Merely going inside a church is no guarantee that a young person will be helped. The positive influence of religion on his life depends greatly on the personal influence of the minister and the congregation. He has to be helped to feel accepted, wanted, and worthy by those inside a church before he will allow himself to get close to them and permit them to help him.

Ministers’ Attitudes Toward Delinquency

Our attitudes toward persons with problems greatly determine how effective we ministers are in helping them. What we think of them and their problems influences what we do about them and what they do in response to us. Thus, we need to be aware of our attitudes and understand how they affect our behavior and the behavior of persons we seek to help. Through such awareness and understanding, we can improve or change our attitudes and be more effective in ministering to persons.

The purpose of this article is to show how our attitudes toward delinquency help or hinder us in working with youth offenders. Another purpose is to show that the more we understand and handle our attitudes toward young people involved in delinquency, the better we will understand and handle them.

The article deals with two sets of attitudes toward delinquency revealed by interviews with two groups of Protestant ministers serving churches in the Boston area. The one set is called “authoritarian,” the other “supportive.” The interviews definitely show that authoritarian attitudes hinder a minister’s effectiveness in working with youth offenders, whereas supportive attitudes prepare him to be helpful. While no minister’s attitudes are purely “authoritarian” or “supportive,” we shall see how one or the other set of attitudes dominated these particular ministers’ thinking and influenced their behavior toward youth offenders. The article should contribute to the reader’s understanding and handling of his own attitudes toward delinquency.

The ministers interviewed were the 20 highest (authoritarian) and 20 lowest (supportive) scorers of a total of 74 ministers who completed the Juvenile Delinquency Attitude (JDA) Scale. The JDA Scale measures ministers’ attitudes toward delinquency on an authoritarian-supportive continuum. For a complete description of the JDA Scale, sample, and interviews see, William E. Alberts, “Ministers’ Attitudes toward Juvenile Delinquency,” Research Monograph, Division of Alcohol Problems and General Welfare, General Board of Christian Social Concerns of The Methodist Church, 1962.

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1 The author expresses grateful acknowledgment to Dr. Paul E. Johnson, Dr. Daniel J. Levinson, and Dr. Donald T. Devine who contributed to the study on which this article is based.
2 Forty ministers were interviewed regarding
Authoritarian Attitudes

The minister with authoritarian attitudes is not able to experience or accept children as they are. He thinks of them as though they are already grown up and fully capable of perfection. For example, when one minister was asked his opinion of the ideal child, he said, "Absolute honesty is the thing I like to see in children. A friendliness toward everyone. Of course, obedience falls into both of these categories." Another minister answered by talking about a family with three boys: "I like this family. They are the most respectful children to me. Respect for authority is the thing." And a third replied by pointing out the ideal qualities of two girls in his church: "They’re well-behaved, polite, well-disciplined girls. They carry out their duties; they don’t come back with twenty-five questions." The needs and individuality of growing children are lost in the authoritarian minister’s rigid and absolute expectations.

The authoritarian minister applies the same rigid thinking to youth offenders. He believes that young people get into trouble completely because of their own free will. He thus feels that they not only deserve but need to be punished. As one minister said, "I think every young person has freedom of the will. If there could be no freedom of the will, there could be no damnation in my judgment." And another minister felt that "the treatment of crime is the meting out of a punishment to fit that crime," as "crime is a life adopted by choice, with the full knowledge of what the consequences are."

This moralistic preoccupation with free will, guilt, and condemnation leads authoritarian ministers to advocate a punitive approach to youth offenders and their parents. To them, treatment is mainly a matter of "laying down the law and teaching them a lesson they won’t forget.” Ministers who hold punitive attitudes fail to realize that delinquent tendencies often are crystallized rather than neutralized by too much punishment.3

Unqualified belief in free will is one of the wastebaskets into which an authoritarian-inclined minister dumps his ignorance of why people behave as they do. And it is a fundamental way by which he rationalizes his own punitive attitudes. Feeling that nothing is deeper and more dynamic in personality than a conscious and free will, he tends to oversimplify human behavior and need. In this way he avoids understanding people with problems (and himself), and uses them as scapegoats on which to pour out his own punitive impulses. Such behavior operates completely unnoticed by him.

Since youth offenders are assumed to have will power, the authoritarian minister feels that rehabilitation consists primarily of their submitting to the demands of the authorities over them. His preoccupation with submission to authority as the goal of rehabilitation leads him to blot out the individual characteristics of young people. For example, one minister who believes that "our educational system is to blame" for delinquency said, "We’ve advocated a progressive education system which encourages the self-expression of the child. This is one of the things that brought about the attitude of rebellion against authority on the part of young people." Then he added, "We have a little spirit within us, and unless it is submissive to the people above us . . ." He did not finish. Whether he talks about youth offenders or the qualities of the ideal child, the authori—