

Updated pastoral care

by [K. Brynolf Lyon](#) in the [November 17, 1999](#) issue

*The Pastor as a Moral Guide*, by Rebekah L. Miles

Pastors stand with their parishioners in many of life's most complex and troubling moral moments. The early modern pastoral care and counseling movement made clear the dangers of simple moralism, and more recent commentators have excoriated the seeming moral relativism that came next. Many pastors have been left wondering how best to care for their parishioners. How can they both respect people's integrity and offer them the full resources and wisdom of Christian faith?

To this dilemma Rebekah Miles brings a thoughtful point of view, seasoned by several years of pastoral experience in United Methodist congregations and by teaching posts as a Christian ethicist at Texas Christian University's Brite Divinity School. Miles believes that most of the ethical problems pastors confront—in their own lives as well as in the lives of their parishioners—involve failures of responsibility. The challenge is to be present with people in a way that helps maintain and restore responsibility in the context of Christian community.

Providing extensive case studies of ethical dilemmas involving work, divorce and sexual behavior, Miles offers grounding in both Christian ethical reflection and practical pastoral techniques. She extends the arguments of Don Browning, John Hoffman and Charles Gerkin on the importance of recovering the moral dimensions of pastoral care. Miles demonstrates how that might be done in the context of pastoral conversation.

Not everyone will like Miles's approach. She sometimes seems unnecessarily to cut herself off from the resources of modern psychology. She frequently (and rightly, I think) disparages "popular psychology," with its heightened emphasis on transient feelings and self-fulfillment at the expense of responsibility-in-community. Yet some contemporary psychology and clinical theory offer great insight into the dynamic and systemic nature of such failures, exploring the ways they are embedded within complex, obscured and resilient ranges of expectations and patterns of experiencing. Sin is often dynamic in ways not accounted for in Miles's text.

This book should be read and discussed with others. The pleasures and anxieties of doing so can promote a deeper and more complex sense of the challenges of moral guidance in the church and enable pastors to be the moral guide to their parishioners that Miles is to her readers.