

# SUSTAINING MINISTRY

FOUNDATIONS AND PRACTICES

*for* SERVING FAITHFULLY

SONDRA WHEELER



**Baker Academic**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Sondra Wheeler, *Sustaining Ministry*  
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Published by Baker Academic  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wheeler, Sondra Ely, 1956– author.

Title: Sustaining ministry : foundations and practices for serving faithfully / Sondra Wheeler.

Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Academic, 2017. | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017020097 | ISBN 9780801098369 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Clergy—Professional ethics. | Clergy—Conduct of life. | Pastoral theology. | Character.

Classification: LCC BV4011.5 .W444 2017 | DDC 241/.641—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017020097>

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17 18 19 20 21 22 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To all the pastors who have shared with me  
their successes and failures in ministry,  
whose hard-earned insights made this work possible

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## Acknowledgments

This book is largely the fruit of conversations conducted over more than twenty years with long-serving ministers and new student-pastors, district superintendents and bishops, and judicatory officials from several denominations. Occasionally they involved congregants whose pastors had gotten into moral difficulties of one kind or another. It would be impossible, and probably unwise, to name all these interlocutors. Those who have participated in these conversations may recognize themselves in this book, but I would not be surprised if they did not. (We often do not realize the impact our casual remarks may have on someone else.) In any case, I remember them and remain grateful for their particular insights and contributions.

Special thanks are owed to Reverend Anna Copeland, pastor in the United Church of Christ, who read and responded to some of the most delicate sections of the text, sharing with me the fruit of her considerable experience and challenging me to rethink some of my own judgments. The Reverend Peter Moon, district superintendent in the United Methodist Church, patiently entertained my questions and offered me his own perspective on questions of policy and procedure in cases of misconduct, which was very helpful.

I also garnered ideas and insights from others in the field of ministerial ethics, several of whom are cited in the text or whose work is included in the list of further readings. But even among colleagues, it was often the collateral discussions at meetings and the exchange

of stories we had heard or been part of that proved most provocative and useful. In this regard I think especially of Joe Kotva, a colleague with many years of pastoral experience, and Rebekah Miles, professor of Christian Ethics at SMU. In exchanges with such people I discovered illuminating patterns, consistent ways in which ministers begin to go wrong, and likewise consistent ways they find their way back in time (or don't).

There is, I have learned, no formula—no policy or procedure or set of rules that can guarantee that a person will not become confused or cynical about the role of pastor and misuse its powers. But there are ways forward, strategies and disciplines that help ministers negotiate the challenges they face and offer them safe and healthy ways to receive the support every human being needs. What I know about these practices I have learned chiefly from listening to and watching others, gifted pastors like the Reverend Daniel Mejia and the Reverend Dr. Scott Kisker who have long been sustained by them. I am grateful for their example as well as their instruction. Finally, I remain grateful to all the ministers I have had the privilege of working with as students, teachers, and colleagues over many years. Their faces, voices, and stories crowd my imagination, and it is to them I have dedicated this work.

# Abbreviations

## Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Song of Sol.	Song of Solomon
Exod.	Exodus	Isa.	Isaiah
Lev.	Leviticus	Jer.	Jeremiah
Num.	Numbers	Lam.	Lamentations
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Josh.	Joshua	Dan.	Daniel
Judg.	Judges	Hosea	Hosea
Ruth	Ruth	Joel	Joel
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Obad.	Obadiah
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles	Jon.	Jonah
Ezra	Ezra	Mic.	Micah
Neh.	Nehemiah	Nah.	Nahum
Esther	Esther	Hab.	Habakkuk
Job	Job	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Ps. (Pss.)	Psalms	Hag.	Haggai
Prov.	Proverbs	Zech.	Zechariah
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Mal.	Malachi

## New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	John	John
Mark	Mark	Acts	Acts
Luke	Luke	Rom.	Romans

1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians	Philem.	Philemon
Gal.	Galatians	Heb.	Hebrews
Eph.	Ephesians	James	James
Phil.	Philippians	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
Col.	Colossians	1–3 John	1–3 John
1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians	Jude	Jude
1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy	Rev.	Revelation
Titus	Titus		



# Introduction

## *Why Good Rules Aren't Enough*

This book is one of a pair of companion volumes that address different aspects of the relationship between ethics and ministry. The other volume focuses on the elements of pastoral leadership that call on a minister to serve as resident moral theologian for her or his community.<sup>1</sup> These include preaching on biblical passages that are ethically demanding, confusing, or even offensive, as well as teaching about ethical issues that are controversial or divisive within the church. They also include offering counsel to those facing moral uncertainty or temptation. Finally, there is the fact of being taken as a model of discipleship—a feature of the minister's role that many find problematic but that cannot be avoided. These dimensions of ministry are essential for the church to preserve its identity as a moral community: a place of moral reflection and conversation, a context of mutual support but also of mutual accountability. Such tasks require ministers to possess knowledge and a particular set of skills, which are treated at length in the companion volume.

But as the necessity of serving as a model of faithful life makes clear, more is needed to lead a moral community than information

1. Sondra Wheeler, *The Minister as Moral Theologian: Ethical Dimensions of Pastoral Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

and techniques. To fulfill these obligations also requires that a minister become a certain kind of person. Moreover, she or he must sustain the required character through the distinctive challenges and risks that come with intimate engagement in the moral and spiritual lives of others. The present book is about these challenges—why they run so deep in ministry, why they can be so difficult to negotiate successfully, and how one might prepare to navigate them across the decades of a life devoted to pastoral leadership.

Insofar as this is a book about the ethical demands of ministry, it is hardly alone. In the last twenty-five years several works have been published in this area, some general and others focused on special topics such as sexual misconduct.<sup>2</sup> I have found many of these volumes useful in my decades of teaching about the ethics of ministry. All of them offer clear expositions of the shape and seriousness of pastoral obligations, and of the potentially devastating consequences when those obligations are not met. They lay out helpful rules to protect congregants or counselees from abuse and harm by those entrusted with caring for them. Several of them provide useful practical guidance and sound advice for ministers, which aim at avoiding confusion and miscommunication about their role and help them to establish barriers that prevent accidental violations of professional norms. Taken together, these books represent a great advance in the clarity and concreteness of preparation for pastoral work as they are read in seminary courses and contexts of continuing education.

