

Allan Hugh Cole Jr. ed. *From Midterms to Ministry: Practical Theologians on Pastoral Beginnings*. Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 2008. 324 pages. \$24.

In my judgment, Allan Cole's *From Midterms to Ministry* should be read by every seminarian about to be ordained to pastoral ministry. My life experience has informed my reflections on this book. From 1961 until 1996 I served as a pastor in the United Methodist Church. In 1996 I was elected to the episcopacy and I had the privilege of serving the United Methodist Church in Virginia. While in Virginia, I had responsibility of overseeing over 900 pastors many of whom were in the early years of their ministry. Others were recent graduates of various theological schools.

The twenty-five contributors to this book have offered the reader a balanced presentation. Every writer affirms the value of a sound and academic theological education. At no point does this book minimize the critical importance of forming pastors who are able to reflect on life from the vantage point of the Christian faith. Every writer is calling in one way or another for competent pastors who see themselves and are seen by their congregations as resident theologians. However, for these contributors a strong theological education is not enough for effective pastoral ministry. Newly ordained pastors need to understand that there is a brittle transition that takes place when one moves from the world of the seminary to the context of the congregation. *From Midterms to Ministry* will be helpful to those who make this shift.

This book focuses on the important transition from theological school to the pastoral life. It will be most helpful to those who are newly ordained and to those who will mentor and support first time clergy. Those who contributed to this book do not back away from the challenges and difficulties that will confront those who ride the unpredictable waves of flux and change.

According to these writers beginning pastors will face the disappointments that they will see in the church as an institution. In seminary the pastors learned about the ideal church and now they must work with a real congregation. They learned about the counter cultural nature of the church but they are working with laity who are conventional. They will experience laity who "hire" the minister to do ministry for the people instead of empowering laity to be Christ's people in today's world. They will face such challenges as how to handle resistance, how to work creatively with conflict, how to bear a meaningful witness when there is a lack of stewardship resources, how to organize the congregation around the pain that is in the community, and how to speak of God in ways that are inclusive. This book speaks to these needs and how they might be addressed from the lived experience of many writers.

Cole's book also gives attention to the joys and exciting possibilities that await those who are moving toward a first time ministry setting. It points to such ministries as crafting and leading worship, preaching, teaching, shepherding those who are broken, practicing deeds of mercy and kindness, serving the sacraments and walking with laity as they grow in a faith that seeks understanding. One will find many helpful suggestions that move from theory to practice. The newly ordained pastor will get in touch with ministry that is both a serious task because of God's greatness and a happy task because of God's companionship with us through the laity who has so much to teach those of us who are ordained.

This book will not only be helpful for those who are moving from midterms to ministry. It also will be a precious gift for the experienced pastor who is about to move to another ministry setting. I would venture to say that it also will help those for whom the flame needs to be re-

lighted. In these pages one will find rich possibilities for ministry as they are shared by twenty-five women and men from a wide range of traditions and theological perspectives.

In my almost fifty years of pastoral ministry I have met a multitude of pastors who could have benefited from this fine book. Some were just in the beginning of pastoral ministry others were mentors and others had been taught by experience. Every theological school would greatly benefit congregations by giving a copy of this book to every graduate who plans to enter pastoral ministry.

Joe E. Pennel Jr.  
Vanderbilt Divinity School  
Nashville, TN