

Barbara Blodgett, *Becoming the Pastor You Hope to Be: Four Practices for Improving Ministry* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2011), 181 pp.

Barbara Blodgett notes in her introduction, “Our gifts are not ultimately our own to take credit for. But we can take credit—and responsibility—for what we do with them.” This sets the tone for her book, *Becoming the Pastor You Hope to Be*, full of sage counsel informed by her own experience, powerful theories, and theological reflection. Blodgett, who formerly served as director of Supervised Ministries at Yale Divinity School and now as Minister for Vocation and Formation for the United Church of Christ, is well-equipped to advocate for practices intended to encourage excellence in ministry while deepening the relational resources that nourish the minister.

In five chapters Blodgett addresses four practices: soliciting feedback (instead of praise), seeking transformative mentoring, participation in a professionally and personally enriching peer group, and purposeful growth in public leadership.

Blodgett draws on her experience as a field educator and on the research of social psychologist, Carol Dweck, to assert that ‘smart is as smart does.’ In other words, “Smart is not who you are but something you work at” (p. 33). An important strategy in this work is soliciting feedback. She explores the nature and challenge of providing useful feedback through her field education experiences. Then she lays the responsibility for receiving specific actionable feedback on the shoulder of the pastor to help train persons who can provide this useful critique—both positive and negative—with specific counsel and illustrations.

Chapter two addresses the need for mentoring. Blodgett provides a good working definition, “being mentored simply means courting the company and counsel of someone who does what you do better than you currently do it” (p. 36). She later cites a study conducted in the Episcopal church in which “priests named a relationship with a mentor as the single most important influence in their development in ministry...” (p. 66). She discusses “functionalist mentoring” that gets one started in an enterprise, but urges clergy to pursue “transformative mentoring” which aims at change. “Your mentor does not just inspire and motivate you but also tests you” (p. 55). Blodgett concludes the chapter with helpful counsel on “how to be a good mentee.”

A commitment to peer learning is the focus of chapters three and four. She asserts that participation in a peer group may effectively support clergy who are faced by three traditional ministerial challenges: loneliness, monumentally difficult work, and being prone to inauthenticity. What is particularly useful in chapter three is her re-introduction to clergy of Donald Schön’s work that calls for reflective practitioners and her introduction to the work of Etienne Wenger around the powerful learning capacity available in communities of practice. Tacit knowledge—hard won through experience and reflection—is available to one another if we will invest in the patient work of peer groups.

In chapter four, Blodgett carefully and thoroughly lays down the ground rules for effective peer groups in an FAQ format. Anyone giving consideration

to forming a peer group would do well to have each group member digest this chapter at the outset. Field educators especially will want to share this chapter with facilitators of peer reflection groups in their programs. In chapter five, Blodgett ambitiously attempts to equip clergy for their role of public leadership. I think she may be overly generous towards seminary and divinity schools with regards to their effectiveness at preparing students for this important role. For this reason, I am particularly grateful that this is the lengthiest chapter in the book. She gains the reader's attention immediately with a case study involving a US Immigration and Customs Enforcement raid, which results in the arrest of a number of immigrants. The religious community wants to mobilize and respond and you are invited to participate. This scenario provides the platform from which Blodgett, a trained ethicist, leads the reader through a carefully crafted primer on public engagement by the minister.

She begins by discussing the inherent tension between the roles of prophet and priest, *speaking out* and *standing with*. She finds a way to hold them together in a mutually beneficial way, but goes further to discuss in depth the way of exercising the leadership of regency. “[R]egent ministry begins with listening...it is listening that builds relationship...Regency involves agitation, in the best sense of the word. Inspired by the Spirit, this ministry is about movement and change” (p. 150).

Blodgett then goes on to distinguish between problems (big and complex) and issues (local and concentrated). She commends a way to discern involvement and how one begins to break down an issue into elements that can be addressed effectively. In order to do this she also discusses the tension between idealism and pragmatism when working in the public sphere with different partners.” [I]nvariably the time comes when we have to act, and our point of origin for acting is not the world as it should be but rather the world at hand” (p. 162). Never does she downplay the challenges for the minister called to step in, and up to, this role.

Finally she addresses the “Iron Rule.” “Never do for others what they can do for themselves” and why this is particularly challenging for clergy. Many of us understand from personal experience how “helping can hurt.” Barbara Blodgett has done a wonderful service for working pastors, regardless of years of service, and those of us who try to instill these practices during their formational experiences in seminary or divinity school. I have a suspicion that pastors, priests, and rabbis three to five years out in the field will especially appreciate receiving this book from someone who appreciates their ministry and hopes to see them flourish.

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