What one does not regularly find in these texts, however, is insight into how and why even ministers who set out with the best intentions get into moral trouble—for most ministers do set out with

2. For instance, Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); Richard M. Gula, *Ethics in Pastoral Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996); William H. Willimon, *Calling and Character: Virtues of the Ordained Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000); Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter, *Ministerial Ethics: Moral Formation for Church Leaders*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); Joseph E. Bush, *Gentle Shepherding: Pastoral Ethics and Leadership* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2008); Barbara Blodgett, *Lives Entrusted: An Ethic of Trust for Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008); Richard M. Gula, *Just Ministry: Professional Ethics for Pastoral Ministers* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010); Marie M. Fortune, *Is Nothing Sacred? When Sex Invades the Pastoral Relationship* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989); Stanley J. Grenz and Roy D. Bell, *Betrayal of Trust: Confronting and Preventing Clergy Sexual Misconduct*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001).

good intentions. Predators and frauds exist in ministry as in all other fields, but they are the exception and not the rule. Thus it comes as a surprise that clergy are, for instance, statistically more likely to be guilty of violating sexual boundaries than other professionals.<sup>3</sup> The root of such failures has not been deeply explored in the literature. Neither is much attention paid to the peculiar demands of pastoral service or to the particular moral challenges and perils that attend that service, even (or perhaps especially) for those whose personal investment in ministry is greatest and most sincere. The work of ministry is difficult, not only practically but also morally, and has risks built into it that cannot wholly be foreclosed. Therefore, it is not enough to explain the general moral obligations of ministers, the rules that specify these obligations, or the reasons that they apply. Nor does it suffice to discuss policies and procedures for responding to ethical violations by pastors when they occur. While addressing these matters is necessary, long experience and observation have persuaded me that it is not sufficient.

Accordingly, this book focuses on the underlying dynamics that make ministry potentially dangerous both to those who practice it and to those for whom they care. To explore this, I treat matters rarely discussed in relation to pastoral ethics, like subtle distortions in the practice of ministry that signal that something has gone awry long before the financial and sexual scandals that attract media attention. The list of such distortions is long. They include an inability to delegate and an unwillingness to share authority. They may appear as a reluctance to develop leadership competence in others and a tendency to structure the church's life and worship so that the minister remains the center of attention. They may also include carelessness about elements of the minister's role that really are distinctive, such as the symbolic power of the office and the special duties of those who are entrusted with the personal confidences of congregants. Alongside

3. In her book, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), Pamela Cooper-White offers the following broad but reasonable estimate: "Somewhere between one in eight and one in three clergy have crossed sexual boundaries with their parishioners" (149). For comparison, a review of several self-report surveys of US physicians yields a figure of just under 7 percent reporting sexual contact with present patients. See Randy Sansone and Lori Sansone, "Crossing the Line: Sexual Boundary Violations by Physicians," *Psychiatry* 6, no. 6 (June 2009): 45–48.

these deformations of leadership, I also describe how common patterns of life among clergy may contribute to the corrosion of pastoral identity and, conversely, the ways in which the ordinary disciplines of Christian life—including the crucial discipline of rest—can undergird and protect that identity.

Fundamental to all these matters is the distinctive kind of power that ministers wield, power that makes their ethical obligations particularly vital and at the same time can make them harder to fulfill. I lay out the peculiar characteristics of pastoral service that make up professional ethics as it is generally understood—a set of role-specific obligations readily codified as rules to follow—too rigid and shallow to be helpful in a crisis. However correct the proffered standards may be, they are unable to illuminate the inner life on which adherence to all such rules depends. I draw on an older and more profound account of the classical professions, one that understands them as inherently moral enterprises. More broadly, I provide resources for a deeper understanding of the way that human beings who are also ministers can be drawn into corruption by a failure of self-insight, a failure made more likely by a gradual collapse of the disciplines and practices that constitute the sustaining warp and woof of Christian life.

With these matters in view, I begin by discussing the particular character of power as it is exercised by ministers and the recognition of power as a tool of ministry that is both necessary and dangerous (chapter 1). Then I turn to the moral and theological understandings that undergird the ethics of ministry (chapter 2). I argue that pastoral boundaries are to be understood not primarily as rules of professional conduct, but as external signs of deeply rooted disciplines that maintain the emotional and spiritual health required for safe ministry. Nevertheless, such an understanding does give rise to rules, both requirements and prohibitions, and these function as vital bright lines to show when the practice of ministry is compromised and put at risk. Accordingly, I next explore the function of boundaries in ministry and offer practical guidance for maintaining them in the day-to-day work of the pastoral (chapter 3). In the final two chapters—perhaps the most distinctive of the book—I explore the underlying dynamics that make the vital work of spiritual caregiving powerful but also dangerous, and describe the strategies that are most effective at reducing the risk. In chapter 4, I focus on how and why

pastors get in the kind of moral and spiritual trouble that can lead to pastoral misconduct, offering warning signs to help them recognize when they are at risk and guidance for how to respond. Finally, in chapter 5, I make a case for the essential spiritual practices that—while providing no guarantee—constitute the strongest barrier against the inner losses that often lead to corruption and failure in ministry.

# 1

## A Moral Framework for Power

We live in a time when the language of power is used often in popular discussion but with quite contradictory inflections. Power is both sought after and feared, praised and decried. Depending on the context, what is meant by the word “power” and how it is viewed by the speaker vary dramatically. Working (as I do) in Washington, DC, one quickly becomes aware of the resonances of the description “politically powerful,” which suggests self-interested elites able to manipulate a system toward their own ends. Power seen from this angle is something to be guarded against, something to be monitored and limited to the best of our ability in order to prevent inequity and injustice. We frequently hear of maintaining the balance of power between nations and of the checks and balances put in place by the US Constitution to prevent power from being concentrated in a single branch of government or in the hands of a small group of people. These measures reflect our appraisal of human beings as perennially tempted by power, ever inclined to misuse or overextend legitimate authority to the detriment of others. Some of our most hotly contested public debates have to do with measures to reassign, reallocate, or restrain power in arenas ranging from health care policy to voter registration to campaign finance law. Managing power in the public realm is a constant preoccupation and a constant struggle.

But much attention is also paid to enhancing power, both for individuals and on behalf of groups that are deemed to be disadvantaged or vulnerable. A wealth of self-help literature is aimed at people in various situations and walks of life, coaching them on how to achieve, maintain, and use power in work or social relationships.<sup>1</sup> And a wide array of political movements have the explicit goal of gaining power for people whose economic status, ethnicity, or other characteristics are thought to make them more likely to be harmed or exploited—though there is little consensus regarding which groups really are most vulnerable.

Many definitions of power operate in these conversations, and quite different kinds of power are in view. Therapeutic strategies for those who have been traumatized or abused may focus on recovering the personal power to defend oneself from threats in the environment, whether arising from other persons or from things that may trigger responses of fear or aggression.<sup>2</sup> Feminist activists and writers stress the acceptance and use of personal and institutional power by women, who are often socialized to regard direct exercises of power as domineering and inappropriate. In a different arena, several resources lift up power as a tool of spiritual growth. These may be grounded in a variety of religious faiths and practices or in the teachings of a leader of no particular tradition. They may invoke the power of the Holy Spirit or of meditation or of positive thinking; they may put forward wisdom more or less esoteric about harnessing the power of the spiritual forces of nature or of the ancestors.<sup>3</sup> All of these are offered as paths to greater well-being and peace for human beings, who often experience themselves as beset and beleaguered, pushed one way and another by forces beyond their control. In short, people pursue power in a variety of ways, even while they are often uneasy about it.

