

ETHICS for CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

Moral Formation
for Twenty-First-Century Leaders

Joe E. Trull *and* R. Robert Creech


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To
all good ministers
who faithfully serve
Jesus Christ and his church
with integrity



Wide was his parish, houses far asunder,
But never did he fail, for rain or thunder,
In sickness, or in sin, or any state,
To visit the farthest, regardless their financial state,
Going by foot, and in his hand, a stave.
This fine example to his flock he gave,
That first he wrought and afterwards he taught;
Out of the gospel then that text he caught,
And this metaphor he added thereunto—
That, if gold would rust, what shall iron do?
For if the priest be foul, in whom we trust,
No wonder that a layman thinks of lust?

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*

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Preface

Few voices were raised on the subject of ministerial ethics in the latter half of the twentieth century—seldom did theological seminaries offer training on the topic, and texts written on pastoral ethics were scarce. Although not many books on ethics in ministry appeared during the final years of the twentieth century,¹ a handful of excellent texts on the subject were written.² During the last two decades, little has changed—the lack of adequate resources for the study of ministerial ethics continues.

A corollary truth adds to this serious deficiency in pastoral education—very few seminaries offer even one course in this subject. Ironically, the most conservative Bible schools and theological seminaries are the ones most lacking in the study of ministerial ethics. Most divinity schools speak to this subject in pastoral ministry classes. However (as is so often true), the subject usually is left until last and thus often left out completely!

To be fair, many religious schools and seminaries have accepted greater responsibility to develop moral character in their students through studies in spiritual formation.³ Emphases on spiritual growth and ethical character form a good foundation for ethics in ministry, but the complexity of moral issues in the minister’s home, church, and society requires more than a “character development” course.

Rightly or wrongly, churches formerly assumed Christian ministers were persons of integrity who could be counted on to be ethical. No longer is this presumption possible, if it ever were! In 2002 clergy sexual misconduct by Roman Catholic priests, coupled with an apparent cover-up by church officials, shocked the nation and captured the news. Lawsuits threatened to bankrupt several dioceses. Leaders in all religious groups reassessed the need for ethics

in ministry among their own clergy. Since then, hardly a week goes by without a revelation of a “fallen minister.” On April 15, 2016, the new director of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention wrote: “This week another high-profile pastor was removed from ministry for immorality, this time a friend of mine.”⁴

Add to this the number of knotty social issues faced by the modern minister, which increases annually—especially those ethical dilemmas exacerbated by our complex technological society. More than ever, the minister in today’s world must be prepared to grapple with intricate moral problems and community conflicts, as well as ethical dilemmas in his or her own church and personal life.

The purpose of our text is twofold: First, this book intends to teach Christian ministry students the unique moral role of the minister and the ethical responsibilities of that vocation. The second purpose is more practical: to provide for new and established ministers a clear statement of the ethical obligations contemporary clergy should assume in their personal and professional life. The text begins with the minister’s unique role as a professional (chap. 1), followed by an elaboration of those ethical responsibilities of the clergy to self, family, ministry colleagues, and society (chaps. 2–6). Chapter 7 addresses the particularly difficult issue of clergy sexual abuse, and chapter 8 uniquely outlines the way a minister may write their own personal code of ethics. Dr. Trull prepared chapters 1, 2, 7, and 8. Dr. Creech prepared chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Four appendixes at the close of the book provide the reader with “A Procedure for Responding to Charges of Clergy Sexual Abuse” (app. A), “Early Denominational Codes of Ethics” (app. B), “Contemporary Denominational Codes of Ethics” (app. C), and “Sample Codes of Ethics” (app. D).

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1

Walking with Integrity

A Profession or a Calling?

Ours is an age of ethical uncertainty. In Walker Percy's novel *The Thanatos Syndrome*, a minister faces an ethical dilemma. Percy capsules his moral confusion and ours in one line: "This is not the Age of Enlightenment, but the Age of Not Knowing What to Do."¹ One writer calls this quote an apt aphorism for our age and adds: "Politicians, scientists, physicians, business leaders, everyday citizens, and our clergy increasingly find themselves in situations where they really do not know what to do. As a result, ethics has become a boom industry, and moral failure a regular front-page phenomenon. Conventional wisdom seems glaringly inadequate in the face of our environmental, technological, political, economic and social situations."² Ministerial ethics can no longer be assumed, if ever they were.

During the election year of 2016, many prominent evangelical ministers became involved in the political campaigns of candidates. One, the pastor of the renowned First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, even traveled to another state during a primary campaign to give his ringing endorsement of a candidate for president, although the candidate was himself not considered religious or even mildly moral.³ Not only was this a violation of federal law for clergy but the act was also an obvious breach of all ministerial codes of conduct.⁴

To this seeming confusion about ministerial morality, add the present decline in organized religion. Martin Marty, eminent church historian at the University of Chicago, calls the present trend a "drift away" from traditional churches,

quoting author Linda Mercadante: “‘No matter how organized religions try to ignore, challenge, adapt, or protest it, our society is being changed by this pervasive ethos.’ Her studied types, ‘dissenters, casuals, explorers, seekers, and immigrants (to new beliefs)’ are often ‘millennials’ who cannot return to the religion of their youth, ‘in part because many of them never had one.’”⁵ All studies indicate that today’s youth are often more skeptical of the country’s institutions than the youth in the generations that preceded them.

George Bullard, an expert on church ministry and cultural change, asks whether the millennial generation (those born from 1982 to 2000) brought radical change. His answer: “During their birth years, we saw the emergence of the postmodern age, in which paradigms shifted and many understandings of reality retuned to zero and reset. The heavy focus on vision . . . has shifted to a focus on relationships. . . . Absolute truth has morphed into the story of each person’s truth. . . . Information previously imparted only by experts is now free on the Internet. . . . The fastest growing denomination beginning about 20 years ago is called nondenominational.”⁶

Somewhat like the Earl of Grantham in *Downton Abbey*, I have difficulty accepting the fact that something I love and to which I have given my life is changing. Yet the last two decades have brought many alterations to the shape of American church life. Things are different. Among the many challenges faced by churches and denominations in this second decade of the twenty-first century, ministerial ethics ranks near the top.

