

# Who bears responsibility for unethical clergy?

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Ministers are held responsible for their actions—sometimes by civil authorities and ultimately by God. But what responsibility should the local church and the denomination bear for unethical behavior of pastors and other ministers?

That question is difficult for religious bodies that follow a congregational form of governance. And congregational polity has become the primary basis for refusal by many groups, including many Baptist denominations, to compile lists of ministers caught in unethical or immoral behavior, particularly sexual misconduct.

Joe Trull, retired professor of Christian ethics at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and former editor of *Christian Ethics Today* magazine. Establishing an inclusive procedure is more difficult for denominations without a hierarchical structure, said ethicist Joe Trull of Denton.

“As Baptists, we want to maintain our belief in local-church autonomy and are hesitant to be viewed as telling churches what to do,” said the retired professor of Christian ethics at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and former editor of [\*Christian Ethics Today\*](#) magazine. “I think denominations could do more, but they are so afraid of someone accusing them of exerting control.”

Healthy accountability structures within the local church are a way to minimize the possibility of clergy misconduct, said Daniel Darling, vice president for communications at the Southern Baptist Convention’s [Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission](#). The pastor is placed under that

accountability as a form of service to the congregation, Darling noted.



Daniel DarlingFor Tarris Rosell, who holds the Rosemary Flanigan Chair at the [Center for Practical Bioethics](#) in Kansas City, Mo., ability or empowerment determines responsibility. As a professor of pastoral theology, ethics and ministry praxis at [Central Baptist Theological Seminary](#) in Shawnee, Kan., he insists anyone who has the ability—and who is empowered—to respond is responsible.

Congregations have the responsibility to put policies and procedures in place, to do background checks and to have whistleblower policies that allow church leaders and members a safe way to report abuses, including financial misconduct. Those who are disempowered become the most vulnerable, he said.

Jerry Cain, chancellor of [Judson University](#) in Elgin, Ill., believes both the pastor and the congregation have obligations. “The pastor should be expected to live a holy life of unquestioned morality, yet should be protected from detractors who wish to diminish his reputation,” Cain said.



Tarris Rosell He also emphasized church policies, including background checks, perusal of a potential pastor's social media usage and annual pastoral reviews. The evaluation should include questions about all areas of the pastor's ministry and home life "and other topics that might be a source of temptation," he said.

[American Baptist Churches USA](#) is one of the few Baptist groups that have another level of accountability for ordination. While congregations determine who they will ordain, another jurisdiction—an ABC regional or associational body—must officially recognize the ordination for it to be valid, and in most cases, a regional or area minister is involved.

Cain sees using that process as another possible way to deter or punish misconduct. "Like an educational accrediting agency, it might be good for the denomination to review ordinations every decade to see if a pastor should retain his papers. Should ordination be for life?"

Baptist groups should put some type of ethical code in place for ministers, Trull believes. Most professions have a code of ethics developed and sometimes enforced by their members. While the American Baptists do not enforce a pastoral code of ethics, they provide guidelines for churches to develop their own code.



Jerry Cain, chancellor of Judson University. While serving as a consultant for the [Baptist General Convention of Texas](#), Trull encouraged state leaders to adopt a ministerial code of ethics churches could use. Instead, the BGCT developed a covenant of ethics, which Trull believes does not carry the same weight.

Rosell and Darling both pointed out most ministers faithfully serve and do not violate members' trust, but accountability in place protects everyone.

Understanding relationships at all levels of ministry, particularly within the local church, is a way in which pastors and members can bear responsibility and promote accountability, Rosell said.

He likens the relationship to that between a benefactor and beneficiary. The relationship centers on the beneficiary.

For example, Rosell explained, the relationship between the pastor and a dentist who is a church member differs depending upon place. In the church, the minister holds the role of benefactor. The "power" of the relationship resides in him, with the dentist at greater vulnerability.

If the two are in a social or other setting as peers, power and vulnerability are relatively equal.

When the pastor goes to the dentist's office and seeks the dentist's

professional expertise, the roles are reversed. The dentist has the power and the minister is more vulnerable, Rosell said.

Ministers cannot avoid the multiple roles both they and members hold, he added. But they must be aware of where they are on the spectrum of each relationship because role reversal can open the possibility for confusion and abuse.