

Joseph E. Bush Jr., *Gentle Shepherding: Pastoral Ethics and Leadership* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006), 208 pp.

Barbara J. Blodgett, *Lives Entrusted: An Ethic of Trust for Ministry* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 169 pp.

In 1957 the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz put forward a cogent distinction: “A people’s ethos is the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects. Their world view is their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society.... This demonstration of a meaningful relation between the values a people holds and the general order of existence within which it finds itself is an essential element in all religions, however those values or that order be conceived.”¹ Nothing reveals the interplay of these factors in our cultural experience more clearly than conversations about clergy ethics; for in delineating the boundaries of ethical behavior by religious caregivers, we simultaneously encounter the convictions we hold sacred, our perceptions of social structure and influence, and the norms that govern our conduct, whether we are clergy or laity. Mapping this rich and textured landscape is the mission of these two excellent, nuanced volumes, which I will discuss in chronological order.

In *Gentle Shepherding*, Bush charts an ambitious itinerary for his travels. He intends to introduce pastoral ethical issues within the larger context of moral and ethical philosophy, based on his assumption that clergypersons, like their congregants, are “in the middle” and negotiating multiple layers of meaning at any given moment (p. viii passim). He hopes to demonstrate that moral responsibility in ministry entails three responsibilities: moral agency in offering care, moral enabling in encouraging others toward virtue, and moral leadership in facilitating congregational life and engagement with the larger society. He embarks on this task in chapters addressing the duty of nonmaleficence, balancing “between forbearance and intervention” in ministry (p. 42); informed consent, which for Bush involves developing a sensitivity to hearing both requests for help and requests for privacy; truthfulness as manifested in not lying and in speaking truly (Bush considers these aspects separately); evaluating confidentiality in terms of promises made, ownership of information, and differentials of power; and exploring the vocation of the minister “within the context of the vocation of the church, of humanity, of society, and of creation” (p. ix). From a practical standpoint, Bush is strongest in his earlier chapters, and most abstract in his last two; throughout, he assumes a Christian readership.

At the beginning of *Lives Entrusted*, Blodgett makes two assertions. She establishes trust as the foundation of her ethical approach, which yields a distinctly relational tone: “I will argue,” she writes, “that healthy and prudent trust relationships are indispensable to communities of faith and that many of the moral problems that plague communities of faith are related to failures of trust” (p. 1). She then contends that “trust always involves risk, vulnerability,

and power. We can, therefore, develop an ethic for trust relationships based on the principles that any risk should be appropriate to the trust relationship, any vulnerability be acknowledged and accepted by both truster and entrusted, and that the power between them be balanced as much as possible” (pp. 2–3). In the remainder of her book, Blodgett applies this elegant and concise paradigm to four dimensions of ministry practice. These include confidentiality, which she defines as the act of keeping a secret and then explores as a tension between secrecy and disclosure in public and private relationships; misconduct, about which Blodgett advances an intriguing case against relying so heavily on background checks, safe church practices, and audit mechanisms that we discourage and suppress “the smart practice of trust” (p. 55); gossip, which she describes as “informal, evaluative discourse about someone not present who is a member of the speakers’ social group” (p. 88) and contrasts with the healthier practice of testimony or “first-person, public revelation of oneself and one’s faith” (p. 116); and bullshit, which is Blodgett’s colorful term for inauthentic pastoral discourse that functions as “a tool of the powerful to maintain the power they have been granted but fear losing” (p. 145). Like Bush, Blodgett writes from a Christian theistic stance, yet her writing seems to translate well for religious leaders serving in a multi-faith context.

Bush paints a picture of the theological and philosophical scenery and creates a detailed travelogue that points out and summarizes many theoretical landmarks. He provides complexity without confusion, multiple perspectives, and concrete examples from his own career as a minister in cross-cultural settings. Blodgett’s strategy is not simplistic but streamlined—akin to a topographical map with a path highlighted on it. While both write clearly, Blodgett’s style tends to engage the reader more easily. Yet Bush’s book benefits from several case studies and accompanying provocative questions to ponder throughout. On this point, Blodgett is more economical, although she utilizes some memorable examples from modern literature to illustrate her points.

While neither author explicitly attends to the specialized ministries represented by this journal’s audience in much detail, both texts are quite helpful in illuminating the issues, dilemmas, and possible responses that arise as people engage in the work of spiritual caregiving.

Given how intimidating this terrain can seem, Bush and Blodgett are seasoned, wise, and reassuring guides on this journey. I benefited greatly from walking with them, and, thus, I would (and will) recommend either volume enthusiastically to students and colleagues in pastoral formation or supervision.

NOTE

1. “Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols,” reprinted in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, Clifford Geertz, ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 127; emphasis added.

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