DEDICATION

This book is dedicated with love to my wife,
Sylvia Taylor Flippin
and my mother
Virginia Brooks Flippin
(1909-1989).
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This current project is a fresh look and revision written with twenty-five years of pastoral service. Additionally, as a forty-year member and active participant of the church, we submit this work.

Special thanks and appreciation to the Rev. Dr. Michael Brewer and to my son who serves as the Executive Assistant to the Senior Pastor, the Rev. Richard C. Flippin. This project could never have been completed without the teamwork of The Greater Piney Grove Baptist Church and our dedicated church staff. Thanks to Charlene Ross and Tangie Black for your dedication and push.

To the church of my youth, The Fifteenth Avenue Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee, where I received early Christian training and development that will always inform my life and ministry.

To Dr. John H. Corbitt, former Director of the National BSU Retreat, where I served as a National President in 1974, and also to the late Mrs. Irene Grinstead Turner who nurtured me through the Baptist Student Union at Fisk University.

To the late Dr. Edward R. Davie, who gave me my first opportunity to serve in professional ministry through the Georgia Baptist Convention.
Books are written with many intentions. However, the best books are written to provoke our thinking. *God’s Order: Order in the Pulpit* is in that genre. The essence is simple. The message is—Mind your manners, you’re in His house. Dr. William E. Flippin Sr., Pastor of The Greater Piney Grove Baptist Church writes this book from years of careful observation of the erosion of church decorum.

I have written elsewhere of the Scriptural warning against casting “your pearls before swine” (Matthew 7:6). This book reminds us of one interpretation of that verse. Swine will trample our pearls and then turn on us, making us look like we’re the bad guys. If the same Scripture were written in a modern translation for leaders, it might say, “Don’t cast your vision in front of the bottom twenty percent because they’re going to destroy your vision and turn on you.”

I am not calling a group of people names, but we must be strategic in our casting. In order for our message to find open ears and ready hearts in the church, it is essential for today’s congregations to recover an atmosphere of decorum, respect, and dignity.

Regardless of your church background, you do have standards. The corporate community calls it SOP (Standard Operating Procedures). These are relevant, communicated clearly, enforced rigorously for a reason—because this defines corporate culture for that organization.

*ALL RISE: Order in the Pulpit* reminds and informs us that there is still need for order in the pulpit. Dr. Flippin not only diagnoses the problem of disrespect and disorder, he also prescribes the cure. For the good of the church, I hope the pearls of wisdom in this book will find enthusiastic readers.

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In our first book we have examined church etiquette and behavior from the perspective of those who fill the pews. We have considered the responsibilities and privileges of church membership and God’s calling to order and mutual respect within the family of believers. Our exploration of the biblical vision of the church reveals God’s plan for a transformative family of faith in which each member plays a significant role in serving and honoring our Lord.

In this book we now turn our attention to the front of the sanctuary and focus particularly upon ministerial standards of etiquette. We lightly touched upon this topic earlier and now we will pursue the matter in more depth. The behavior of ministers is important
both for its own sake and also for the model ministers present to the church at large. The shepherd must abide by even higher standards than those required of the flock. Just as God calls for order among church members in general, our Lord zealously requires order in the pulpit as well.

Before we address the practical nuts and bolts of ministerial etiquette, we will lay down a theological framework for our thinking. Pastoral behavior is more than a list of rules; it is an effort to “live out” our Christian beliefs within the context of church leadership. To help sketch a theology of ministry, I will begin by sharing a systematic and biblical understanding of my personal practice of ministry.

I offer this personal view of ministry for two reasons. First, I believe my vision of ministry, hammered out through years of experience, prayer, reflection, and study, may yield helpful insights to other ministers struggling with similar issues in the pastorate. Second—and more important—I hope my own reflections will encourage other pastors to clarify and articulate their particular perspectives on ministry. Even if you don’t agree with everything I have to say, I hope to convince you of the crucial importance of careful and prayerful expression of your theological framework for serving God in the church. I humbly present my vision as a working model of the kind of vision every pastor ought to formulate.

As God’s appointed leader in the congregation, the pastor has a responsibility to inspire his staff and colleagues with his or her personal vision for that particular church. If each pastor had a written outline of the assumptions and beliefs undergirding God’s work, many churches would escape the turmoil and conflict associated with clashing priorities and differing styles.

Before deciding to become a part of a local church, the wise minister will seek to clearly understand and devoutly accept the mission of that church and the vision of the pastor. A straightforward statement of ministry goals and practices allows a prospective minister to make a thoughtful and informed determination about whether God has a calling to that particular congregation.

With hundreds, even thousands, of churches in most cities, no minister needs to settle for being miserable in the service of a congregation that doesn’t match his own vision and calling. When the minister is mismatched with the congregation—or the pastor—the outcome leads to conflict and bad feelings. Serving Christ is sufficiently challenging without complicating the practice of ministry with hidden agendas, squabbling for special attention, jockeying for position, maneuvering to preach, and competing for the favor of the pastor or some other church leader. When infighting prevails, bitterness, confusion, and frustration hamstring our work on God’s behalf.

Having seen first-hand the sad aftermath of such church conflicts, I encourage every pastor to draft and communicate a personal vision of the meaning and method of ministry within the local church. Only with shared vision is shared leadership possible in the congregation. To that end, I offer my own vision of Christian ministry as a model for consideration by other pastors.

**The Black Birthright**

Black Americans are born into a complicated and ambiguous heritage. Only a few decades ago I joined many of my peers in cursing my birthright as a member of the Negroid race. Yet the African-American experience also yielded unexpected blessings. Although growing up black in America was difficult, our parents and com-
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Community taught us to savor the uniquely rich and valuable minority experience. As we came to terms with our racial identity, our elders continually told us, “You can be somebody!” Regardless of how the majority culture might view us, there was a rich future awaiting those who were sufficiently determined to seize it.

