

**A Review by David J. Wood of, *From Midterms to Ministry: Practical Theologians on Pastoral Beginnings*, Allan Hugh Cole, Jr., editor. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008**

Over the past eight years, I have had the privilege of serving as the Program Coordinator for Lilly Endowment's Transition into Ministry grants program. This work has helped me to see fruitfulness of attending more closely to those who are in their earliest years of ministry. When this program began back in 2001, "transition into ministry" was little more than the name of a program. Now, as indicated by this volume, "transition into ministry" has become a category of reflection and inquiry. This evolution of attentiveness is all good in my estimation.

*Midterms to Ministry* is a collection of twenty-four essays by those who have been ordained to ministry (the majority from within the PCUSA, several United Methodist, and one National Baptist, and the rest from other mainline denominations) reflecting on their individual experiences of the transition from the preparation for ministry in the seminary to the actual practice of ministry in the congregation. The book is intended to be a collection of distilled wisdom *from* those who have already made this challenging transition *for* those who are themselves in the midst of, or soon to be engaged in, making it.

The result is a collection of essays that fall, roughly, into one or more of the following categories: a personal memoir of one's initiation into ministry with a summary of lessons learned, best advice for new graduates on how to begin ministry well, a primer for faculty on how to prepare students for this transition, a defense of the distinctive formation gained in seminary, a critique of the seminary's failure to prepare students for the realities of ministry. While there are "nuggets of wisdom" to be found in these pages, this collection would have benefited from a stronger editorial hand that held the contributors more closely to the editors' intent. For example, some write as if their primary audience is the academy and those engaged in the preparing students for ministry (the essays by Jones & Jones, Paulsell, Doehring, and Miller McLemore). Some barely touch upon personal experience, while others never move beyond it. The most compelling contributions use the narrative of personal experience as a context for conveying key insights for anyone making the transition from seminary to congregation.

Tom Long's essay, "The Essential Untidiness of Ministry," is essentially an argument, with engaging personal anecdotes along the way, for the appropriate regard for the essential curriculum for ministry resident in both the seminary and the congregation. These domains of learning are not to be opposed or conflated. Rather, he concludes, "Good ministry is found...where pastors stand with one foot firmly planted in their theological education and the other foot just as firmly planted in the parish, and allow this resulting tension to shape their pastoral practice." (5) This is all well and good, but Long is short on advice for the transitioning pastor on how one actually succeeds in keeping one foot planted firmly in the shifting sands of congregational life and the other on the more predictable ground of the academy without suffering a serious groin injury in the process. At the other end of the spectrum there is Will Willimon's somewhat cranky

essay, “Between Two Worlds,” in which he depicts the transition from seminary to congregation as nothing less than an unavoidable collision. Seminaries, according to Willimon, “labor under a growing disconnect between the graduates they are producing and the leadership needs of churches these graduates are serving. This disjunction causes friction in and sometimes defeat of [sic] the transition between seminary and church for new pastors.” (277) The remainder of his essay, which should have been the outline for his piece, is a list of ten things every beginning pastor should know. Classic Willimon.

Tony Robinson’s essay explicitly lifts up the skill of “contemplation-in-action,” a theme that speaks directly to the difference between becoming wise through experience and being hollowed out by it. Several essays (especially by Michael Jinkins and Loren Meade) demonstrate how much learning to be a pastors is dependent upon cultivating an appreciation for the wisdom embedded in the laity and developing the relationships that will mediate that wisdom in the course of one’s pastoral work.

