



**Anthony B. Robinson. *Useful Wisdom: Letters to Young (and Not-So-Young) Ministers*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020. 117 pages.**

I wonder if you heard the same refrain I did. As COVID-19 rocked our world and congregations grappled with crash courses in virtual worship, Zoom meetings, and socially distanced sacraments, I heard more than a few pastors say, “Please be patient with me: there was no divinity school class on ministry in a pandemic.”

While our COVID-19 crisis may be unprecedented, church leaders feeling inadequate to their task is not. Veteran ministers often rib their new colleagues: “Forget everything you learned in the classroom; your real education for ministry begins *now*.” In other words, theology and scripture may have been important to your professors, but pastoring a congregation requires so much more: leading capital campaigns, crafting agendas, navigating conflict, and confronting decline. The learning curve is steep, on-the-job training is light, and mentors are few. Many bright lights flame out, overwhelmed, after a couple of years; their first stint becomes their last.

Enter Anthony B. Robinson’s elegant little book. With twenty-seven chapters, each of them only three or four pages long, Robinson takes ministers and ministers-in-training by the hand and leads them on a wise and well-worn path. Each chapter addresses a question or issue raised by two younger ministers who had sought out Robinson’s advice on topics such as beginning a new call, keeping good boundaries, praying in public, and dealing with bullies. Robinson’s aim is to share what he’s learned, help ministers thrive in their calling, and give perspective and vision amid the day-to-day demands that can so easily turn from joy into drudgery.

Robinson writes with a light touch. He clearly knows his stuff after years of thoughtful ministry and reflective practice, including coaching and consulting. Each chapter shines with the insights of one skilled at his craft. To name a few topics: the difference between “technical problems” and “adaptive challenges” and why it’s important, how to pay attention to the ‘energy’ in worship, a list of spiritual and life practices to keep one grounded, and strategies for revitalizing faith communities in a secular age. But despite this expertise, there’s a gentle humility to Robinson’s writing. His guidance is succinct, lively, humorous, and hopeful. He does not overwhelm with direction and detail. After reading a chapter, you think, “I can do this.”

Best of all, despite whatever his own elders said to the contrary, Robinson does not leave theology and scripture behind in the classroom. Throughout the book, the

answer to the question of what makes ministry alive and compelling is again and again, simply put, God. How do you pray faithfully in public? You take a deep breath first and consider what God is doing before you. What's the best antidote to the narrative of decline in so many churches? Telling and retelling the biblical narrative, which is about "God's capacity to do a new, an unexpected thing" (90). How does a minister breathe new life into the institutional church so weighed down by bureaucracy and lifeless traditions? "Focus on Jesus. He is amazing. Always upsetting expectations. Forever turning the world upside down" (93).

Robinson's great achievement, his "useful wisdom," is shown through his ability to unpack the technical components, the core competencies, of ministry without sacrificing its heart and soul. He holds together skill and Spirit, craft and calling, human leadership and God's always prior leading.

Given the breadth of the book and the brevity of the chapters, *Useful Wisdom* is a terrific text to spur conversation between mentors and interns and to feed discussions between small groups of practitioners. A chapter can be read silently in ten minutes over coffee, followed by conversation connecting Robinson's reflections with ministry experience. Adding Robinson's voice to the mix will shed new light on overlooked tasks and spark fresh insight into mundane responsibilities. Even better, Robinson becomes the teacher, and supervisors and interns get to learn and compare notes together.

The book's final chapter shares with ministers a secret that is hidden on every page: "delight in your calling." Robinson treats the vocation with dignity, showing it to be worthy of imagination, intellect, creativity, dedication, and effort. Despite all the challenges and difficulties he names, his delight in pastoral ministry is clear, inescapable, and catching.

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