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<http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2010/03/pastors_professional_integrity.html>

**Pastors' professional integrity**

*(A) What should pastors do if they no longer hold the defining beliefs of their denomination? (B) Do clergy have a moral obligation not to challenge the sincere faith of their parishioners? (C) If this requires them to dissemble from the pulpit, doesn't this create systematic hypocrisy at the center of religion? (D) What would you want your pastor to do with his or her personal doubts or loss of faith?*

1.....What should scientists - Daniel C. Dennett, for example - do if their opinions develop in a direction they know would be at least distasteful to their peers? Two recent articles in major publications revealed scandalous behavior among scientists more interested in advancing their careers and maintaining their peer status than in advancing truth and the public interest.

2.....I'll skip scandalous behavior in the medical profession and in the legal profession and in politics and journalism and in entertainment and come right down to scandalous behavior in the clergy, especially pastors. This week's question should be responded to in the context of the present-day public belief that professionals are not to be trusted. But I must remark the ironic humor that the source of this week's question about pastors is a prominent atheist, Daniel C. Dennett. In interrogative mode, the questions are indicative *attacks on the pastoral profession*.

3.....While other employees are hired to promote the interests of their employer, pastors are hired *to promote the interests of God*, who calls on them to love their congregations and "speak truth to power," sometimes preaching what their people would rather not hear. Pastors are primarily servants of God, who "calls" them into their "vocation," and only secondarily servants of the particular congregation employing them. (The questions assume the pastor-people relationship in the so-called "free" churches, in which the employer is the congregation.)

4.....The moral dimension of the questions' economic context is the employee's integrity in relating to the employer. Confront your employer, and your job is at stake. Think of the COURAGE it takes to pastor: one aspect of your job is to confront, even at times to cross the interests of, your employers, the members of the congregation singly and collectively! No one should be surprised to learn that long pastorates are extremely rare, or that the courage of some pastors fail.

Now to the questions, in order:

A.....*Move on*. It's part of the courage the profession requires: you no longer fit in a corporation (a denomination, wider church) whose "defining beliefs" you no longer hold. But this is true of all jobs, not just pastoring.

B.....The question is laughably inauthentic. On its basis, hirelings could argue that in preaching what the people want to hear, they are fulfilling a "moral obligation"! Further: Ordained to "speak the truth in love," pastors cannot accept beliefs wholly on the basis of sincerity: every human being is, sometimes, both *sincere and wrong*.  
But a wide belief-gap between pastor and people doesn't last long: the pastor leaves disheartened, or the market takes over.

C.....Nothing "requires" a pastor to "dissemble from the pulpit." My long experience in the education, continuing education, counseling, and mentoring of pastors laughs at the question's expression, "systematic hypocrisy." The notion is *an invention of novelists*, not a description of reality. I was ordained as a pastor 70 years ago, and I have never met a pastor I could call hypocritical.

D.....For reasons too numerous to list here, every pastor should be in weekly conversation with a mentor. Life is change and can also be growth, development, including the increase of appreciative and critical awareness to the glory of God and the good of humankind and the good earth. On*the triangle of people / pastor / mentor*, all can be agents of this increase, servants of God and of one another.

**BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT  |  MARCH 15, 2010; 10:31 PM ET**

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