1. See, e.g., Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (New York: Scribner, 2016); Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (New York: Broadway Books, 2013); Roy Baumeister and John Tierney, *Willpower* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

2. Lucinda Bassett, *From Panic to Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

3. Neville Goddard, *The Power of Awareness* (New York: Penguin, 2012); Joanne Brocas, *The Power of Angels: Discover How to Connect, Communicate, and Heal with the Angels* (Pompton Plains, NJ: Career Press, 2014); Joel Osteen, *The Power of I Am* (New York: Hachette, 2015).

Ambivalence about power may be particularly strong among those deeply informed by Christian faith, and this ambivalence may pull them in two directions at once. On one hand, Christians are used to thinking of God as omnipotent, and they are accustomed to forms of address that stress divine power. “The Lord of Hosts” and “the Almighty” are familiar and reassuring names for God in prayer and song, inspiring confidence in the believer that the One on whom they call is able to help and sustain them, no matter what circumstances they face. Christians are also formed by biblical texts and liturgies that call on God the Holy Spirit to descend in power on God’s people, enabling them to resist evil and transforming them so that they might be signs of the in-breaking of God’s power to heal the world. All of this encourages them to view power positively, in terms of its agency for good in a broken world.

On the other hand, Christians are also heirs to the scathing critiques of earthly power, both political and economic, that run through the great Hebrew prophets. These range from the woes pronounced on “those who are at ease in Zion” who “eat lambs from the flock, and fattened calves from the stall” but “are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph” (Amos 6:1, 4, 6) to predictions of all the impositions that would result from the king Israel was determined to have in order to be “like other nations” (1 Sam. 8:4–18). Over and over, the Hebrew Scriptures denounce the arrogance and overreaching that attend the exercise of human power, warning that the abuses of the powerful will bring down judgment on the nations, including Israel and Judah. And for Christians the climax of the biblical witness is the revelation of Jesus the Redeemer, who empties himself of his own power for the sake of those he comes to save (Phil. 2:6–8). He appears not as the conquering hero but as the Suffering Servant, the Lamb of God who “did not open his mouth,” even to defend himself before corrupt authorities (Isa. 53:7; Matt. 27:12–14). His advent marks the decisive intervention of the God who “has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree” (Luke 1:52 RSV), and firmly ties the cause of the Holy One of Israel to those who are despised and powerless.

The unease about power is likely to be especially acute among those who have been to seminary. Theological research over the last fifty years has stressed the degree to which the mission of God in the world is



identified with rescuing the marginal and challenging the structures that maintain inequity and foster injustice.<sup>4</sup> Jesus explicitly takes up this mantle at his first public utterance, when he applies Isaiah's words to his own ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19). No wonder those who aim to follow this itinerant preacher, a man of questionable parentage and no visible means of support, are uncertain about the role of power in Christian life and ministry.

But pastors who wish to align themselves with God's mission, who wish to be of help to the world that God loves, cannot simply dismiss all human power as a manifestation of evil. The broadest and most helpful definition of "power" may come to us not from sociology or political science, but from physics: power is simply the ability to have an effect in the world. In itself, then, power is a kind of capacity, a channeling of energy that makes it possible to bring about a change. Only those who are content to be ineffectual in their ministry can eschew power altogether or regard it as inherently tainted. Thus the key questions, the ones necessary to any moral evaluation of power, are these: What kind of power is used? By whom? And to what ends is it directed? Only when we have answers to such questions can we determine whether the abstract good that power represents is good in any actual case, that is, whether it is good news for the inhabitants of the world in which it is exercised. To recover a critical appreciation of power as a necessary force for good, we turn below to an older conception of what makes the use of unequal power legitimate. It is an understanding already well developed in pre-Christian antiquity, and it underlies the three classical professions of ministry, medicine, and law.

### Ethics of the Professions

In the contemporary context, anyone who wishes to draw on professional ethics as a source of insight must overcome several hurdles.

4. Two seminal works on this topic are Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988); and James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997).

To begin with, today we use the word “professional” to designate anyone who is paid for any sort of activity, from landscape design to pet photography. It is possible to be a professional house-painter or skateboarder, or even a professional escort (bringing to mind the phrase “the world’s oldest profession,” a euphemism for prostitution). With the bar for what we mean by a profession set so low, it is no surprise that we often take “professional ethics” to mean no more than the application of lowest-common-denominator standards of decent behavior to the arena of paid work. Thus we might expect to find in manuals on professional ethics minimal requirements of honest exchange and prohibitions on force and fraud, perhaps with some aspirations to basic competence thrown in for good measure. And in general we would not be far off. But embedded in the word “professional” is the trace of the term’s origin in the verb “to profess”—that is, to declare publicly one’s central convictions and commitments. This is a clue to a much older and richer understanding of certain kinds of human work, one that regards them as fundamentally moral enterprises demanding far more than the minimum of decent behavior.

Underlying the classical professions is the ideal of service to fundamental human needs, needs that require the development of specialized knowledge and skills to address. The acquisition of such knowledge and skills is a prolonged and labor-intensive process. It demands focused study over a number of years and a substantial period of supervised practice. These preparations must be supplemented by ongoing education so that practitioners remain well informed about emerging knowledge in their fields. Since it is not possible for everyone to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills—and indeed not possible for anyone to become expert in all three arenas—all human beings must sometimes depend on the services of professionals to meet essential needs, including the need for spiritual health and salvation, for bodily health and life, and for the maintenance of justice among humans and between them and their societies. Dedication to meeting these needs is the moral foundation of the three original professions of ministry, medicine, and law.<sup>5</sup>

5. The following discussion is indebted to the account offered in Richard M. Gula, *Ethics in Pastoral Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 51–64.

The disparate knowledge and skills possessed by the professional regarding a basic human need create an imbalance of power between the practitioner and those served in a critical area. It is one thing for a student's tennis instructor to know more about his or her game than the student does, but it is quite another for someone's physician to know more about his or her body and how to treat it than that patient does. The latter is potentially a matter of health and survival. Similarly, the expertise of the minister may have a bearing on the eternal welfare of a congregant's soul, as the knowledge and skills of the attorney may be needed to preserve a client's property, liberty, or even life. The moral justification for the cultivation and application of this disparate power in other people's lives is the protection of the interests of the patient, congregant, or client. This entails that the interests of those served must govern, direct, and limit the use of the professional's power.