An annual poll of the top ten religious stories in 2014 listed clergy wrongdoing as number eight. Catholic communities are still reeling from the sordid revelations and costly court cases involving priests who sexually abused young people—the Archdiocese of Chicago released more than twenty-one thousand pages of evidence related to such clergy abuse. Mark Driscoll, the leader of a Seattle-based megachurch network in five states, resigned following a series of charges that included financial misconduct, plagiarism, and a harsh, hyper-macho theology. In the nation’s capital, Barry Freundel, a prominent Orthodox rabbi, was accused of voyeurism and secretly spying on naked women in the *mikvah*, the ritual bath.⁷

Moral failures in the ministry are all too common today. Chaucer asked, “If gold would rust, what shall iron do?” Obviously, it too rusts—perhaps more rapidly. “For if the priest be foul, in whom we trust,” continued the author of *The Canterbury Tales*, “no wonder that a layman thinks of lust?”

The present crisis in ministerial ethics is both a reflection of our times and an influence on our society. Ethical failure in the pulpit affects the pew. At the same time, clergy morals seem to mirror the general decline in morality among the laity. In a day fraught with political cover-ups, insider trading on

the stock exchange, corporate scandals, and media manipulation, people are seldom shocked when they hear of an immoral minister.

Today's minister walks an ethical tightrope. At one moment, she or he may serve as a prophet, priest, or educator; in the next, a cleric may be an administrator, a counselor, or a worship leader. Each of these roles raises ethical dilemmas and exposes moral vulnerability not faced by doctors, lawyers, or other professionals. For example, most church members trust their minister without hesitation. Yet this intimate relationship often involves parishioners sharing their souls, which makes a church minister vulnerable to many subtle temptations. The most obvious danger is sexual misconduct. Many clergy catastrophes involve adulterous relationships, sexual liaisons, pedophilic acts, and other sexual transgressions.⁸

Equally immoral, though often overlooked, are certain ministerial habits that may be considered part of the "job description." Pulpit exaggeration is accepted as a normal trait of preachers. More serious is the unethical conduct of an autocratic leader who misuses power, manipulates people, and practices deception and dishonesty. Blaise Pascal warned that people "never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious convictions" (*Pensees* 894). The American culture stimulates in many clerics the desire to succeed. To be called as a pastor of a large, prestigious church is a goal that has led many good ministers to sacrifice their integrity on the altar of success.

A foundational question must be asked at the beginning: Is Christian ministry a career or a profession? Is church ministry simply a vocational choice based on aptitude tests, personality profiles, or job opportunities? Should a person prepare to be a church minister without a sense of divine calling?

Oliver Sacks begins his book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* with the fascinating story of a person suffering from agnosia.⁹ Dr. P. (the patient) was a distinguished musician and teacher in Berlin. His students first recognized his strange behavior when he was unable to identify people he knew well. In addition, he often mistook objects such as parking meters and fire hydrants for young children. At the close of one session with Dr. Sacks, Dr. P. started looking for his hat. Finally, he reached toward his wife's head and tried to put it on his own. *Agnosia* is the psychiatric term for the loss of the ability to recognize familiar objects. Although Dr. P. retained a highly abstract cognitive ability, his illness prevented him from recognizing people, for he saw faces only in bits and pieces. Incredible as it seems, Dr. P. got along quite well despite his disability and was able to work until the end of his life.

Amusing and yet tragic, the case of Dr. P. is a metaphor for the practice of ministry and for ministerial ethics.¹⁰ Every seminarian knows that a call to become a minister of a church is a call to various tasks. Preaching, teaching,

counseling, visiting, administrating, promoting, recruiting, leading worship, and doing community service are just a few of those tasks. Today's minister must wear many hats. The unseen danger for the busy religious worker is "clerical agnosia," becoming a minister who mistakes a parishioner for one of his or her hats! In short, people can get lost in the midst of an active ministry.

What caused this multiplication of roles, which increases the risk of contracting clerical agnosia and overlooking persons? James Gustafson observed three primary developments during the past century that precipitated this role change for ministers:

The first is the voluntary character of religion in the United States, which in its various dimensions makes the clergy unusually responsive to the desires and needs of the laity and to changes in the culture. The second is the breakdown of a sense of independent authority in the clergy; in the absence of wide acceptance of the traditional bases of their authority, clergymen seek substitute ways to make themselves legitimate. The third is the effort of the clergy to find new ways to make religious faith relevant to changing social and cultural patterns.¹¹

These changes have led to clergy confusion and a condition Gustafson calls *anomie*, a lack of clear delineation of authority. The typical minister is bewildered, not only about what to do but also about whom to serve. Who has the final word: the individual member, the congregation, the denomination, or God?

Dr. P.'s story is a parable of what can happen to any church overseer. Without realizing it, pastors and other ministers can slip into believing that as long as the "bits and pieces" of people are visible, all is well. Ministry can become impersonal. Church members begin to look like consumer-oriented clients, and the church itself takes on the appearance of a corporation, whose chief executive must work to keep "profits" high and "customers" happy. In the midst of this busyness, the real purpose of ministry can be lost.

As we propose in the next chapter, the moral ideal for a minister is integrity, a life of ethical wholeness and moral maturity. How does the person called by God to serve the church achieve integrity of character and conduct? The most naive believe that since a minister is set apart by God, ethics will take care of itself, for God calls only good people. Others assume that those who preach the gospel must surely live by the Bible's precepts and principles. Most laypersons admire the dedication of those who devote their lives to a Christian vocation and suppose that this commitment ensures a Christian lifestyle.

Ministerial integrity is neither simple nor automatic. Clergy ethics, however, does begin with a proper understanding of the minister's vocation. Therefore,

the purpose of this chapter is to reexamine the vocational role of the clergy. This begins with the minister's understanding of "calling." Is it to a career or to a profession? To answer this basic question, we must also define *profession*. A brief review of the history of professions, which originated in religious orders (whose members "professed" something), will aid an understanding of the term. This chapter also explores a significant change in cultural values that precipitated a crisis for professionals. Many believe that because of a change in professionalization in American society, the professional ethics model is fundamentally inappropriate for today's clergy. Finally, we will attempt to determine whether the minister is indeed a true professional, and if so, how the professional ethics model can be a tool for "doing" clergy ethics.

