

Boundaries as Acts of Care for You and Your Team

By Bryce Thomason · April 8, 2025 · 3 min read



Many leaders tell me they struggle with boundaries, and almost always the story begins the same way: “I just need to get better at saying no.” But the challenge isn’t really the word no. It’s the fears that follow: disappointment, judgment, misunderstanding, or the quiet worry that if we stop holding everything together, something important might fall apart. I know that feeling intimately.

In congregational life where I experience this most, the needs are endless and often tender. There is always another meeting to prepare for, another pastoral concern to attend to, another situation that feels like it might unravel without intervention. More than once, I’ve found myself in my office long after everyone else has gone home, answering one more email or writing one more update because it felt like the compassionate thing to do.

But here’s what I’ve learned, and what I’ve preached from the pulpit more than once: love without boundaries is not sustainable. It shines brightly at first, but eventually it burns out.

Boundaries are not barriers; they are the structures that allow love, leadership, and care to endure. A boundary is the point at which you choose to protect what keeps you grounded: your energy, your clarity, your time, your integrity. Boundaries shape how and where you give, so your giving can be generous rather than depleting. They are not about withholding; they are about staying rooted.

In ministry and leadership, the absence of boundaries can easily be mistaken for devotion. You may be praised for being available, for stepping in, for carrying the extra load. People thank you for your responsiveness and presence. And while each individual “yes” feels compassionate, they accumulate into something else: exhaustion, tension, and a thinning of presence that no amount of goodwill can conceal.

I once told my congregation that the most important thing a spiritual leader can offer is presence, not perfection or omnipresence or constant availability. Presence is the capacity to be fully with someone, or with a moment, without rushing, splitting your attention, or overriding your own limits. And presence is not possible without boundaries.

Boundaries are what allow our best selves to arrive.

One of the most important shifts leaders can make is understanding that boundaries are not acts of self-protection; they are acts of care. Care for ourselves, yes, but also care for our communities and our teams. A leader without boundaries eventually becomes reactive, scattered, or depleted. A leader with boundaries creates steadiness, the kind others can trust.

Here is a small practice I often share in coaching: Before you say yes, pause and ask yourself: “If I agree to this, what (or who) am I saying no to?”

You might be saying no to rest. No to your family. No to the clarity you need for the next day. No to someone else’s opportunity to grow.

That single question reframes everything. It shifts the moment from guilt to discernment, from fear to alignment. Once you begin noticing what your yes displaces, your boundaries start to reveal themselves.

And when that happens, something remarkable unfolds. Relationships deepen because they are grounded in honesty rather than obligation. Teams grow because they are trusted. Work becomes more sustainable. You begin to recognize that boundaries do not distance you from others. They bring you closer in a way that is healthier and truer.

If you’ve been carrying more than your share, or if your yes has become automatic, consider this a gentle invitation. Boundaries do not diminish your leadership; they deepen it. They do not close you off; they keep you connected to your purpose, your people, and your own humanity.

And they allow you to lead not from depletion, but from wholeness.