

Ethics linked to what the minister does, who the minister is

April 14, 2011

ABILENE—Ethical ministry flows out of action and identity, two veteran ministers stressed during a workshop at [Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon Seminary](#) April 11.

Suzii Paynter, executive director of the [Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission](#), and Phil Christopher, pastor of [First Baptist Church in Abilene](#), discussed ministerial ethics at a workshop sponsored by Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas. Participants included students and ministers attending the seminary's T.B. Maston Lectures.

Rather than listening to Jesus and holding opinions about him, ethical ministry is based upon action, Paynter stressed.

The 2011 Young Maston Scholars—recognized during the T.B. Maston Lectures in Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon Seminary—are (back row, left to right) Andrew Price and Garrett McGraw of Dallas Baptist University, Rhea Bullock of Howard Payne University, Chase Brown of the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, (middle row) Jacqueline Findley of UMHB, Abby Wood of Howard Payne, Sarah Rogers of Hardin-Simmons University, (front row) Lyndsay Matthews of Hardin-Simmons and Bridgette Onion of Baptist University of the Americas. (PHOTO/James Stone/Logsdon Seminary)

She recalled the admonition of the Apostle James: “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only.” She noted James’ teaching mirrored Jesus’ warning to people who hear his teachings but fail to do anything about them. Jesus compared doers to a “wise man” who built the foundation of his house upon rock and the hearers-only to a “foolish man” who built upon sand.

“Jesus says, ‘Get busy doing my words, or the house of your life will collapse,’” Paynter paraphrased. “Jesus says, ‘Your foundation is based upon what you do.’ ... It is the doing of Jesus’ words that makes our foundation strong.”

Unstable ministry is built upon the sand of “unlived” words, thoughts and actions, she said, noting the gospel calls for applying Jesus’ teachings to real people’s lives. To illustrate, she said proposed legislation could cause 42 percent of Texans in nursing homes to lose the financial support they need to remain in care, and she insisted lamenting the loss is meaningless if Christians don’t do something to prevent it.

“The legacy of being ‘doers of the word’ is the central aspect of ministerial integrity,” Paynter said.

Christopher linked the minister’s identity to ethical action.

“You cannot separate the person (of the minister) from talking about ethics,” he said. “It’s about who we are. You show up and trust God for what happens. It’s about a relationship that’s formed out of who you are.”

A secure ministerial identity is grounded in divine calling, Christopher said. He cited Baptist ethicists James Carter and Joe Trull, who claimed clergy burnout results from “blurred pastoral identity,” which can be counteracted by adhering to professional ethics.

Ministry is “about who we are,” Christopher told the audience, composed primarily of clergy and ministers-in-training. “You show up and trust God

for what happens. It's about a relationship that is formed out of who you are."

Referencing "Ministerial Ethics: A Covenant of Trust," a guide to clergy-church relationships developed by the Christian Life Commission, Christopher called on ministers to act ethically in six phases of their lives:

- **Relationships.** Ministers must relate to God, their families, their colleagues and their congregations, he said.

A vital relationship with God comes first, he stressed, noting, "You can't lead people to grow if you're not growing." And the way to tell if a minister's relationship with God is on track is observing if she or he is "concerned about the things Jesus is concerned about."

- **Time.** Ministers must be accountable for their use of time, Christopher said. "Plan your week; put it down on paper," he said, also advising ministers to resist the danger of "finding and feeding my worth through work."

- **Health.** The first priority is spiritual health, he said, urging ministers to reserve time alone with God, apart from their parishioners. He quoted author Thomas Merton, who said, "If your furnace door always is open, it will grow cold and die."

Christopher lauded the benefits of exercise, recreation and hobbies to maintain physical health, and he warned against making the church an "idol" that consumes and controls a minister's life.

- **Finances.** "Live with a sense of contentment, and follow the call to look out for the poor and to correct injustice," he said. "A vow of poverty is not essential to a minister's calling. We must maintain a balance between greed and austerity."

- **Sexual conduct.** Ministers must set appropriate boundaries between themselves and church members, and also between themselves and ministerial colleagues, Christopher suggested, calling upon them to honor “the sacred trust of relationships and our covenants.”

“No one in our church is afraid to walk into my office, and I don’t want to lose that,” he said. “And as for my marriage, after 35 years, I don’t want to violate our covenant.”

- **The church’s community.** Ministerial involvement is “one of the glaring absences today in our communities,” he said of many ministers’ hesitancy to engage people and groups outside their churches.

“Find ways to get involved” in the community, he stressed. “It is missional living. It will set you free. ... And being involved in the community helps ministers to understand what it means for church members to volunteer and give of their time.”