The Call to Ministry

A basic prerequisite for an ethical ministry is a clear understanding of the minister's calling. How does a person enter vocational Christian service? Does a candidate receive a divine calling from God or simply choose a career? Is the ministry an occupation or a profession? What does the office itself require of the ordained: an inspiring moral life, effective church leadership, polished ministry skills, sound theological beliefs, unerring professional conduct, or some combination of these ministerial attributes?

H. Richard Niebuhr called the ministry of his generation a "perplexed profession." The situation today has not improved, for contemporary clerics are equally puzzled. Like butterflies newly hatched, seminary graduates flutter away from ivy-covered campuses planning to fly high, only to crash into the brick wall of "Old First Church." Young ministers quickly discover that pastoral ministry, rather than the spiritual enterprise they expected, is more like running a secular business. The weekly calendar is crammed with financial meetings, publicity decisions, personnel problems, and laity complaints. When will there be time for theological discussions, spiritual disciplines, or the real mission of the church?

A survey of recent graduates conducted by two seminary faculty members revealed that the major concern of these first-time ministers was coping with uncertainties regarding their roles in ministry. "We found beginning clergy-persons almost completely at the mercy of the expectations of their first parish without counterbalancing claims from denomination or profession. Formation of clerical identity depended on satisfying the first congregation."¹²

If this be true, it is important for first-time clergy to have a clear understanding of their role. Every church has an unwritten list of expectations for

its ordained leaders, and similarly, each new church shepherd arrives with a notebook filled with plans and priorities. The two sets seldom match. Much disappointment and many tensions arise during the first years because of such misunderstandings. The result can be catastrophic: increasing conflict, ministerial fatigue, and even forced termination. Yale professor Gaylord Noyce asserts, “Clergy ‘burnout,’ so publicized, results more from a blurred pastoral identity than from overwork. Professional ethics well taught counteracts that kind of haziness.”¹³

So the question arises again: To what is a minister called—a career or a profession? An occupation or a unique vocation? Each cleric must also ask, “Whom do I serve, Christ or the congregation?” Or to put it another way, “Am I serving Christ as I serve the congregation?” Building a ministry based on integrity requires that a minister’s sense of calling and concept of service be biblical, ethical, and Christlike.

Most evangelical ministers would identify with Jeremiah’s account of his calling: “The word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations’” (Jer. 1:4–5 NIV). This messenger to Israel believed that the sovereign Lord had graciously planned for him to be a spokesman for God from the beginning of his existence. Christian ministers should likewise be confident of God’s plan for their lives as revealed in their call to Christian ministry. This conviction about the will of God is more than a choice of career based on personality inventories; it is an acknowledgment of a divine appointment. As Yahweh chose Abraham to lead a new people (Gen. 12:1–3) and sent Moses on a redemptive mission (Exod. 3:10), so God calls and sends ministers today. Their response to God’s calling must be like that of Isaiah: “Here am I; send me!” (Isa. 6:8).

Yahweh’s prophets are not only called but also given a message and a mission. Such was the case with Deborah (Judg. 4–5), Isaiah (6:8–9), Amos (7:15), and John the Baptist (John 1:6–8). The apostle from Tarsus was so convinced that God had appointed him as a missionary to the gentile world that he wrote, “I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16 NIV). There can be no doubt that the minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ is set apart and sent forth by God to fulfill a divine mission. The ministry is a *vocatio*, a calling from God.

At the same time, the minister usually fulfills this calling through service to a congregation of God’s people. This body of believers pays the salary of the church leader and expects some type of ministerial service in return. How should a person set apart by God to minister to the Christian community interpret his or her relationship to the church?

Simon Peter wrote a clear word about pastoral responsibility to the *ekklesia* of Christ: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2–3 NIV).

It is impossible to discuss ministers and what they do apart from the church, for what the clergy most needs is a function of what the church most needs. “At a very early date, from among the ranks of the baptized, the church found it good to call some of its members to lead, to help the congregation nurture within itself those virtues needed for the life and work of the colony. Call these leaders preachers, priests, pastors, prophets, or just plain Jane—this is their particular vocation: building up a congregation.”¹⁴

Although a minister’s primary loyalty is to God, this devotion must never be an excuse for avoiding pastoral duties. Ministry involves both privilege and responsibility. A minister’s calling always must be fleshed out in some kind of community, usually a local congregation. One cannot serve Christ without serving people, for to serve people is to serve Christ (Matt. 25:31–46).

As we seek a clear understanding of the minister’s calling, we should note that the terms *vocation*, *profession*, and *career* have multiple meanings. William May of Southern Methodist University has suggested that this confusion of terminology has created tensions. He points out that every Christian has a vocation, which traditionally has meant a commitment to God and neighbor. A career, however, is a more selfish thing; it is a means to pursue one’s own private aims and purposes. Instead of asking what the community needs, a career person asks, “What do I want to be, and where do I want to go?”¹⁵ If these two questions are uppermost in your mind, does that not mean you are pursuing a career rather than answering a call?

In the biblical sense, as Martin Luther and John Calvin both emphasized, all Christians are “called” to serve God in and through their vocation. The minister stands somewhere between this generalized concept of vocation for all Christians and a specific career. She or he is fulfilling a calling and not just choosing a career. Yet something more is involved. The unique calling to be a Christian minister has features that result in unusual obligations.

Historically, the word *profess* meant “to testify on behalf of” or “to stand for something.” Being a professional person carried implications about knowledge and moral responsibility. “The professional knows something that will benefit the wider community, and he or she has a responsibility to use that knowledge to serve the wider human community.”¹⁶ Let us now explore how this traditional concept of a professional relates to the vocation of the minister.

The History of Professions

John Piper wants his fellow pastors to know “we are *not* professionals.”¹⁷ His book with that title is a collection of essays that urges his preaching colleagues “to quit looking at their jobs through the eyes of secular society.” He believes professionalism leads to spiritual decline and has nothing to do with the essence and heart of Christian ministry.¹⁸

This misunderstanding is common. The term *professional* is often considered a secular title reserved for reverends who are more concerned with status and prestige than spiritual ministry. In fact, the very opposite should be true. Indeed, only if a minister is truly a professional will that person’s ministry be truly biblical and Christian.

