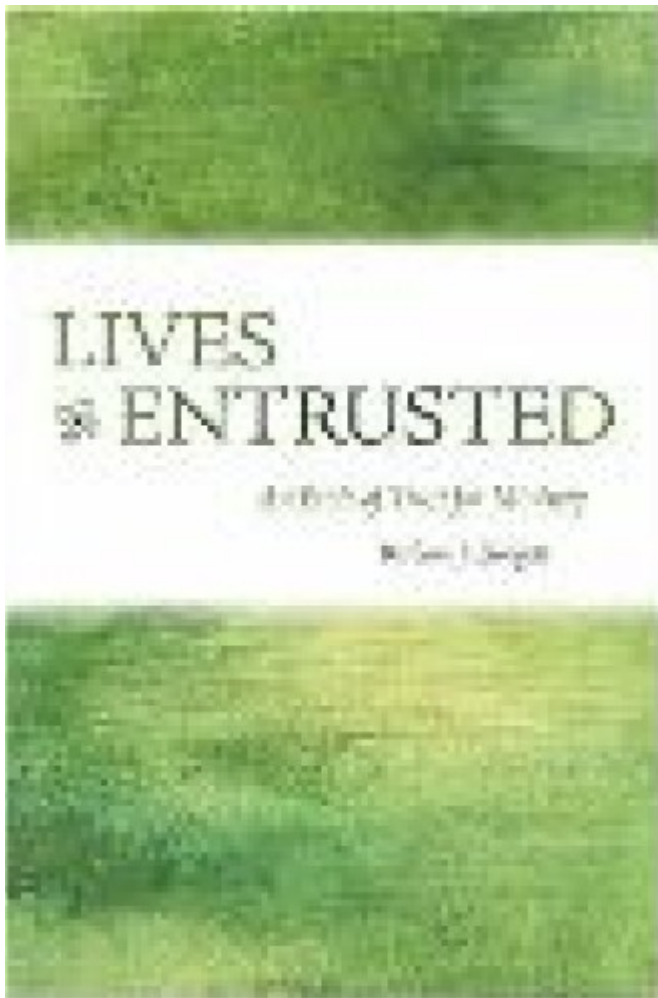


# Trustworthy

By [William H. Willimon](#) in the [January 27, 2009](#) issue

## In Review



### **Lives Entrusted: An Ethic of Trust for Ministry**

Barbara J. Blodgett  
Fortress

Barbara Blodgett, director of supervised ministries at Yale Divinity School, has written what may be the best book yet on the crucial issue of pastoral trust. She

defines trust as an act, a practice, something that we choose to do in relationship. But she doesn't rely only on abstract definitions. She skillfully probes the nature of trust, using a couple of novels and drawing on the work of philosopher Niklas Luhmann.

In trust, Blodgett explains, we hand over to someone we consider trustworthy something of value for safekeeping. In trust, we "prune the future" to reduce our vulnerability, to prevent some of the scary things that can happen between human beings. To trust someone else is to risk being vulnerable to another. To be trusted is to be given power by another. Those three words—*risk*, *vulnerability* and *power*—crop up throughout Blodgett's book.

Unfortunately, Blodgett displays little theological or biblical underpinning for her thoughts on trust, but she is probably right in her suspicion that some of our theological rationale for ministry may be merely evidence of clergy self-deceit. Stressing that we are overdue for a tough, realistic moral assessment of the clerical vocation, she adeptly uses psychological and philosophical insights to cut through clerical self-justification. On the other hand, she criticizes the "therapeutic model" of ministry, in which assessments of clergy power and behavior do not take into account congregational culture, and in which images from the health-care professions are inappropriately laid on clergy.

From one angle this is a work in clergy ethics, and Blodgett raises the bar on what passes for ethical thought about pastors. She recognizes that clergy are powerful people in whom we place extraordinary trust, and she urges us to take another look at issues of clergy confidentiality. Ministry is a peculiar profession that is both very private and very public, in which secrets must at times be carefully kept and at times be lovingly shared with the community. No system of clergy screening or training makes up for the need for clergy to be judicious and prudent, and there is no good substitute for wisdom in both pastors and those who oversee them. Blodgett's underlying ethical assumptions are definitely Aristotelian: *Lives Entrusted* is a work in virtue and character ethics applied to clergy.

Blodgett criticizes "safe sanctuaries" programs, with their background checks and rules about adults' interactions with youth, as bureaucratic "audit societies" that aren't congruent with the nature of the church and its clergy. Sometimes "integrity training" for ministerial candidates backfires, destroying trust rather than encouraging prudence and wisdom. Because of the sort of intimacy and community

that is practiced in congregations, no church is completely safe, Blodgett points out, so the way to “minimize the risk of harm is to be ready for it.”

Church bureaucrats can best reduce the chance of harm by having clear procedures that are used publically and immediately whenever there is a charge of misconduct. Clear communication of a zero-tolerance policy lets everyone know that the church will not put up with abuse by anyone, particularly its clergy. I suspect that Blodgett is right about the limitations of the audit mentality, but churches are doing much better than they did before because of these new procedures and related training. Maybe the measures that Blodgett commends are a good next step.

*Lives Entrusted* contains one of the most carefully nuanced and wise discussions of gossip that I’ve ever read. Blodgett defines gossip as “informal, evaluative discourse about someone not present who is a member of the speakers’ social group,” and she has a problem with just about everything within that definition. She is thoroughly unconvinced of the potential salubrious moral effects of gossip, which she finds inherently hurtful and self-deceitful.

Addressing my own view, which I expressed in an article for the *Century* back in 1990, she accuses me of “overestimating the trust level that exists in typical congregations.” (My present job of bishop has cured me of that.) Rather than attempting to redeem gossip, she commends the practice of testimony—first-person public sharing of our faith secrets in the context of the church. My Wesleyan heart is warmed.

Blodgett saves her wildest and bravest thoughts for her last chapter—on the unlikely topic of bullshit, in which she builds on the work of philosopher Harry Frankfurt (*On Bullshit*) and others. BS is a kind of lying but is more morally perverse than lying. It is an insidious violation of trust, “spiritual nonsense” in which “the *effect* of words takes precedence over veracity.” It destroys public discourse, shows contempt for listeners and a complete disregard for the truth, and in the church is a sick perversion of Christian testimony and proclamation. Bad enough when dispensed by politicians, BS is horrible when spread by clergy because “the bulk of what clergy do is related to what they say.” When preachers speak with a reckless indifference to the truth, when they become intellectually lazy purveyors of nonsense, they forsake their high calling to be courageous prophets who speak gospel truth.

If you don’t mind risking some mind expansion and soul-enriching self-scrutiny, read *Lives Entrusted*. It’s a good book. Trust me.