

Faith, family & finances can test pastors' integrity

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WACO—Faith, family and finances are three points where many ministers find their integrity tested, a veteran pastor and denominational leader told a ministerial ethics conference.

Authentic spirituality, stability at home and a nonmaterialistic lifestyle demonstrate wholeness—"a person who has it all together," said James Carter, former director of church-minister relations for the Louisiana Baptist Convention.

"An effective, ethical minister is a person of integrity," said Carter, who served 30 years as a pastor. He spoke during a conference at Baylor University's Truett Seminary, sponsored by the Christian Ethics Today Foundation.

"The minister's faith must be a growing faith," Carter said.

Ministers need to read the Bible devotionally and with the goal of being shaped by it, not just routinely seeking sermons and teaching material, he insisted.

"There is danger in handling the holy. The minister can become too familiar

with the holy and the sacred,” he warned. “Spiritual disciplines can become perfunctory.”

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The minister’s home is the place where integrity and faith are demonstrated in intimate relationships, Carter noted. Quoting a Mormon ad campaign about family values from several years ago, he said, “No other success compensates for failure at home.”

Stress in ministry can create stress in marriage—particularly when the divine calling into ministry comes later in life.

“Many ministers’ spouses did not marry a minister. They’re not the one

who received the call," he said.

In practical terms, the minister can strengthen relationships at home best by giving priority to family time.

"Time together is a key ingredient for a happy home life," he said, advising ministers to write appointments with spouses and children on the calendar, and then honor the commitment. "Schedule it, and then protect it. It's more important than a lot of the appointments you keep."

Money management presents another test of integrity for many ministers, Carter said.

"Church leaders do not appreciate being embarrassed by their minister's financial irresponsibility," he said. "Handling finances responsibly is a spiritual discipline."

Carter warned against the misuse of credit, the burden of debt and the poor Christian witness that conspicuous consumption presents. He also urged every minister to "practice what you preach" concerning tithes and offerings.

"All that a minister is, as well as all that a minister owns, is a trust from God," he said.

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