To understand the true meaning of the word *professional*, it is necessary to review briefly the history of professions, how professionalization began, and what changes have occurred over the years. This is especially crucial for comprehending the present-day crisis facing all professionals, including ministers.

Darrell Reeck believes that the roots of contemporary professions can be traced back to those early priests, healers, and chiefs who promoted human values in primitive societies. Unlike the modern version, these “prototypical professionals” were unspecialized and usually perpetuated themselves through inheritance rather than through achievement. Nevertheless, these traditionalists did use their rudimentary skills to meet basic human needs in their cultural groups.¹⁹

In early Israel, a special class of religious professionals developed—namely, priests and prophets. They became the supreme authorities in law and religion and also performed some medical functions. The wealthy commercial and political “professionals” were castigated by prophets such as Amos for crushing the poor through dishonest and unethical business practices. The concept of the prophet in ancient Israel was a “religious-cultural creation of the highest order,” because this religious profession “presuppose[d] the very source and meaning of the life of the individual and of the covenanted community.”²⁰

By the time of Jesus, a variety of professions had emerged: priests, teachers, lawyers, physicians, and soldiers. Although Christ often denounced the clerics and legal experts of his day as hypocritical and legalistic, Jesus himself became known as a rabbi from Galilee, a member of the teaching profession. In the Gospels and Acts, we meet another professional, the “beloved physician” Luke, who ministered to Paul and wrote two books of the New Testament.

During the Middle Ages, particularly in northern Europe, little change occurred. With the established church in control, the clergy became the dominant professional group. The religious leaders of the medieval period also

controlled education, allowing them to write the rules governing the practice of all other professions. There were some benefits of this control. Medicine, law, business, and teaching all existed within a common framework of shared values and beliefs.

During this time and afterward, many occupations and commercial groups organized into guilds. The guilds served to maintain standards, train recruits, and discipline the wayward. After the Industrial Revolution, some guilds evolved into professions.

Important to an understanding of modern professions and the ministry is the revival of a key biblical doctrine during the Reformation. Before the Reformation, it was generally believed that the only people who received a divine calling were those chosen by God to enter the spiritually superior monastic way. This calling (*vocatio*) was reserved for religious professionals alone. Martin Luther and John Calvin challenged this tradition, basing their argument on the biblical teaching of calling prominent in the Pauline Epistles (Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 7:20–24; 12:28; Eph. 4:11). Both Reformers asserted that every worthwhile form of work was a divine calling. The farmer, the merchant, and the cobbler, not just the priest, had a call from God to serve the world in their work.

Luther, being a bit more conservative, felt that each person should labor in the occupation of his forebears. Calvin disagreed. He taught that the call to serve God and people was through whatever vocation best suited that person. According to his view, admittance to a profession should be based not on inheritance but on achievement. The importance of this teaching for professional life is difficult to overestimate. “The Judaeo-Christian culture from Biblical times through the Reformation imbued the concept of profession with the moral principle of service grounded in a religious vision of God working together with people for the improvement of all creation. The doctrine of the vocation or calling became the religious and moral theme that most illuminated the meaning of the professions and professional work.”²¹

After 1500, most professions stagnated, remaining small in number and exclusive. Members of the professions led the “good life” of leisurely gentlemen, gaining high social status through attachment to the king and his court. Work that required labor was for the trades; professionals lived the life of refinement among the upper classes.

Even as late as the eighteenth century, the education and competence of professionals were deplorable. Physicians knew Latin and the Greek classics but very little about science or how to treat sick people. The law profession had actually deteriorated since medieval times, as barristers primarily served the gentry.

The clergy was not unaffected by these social trends. In eighteenth-century England, the minister's role was mainly "an occupational appendage of gentry status."²² By the nineteenth century, many of the clergy were eager to be regarded as professionals with specific functions and duties. Regrettably, this desire was difficult to achieve, for a minister's role included many functions more related to his social position as patriarch of his rural parish than to his ordination. Often the local English pastor was also judge, doctor, lawyer, magistrate, and teacher.²³

The professions in colonial America, however, took on a new character. Unhampered by the social class restrictions and institutional inheritance so rigid in England, the American professional "blithely ignored such hallowed distinctions as that between barrister and attorneys, or between apothecary and physician. Professionals were judged by the competency of their performance and not by the impressiveness of their credentials."²⁴

This unique development of the professions in America also had a significant impact on religion. At first there were relatively few professions, the major ones being medicine, law, and ministry. As in rural England, in many towns in the new colonies the minister was the only professional, the one called on to help in matters of law and medicine as well as religion. At this time, all professionals felt a sense of service to the entire community, but they also believed their service was to God. For the minister, this sense of calling, of being chosen by God for this work, was even more intense. Yet Protestants, with their Reformation tradition, also insisted that every occupation was a holy calling. This generalization of the idea of calling led many in America to adopt an attitude of antiprofessionalism. "Lay preachers who were truly called by God could be seen as superior to an educated but spiritually tepid ordained ministry. The growth of the Baptist churches, which began to outnumber the older established Protestant denominations . . . offers an indication of this trend."²⁵ The social situation in America created a new history for professionals. Because there was no noble class, doctors, lawyers, and ministers attached to the middle class and offered to the young an avenue of expression and achievement.

The number of professions in the United States expanded rapidly in the twentieth century. One of the positive results has been a high degree of specialized knowledge and skills. Orthodontists straighten teeth, neurosurgeons correct spinal injuries, and ministers of music direct church choirs. However, because of the market orientation of American capitalism, the services of professionals have sometimes been seen as one more commodity for sale to the highest bidder. Lawyers often feel like hired guns; doctors appear more preoccupied with technology and economics than patients; ministers view themselves as slaves to laity expectations.

A large Southern Baptist seminary surveyed laity and clergy in eight southeastern states concerning the role of pastors. About thirty-two hundred people responded. The results indicated unreasonably high expectations for pastors by laity, as well as wide differences of opinion between the two groups.

Lay respondents showed a strong preference for a direct, aggressive, program-oriented leadership style, whereas professional ministers said they valued “shared, caring relational styles.” . . . People in the pews expect pastors to be equally competent in virtually all aspects of ministry. . . . When laypeople were asked 108 questions about qualities for pastoral ministry, “they basically said all 108 are important. So there is nothing unimportant, which is in a way quite unrealistic.”²⁶

This is part of the crisis that ministers face today as they seek to clarify their role and define their ministry in the modern world.