But laypeople in any given arena will not be able to assess fully either the competence or the moral performance of the professional to whom they entrust these basic and critical needs. In churches, laypeople do not usually know enough pastoral theology to judge whether the pastoral counselor gives sound spiritual advice, nor are they in a position to know whether the minister is scrupulous and careful in the performance of professional duties. In seeking medical care, patients are generally not able to evaluate independently the medical knowledge and clinical judgment of their doctor, nor to tell whether she or he has done diligent research to identify the best possible treatment plan. Similarly in law, the average client is unable to interpret either the language of legal documents or the significance of legal proceedings. In all these cases, those who turn to professionals for help are in a significant sense at the mercy of those whom they consult. Those seeking help must depend not only on the professionals' knowledge and skills but also on the professionals' diligence, compassion, and dedication to the good they are trained to serve. That is to say, they must depend on the character of these strangers who wield enormous power over them at times when they may be extremely vulnerable. For this reason the practice of the professions has historically been understood as an inherently moral undertaking. It is not merely a means of livelihood but a dedicated way of life. With this understanding come the five requisite characteristics that distinguish a profession from other forms of compensated work.

### *Competence*

The first requirement of the professions is competence, which involves the specialized knowledge and skills that enable the professional to meet basic human needs—knowledge and skills that must be acquired and maintained at the highest level. The need for professional competence makes ongoing study a moral obligation, an expectation codified in continuing education requirements for maintaining professional licensing.

### *Moral Commitment*

The second central requirement of the professions is moral commitment. The professional must embody a commitment to the good to be served, whether salvation, health, or justice. This is a matter of conviction and personal dedication as well as knowledge and skill. It is not enough to have the required abilities; the professional also must be the right kind of person and care about the right things. This commitment is expected to shape one's whole being. A profession is not just a kind of work; it is a kind of life. Thus professional licenses can be forfeited for moral unfitness or misconduct even if it is unrelated to the individual's work.

### *Self-Monitoring*

Since only those possessed of the requisite knowledge can evaluate the competence of professionals and the performance of their work, the third requirement of the professions is self-monitoring. Professions must have standards of preparation and practice internal to their membership and must provide mechanisms for evaluating and holding one another accountable to those standards of knowledge, skill, and behavior. This requirement for self-monitoring is maintained in bodies of professional licensing and adjudication, such as boards of ministry, state medical boards, and state bar associations.

### *Altruism*

The fourth central requirement of the professions is altruism. The commitment to the well-being of congregants, patients, or clients

includes placing their interests above the self-interest of the professional. The form of life of a professional is expected to cost the practitioner something, to entail some degree of sacrifice on behalf of the good of those served. Doctors, for example, are not only expected to be available in emergencies at all hours of the day and night; they are also expected to care for patients even when these patients pose a risk of infection to the doctor. The willingness to make such sacrifices when they are called for is a core element of the moral commitment a professional undertakes. Correspondingly, it is the foundation of the high esteem in which devoted professionals are held by society.<sup>6</sup>

### *Fiduciary Responsibility*

We have said that professionals attend to essential human needs, that they possess vital knowledge not shared by others, and that their work involves the exercise of power in relation to people who may be especially vulnerable. We have noted the requirements of altruism and devotion to the well-being of others. Together, these features of their work entail that the power professionals wield must be rigorously directed to the interests of those they serve and not to the professionals' own interests or needs. The obligations that arise from this duty include the scrupulous honoring of confidentiality and the active and intentional protection of the congregant, patient, or client from harm, whether by act or omission. For these reasons, the kind of power exercised by professionals is called "fiduciary power." It is a term rooted in *fides*, the Latin word for "faith," because it represents a power entrusted for the sake of the one served and not that of the one exercising power. Fiduciary power is not power over another person but power *for* him or her, exercised at the beneficiary's behest, and on his or her behalf. Thus the final requirement of the professions is fiduciary responsibility, the commitment to use entrusted power appropriately.

6. In Washington, DC, one feels compelled to note that lawyers, who are ubiquitous here as lobbyists and corporate litigators, are frequently not well regarded. However, one need only look to journalistic coverage of major criminal trials or the media's treatment of attorneys who represent the indigent or the victimized to see the other side: such lawyers are often lionized and regarded as crusaders for justice. Many of them deserve this regard, for much public good depends on their integrity and commitment.

## Ministry as a (Peculiar) Profession

Thinking of ministry in light of the traditional requirements of professional ethics offers us several insights. Each of the distinctive marks of the professions has implications for how ministry is prepared for and practiced, and for what excellence in that practice requires. First, the nature of professions as grounded in special knowledge in service to human need creates an obligation for ministers to become and remain well informed and well equipped for their work. This means that theological education cannot be finished in seminary. Ministers must set aside time for reading and study, continuing education events, and consultation with others when particular expertise is needed for some aspect of their pastoral work. This is not a luxury but a duty to those they serve.

The idea that professional practice requires a personal commitment to the good to be served and a certain character on the part of the practitioner underscores that preparation for ministry can never be merely a matter of information and technique, a body of knowledge and skill that anyone might acquire and employ. Preparation for ministry rests equally on moral formation and spiritual development. Pastors must not only know the right things; they must *love* the right things and become the sort of people who can truly be shepherds to souls. Theological schools and their students must take the spiritual-formation aspects of pastoral preparation seriously. And since character is not only expressed in behavior but also continually molded by it, the work of formation must be recognized as ongoing, a path to which one is committed rather than a destination one reaches.

The necessity of professions maintaining internal standards of accountability means that those who judge the suitability of candidates for ministry and those who evaluate their readiness for service must be prepared to say no as well as yes. Likewise, the church boards and officers charged with monitoring professional performance—particularly those members who are themselves ministers—need to regard their work as bearing responsibility for the welfare of the whole church. To take this responsibility seriously demands the willingness to remove those who for whatever reason are incompetent in, or unfit for, ministry. It is not grace to look the other way—not for the community that is badly served nor even for the person who is thereby

abetted in doing harm to the people of God. Jesus's unflinching words about the fate of those who "put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe" in him come to mind (Matt. 18:6; cf. Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2).

If altruism is the virtue central to all professional practice, for Christian ministers this virtue has a particular character and a personal name. The love of God made known in Jesus Christ is the touchstone of Christian existence. Accordingly, Jesus is the definitive model of self-giving love, something made explicit in the New Testament: "We know love by this," says the writer of 1 John, "that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16). While such an admonition is addressed to the whole church, it has a particular bearing on life in ministry: those who are called as pastors are to imitate the Good Shepherd, who "lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:12). Few pastors in the contemporary church may be called on for such literal self-sacrifice (although that depends greatly on where and whom they serve). But even in settings of relative safety, the steady work of being present for and attentive to the needs of others, of resisting the corrosive powers of disillusionment, discouragement, and simple fatigue, can be demanding and costly. For those who aim to sustain such a self-giving pattern for a lifetime, more than good rules of practice are needed. Ministers must be deeply formed in a love that imitates the love of God.

