

Cheryl J. Sanders, Howard University School of Divinity



Cheryl J. Sanders has been Professor of Christian Ethics at the Howard University School of Divinity since 1984, and Senior Pastor of the Third Street Church of God in Washington, D.C., since 1997. She has published more than 100 articles and is the author of several books, including Ministry at the Margins (1997); Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture (1996);

Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People (1995); and

Living the Intersection

(1995). For several years she has been a contributing guest editor for Leadership

, a journal for pastors. She was a Henry Luce III Fellow in Theology for the academic year 2000–2001, an award conferred by the Association of Theological Schools. At Howard she teaches courses in Christian ethics, pastoral ethics, and African-American spirituality, and her key areas of research and writing are African-American religious studies, bioethics, pastoral leadership, and womanist studies. Contact:

This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it

.

Because I am an ethics professor who pastors a church, I do not subscribe to the strict pecking order of theological inquiry and curricula where the “practical” and “applied” things that happen in churches are deemed to have less significance than biblical studies, history, and theology. Instead, it is my view that the parish is the premier social context for moral formation and ethical reflection. I find that key questions and issues that arise in the day-to-day lives of parishioners generate the topics which are of greatest interest to students who are being equipped for leadership and participation in faith communities.

In other words, the parish is not only the arena of applying ethical ideas; it is also a vital source

of these ideas. Frequently, I report to my parishioners something my students have said in class, and I readily use examples from my church as illustrations in the classroom. Since the days when I was a pastor in Boston and a doctoral student at Harvard Divinity School, I have viewed the parish as a laboratory for testing ideas first conceived in the library and the classroom. But for me it works both ways; the classroom functions as a gauge for detecting the strength and vitality of the lifeblood of the churches, most notably, the commitment to care enough to discern right from wrong. The specific challenge I face as an ethicist, then, is to introduce my students to a moral language for evaluating the ethical perspectives of communities and individuals who bring the basic convictions of Christian faith to bear upon their worldly existence.

At the Howard University School of Divinity, where I have been teaching full-time since 1984, we proclaim our key mission by saying that “we train leaders.” For pastors and religious leaders, almost everything we do in the realm of parish ministry has ethical meaning and produces potential learning outcomes. Whether our preaching is based upon scripture, classical or contemporary literature, or everyday experience, some moral insight or burden is manifested in the message. In my own holiness faith tradition, the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), we preach for decision, and responses to our preaching entail moral deliberation and commitment. In the black church context where the preacher “tells the story,” some significant moral lesson is being taught for those in the listening audience who have an ear to hear. This is not to say that preaching has to be preachy or judgmental; rather, it is to suggest that a sermon that requires no moral reflection is not really worth preaching or being heard. Preaching offers a great opportunity to elevate awareness of ethical questions and concerns, and sometimes even to point people toward answers, especially those who are poised to listen for cues to a better existence for themselves and others.

Ethics is also an indispensable element of religious education. The notion of “Sunday School morality” may evoke laughter or contempt in some circles, but there is something to be said for the positive outcomes of children and young adults whose moral and spiritual formation has been influenced by frequent exhortations to live in the light of what they are learning about the Bible. Even if the quality of instruction seems boring or irrelevant, the Sunday School teacher can convey some meaningful moral lessons just by showing up every Sunday to teach the class. I will never forget the years when my daughter was six or seven years old and she was often the only one in her Sunday School class. Yet her teacher came prepared every week to teach the lesson, and gave my child her undivided attention without ever complaining that it was a waste of her time to make all that effort for just one kid. Consequently, that one kid learned a lot about caring, commitment, and faithfulness week after week from a teacher whose actions underscored these and other moral lessons illustrated in the Bible stories.

The ethical practices of Christian churches can be observed in a host of activities beyond

preaching and teaching. Pastoral counseling, for example, is enriched by thoughtful attentiveness to its moral context, especially if the goal of counseling includes empowering the parishioner to make critical decisions and not just to receive and implement the pastor's good advice. The role of the pastor in conducting weddings and funerals invokes serious testing of the ethics of truth telling. Does the pastor disclose or conceal misgivings concerning the potential incompatibility of a couple presenting themselves for premarital counseling? Regarding funerals, to be sure, one ought never to speak ill of the dead. But when we preach at funeral services, must our obligation to tell the truth divest our eulogies of charity and exaggeration?

In the social context of church and community, our mission activities most readily reveal our ethics. Do we really have to love the poor in order to serve them well? Is the intention of our outreach ministries to invite others to reflect ethically upon their own life, or is it rather to make ourselves feel good about the good we have done whether or not it actually does anybody else any good? Through hard questions like these, pastors must negotiate through murky waters of self-scrutiny and doubt on the journey toward moral clarity in liturgical and social practice.

I am impressed by the fact that ethics curricula abound in almost every profession except the ministry. Much of this interest in ethics is motivated by the proliferation of ethical abuses that bring forth bad publicity and lawsuits, to the point that schools and corporations are protecting themselves by orienting students to ethical standards of professional practice and accountability. By contrast, it puzzles me to observe that divinity schools appear not to be nearly as conscientious about these matters as medical or business schools, notwithstanding the horrific scandals involving clergy sexual abuse in recent years.

When I first offered my pastoral ethics course at Howard University several years ago, only one student signed up for it. Thankfully, that student was the pastor of one of the largest and most influential Pentecostal congregations in the city and a leading bishop in his denomination, so I learned as much from our directed study as he did. Because this course is not required, however, the class size remains relatively small, which is a good thing for teaching. In lieu of a final research paper, I require students to submit either a case study based upon their own parish experience, or a code of professional ethics applicable to their context of ministry. All of our graduate degree programs at Howard University require at least one basic course in ethics, so not all of my students are practicing or preparing themselves for pastoral ministry. It is my experience, however, that many students have no idea what to expect to learn in an ethics course. My goal is to make it interesting and motivating, especially since, based upon my experience, the study of ethics can be boring. The key is to focus on the quality of the learning experience so that students feel empowered to think more clearly in ethical terms, and to make reasoned decisions about how to act. Virtually all of my midterm and final examinations are clipped from the daily newspapers, from which I take a current news item and frame a question for the students to consider. Included in the examination packet is an article and/or editorial that

presents enough information about the case for them to write an essay without having to do further research. There are no right or wrong answers, as I advise my students that their grades are not based upon the extent of their compliance with my point of view. I am testing their ability to use the tools they are acquiring through class readings and lectures to process a “real life” ethical inquiry, supported by thoughtful arguments that are clearly communicated. I encourage them to submit their exam essays to the newspaper to be considered for publication as letters to the editor.

My overall pedagogical objective is neither to give students ethical “answers,” nor is it my intent to reinforce or to negate whatever answers they may have already constructed to address the difficult moral dilemmas of our times. I simply want to challenge them to hear and to formulate compelling ethical questions as they cultivate the grace of listening deeply to points of view divergent from their own. In my courses I want them to learn how to read intelligently about moral issues, to engage others through purposeful exchange of ideas, information, and experiences, and to broaden their awareness of the social context of ethical analysis and action.