What conclusions can be drawn from this brief history of the professions? The earliest use of the word *profession* was in relation to those who “professed” vows in a religious order. The essential services provided to society by these religious communities included both the sacred and the secular, as monasteries became centers of culture and education. Thus, these religious orders provided society with artists and educators, experts in law and medicine, political advisers and leaders, as well as theologians, priests, and ministers.²⁷ Gradually, the three vocations of medicine, law, and divinity came to be regarded as unique. The term *laity* originally referred to those untrained in these three professions. By the late Middle Ages, physicians and lawyers who took no religious vows were practicing their crafts. However, the original qualities the clergy “professed” continued to define the true professional.²⁸

One ideal that emerges from this moral heritage of professional life is a theme that Darrell Reeck calls *enablement*, “the devotion of professional skills to meeting the needs of client groups and ultimately, to the common good.”²⁹ The opposite of enablement is exploitation. Reeck believes that a critical question for all contemporary professionals, and especially for the modern minister, is: “Am I in my professional life an enabler or an exploiter?” Before that question can be fully addressed, however, we must first understand what it means today to be a professional and whether that term really fits the minister’s role.

The Meaning of *Professional*

In popular language, the word *professional* is used in careless ways that confuse. Athletes call themselves “pros,” and people with occupations such as

exterminator and beautician advertise their work as “professional.” This common usage of the term is intended to elicit from the public both respect and confidence, but it actually conceals the true meaning of the word.

Sociologists have written extensively about the true nature of professions, professionalization, and professionalism. Two major schools have developed: the “Harvard school,” exemplified by Talcott Parsons, and the “Chicago school,” represented by Eliot Friedson. The Harvard school is functionalist in approach, seeing a profession as a distinct occupation characterized by complex knowledge, social importance, and a high degree of responsibility. The Chicago school sees the category of professional as a “semi-mythic construct” created by members of an occupation to obtain social and economic advantage.³⁰

The functional definition of a profession has been accepted by most researchers, and it is conceptually more substantial. Using Talcott Parsons’s definition as a basis, James Adams characterizes a profession this way: “It performs a unique and essential social service; it requires a long period of general and specialized training, usually in connection with a university; it presupposes skills that are subjected to rational analysis; service to the community rather than economic gain is supposed to be the dominant motive; standards of competence are defined by a comprehensive self-governing organization of practitioners; a high degree of autonomy . . . ; some code of ethics.”³¹ Parsons also argues for certain moral obligations, such as competence and a lack of self-interest, as essential to performance of the social function of a profession.

Concerned about the moral drift in medicine, a health practitioner contends that there are four unchangeable characteristics of the helping professions: “The four features that are fundamental to a true profession are: (1) the nature of the human needs it addresses, (2) the vulnerable state of those it serves, (3) the expectations of trust it generates, and (4) the social contract it implies. Taken together, these features set the traditional ideal of a profession apart from other occupations that lay claim to the title.”³²

In a contemporary text on professional ethics, Michael Bayles outlines three central features necessary for an occupation to be a profession: (1) extensive training, (2) a significant intellectual component in the training, and (3) a trained ability that provides an important service in society. He also notes other features common to many professions—namely, credentialing, an organization of members, and autonomy in the professional’s work.³³

Other functional definitions of a professional devised by sociologists are similar, emphasizing four traits: (1) specialized training, (2) a sense of calling to serve the public, (3) self-regulation including a code of ethics, and

(4) autonomy. Reduced to the simplest terms, “a profession is intended to be a combination of *techné* and *ethos*—of technical knowledge and practice combined with responsible behavior . . . the joining of knowledge and character.”³⁴

A comparison of these professional characteristics with the vocation of minister reveals many points of identity. The role of minister matches all these characteristics except two, a code of ethics and autonomy, both of which are partially met in some denominations.³⁵

Concerning the first, a code of ethics, some Christian groups have developed this document for their ministers, while others have not. The reasons for this inconsistency and the difficulty a code of ethics poses for ministers are explored in chapter 8. The second characteristic, autonomy, is the most critical dimension in an analysis of professions and one especially plaguing for the clergy. Professional autonomy is rooted in an authority based on superior competence. It is assumed, for example, that an orthopedic surgeon is competent in his or her area of specialized knowledge and therefore will assume responsibility for professional decisions. This issue of professional autonomy has become a major area of conflict between professionals and the organizations to which they belong.³⁶

The autonomy of Protestant ministers is much more limited than other professionals because in most churches the clients (members) are also the directors and owners of the organization in which the ministers practice. There has been no small amount of church conflict over pastoral authority and congregational control.

One of the reasons many sociologists are reluctant to include clergypersons in the category of professional is that the pastoral role has become an occupational conglomerate. There are not only various specializations, such as education minister, church counselor, church administrator, and youth minister, but also a multiplicity of tasks in each category. “The job means different things to different people, depending upon who these people are and what they do. In fact, the overall image of the clergy appears confused, and to many, both in and outside the ministry, unattractive.”³⁷

Another research team, A. M. Carr-Saunders and P. A. Wilson, in a standard volume on the professions, excludes the church from consideration because “all those functions related to the ordinary business of life . . . which used to fall to the Church, have been taken over by other vocations. The functions remaining to the Church are spiritual.”³⁸

An adequate definition of *professions* is critical because “one of the most revealing ways of grasping the character of any civilization is precisely through discerning the ultimate orientation and the types of leadership which the civilization adopts.”³⁹ Our culture could be judged by the nature of professional

life today. A widening gap is developing between the traditional definition of a profession and the way professions function at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Before we attempt to determine whether the minister is a true professional, then, one other task remains: to understand the cultural crisis that threatens professional life today. It may well be, as a result of the shift of values in modern American society, that the possibility for a minister to be a professional is no longer an option.