The concept of fiduciary responsibility has a particular resonance in the ethics of ministry. As with all professionals, pastors' ability to help others depends on the trust of those they serve. Such trust includes the confidence that those who have greater knowledge will not use it to do harm, or for their own convenience, or carelessly—but will use it to help the vulnerable who must rely on them. But in the case of clergy, congregants' trust in the pastor is often closely aligned with their trust in God, so that their trust has a religious quality. Though it may not be wise to identify ministers too closely with the God whom they serve, the fact remains that many people see their pastor as God's representative. This is especially the case with people in trouble, who sometimes entrust themselves to a minister's care without reservation. In view of Christian convictions about the pervasive and insidious quality of sin, all who wield such power should

be wary of the inclinations to self-serving and self-deception that all humans share. To be invested with authority as a servant of God calls for the most careful self-scrutiny and for scrupulous attention to how, and to what ends, power is used.

Thus far I have focused on the ways in which ministry is like the other classical professions, so that its practice can be illuminated by the ethical requirements common to them all. This is true even though the work of religious professionals contains special elements that give the application of those requirements a particular inflection, as the above discussion indicates. But there are also important dissimilarities between pastoral practice and the work of other professionals, including differences in the particular character of the power that operates and its associations. These bring with them a distinctive set of challenges and risks.

The first of these dissimilarities has already been alluded to. Only in ministry is there the dimension of sacral authority, a power viewed by the community as grounded in transcendent claims and ultimate commitments. For the religiously serious, the stakes can be extremely high. Therefore, ministers are never simply individuals. They are understood to represent a religious tradition and to speak out of an authority much older and broader than their personal insights or opinions. In many cases, they are taken more or less to speak for the whole church or even for God. Many people grant their judgments and advice a (sometimes unreasonably) high degree of deference, which helps to explain how those who intentionally abuse religious authority are sometimes able to get away with it for so long without being called to account.<sup>7</sup>

Allied with the formal, institutionally conferred power of the pastoral office and the authority based on their knowledge of the tradition they represent, ministers are invested with symbolic power. They are visible signs of faith and piety, presumed to be especially close to God, and taken as models of faithful discipleship. Often ministers have ascribed to them virtues and traits they do not actually possess—or at least do not possess in the measure attributed. They are taken to

7. See, e.g., Diana R. Garland and Christen Argueta, “How Clergy Sexual Misconduct Happens: A Qualitative Study of First-Hand Accounts,” *Social Work and Christianity* 37 (2010): 1–27.



be wise and holy people because that is what their work suggests. It is common for young children to confuse the pastor whom they see with God whom they do not, imagining (for instance) that God must be tall and have red hair because that is what Father Flynn looks like. Such simple associations might cause adults to smile, but even adults who surely know better sometimes harbor a similar confusion. The judgment of the minister is taken without reservation to indicate divine judgment, and the minister's approval or disapproval is equated with the approval or disapproval of God. Such associations are most likely to occur among those who are most vulnerable, people under duress or in pain who feel the greatest need for a tangible support system. This overidentification between the pastor and God is an element frequently found in the most egregious cases of pastoral abuse.

Finally, ministers often bear what might be called projected power, the psychological identification of the pastor with whatever figure of authority and trust a particular parishioner is inclined to turn to for guidance: a parent, a teacher or mentor, or even another pastor from an earlier and more dependent period in the congregant's life. Such projections are particularly easy to apply to ministers for those who encounter them chiefly in their most public roles, as leaders in worship. In public worship settings, the individuality of the pastor may be obscured to some extent by the robes of the office and the structured elements of the liturgy. Depending on the character of the projected relationship for which the minister is a "screen," projection can greatly increase the power the minister wields over the parishioner and can bring an inappropriate set of expectations to bear on the pastor's role.

All these forms of pastoral power are informal, not officially assigned by any institution. They are also not automatic and uniform, but depend on a number of variables in both pastor and parishioner.<sup>8</sup> Rather than being strictly rational and intentional in their operation, such forms of power may be at work subliminally, not fully recognized or even conscious. This makes them harder to analyze and thus harder to govern. Together they constitute an added layer of responsibility

8. For instance, other forms of personal power, such as eloquence, attractiveness, charm, and the ability to empathize, are allied with and contribute to the symbolic and projected power ministers may wield. Likewise, the particular history and psychology of a congregant plays a role in how the minister is seen and received.

and risk in the exercise of the minister's office. Ministers need to be aware of, and careful about, the effect of such dynamics in their relationships with those they serve.

### Navigating Unmarked Territory

In addition to the distinctive dimensions of power that attend it, ministry is distinguished from other realms of professional service by its relative lack of contextual role markers. The clearest way to show what this means is by contrasting ministry with other professions. Consider the ordinary setting of medical practice for comparison. When you visit your physician, you go to an office, where you wait alongside other patients who are there for the same purpose. Your doctor is at work, usually with other physicians, in a suite of examining rooms, attended by nursing and support staff. She or he is usually wearing a white coat over business clothing and will likely have a stethoscope around the neck and a handful of tongue depressors stuck in a pocket. You are wearing street clothes or perhaps a cloth or paper examination gown. You meet in a consultation or examination room with quite particular furnishings and equipment that could be mistaken for no other kind of office. Your interaction with your doctor is focused entirely on matters relevant to your health, whether a particular complaint or your general well-being. When the examination and conversation are finished, you shake hands and depart, perhaps with a prescription, some orders for laboratory work, or some counsel about diet and exercise.

Everything about the encounter reinforces the nature, purpose, and limits of the relationship between physician and patient. This is not to suggest that such interactions must be chilly or perfunctory; the doctor's manner and conversation may be warm and concerned, full of human care and compassion. But no one would mistake a visit to the doctor for a meeting between friends to catch up on family news. And ordinarily this professional connection is the only kind of association you have with your physician. As part of their training in ethics, doctors are strongly cautioned against treating friends or family members because it is thought to compromise their clinical judgment and objectivity.

A similar description could be given of what you experience when you consult an attorney or a psychotherapist: there are signals everywhere of the character of the relationship and of what is expected of both parties within it. These professionals are also warned against entering into what are called “dual relationships,” situations where they attempt to serve professionally someone with whom they also maintain a personal connection as a friend or relative or even someone whose services they rely on in another context. Such dual relationships are thought to interfere with the quality of the professional service offered and to risk dangerous conflicts of interest. All this is taken with such seriousness that efforts to develop another kind of connection with a responsible professional—say, by asking questions about his or her personal life—are likely to be politely but firmly deflected. (A therapist I know responds to even the most basic inquiries about herself with, “Let’s talk about why you want to know.”)