The practice of preaching is identified most often as the place of greatest challenge in taking up the pastoral life. Ray Anderson relates how he “was caught in the headlights, so to speak, by the luminous faces of those who turned toward me seeking the person of God, not merely mental constructs about him.” (29) He goes on to relate how he learned the language of his people without sacrificing the intellectual depth gained in seminary. Stephanie Paulsell makes a wonderful contrast between her experience of writing an academic paper and her experience of writing a sermon. In the academic paper, she writes, “I lift myself carefully hand over hand up the rungs of my evidence into an argument meant to convince.” In sermon writing, however, “It is more like lowering a ladder into the dark and feeling around until I touch something solid. Gradually I learn to trust that if I follow a word, a phrase, a connection that strikes me, something wholly unexpected, but possibly worthwhile might happen.” (47) She regards preaching as a mysterious undertaking and experiences it as “the most exhilarating and the most utterly deflating work I’ve ever tried to do.” (47) Narrating her own experience of spiritual and intellectual drought common to those who preach with any regularity, especially to the newly initiated, Paulsell writes, “I fall into a trough and cannot climb out for weeks and weeks. What am I doing? Why is anyone listening? What in God’s name can it mean to preach?” (48) For Paulsell, this is not a problem to be resolved—it is an experience intrinsic to the demand of being a preacher. However, in the face of such persistent questions, more needs to be said about how one remains alert to such questions without being overwhelmed or undermined by them.

While many essays touch upon the essential messiness and untidiness of ministry in congregations, there are two essays that give us especially helpful insight into how to rightly appreciate and navigate these quotidian realities. The first is by Craig Barnes who is one of the few contributors who can lay claim to actually *being* a pastor in a local congregation (the only other author able to do so is Earl Palmer). Even though he now teaches regularly in a seminary, Barnes’ primary vocational identity and domain of practice is the life of the congregation—specifically, Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. His essay, “The Meandering Ministry,” is an account of his journey back to the beginning. He recalls that his “biggest surprise after leaving seminary” was the

dawning realization that “effective pastoral work in a congregation is impossible to measure.” (104) Looking back, he can now see that much of his ministry was characterized by a yearning to escape the ‘meandering’ circularity of pastoral life that he encountered from his earliest days of ministry. It was not until he left the pastoral ministry for the more ordered, ‘linear’ life of the academy that he discovered how deeply formed he was by and for the peculiar shape of the pastoral life. He now regards his short-lived departure from the pastoral life for the academy as his need for “a break from the meandering ministry” and “really just an effort to think about being a pastor without the bother of actually being one.” (110) I know many pastors embarking on their third decade of ministry who will resonate deeply with Barnes’ loss of wonder amidst the wandering. He tells us that his return to the pastoral life was paved by a realization “that my calling has been only to wander through the desert with the people I have vowed to love, pointing out the manna and the thin stream that flows along the way. That journey is never linear or easily measured. . . . watching faith develop is a long, slow, meandering way to spend one’s life. It is also a far more wonderful life than I could have ever imagined.” (109) One of the reasons Barnes’ essay is so compelling is that he reveals how his transition into ministry was left unresolved for decades and how, only now, in the midst of his third decade of ministry, he is finding his place and making his peace. It is not accidental that this sense of place coincides with his reengagement with the academy. What has been lost to the academy and to congregations by the failure of both these domains to make the bridged life that Barnes has carved out for himself such rare achievement for practitioners?

The second essay that uses the quotidian reality of pastoral life as its point of departure is Earl Palmer’s, “Sustaining the Pastoral Life.” His essay centers on one of the most important and enduring discoveries he made about ministry: “Most pastors have been given what I call the *gift of time*; that is, the privilege of organizing time with more flexibility than those in most other professions. As each of us knows, however, this gift of time has its own snares, particularly for those who are not self starters, or who allow the hours of the week to confuse themselves into a random jumble of low quality segments.” (181) He then proceeds to advise the reader on how to embrace this freedom from which far too many pastors have sought to escape. In my experience, a sure sign that a pastor is in escape mode is the claim that he or she has no time. Palmer helps us see how the ordering of time lies close to the heart of keeping one’s bearings amidst the meanderings of pastoral life and work. He talks of the importance of thinking, first, in terms of weeks (vs. days or months or years). Of course, he stands on solid biblical footing here. He goes on to discuss the importance of cultivating weekly rhythms of work, rest, worship, and play.