The Crisis in Professional Life Today

Michael Bayles begins both editions of his contemporary and often-quoted book *Professional Ethics* with this paragraph:

The ethics of professional conduct is being questioned as never before in history. Lawyers, physicians, engineers, accountants, and other professionals are being criticized for disregarding the rights of clients and the public interest. Perhaps society is reconsidering the role of professions and professionals. In any event, many difficult ethical challenges are being faced by both professionals and the public. Given the important roles professionals are playing in society during the last decade of the twentieth century, everyone is concerned with professional ethics.⁴⁰

The Alban Institute sponsored a study in 2001 on the status of leadership in American religion. The study concluded that professional ministry today evidences two basic pictures: crisis and ferment.⁴¹ What has happened?

Between the Reformation and modern professionalization, the twin Christian doctrines of vocation and covenant changed decisively. The sense of calling was broadened to the “priesthood of all believers” and eventually included every individual. The doctrine of covenant encouraged the formation of religious communities whose members believed they served the purposes of God by serving others.

The idea of vocation has been replaced by the idea of career as the governing notion of professional life. And the idea of covenant has been replaced by the idea of contract. “Career” comes from a word that referred to the race course in the ancient Roman world. It is a word that refers to achievement by competitive combat, getting ahead, and triumphing over others—even if such achievement involves merely going around in circles. . . . The word “contract” refers to the utilitarian agreements between parties whereby we establish a give-and-take relationship in which goods or services are exchanged on a tit-for-tat basis.⁴²

This secularization of vocation and covenant into career and contract has seriously threatened the recovery of the traditional virtues of professionalism. A physician, Edmund Pellegrino, is alarmed that the central ideas of a profession—altruistic service and effacement of personal reward—are today downplayed. The shift is in the direction of self-interest and away from moral commitments. Pellegrino believes that the present moral character defects of many doctors, lawyers, scientists, and even ministers constitute a grave danger to professional life and to our present society.⁴³

The crisis has both a personal and a social dimension. On the personal side, contemporary professional life poses certain risks. A researcher who has studied the professions in American history has warned that teachers, doctors, lawyers, and pastors face three present dangers: to become more self-reliant, more success oriented, and more convinced of how deserving they are. He concludes: “The church of Christ does not need smug professionals, preoccupied with managing their own careers. The church does not need success-oriented members who reach out only to other winners. The church does not need those who expect the good life because of how hard they work. Instead, Christians are to live out the original ideal of the professions: to serve rather than to be served.”⁴⁴ On the other hand, Dennis Campbell has analyzed some realities in American society that threaten a Christian approach to professional practice. Three major movements in Western culture that are wearing away the underpinnings of professionalism are secularization, pluralism, and relativism.⁴⁵

The United States, like most other nations in the Western world, is predominantly secular. Life is no longer informed by a vision of God or the church. Many views of reality compete in the marketplace of ideas, and thus no one view commands the ultimate loyalty of a majority of Americans.

During the Middle Ages, when the professions were emerging, a Christian worldview prevailed. All aspects of personal and social life were defined by the church and a religious interpretation of life. Society was unified by common religious beliefs and shared values. Concepts of professionalism developed during a time when Christian moral values were widely accepted.

Secularization, like weeds in an unmanaged garden, gradually outgrew the Christian monopoly of Western civilization. As new views challenged the traditions of the past, a plurality of ideas about the meaning and value of life emerged. This pluralism created many problems for the common life of Americans because it bred another cultural monster: relativism. Relativism contends that there is no one absolute view of reality; therefore, all perspectives are equal in value.

With nothing of ultimate meaning to believe in, the average American must turn to material reality for salvation. Religious affirmations make no sense

for people who believe that only what is, is now, and there is no more. When it comes to values and virtues, modern Americans are diverse, divided, and often disinterested.

This absence of shared values is a serious problem for the professions. Since the devastating attacks by radical Islamic terrorists on September 11, 2001, the American public has become acutely aware of multiculturalism in our society. Tolerance of all views and values is the new order of the day. Yet if America encourages a pluralism of worldviews, and if all these views and their ethical teachings are of equal value, how can anyone make judgments about moral actions? “Unless judgments can be made about moral decisions, they are not *moral* decisions, but simply decisions of individual idiosyncrasy. Ethical reflection requires clearly stated assumptions to which one can appeal when reasons for action are examined.”⁴⁶ Developing guidelines for ethical conduct among professionals requires some consensus about values. The social crisis facing all professionals today is the increasing lack of shared values in American society.

Professional ethics also faces a crisis that has other personal and social dimensions. In many ways, it is an outgrowth and reflection of the social changes discussed above. The authority and identity of the professional person is in jeopardy as never before. Traditionally, the authority of doctors, lawyers, and ministers was never questioned because of their vocational competence and their dedication to serve. In the contemporary world, however, the lay public is challenging the professionals at both points. As laypeople have become more knowledgeable, they have become more critical of professional practice. Public disclosures of negligent physicians, incompetent lawyers, and misguided ministers have increased society’s skepticism. Lawsuits have escalated dramatically.

A lack of public confidence in professional competence has paralleled the charge of diminishing professional dedication. Historically, those practicing medicine, law, and religion were trusted because people assumed their only interest was the welfare of those they served. Today, people are not so sure a professional practitioner can be trusted. “Reports abound of unnecessary surgery, unreliable dental practice, questionable legal advice, and poor-quality teaching.”⁴⁷

Since 1977 Gallup has asked the public to rate the honesty and standards of various professions and occupations. In 1985 the clergy had its highest positive rating of 67 percent. In the 1989 poll 12 percent of the public said the clergy rated “very high” on ethical standards, and 43 percent gave a rating of “high”—a 55 percent favorable rating, second to pharmacists and druggists (62 percent), followed by physicians and dentists (52 percent). In

2002, 52 percent of Americans gave “very high” or “high” ratings to clergy, compared to 64 percent in 2001. Researchers attributed the decline in large part to the highly publicized sex scandals that plagued the Roman Catholic Church in 2002, but religious leaders believed there was more to it.⁴⁸ (This number dropped to 45 percent in 2015.)