Indeed, our value as persons was well established. Not only could I become somebody someday, I was already somebody today. The love that surrounded me affirmed my identity independent of social and economic disadvantages. I treasure the childhood experience of togetherness in the midst of cultural apartness. I do not glorify poverty, but I give thanks for the spirit of a community that faced financial need with playfulness, the expectation of deliverance, and the gospel message that “trouble can’t last always.”

Those encouraging words nurtured my spirit through hard times. “You are somebody,” my parents told me over and over. Their certainty allowed me to see my worth through their eyes. “And you’re going to be somebody in the eyes of the world,” they promised. The courage exemplified by such attitudes enabled struggling, grade-school educated parents to rear a family on fifty dollars a week to become somebody in America. I am that somebody.

My perception of ministry is shaped largely by where I have been. When I think of the role of the minister, my first impression grows from the black ministers who fed my soul through my maturing years in the 1950’s and 1960’s. My understanding of the pastoral role emerges from my experiences in the black church. In most black communities, the ministry was the first and often the only profession to gain a foothold in society.

Because I realized the awesome task of the minister, especially the black minister, the contemplation of accepting a call into the ministry was a tremendous decision. In my thinking, a minister is simply someone who serves Christ through the church, whether or not that person is specially educated and ordained. For instance, we commonly speak of Youth Ministers and Ministers of Music without assuming theological education or ordination. Referring to the ordained clergy as “minister” does not defrock others who serve in different capacities. Therefore, minister is a general term describing anyone who ministers or serves: clergy, ordained, commissioned, or set apart by the church to a particular task.

To clarify the distinction, the professional clergy is a formally trained and ordained minister of a church or denomination. The Baptist Church from which I received my early Christian education recognized both ministers and professional clergy. Our pastor was one of the few trained black pastors in the city of Nashville. Consequently, as I pondered my calling from God, I had to decide if I would accept the responsibility and challenge of becoming a “minister” or a “professional clergy.”

MODELS OF MINISTRY

When I made my decision to enter the professional ministry, the only model of ministry available to me was DuBois’ ideal of the smiling politician who preached and exhibited a pleasant personality. I fully expected to be the boss in my congregation, the unchallenged leader of the pack. These preconceived ideas were easier to cultivate before I delivered my first sermon or “ministered” to anyone.

My narrow-minded opinion of the ministry expanded when the scriptural passage from Luke 4:18 became my burning testimony: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel...” I interpreted the work of preaching very fundamentally, narrowly, and charismatically. God was calling me to stand over the ditch of life and lift my poor fallen brothers and sis-
ters from despair, restoring their sight and delivering them from the oppressor, Lucifer himself. In other words, my life was in order and I intended to help others get their lives in order, too. I could point the way because I had already arrived!

If my earlier attitude smacks of self-righteousness, I can only plead the naiveté of youth and honest sincerity. Of course, a person may be absolutely sincere and still be altogether wrong. Fortunately, God was patient with me. Through the years, I have changed my thinking about the nature of my calling, but I have never doubted the calling itself.

As surely as God summoned Amos from Tekoa and laid a hand upon the youthful Jeremiah and appeared to Isaiah in the temple and seized Paul on the Damascus road, so also God set me aside for the ministry.

Although I had no doubt about God’s call, I kept raising the issue, “What kind of minister will I be?” My one-sided approach to ministry grew increasingly inadequate as I considered how little training and experience I brought to my calling. The writing of Urban T. Holmes has been a Godsend in expanding my understanding of ministry. According to Holmes, the priest or minister serves both the community and God. This role does not undermine but furthers the priesthood of all believers. All Christians are ministers, but the power of the priestly office expresses itself in every religious community, even in cases without a formal leader. Every religious community chooses someone explicitly or implicitly to fulfill the necessary function of the priest.

While the Lucan passage mentioned earlier remains my biblical starting point, I contend that the task of ministry should extend beyond the organized church into the larger community. Shifting the focus of my calling from self to community was a difficult transition, turning upside-down many long-cherished beliefs. In search of guidance and training, I enrolled part-time at a small black Baptist Bible college while working as an engineer for South Central Bell Telephone Company. God provided the further guidance that later led me to surrender my engineering career to enter the professional ministry full time. To that end I entered Candler School of Theology to broaden my theological perception and purpose in ministry.

As part of my seminary education, I worked at the Fulton County Alcoholism Treatment Center, on Boulevard Avenue, near downtown Atlanta. In that setting I encountered the raw wounds of human need. Dealing with the ragged edge of life soon convinced me that pat answers and canned ideas were inadequate to the challenges of ministry. One day as I mingled with patients at the center, a young man drew me aside for a heart-rending conversation. This handsome man in his late twenties confessed that his struggle with homosexuality had driven him to alcoholism. In the church of his upbringing he learned that all sex outside of marriage was sinful. Piously, I bowed my head in agreement and asked, “What have you done to deal with the problem of homosexuality as it confronts you?”

“I got married,” he told me, “hoping to change my sexual feelings. I even had a son, but nothing changed inside me. The marriage fell apart. After the divorce, I went to a psychiatrist, still trying to change my feelings.”

“Did that help?” I asked.

“No,” he said bitterly. “I ended up having sex with the psychiatrist. I became so disgusted with myself that I withdrew from everyone and everything. I lived like a hermit. In my loneliness, I turned to alcohol for comfort. As if I didn’t have enough problems already,