Perhaps the moment of in the book where the deep struggle that often plagues beginning pastors is sounded with crystal clarity comes in the final essay. Reflecting on one of the lowest moments that led to his resignation from his first call, the editor of the collection, Allan Hugh Cole, Jr., relates how he moved from “strong feelings isolation, then to boredom, and thereafter to a kind of vocational disorientation, I became restless in my calling, disillusioned with my pastoral life, and probably a bit depressed as well.” (289) I lift out this description because it witnesses to the kind of struggle I hear often from

beginning pastors. To be sure, many beginning pastors find the pastoral life to be a most congenial, exhilarating, energizing, and captivating experience. But the kind of struggle that Cole names is not uncommon. The remainder of his essay, unfortunately, fails to connect his experience to habits and practices that helped him to address this kind of struggle. The lessons he proceeds to pass along are the importance of maintaining sensitivity to feelings, of developing a theology of suffering and death, and of cultivating a sense of humor. All well and good. But, having named so well the valley of vocational despair too many beginning pastors experience, I was ready to learn more of how he navigated his way through.

Given my conversations with hundreds of beginning pastors of the past several years, I could not help but hear their voices in the background as I made my way through these essays. While there was much to be found in these pages that would resonate with them, and while there is plenty of wisdom to draw from these wells of experience, there were several key themes I have heard from beginning pastors that were absent or only addressed in passing. For example, beginning pastors speak eloquently and at great length about the importance of friendships with peers in ministry and of relationships with mentors. Only three essays develop this relational dimension at any length and even in those, the talk of friendship and mentors is offered more as advice than as personal testimony. The unique way the pastoral life interweaves the spheres of public and private, personal and communal, family life and work life, while illustrated in the personal narrative of a few contributors, it is considered at length only by Bonnie Miller McLemore—and even there, her context is the academic life. Only Palmer takes up the challenge of ordering time. Sitting with a group of young, beginning pastors a few months ago, they shared openly of their struggle to know exactly what constituted good and productive work given all the things they could be doing at any given point in time.

I think these absences have something to do with the very odd fact that in all but four cases (J. Philip Wogaman is recently retired from pastoral work and William Willimon now serves as a Bishop) the contributors have left pastoral ministry for the environs of the academy or, in two cases, to serve as consultants to pastors and congregations. Even as I write that last sentence, I can hear the uproar of those ordained for ministry who have left pastoral ministry in local congregations, claiming that their work is no less ministry than that which takes place in the life of congregations. No argument there. However, I think we can all agree that ministry in the academy is not to be equated with the shape and character of pastoral ministry in the life of congregations. It would be an odd thing indeed if we called upon pastors, who may have once served in the academy in a professorial role, to reflect on how they transitioned from student to professor. No, doubt they would have something interesting to say, but it would be odd, nonetheless. Why is it not assumed that a key qualification for reflecting back on one's initial years of pastoral ministry would not be that one has remained in ministry over the course of one's life? Why should we trust as wisdom reflections on the early years of ministry provided by those who chose to exit that very same practice—some within a very few years of entering it? Left unanswered in every essay, except Barnes, is why these folks chose to leave pastoral ministry. I would love to see this same group reflect on why they chose to leave pastoral ministry for ministry in the academy alongside a collection of essays by

those who decided to remain as pastors in local congregation even though they had at one time or another contemplated a move to the academy.

Let me put my cards on the table: For all its goodness (and I do think this volume is worth the read by transitioned and transitioning pastors alike), this volume betrays a deep and pervasive bias in the academy against the capacity of practitioners to reflect meaningfully upon their work. It is assumed that those who dwell in the academy are the experts when it comes to this kind of reflective work—it requires the work of those formally trained to be ‘Practical Theologians’. However unintentionally, this volume implies that the pastor who is now 10, 20, 30, or even 40 years in the ministry is the least capable of reflecting back meaningfully upon his or her experience of transitioning from the halls of academe to the terrain of congregational life. It is a fair assumption that those who have served week in and week out, year after year, in the vineyard of the congregation, are the best qualified to reflect upon their earliest years of ministry and upon how they drew forward into the practice of ministry and extended the formation for ministry they received in seminary. Is it not reasonable to assume that those many years of practice concentrate one’s reflection rather than clutter one’s perception?

Until all our talk about valuing the knowledge that is embedded in practice and embodied in the practitioner expresses itself in genuine regard for the witness and intelligence of pastors, the divide between academy and congregation will persist and deepen.