The point is obvious. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, and even ministers do not command the aura of respect and admiration they once did. Professionals themselves do not share common values, which has no doubt contributed to this question of competence and dedication. Ministers in particular are confused about their identity. James Glasse reported over three decades ago what seems to be true even today: “The image of the ministry is cloudy, confused, and unattractive.”⁴⁹ In particular, he noted that three images of ministry create an identity crisis for the clergy: the ministry as (1) a calling for a particular kind of person, (2) a calling from a particular kind of institution, and (3) a calling to a particular kind of work.⁵⁰ In an analysis of the role of the minister, James Gustafson further points out: “The problem the minister faces in any social context is that of determining *who he is* and *what he is doing* within the complexity of his functions. He frequently lacks, more than anything else, an awareness of what he is about, and therefore he has no central focus for the integration of his various activities.”⁵¹

The crisis faced by ministers is like that of other professionals because both groups have been significantly affected by the shifts in cultural values in America. Perhaps the situation is best summed up by Martin Marty in a text on clergy ethics in America. The highly respected historian contends that the context for clergy ethics has changed to “a more privately contracted entrepreneurial understanding.”⁵² Five elements have intensified this centuries-long trend: (1) a secular view of the clergy, (2) the legal subordination of religion to the state, (3) modernity and modernization, (4) the moral specialization of the clergy, and (5) theological accommodation. Using show-business lingo, Marty explains that in days past a minister’s identity was determined by being part of a church establishment or denomination, but now “you are only as good as your last act.”⁵³ After extensive research, an Alban Institute leader concludes: “If professional ministry is to take its new place in our postmodern world, it need not compete with other professional jurisdictions. . . . The new jurisdiction that awaits professional ministry depends upon a return to the theological vocation of interpretation—a prophetic role filled by the professional minister.”⁵⁴

An exploration of the factors that have contributed to a crisis in the professions has revealed that Americans lack a shared moral tradition. This cultural change has created a social and personal crisis for professionals. An absence

of shared values has contributed to skepticism from without and an identity crisis from within. In a secularized, materialistic culture in which moral values are relative, what is a minister to be and to do?

This brings us then to the crux of the matter: Is the minister a true professional? If the minister does “profess” something, what is it they profess, and in what way does this “profession” affect ministerial ethics?

The Minister as a Professional

To summarize, then, we can now define a professional as a broadly educated person with highly developed skills and knowledge who works autonomously under the discipline of an ethic developed and enforced by peers, who renders a social service that is essential and unique, and who makes complex judgments involving potentially dangerous consequences.⁵⁵ A professional is more concerned with communal interest than with self, and with services rendered than with financial rewards.⁵⁶ The question we must now answer is this: Does the minister’s vocation fit this general characterization of a profession?

First, the concept of a professional does not neatly describe the minister. Many ordained ministers do not have a higher education, and even more lack professional (theological) training. Although the clergy was the historical setting to which the modern professions owe their origin, intellectual training among modern ministers varies greatly.⁵⁷

Another sphere of difference is the social role of the minister, which today includes not only pastoral responsibilities but also many other parish skills. The contemporary minister, for example, must be adept in business administration and public relations, tasks for which most ministers do not have technical competence.⁵⁸ At the same time, theological education has moved away from the study of divinity to provide “a cafeteria-like offering of studies in specialized disciplines and an accumulation of professional skills.”⁵⁹ Too often this effort to prepare ministers for the multiplicity of vocational demands they will face is incomplete and superficial.

Peter Jarvis has raised another question: Is the ministry an occupation, a profession, or a status? He notes two major difficulties: the concept of profession has undergone a transformation from status to occupation, and there are no universally accepted criteria for a profession. Jarvis concludes that the minister is something less than a professional because (1) the ministry is so heterogeneous that it is impossible to argue that it is either an occupation or a profession, and (2) the ministry has become a status profession with no high social position and thus is anachronistic in a world emphasizing achievement and specialization.⁶⁰

Although a lack of autonomy and specialization may prevent ministers from being considered professionals, Jarvis believes this “neither denies the possibility of individual ministers being professionals nor that they may develop expertise which makes them highly skilled practitioners.”⁶¹

In an opposite sense, the minister of a Christian church is something more than or other than a professional. Similar to Søren Kierkegaard’s distinction between the apostle and the genius, there is a “nonprofessional” ingredient in the vocation of the religious calling. The minister’s *vocatio* is not of this world.⁶² This distinction underscores the minister’s unique authority, which is grounded not ultimately in technical competence but in religious and moral tradition. This means the clerical office is legitimized by its charismatic witness, which does not maintain cultural tradition as much as reject a self-sufficient culture, bringing it under the judgment of the One who transforms both church and culture.⁶³ Perhaps for this reason Jacques Ellul contrasted vocation and profession, seeing them as a “total divorce between what society unceasingly asks of us and God’s will. Service to God cannot be written into a profession.”⁶⁴

Two Duke University professors, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, also believe the ministry is something more than one of the “helping professions.” They resist placing the minister in this category because of the implied presumption that ministry is simply a matter of meeting the needs of people. This “sentimentality” makes a ministry of integrity impossible, for people “not trained to want the right things rightly” will shape ministry more than the gospel narrative. “Being a minister (like a pastor) is not a vocation merely to help people. We are called to help people ‘in the name of Jesus.’”⁶⁵

Having admitted these ways in which the modern minister of the gospel is unlike the traditional professional, let us also note some ways in which the ministerial vocation fits that designation. Unlike typical specialists today, ministers are usually concerned with the total person; they are generalists with broad educational backgrounds, traditionally a trait of the professional. As the status of professionals depends on technical competence in their field, so the status of the clergy person depends on competence in certain theological disciplines, both theoretical and practical.⁶⁶ Church clerics, for example, must be able to explain the meaning of Christian marriage as well as perform a wedding service.

As leaders in the colony that exists as God’s redemptive community in the world, pastors and other ministers render service that is both unique and essential. The message they preach and teach is “dangerous knowledge,” for it reveals the real meaning and purpose of life, as well as knowledge of the One who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

As a professional, the minister of the gospel is dedicated to serving others. Financial reward and social status are not primary motivations; the minister puts the needs of others before his or her own, for this is what it means to be a called minister and a follower of Jesus.

Many ministerial bodies have developed codes of ethics for their clergy. As will be explained in chapter 8, these codes are usually developed by peers for guiding ministerial conduct, particularly in areas of unusual vulnerability. At the same time, there is a conspicuous absence of codes of ethics for large groups of ministers, particularly those of the “free church” tradition.

