Ministries serving or encountering children, youth, older adults, people with disabilities, or other vulnerable individuals need additional safeguards. Boundaries should be consistent with the church or organization's child-protection, vulnerable-adult, screening, supervision, and reporting policies.

- ☐ Volunteer screening and background-check requirements are clear.
- ☐ Two-adult, visibility, restroom, transportation, overnight, and one-on-one rules are clear where applicable.
- ☐ Volunteers do not create secret relationships or ask children or vulnerable adults to hide communication or contact.
- ☐ Physical touch is appropriate to the setting and follows ministry policy.
- ☐ Medication, toileting, personal-care, lifting, and health-related assistance are handled only by approved people under appropriate procedures.
- ☐ Concerns about abuse, neglect, exploitation, or safety are reported through the ministry's designated process.
- ☐ Volunteers understand that they should report concerns rather than conduct their own investigation.

When Safety Concerns Arise

A boundaries guide is not a substitute for child-protection or vulnerable-adult policy. Serious concerns should move immediately out of ordinary volunteer problem-solving and into the ministry's established reporting, safeguarding, and emergency process.

Our Ministry Safeguarding Contacts

Primary safeguarding contact	_____
Backup contact	_____
Where policy is located	_____
Emergency procedure location	_____

9. Spiritual Boundaries: Sharing Faith With Grace and Integrity

Christian compassion ministry naturally creates opportunities for prayer, Scripture, testimony, and gospel conversations. Spiritual care should be sincere and clear, but never manipulative. Help should not be used as leverage for a spiritual response.

- ☐ Prayer is offered respectfully rather than forced.
- ☐ A person is not required to make a spiritual decision in order to receive ordinary ministry help unless participation in a clearly identified spiritual program is itself the service being offered.
- ☐ Volunteers do not shame, argue, threaten, or imply that hardship proves spiritual failure.
- ☐ Volunteers do not use confidential information as material for public prayer or testimony.
- ☐ People are given truthful information about the Christian identity and purpose of the ministry.
- ☐ Spiritual questions beyond a volunteer's experience are referred to an appropriate pastor or ministry leader.
- ☐ Forgiveness is not used to pressure someone to return to an unsafe situation, remove appropriate consequences, or restore trust before trust has been rebuilt.

Grace and Choice

Christian witness is strongest when compassion, truth, dignity, and freedom from manipulation remain together. A volunteer can be clear about faith while still respecting a person's ability to listen, ask questions, decline prayer, or take time.

10. Professional-Role Limits and Referrals

Compassion ministries often meet people whose needs extend beyond the ministry's training or authority. Volunteers can listen, encourage, help identify options, and connect people with qualified resources, but they should not present themselves as professionals when they are not.

Need or Situation	Volunteer May	Volunteer Should Not
Medical concern	Listen, help locate care, follow emergency procedure.	Diagnose, recommend treatment, manage medications unless specifically authorized.
Mental-health crisis	Stay calm, involve leader, follow crisis/referral procedure.	Provide therapy or manage a serious crisis alone.
Legal problem	Help locate qualified legal resources.	Give legal advice or interpret legal rights as a professional.
Domestic violence / stalking	Listen, preserve dignity, follow safety/referral procedures.	Confront the alleged abuser, create a safety plan beyond training, or promise secrecy.
Substance-use crisis	Follow ministry response plan and connect with appropriate help.	Detox, medically manage withdrawal, or become the sole crisis contact.
Financial crisis	Use approved benevolence/resources and refer.	Make private loans or become a person's personal financial manager.

Can I / Should I / Must I Refer?

Use these three questions before responding to a difficult request:

- ☐ CAN I? Is this action allowed by my role, ministry policy, training, and supervision?
- ☐ SHOULD I? Even if I am allowed to do it, is it wise, fair, sustainable, and consistent with how others are served?
- ☐ MUST I REFER OR REPORT? Does this involve professional expertise, immediate danger, abuse concerns, serious crisis, policy requirements, or another issue that belongs with leadership or a qualified resource?

11. When Boundaries Are Tested

A boundary may be tested because a person is afraid, disappointed, used to inconsistent relationships, under pressure, or simply hoping the answer will change. The volunteer's task is not to punish the person or win an argument. The task is to remain calm, clear, respectful, and consistent.

A Simple Response Pattern

Step	What to Do	Example
1. Acknowledge	Recognize the concern or emotion.	"I can see this is disappointing."
2. State the limit	Give the boundary briefly and clearly.	"I am not able to give personal money."
3. Name the next step	Offer the appropriate option if one exists.	"I can help you complete the ministry request form."
4. Repeat once	Do not argue in circles.	"My answer is the same, and I can still help with the approved option."
5. Involve leadership	Get support when pressure, anger, safety, or repeated testing continues.	"I need to involve my team leader before we continue."

Helpful Boundary Phrases

- I care about what is happening, and I want to be clear about what I can do.
- That is outside my role, but I can help you identify the right person to ask.
- I am available during our ministry hours, not late at night.
- I cannot make that exception on my own.
- Our ministry does not provide personal loans.
- I am not able to transport you privately, but we can look at approved options.
- I cannot promise to keep a safety concern secret.
- I need to follow our policy and involve my ministry leader.
- I want to continue this conversation when we can speak respectfully.

12. Boundary Drift: Warning Signs for Volunteers and Leaders

Boundary problems rarely begin with one dramatic decision. They often develop gradually through exceptions, secrecy, exhaustion, guilt, or a growing sense that one volunteer is uniquely responsible for one person.