Such well-marked professional terrain contrasts sharply with the character and dimensions of relationships between ministers and those whom they serve, particularly in congregational settings. Even the most casual Sunday-morning-only attender will see the pastor at a minimum as worship leader, preacher, and official greeter at the close of the service—a set of roles that call for rather different aspects of social presentation. Moreover, it is a rare preacher who reveals nothing about herself in the course of a sermon, whether that is through illustrative anecdotes, in references to life events, or simply by the way a text is interpreted or a topic chosen. Preaching is by its nature always a triangulation between text, situation, and speaker; it is not the Word of God simply but the Word of God in *this* passage, for *this* time and community, as brought by *this* messenger. Therefore, whether directly or indirectly, preaching always discloses the messenger to some degree, often in deeply revealing ways inasmuch as the preacher speaks of what is near the center of her or his own life’s commitments.

If a congregant makes the modest investment of stopping by coffee hour after the service, a whole new world of personal information opens up. If the pastor has a family, at least some family members are likely to be present and known to most of the congregation. Within minutes, any one of a dozen people (like those serving the coffee) can share the names of any of the pastor’s children, where they go to

school, and which ones are the most rambunctious. Conversation in the fellowship hall often covers recent news in the church or parish, including how long the minister has served there and various tidbits like where the family spends vacations and whether the pastor will play on the church softball team in the summer.

Suppose a member of the congregation becomes involved in the life and mission of the church to any degree. Now there is not only a wealth of additional information about the minister, but also various opportunities for new kinds of interaction and relationship with her or him. There are church projects like cleanup days and church events like bazaars and spaghetti dinners to plan and attend. There are Vacation Bible Schools to prepare for and mission trips involving travel, shared work, and (often) tight sleeping quarters. There are administrative tasks and offices in which members collaborate extensively with the pastoral staff in church leadership. In all these ways, the minister inevitably comes to be known by parishioners in several dimensions: not only in official functions as the pastor but also as a spouse, parent, co-laborer, and so forth. There are still some markers of the minister's official role: clerical collars or robes and stoles for those denominations who use them, for instance. There are also the physical spaces of pulpit and chancel and pastor's study, and the distinctive words and gestures used by ministers leading worship or presiding over sacraments. These are powerful signs of the set-apart character of ministry and are important for that reason. But they are present in only a small portion of the interactions the average minister has with his or her parishioners, especially with those who are most engaged in the church's life.

While other professionals are instructed to avoid any trace of dual relationships with those they serve—and can generally do so<sup>9</sup>—pastors routinely have three or four different kinds of connections with a single congregant. They might cooperate in worship planning on one committee and disagree strongly over a church personnel issue on another, all while playing together on the church softball team. A parishioner might chair the committee that does the annual evaluation of the pastor's performance at the same time that she sees

9. Very small towns can be an exception to this generalization, as there may be only a handful of medical and legal professionals who can hardly avoid personal acquaintance with some of their patients or clients.

the pastor for premarital counseling and serves alongside him on the Habitat for Humanity project. And all these structured interactions are supplemented by less formal activities like flipping burgers together at the church picnic or participating in a fierce water balloon fight at the youth group all-nighter. Ministry takes place amid a messy, complicated, many-stranded set of overlapping relationships. It is not a field in which the standard professional model—a single, neatly and narrowly bounded kind of contact between a professional who controls the interaction and a client who receives professional services (and a bill!)—can be readily applied.

One might suppose that this means the warnings that other professionals receive about relationships in which personal and professional roles are commingled do not pertain to ministry. But in reality such warnings are even more important in ministry than in the other professions. Because of the complex and multidimensional character of pastoral relationships, confusion about the minister's role is much more likely, both for the congregants and for the pastor. In the absence of external structures to define and reinforce the nature of the interaction, the inward awareness of obligations and limits maintained by the pastor becomes vitally important. It keeps the real nature of the relationship always in view, reminding the pastor of the disparity in power that exists between ministers and their congregants, and of the unequal responsibility ministers bear to protect those congregants' interests. The distinctions between professional and personal relationships prevent either party from distorting the relation between ministers and congregants with expectations that should properly be met elsewhere. Taken together, these distinctions and the practical safeguards that protect them preserve the space within which ministry can safely happen and parishioners' spiritual needs can safely be met.

At the same time, such barriers are more difficult to establish and maintain in ministry than in the other professions. Not only are the lines between personal and professional relationships not "built in" to the context of pastoral service, as it were, but many aspects of that context encourage confusion between the two. Ministers not only work on behalf of their parishioners; they work alongside them. They not only exercise the authority of their knowledge and expertise from a position of confidence and security like doctors and lawyers;

they also live highly visible lives in a community where they must acknowledge human weakness and fallibility as part of their central proclamation. (The good news that we all have a Savior depends for its intelligibility on the realization that we all—ministers included—need saving.) They are personally known by the communities they serve and must be personally present and invested in order to do their work. Finally, pastors are engaged in leadership not only while busy in serious work but also in the shared laughter and play that mark the life of any healthy congregation, which can make them at times seem like just one among a group of peers. Yet they are never simply members of those communities, nor are they ever simply themselves as individuals. They are always pastors, representing a faith tradition and charged with the spiritual care and guidance of the congregation. Congregants may be inclined to forget this, but ministers must not.

### **Dangerous Power**

There is another reason those who practice ministry need to maintain a clear-eyed and constant awareness of the nature of their role. The work of a pastor requires the exercise of dangerous forms of power: the power that comes of being privy to intensely personal information and the power of emotional intimacy created by pastoral service. I treat these related themes in turn.

#### *Information*

Access to private information and the general duty of confidentiality that goes with it are responsibilities all professionals share. However, these responsibilities have added significance in ministry. Whereas a doctor must guard information pertaining to patients' bodily health, and an attorney must keep secret whatever was learned in the process of attending to a client's legal needs, a minister must guard a wide range of information about the lives of parishioners. In the ordinary course of their work, pastors learn who is planning to marry—and frequently who is contemplating divorce. They often know which parents are gravely worried about one of their children, or conversely which adult children are struggling with how to care for their elderly parents. They are consulted by people in all kinds of

trouble, from financial difficulties to crises of faith, from substance abuse to crippling grief. The pastor's office is frequently the place where signs of severe family problems like violence or addiction first become evident. And ministers often serve as confessors, listening to the sins (both real and imagined) that burden people's souls, and to the losses and regrets that haunt their lives. The care of a congregation takes one into deep waters.

Since our most painful issues generally involve not only our own lives but also those of others close to us, it is significant that ministers are often acquainted with the families and friends of those whose secrets they carry. They will know many of their parishioners' connections simply by being located within the social community of the church. Casual or inadvertent disclosure of information in this setting is potentially very destructive. It is much more likely to be destructive than, for example, the elevator chitchat among staff that bedevils hospitals. But the point is not merely that disclosure may be harmful: a minister should not divulge confidential information even when convinced it will bring about the best result. Except in very extraordinary situations—where a child, an incompetent adult, or an unwitting victim cannot otherwise be protected from grave harm—divulging such information constitutes a misuse of the pastor's authority and can do irreparable damage to the trust that ministry requires.<sup>10</sup>

At times observing such constraints can be difficult. It is not altogether uncommon, for instance, for a parishioner to confess to the minister an extramarital affair with another member of the congregation, and for the pastor to know and regularly encounter all four of the married adults as well as their children. Even in such challenging circumstances, the content of the confession must be strictly protected. This remains true no matter how vigorously the pastor may admonish the congregant to break off the relationship and even possibly to admit the affair him- or herself.<sup>11</sup> Even if disclosure really is the best course,

10. For a more complete treatment of the circumstances that might warrant or require breaching confidentiality, see Sondra Wheeler, *The Minister as Moral Theologian: Ethical Dimensions of Pastoral Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 100–102.