The classic defense of the minister as a professional is set forth by James Glasse in *Profession: Minister*. Urging church leaders to reaffirm their vocational identity as professionals, Glasse suggests that a religious professional should embody five important characteristics. The Christian minister is:

1. an *educated* person, the master of some body of knowledge. This knowledge is neither esoteric nor mundane but essential to ministry and available through accredited educational institutions.
2. an *expert* person, the master of a specific group of vocational skills. These abilities, while requiring some talent, can be learned and refined through practice and with supervision.
3. an *institutional* person, relating to society and serving persons through a social institution, of which the minister is partly servant and partly master. Ministers are also part of an association of clergy, usually a denomination, to which they are uniquely responsible.
4. a *responsible* person who “professes” to act competently in any situation that requires the minister’s service. This includes the highest standards of ethical conduct.
5. a *dedicated* person who also “professes” to provide something of great value for society. The minister’s dedication to the values of Christian ministry is the ultimate basis for evaluating ministerial service.⁶⁷

Glasse builds his concept of “the professional perspective” on these five points, which all professions have in common. To identify the minister as a professional, Glasse traces the relationship of doctor, lawyer, teacher, and clergy to these factors.⁶⁸

Adapting this model, Gaylord Noyce develops a grid that compares five professions (he adds business manager) in like manner. Although his list of elements is similar, he includes several additional characteristics. For him a professional (1) is educated in a body of knowledge, (2) makes a commitment

of service, (3) is part of a peer group that sets standards of practice, (4) is in an institutional matrix that claims allegiance, and (5) serves immediate goals in the name of certain ultimate values that are (6) specific to that profession.⁶⁹ Noyce graphically illustrates how these aspects of obligations apply to the religious professional. Reflecting on the grid, Noyce concludes that the minister belongs in the category of a professional. “The ordained minister learns theology, and steps into service in relation not only to a denomination and through it to the whole church, but also to peers in the ordained ministry. Entry into the collegueship is celebrated as the ordinand pledges churchly participation and loyalty. All of this is clearly designated for the mission of Christ and the extension of Christian faith, by means of the proximate goals of pastoral care and the building up of the church.”⁷⁰

In an article in the *Christian Century* titled “The Pastor Is (Also) a Professional,” Noyce adds, “Thus, rightly understood, the professional tag is not destructive. Quite the contrary. It can firm up our sense of purpose and our understanding of how to go about the work of ministry.”⁷¹

What then can we honestly conclude? Should the minister today accept the title “professional,” or should it be rejected? It is our conviction that there is more to be gained than lost by a minister assuming the designation of a professional. This is not to say that this title fits neatly or that there are not some drawbacks to the proposal. Nevertheless, as Glasse and many others observe, there are two main reasons for seeing ministers as professionals: traditional identification and rational definition.⁷²

On the one hand, many clergy today fit the traditional description in the historical sense: university educated, full time, resident, tenured, and salaried. On the other hand, even among denominations that allow less than these standards, expectations for ministers continue to rise toward professional standards in all categories. Most Protestant churches view their ministers as professional, whether they use the title or not.⁷³

If we who are ministers call ourselves professionals, what significance does this have for ministerial ethics? Acknowledging the danger of being redundant, let us once more affirm that if Christian ministers are professionals, they are committed to certain ideals. The standards of professional practice that apply to Christian ministry include these six ethical obligations:

1. *Education.* The minister will prepare for Christian service by experiencing a broad liberal arts education, followed by specialized training in theology and ministry. Ministers will also be committed to a lifelong process of study and growth that prepares them for continued service (2 Tim. 2:15).

2. *Competency.* The church shepherd will develop and refine pastoral gifts and vocational skills in order to act competently in any situation that requires his or her services (1 Cor. 12:7–11; Eph. 4:11–12).
3. *Autonomy.* The minister is called to a life of responsible decision making involving potentially dangerous consequences. As a spiritual leader, the minister will make decisions and exert pastoral authority in light of the servant-leader model exemplified by Christ (John 13:1–16).
4. *Service.* The minister’s motivation for ministry will be neither social status nor financial reward but rather *agape* love, to serve others in Christ’s name (1 Cor. 13).
5. *Dedication.* The minister will “profess” to provide something of great value, the good news of God’s salvation and the demonstration of God’s love through Christian ministry. To these values the called of God are dedicated (Rom. 1:11–17).
6. *Ethics.* In relation to congregation, colleagues, and community, as well as in personal life, the ordained will live under the discipline of an ethic that upholds the highest standards of Christian morality (1 Tim. 3:1–7).

One intangible factor is the honor all professionals seek: the esteem of others in their profession.⁷⁴ Anyone familiar with Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, later an Academy Award–winning movie, will remember the climax of the story. Atticus Finch fails to gain an acquittal for Tom Robinson, the black man who had been falsely accused of raping a white woman in a small Alabama town. As the white lawyer leaves the courtroom, the black observers who had been segregated in the balcony all rise. One of them says to the young narrator of the book, “Miss Jean Louise, stand up. Your father’s passin’.” Justice has failed, but the pursuit of it brought professional honor.

In conclusion, vocation, in the sense of a calling by God, is the essential element that prevents the concept of a professional minister from degenerating into an enterprise for personal success. While not demanding that a minister exemplify the notion of the professional in every way, we are convinced that there are good historical and theological reasons for asserting that the Christian minister is a professional. If this is the case, then the recovery of the religious and social meaning of the clergy vocation and profession can revitalize the church as well as build a foundation for an ethical ministry. Perhaps Paul Camenisch sums it up best: “I would argue that the professional ethics model is useful and appropriate for the clergy as far as it goes. Seen positively as the standards that guide professionals in their relations to

clients and the larger society in light of the special skills and knowledge they claim to have, the distinctive goal they pursue in their professional activity, and the atypical moral commitment they aspire to, professional ethics sets a floor below which the clergy ought not fall.”⁷⁵

The heart of this book is an attempt to explain what this commitment to an ethical ministry means in these various arenas of the minister’s life. Without being legalistic, we will attempt to apply and illustrate the ethical demands the gospel makes on the professional life of the Christian minister. It is our hope that by the time we reach the last chapter, you will be prepared to write a personal code of ethics as a guide for your ministry.

The task of the next chapter is to review the art of ethics. To evaluate the ethical life of the minister, a clergyperson must first have a clear understanding of the role of character, conduct, and moral vision in the process of making good moral choices.

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