

## SECTION II

### VIRTUES IN MINISTRY



The classic virtues that were considered in the previous section are not an end in themselves: they are pillars supporting the kind of wisdom that is needed to sustain life and ministry. Wisdom is not the end either. The mystery of wisdom unfolds in concrete moments of care, in gracious pastoral supervision, in conversations around the breakfast table, in random acts of kindness, in the agonies of choice. All virtues, including wisdom, are real and practical and yet remain an elusive ideal or aspiration. It is important to keep that paradox of the real and the ideal in mind as we examine the implications of virtues for ministry.

Almost three decades ago, William F. May gave a lecture to The Society for Values in Higher Education entitled “The Virtues in a Professional Setting” in which he insisted that virtues are not optional in the professional setting. “One lives under the *imperative to approximate* the ideal; and this task of approximation is not merely optional.”<sup>1</sup> Professionals had better be virtuous, May wrote, because fewer and fewer people know what any given expert is up to. “One important test of character and virtue: what does a person do when no one else is watching? A society that rests on expertise needs more people who can pass this test.”<sup>2</sup> May locates his discussion of several virtues under a more inclusive doctrine of vocation or calling. In the end, humility is the foundational virtue for the professional because it undercuts false posturing and heroics and “lets the air out of the other virtues.” Humility “should remind us of the underground root system of receiving, upon which professional life depends.”<sup>3</sup> Wise words for anyone engaged in formation and supervision in ministry!

Drawing on his experience in that “underground root system” interpreting psychological testing with candidates for ministry, R. Scott Sullender explores the problems of a “moralistic or absolutistic use of virtues and vices” that it has “prevented many religious leaders from seeing the subtleties and nuances of their own personality dynamics, indirectly contributing to their downfall in ministry.” Sullender makes three significant contributions to the discussion of virtues in ministry: a) He suggests that a virtue carried to an extreme may in fact become a vice; b) He examines virtues as personality traits using Sixteen Personality Factors as the resource; and c) context matters and, therefore, some personality traits are changeable, while other traits are more foundational.

The essay by Christian Scharen and Eileen Campbell-Reed is part of an extensive study they are doing in the *Learning Pastoral Imagination Project*. The value of this project for pastoral supervisors is reflected in their careful tracking of two distinct cases of the development of prudence and pastoral imagination. "Learning the knowledge and skills required for making wise judgments is best accomplished alongside mentors and peers who can share in the deliberative learning." That process happens over time and through experience. In the end, they conclude, prudence is the key to unfolding pastoral imagination.

Empathy is not a traditional virtue but Kwon Soo-Young makes a convincing argument for the necessity of empathy not only for pastoral counseling but for ministerial character viewed from the perspective of the agony and sorrow of God. Understanding clients in counseling sessions impersonates the incarnation of God who has descended to the very bottom of human suffering in order to understand our pain and sorrow. One of the challenges of pastoral supervision is to foster the willingness to stand with people in their sorrow. That process will be enhanced by the recognition, as May has noted, that we are all part of "an underground root system of receiving."

Pastoral proverbs from John Patton are a fitting bookend for this section on virtues in ministry. They are received wisdom. These sayings are particularly wise because they embody contradiction. Paradoxical proverbs become a way of inviting clients or parishioners or supervisees to consider seeing another side—to whatever is the current focus of the conversation or in their lives. Most of us can identify family sayings—some of which are hurtful or confining, while others carry family myths and family wisdom. These sayings often have power to counter the wisdom of proverbs—from any source. It might be a useful exercise to invite supervisees to recall family sayings and then read Patton's Proverbs. I suspect a lively conversation would ensue.

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Editor

#### NOTES

1. William F. May, "The Virtues in a Professional Setting: Third Annual Memorial Lecture of the Society for Values in Higher Education," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 67, vol. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 1984). May's lecture was delivered at the 61st Fellows Meeting, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York, August 6, 1984.
2. *Ibid.*, 3.
3. *Ibid.*, 22.