

Moral Dangers in the Ministry: Breakdown and Recovery

An Introduction



**Board of Ministry
May 2022**

Although ministers have always been subject to temptations connected with their office, the rise of a celebrity culture through social media has added to those temptations. It causes pride, and the minister can view himself to be the most acclaimed person in the local church.

His succumbing to moral temptation and public sin has grave implications for the witness of the church. It is also terrible for himself and his family and others involved. It can result in a loss of career, house and reputation.

1. Checklist of warning signs of pastoral sin

The following checklist aims to indicate where there could be errant behaviour which needs to be corrected. Inevitably some responses to the questions posed may refer to perfectly innocent practices.

The checklist may be used as a self-diagnostic tool or as an aid for those involved in teaching or advising. Along with the questions is given some explanatory detail.

- a. Are you doing something, which if it became public knowledge, would mean you would not be able to continue as a minister?

(If this is the situation, then repentance and restitution should be immediate. Otherwise it will become public knowledge and come under the judicial procedure of the Church.)

- b. Do you believe that you have the freedom to indulge in whatever pleasurable activity you like, but want to keep it hidden from other Christians whom you respect?

(There is a temptation for a minister with the idea of spiritual power to feel he can do whatever he likes.)

- c. If you are doing something you know is inappropriate, is your reasoning that it will not hurt others and so it does not matter?

(Typically, it is reasoned that what is done in private does not affect anyone, whereas it impacts on the relationship with the minister's wife, family and on Christian fellowship. The man may still appear to be a good preacher and a good pastor.)

- d. If there is inappropriate conduct in your life, do you justify it on the grounds of your circumstances?

(The blame for the inappropriate conduct can be placed upon depression or stress, either professional or domestic, or the inappropriate conduct can be seen as a way of being able to continue functioning in the ministry.)

- e. If you do something which would be questionable for a minister, do you find yourself justifying your behaviour theologically? Maybe on the grounds of your fallen nature or God-given circumstances or arguing from the lives of Old Testament saints?

(Those who do wrong defend their conduct spiritually. This may be by using failings of Old Testament believers, or by reasoning that they feel comfortable with how they are acting.)

- f. Is the time you are spending on social media, texting or viewing the internet dominating your life to the neglect of your work and family responsibilities?

(Once something starts to take over a person's life, it has an addictive quality about it. The privacy of online communication is recognized as a potential area of temptation)

- g. Do you cut yourself off from close friendship with other ministers or elders and would not wish to be mentored or counselled?

(This is a warning sign of the possible existence of a dual life.)

- h. If someone speaks to you privately with concerns about how you are behaving, do you respond by repelling their concern and justifying yourself. And do you regard that person as a meddler?

(Ministers who misuse their authority, learn how to repulse concerned comments by defensive arguments as well as being critical of the other person.)

2. Recognising and addressing the difficulties faced by the wife and family

The impact of a minister acting inappropriately can be substantial for his family. And it is particularly difficult for them to obtain help. To whom can the wife speak when she realizes that there are dangerous signs in her husband's life and also consequences for her family?

The burden she experiences may be carried for years as she protects her family, her marriage and her husband. Colleagues who become involved may find themselves ill equipped to advise because of the complexity of the situation.

When things do become public knowledge, she may feel guilty, ashamed and angry, and the children struggle to understand what has happened. And some in the church may even excuse the minister and blame the wife.

In these situations, not all ministerial colleagues are equipped to helpfully provide pastoral care. And so the Church needs to provide better training. The church community should be encouraged to give support for the minister's wife and family.

3. Preventative measures and help for the Minister

When inappropriate behaviour becomes apparent, it is best to provide the minister with an opportunity to unburden himself in private conversations with others. This gives opportunity for repentance, restitution and a permanent change of conduct.

a. Personal counsel

Private conversation may be initiated by a concerned person either with the minister alone, or with him and his wife. It can be caused when someone else senses that things are going morally wrong in the minister's life. This is both Biblical and advised in *The Practice of the Free Church of Scotland*.

Such a conversation should not be commenced without reasonable justification and concern for the good of the minister and church.

b. Colleagues meeting with the minister in private conference

When an individual meeting fails to resolve the situation, then, following the Biblical pattern, there is the need for more than one person to talk with the minister concerned. As far as possible this conversation should be in a non-judicial setting to allow for a frank discussion of issues. A sense of mutual accountability amongst ministers leading to a sharing of burdens should be encouraged.

As a general preventative measure, a good working relationship is desirable at a congregational, Sessional and Presbyterial level. It may be necessary to rethink how Presbytery or Kirk Sessions meetings are conducted to allow for opportunity for fellowship.

It should be borne in mind that one danger here is that those who become involved struggle to advise wisely because of their lack of experience or understanding of the situation. In such an instance help should be sought from more experienced ministers in the Presbytery or wider church.

c. Professional help

Certain practices can result in a mental or physiological dependence and may be best helped by medical or psychological agencies. At an early stage seeking such assistance might be requested privately via the Pastoral Care Worker. At a later stage assistance could be sought with the advice of the Presbytery.

Recommended agencies, in the Edinburgh area, which have been used by the Free Church include:

New Growth Christian Counselling www.newgrowthcounselling.org.uk

HealthLink360 (medical and counselling) www.healthlink360.org

d. Resources

One advantage of using helpful resources is that they are anonymous and if properly used can be restorative. However, this does require good personal insight, followed by determination and wisdom to engage successfully with the material.

Some resources are:

Use and Misuse of Authority in Christian Leadership (2 lectures), Diane Langberg, European Leadership Forum www.youtube.com/watch?v=yrBrA1wOD4U
www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-UC6B6Hhd0&t=11s

Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry, Paul David Tripp (IVP, 2012)

Gospel Coach: Shepherding Leaders to Glory God, Scott Thomas & Tom Wood, (Zondervan, 2012)