11. While a full discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this chapter, here I simply note that the question of whether to disclose infidelity to a spouse is complicated and debatable, admitting of no simple and uniform answers. There are

the information entrusted is still rightfully under the congregant's control, and a responsible pastor must not unilaterally decide to share it without consent. Not only are professional obligations at stake; so too is the ability to serve the whole community. A minister cannot meet the spiritual needs of his or her congregants (including the need to be recalled from an irresponsible and destructive path!) without being a safe guardian of information that is given in confidence. Any breach of trust will cut off the vital spiritual ministries of confession and moral counsel that are essential to good pastoral care, not only for the congregant in question but for all who learn of it.

### *Intimacy*

Alongside the power that comes from information shared by congregants, a special power of emotional intimacy comes with the territory of ministry. Ministers are present at key times in people's lives. They are there to welcome new children into the community in infant baptism or dedication, and there to mark the maturing of those same children when they are old enough to make a profession of faith at confirmation or believer's baptism. They witness and bless the union of lives in ceremonies of Christian marriage, and they celebrate the lives and mark the passing of those who have died. In all these ways, pastors share in and honor the times of major transitions in people's lives, whether these are joyous or sorrowful or (as is often the case) both at once. They stand alongside the family and friends who gather for such momentous events, and by word and presence they help to interpret the changes of life within a community united by faith. On such ritual occasions, pastors are there to celebrate or to comfort, to embody and speak time-honored words that connect what is happening in one life to the lives of those who have gone before and those who will follow. Ministers are thus woven into the fabric of meaning and memory that make up a human story, and in that way are drawn into intimate connection.

Pastors are present in times of crisis as well—times of shock or loss, times when the doctor's news is grim or the wandering child is lost beyond recall. They come when the things and people congregants

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powerful arguments in both directions, and the best course may depend on a number of variables particular to each case.



have counted on fail, when a job they thought was their identity is suddenly gone or the friend and partner they trusted without question turns out to have betrayed that trust and deceived them. Likewise, pastors show up when congregants themselves have disappointed and betrayed others and are confronted with unwelcome new knowledge about who and what they are. And if they are good pastors, they come when others withdraw—when even close friends avoid being near because they have no idea what to say. In times of darkness or doubt, of crushing grief or rage, or of bitter self-reproach, a pastor consoles and accompanies—sometimes with word or touch but often simply by remaining present, a mute testimony to the truth that God does not abandon his people, whatever they do or suffer.

Any pastor of long service can tell what a difficult but also what a holy thing this is: to be present in the depths of human experience, when despair looms and it is not possible to see any future beyond the darkness of loss. Sharing such moments is a privilege and a trust, and those who do share them are ushered into a kind of intimacy known only by the closest and most trusted friends. People share a bond with those ministers who walk with them through the deepest and most painful challenges of their lives, a bond that endures even years after the path is traveled and the crisis is past. With that bond comes enormous power—and corresponding responsibility.

The powers of information and intimacy cannot be separated from ministry, for a pastor cannot do her or his most basic job without becoming privy to confidences, nor fulfill the responsibilities of the office without daring to stand beside people in critical moments of their lives. These powers are simply indispensable aspects of the pastorate. Yet, like symbolic and projected power, they are not formally conferred by an institution and so cannot be revoked by the same. They operate as part of the complex and delicate web of relationships between people that are the stuff of the church and its ministry. They are of enormous value, but they also carry great potential for harm if they are misused. Moreover, these distinctive forms of pastoral power can be abused not only intentionally, out of callousness or malice, but also unintentionally: by oversight or carelessness or because the pastor lacks the self-awareness to recognize when there has been a shift from using these powers to meet the needs of parishioners to using them to meet the pastor's own needs. There is no simple technique for eliminating the

risk of such misuse, no set of rules or regulations that can guarantee these relational powers will not be distorted or misdirected. But there are helpful ideas and strategies—ways of understanding and practicing ministry that make its necessary powers less dangerous. These begin with paying attention to the asymmetrical character of relationships between pastors and congregants.

### The Challenges of Asymmetry

The most basic characteristic of human relationships is that they are reciprocal. One person extends a hand in greeting, and the other person grasps it. In conversation, each person both listens and speaks. In the polite social advances that mark the beginning of an acquaintance, one person says something about herself and invites the other person to do the same. Often a minimal acknowledgment, the barest smile or nod, is exchanged even by strangers on the street. Reciprocity seems to be an impulse built into us: a healthy infant only a few months old will smile in response to a smiling face. Even non-acknowledgment—the avoidance of direct eye contact on a crowded subway car, for instance—often represents a sort of unspoken social agreement, serving to reduce the discomfort of such close physical proximity among strangers. The process of learning how to enter into workable, positive connections with other people is called socialization, a central task of growing up. People who lack the ability or willingness to negotiate such exchanges, or who are unable to read the cues of a particular society about how they are expected to behave, seem odd to us, awkward at best and rude or hostile at worst.

What applies in casual or fleeting social contacts is more pronounced and significant in intimate relationships that are central to our lives as human beings. In friendship, we both give and receive the blessings of affection and support. In romantic relationships, we are delighted by and seek to delight our partners in turn. Where such reciprocity is not found to some degree, we would not speak of a friendship or a romantic partnership at all (although we might speak of a love that was not returned—a source of sadness rather than of joy). Close relationships are mutual, and their gifts flow in both directions.

At the same time, not all close relationships are between equals who can reasonably expect the same things from one another. Few bonds rival the intimacy and intensity of the connection between parents and their young children, for example, but the relationship between parent and child is one of profound inequality in a number of dimensions. Both parents and children might be said to owe one another certain things—care and protection on one side, for instance, and respect and gratitude on the other—but what is owed is quite different, reflecting the differences in power and responsibility that define the relationship. While we would find it strange and troubling if parents were not protective of their young children, we would also find it troubling if young children felt they needed to protect their parents. When such distortions or reversals occur, we take them as signs that something has gone badly wrong, either internal to the relationship or in the external circumstances that surround it.