- ☐ I am hiding a ministry interaction from my supervisor or team.
- ☐ I am making repeated exceptions for one person.
- ☐ A participant contacts me far more than the ministry role requires.
- ☐ I feel personally responsible for whether someone succeeds, stays sober, finds housing, keeps a job, or makes a spiritual decision.
- ☐ I am giving personal money, rides, time, or resources that I would not normally give.
- ☐ I feel guilty, angry, resentful, or anxious when I cannot fix the situation.
- ☐ My family, work, health, rest, church life, or finances are being harmed by my ministry availability.
- ☐ I am becoming the only person a participant trusts or contacts.
- ☐ I am avoiding supervision because I do not want someone to question what I am doing.
- ☐ I am using 'compassion' to justify actions that conflict with policy or wise judgment.

A Warning Sign Is a Prompt for Support

Recognizing boundary drift does not require shame. It is a reason to involve supervision, reset the role, share responsibility, restore consistency, and decide what support the volunteer needs.

What I Need to Reset

13. Realistic Ministry Scenarios

Late-Night Crisis Calls

Situation: A participant begins calling one volunteer late at night several times each week. The volunteer is exhausted but fears the participant will feel abandoned.

Discuss: What should be clarified about availability? Who should be involved? What referral or after-hours plan is needed?

The Private Loan

Situation: A volunteer has become close to a family receiving food assistance. The family asks privately for \$300 and promises to repay it next month.

Discuss: What risks are present? What does fairness require? What approved ministry response is available?

Social Media Connection

Situation: A teenager served through a family ministry sends a personal friend request and begins private messaging a volunteer.

Discuss: What policy should guide the volunteer? What safeguarding concerns apply?

The Ride Home

Situation: A participant misses the bus after a ministry event and asks a volunteer for a private ride home.

Discuss: What transportation rules apply? Is there a safe approved option? Who should make the decision?

The Public Testimony

Situation: A ministry leader wants to share a dramatic participant story in a fundraising post because it could inspire donors.

Discuss: What permissions are needed? Could the story expose private information or pressure the person receiving help?

The Volunteer Who Knows Too Much

Situation: A volunteer with professional experience begins giving detailed legal, medical, or counseling advice during ministry conversations.

Discuss: How should the role be clarified? When should qualified professional referral replace informal advice?

14. Ministry Boundary Risk Review

Use this checklist with the ministry leadership team. A 'Not Clear' answer does not automatically mean the ministry must stop, but it identifies an area that needs a decision before volunteers are expected to handle it on their own.

Boundary Question	Clear	Not Clear	Action Needed
Volunteers know exactly what the ministry provides and does not provide.	☐	☐	
Supervision and backup leadership are identified.	☐	☐	
Money, gifts, benevolence, and exceptions have written expectations.	☐	☐	
Transportation and home-visit practices are defined.	☐	☐	
Texting, social media, photos, stories, and digital records are addressed.	☐	☐	
Confidentiality and privacy expectations are clear.	☐	☐	
Children / vulnerable-adult safeguards are clear where applicable.	☐	☐	
Professional-role limits and referral expectations are clear.	☐	☐	
Spiritual conversations and prayer are handled respectfully.	☐	☐	
Serious safety concerns move immediately to the appropriate leader or emergency process.	☐	☐	
Volunteers know what to do when someone repeatedly tests a boundary.	☐	☐	
Volunteer burnout, coverage, and time-off expectations are addressed.	☐	☐	

Top Three Boundary Priorities

15. Ministry Boundary Agreement

This page may be adapted for volunteer orientation. It is not a substitute for your church or organization's formal policies, but it provides a simple shared commitment to healthy ministry relationships.

- ☐ I will serve within my assigned role and ask before taking on responsibilities outside that role.
- ☐ I will treat people with dignity and avoid shaming, manipulating, interrogating, or making promises I cannot keep.
- ☐ I will protect confidential and private information and share it only through appropriate ministry channels.
- ☐ I will follow ministry expectations for money, gifts, transportation, home visits, communication, social media, photographs, and participant stories.
- ☐ I will not create secret or inappropriate relationships with people served through the ministry.
- ☐ I will not present myself as a professional counselor, attorney, medical provider, financial advisor, or other licensed professional unless I am serving in an approved role that requires that credential.
- ☐ I will follow safeguarding and reporting procedures when children, vulnerable adults, abuse concerns, threats, or serious safety issues are involved.
- ☐ I will ask for help when a situation exceeds my role, training, or capacity.
- ☐ I will accept supervision, correction, and changes in assignment when needed for the good of participants, volunteers, and the ministry.
- ☐ I will care for my own health, family, responsibilities, and spiritual life so that service remains sustainable.

Volunteer / Team Member

Name	_____
Signature / Date	_____
Ministry Leader	_____
Leader Signature / Date	_____

16. Boundary Planning Worksheet

Use this page when a boundary issue is recurring, unclear, or difficult. The goal is to move from emotion and uncertainty to a clear, shared plan.

Situation	_____ _____
What is the real need?	_____ _____
What belongs to our ministry?	_____ _____
What is outside our role?	_____ _____
What policy or boundary applies?	_____ _____
What respectful words will we use?	_____ _____
Who needs to be involved?	_____ _____
What referral or next step is appropriate?	_____ _____
When will we review the decision?	_____

Closing Reminder

A compassion ministry does not become less loving when it has healthy boundaries. It becomes more trustworthy. Clear roles protect dignity. Consistent limits protect fairness. Good supervision protects volunteers. Wise referral protects people whose needs require more than the ministry can provide. Healthy boundaries make it possible to keep showing up with compassion, truth, humility, and the love of Christ.

Closing Prayer

Lord, give us tender hearts and wise judgment. Help us serve generously without promising what we cannot provide, listen carefully without taking control, speak truth without becoming harsh, and recognize when another kind of help is needed. Protect the

people we serve, the volunteers who serve them, and the witness of this ministry. Teach us to care deeply, serve wisely, and remain faithful in the work You have given us. Amen.