The distinctive challenges of relationships between ministers and congregants arise from the fact that divergent characteristics of human interaction are combined in them. On one hand, there are aspects of equality with adult members of the community, the ordinary reciprocity of social exchanges with other adults. Depending on a pastor's length of service and a parishioner's degree of involvement in the church, pastor and parishioner may interact often and know each other quite well, so that such reciprocal exchanges are commonplace. On the other hand, the relationship is not *fully* reciprocal: the pastor who helps with the transitions and crises of congregants' lives does not properly expect the same service from them. There remain basic disparities of power and role that define the relation between minister and congregant. Put simply, the pastor is there to serve the parishioner, but the reverse is not true. In the use of authority and influence, in the sharing of information and experience, in the way in which the connection between the two is developed and maintained, the needs and interests of the congregant and not those of the pastor must govern. It is the minister's professional responsibility to see that this remains the case, and thus a fundamental asymmetry lies at the heart of the relationship.

This does not mean that there will be *no* aspects of mutuality between ministers and congregants. A pastor and congregant may well like one another, share interests, and enjoy each other's company. A

parishioner may make gestures of kindness and support when a pastor is facing some special challenge: a thoughtful note on the occasion of a parent's death or a casserole when a new baby disrupts the family's regular meal preparation. But unlike ordinary friendships—where mutual enjoyment and mutual aid define the relationship and care naturally flows in both directions more or less equally—the relationship between pastor and congregant involves important distinctions and limits that must be observed. These limits exist to preserve a space within which ministry is safeguarded. A minister must be careful not to shift the foundation of a relationship with a parishioner from pastoral service to personal liking. This is both for the sake of that parishioner, and for the sake of others with whom such a ready personal connection does not exist. It is vital that congregants be clear about the nature of the connection and the basis on which the pastor is offering care or counsel: as a servant of God and a representative of the wider community of faith.

The disparity of power and the distinction of roles between pastor and congregant help explain why friendship as traditionally understood is a problematic model for that relationship. Odd as it may seem, this remains true even in cases where personal affection and enjoyment are naturally present. To explain this, I draw on the work of Aristotle, whose treatment of friendship as an aspect of moral life remains formative in the West.<sup>12</sup> Aristotle distinguishes between three kinds of connections: with those who benefit us, with those who share some important characteristic or task with us, and with those who are simply part of the same political community. He calls these kinds of associations friendships of a sort: friendships of utility, friendships of interest, and civic friendships. But all of these are relatively superficial ties, and they can be expected to change or dissolve with changing circumstances.

In his writing on character formation, Aristotle focuses on a fourth kind of friendship: friendships of virtue. These are the bonds between people who are bound by mutual trust and brought together by admiration for one another's best qualities. These ties are much more enduring than other kinds of human connection or friendship. Most

12. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 119–52.

deeply, such friends share a common vision of what a good person and a good life are about, and they help one another to attain that vision. For this reason, these relationships shape who and what the friends become. Those who are friends on this level share each other's lives, both the joys and the burdens. They help one another in need, and their relationship is characterized by complete honesty and full mutual disclosure. The friend, Aristotle says in summary, "is another self."<sup>13</sup> For all these reasons, Aristotle argues, friendships of virtue can only be formed between equals, where disparities of power and role do not interfere with or distort the relationship.

In our cultural context, we often use the word "friend" quite loosely. We may mean by it anything from our closest and most intimate companions in life, to the neighbor we chat with casually at the grocery store, to the 672 people to whom we have given access to our Facebook postings. Certainly in its more general senses, where we mean to indicate only acquaintance, positive feeling, and some measure of enjoyment, there is no concern about friendliness between pastors and congregants. I am not suggesting that pastors should maintain a formal and aloof attitude toward the people they care for, or avoid any kind of social interaction with them. (Such an approach, although not uncommon in the other professions, is neither practical nor desirable in ministry.) But establishing more profound friendships—the kind that Aristotle describes (and that many lonely pastors long for)—with a member of the congregation is likely to create several problems.

First, such a friendship confuses the nature of the pastor's connection with that congregant/friend, making it more difficult to provide spiritual care and guidance based on the faith they share and his or her office as pastor. If a situation arises in which this congregant sorely needs admonition, the clear and challenging counsel of one who speaks from the wisdom of the church, where will she or he turn? If the pastor tries to render such service despite the special friendship formed with the congregant, from whom will the congregant be hearing? The minister of Jesus Christ? Or the congregant's good friend Bill? Ironically, by forming deep friendships with congregants, ministers may unwittingly deprive those friends of a pastor in a time of crisis.

13. *Ibid.*, 149.

Second, having special bonds within the community creates a division. When the pastor creates an inner circle of a few congregants who are also friends, this inevitably creates an outer ring of those who are not so chosen and invited. Often hurt feelings and resentments arise to fracture the congregation and poison ministry.

Third, the obligations of confidentiality that belong to the office of pastor are likely to be compromised by close friendships within the congregation. Nothing is more natural than to tell a friend the things one is thinking about and struggling with. For a pastor who is devoted and serious about ministry, these thoughts and struggles cannot avoid including aspects of the ministry. But a parishioner cannot properly be a pastor's confidant, especially regarding issues or conflicts within the community. Even if the pastor *does* manage to guard the confidences and protect the privacy of other congregants, these congregants may not be sure of that, and their willingness to come to the pastor for help will thereby be diminished because of their uncertainty.

In all these ways and more, ministers who form close friendships with members of the community put at risk their ability to serve well the people God has entrusted to their care. This is a risk they should not take.

Attending to the asymmetry of power and responsibility between ministers and those they serve, and to the moral constraints that arise because of it, recalls the distinctive obligations of those who exercise fiduciary power. Given the vulnerability of people who seek professional services and the potentially destructive power held by those who care for their needs for health, justice, and salvation, those whose work is based on trust in such vital matters are bound to high standards of conduct. Though adherence to these standards may protect professionals and the institutions in which they are embedded, this is not their primary function. Rather, they are designed first and foremost to protect patients, clients, and congregants. This primary concern for the good of others, the preference for their interests over those of the professional, is the very hallmark of professional service and the heart of the ethical duties of professionals. Nowhere is this more significant than in ministry, where breaches of trust can do lasting harm to a person's very soul, damaging that person's ability to love and trust God.

Ethical standards for the practice of ministry can be expressed in a variety of ways: in formal codes of ethics, in official denominational rules, through training in professional ethics required of ministers in a particular tradition, and so on. The lines and limits proposed may have varying degrees of detail and specificity. Insofar as these forms of instruction provide clear standards and rationales for the ethical conduct of clergy, they are beneficial. But in order to help those professionals who are at risk and to prevent harm to those they serve, we must have more than rules. We also need more than policies for responding to violations—policies that are inevitably shaped by litigation and aimed partly at institutional self-protection and minimizing liability. For professional boundaries to protect the holy work of ministry, they must function as the outward markers of more profound moral understandings and be undergirded by disciplines that sustain the emotional, spiritual, and moral health of pastors. In chapter 2, we turn to these deeper foundations for sustaining ministry.