

## BOOK REVIEWS

**John Patton, *Pastor as Counselor: Wise Presence, Sacred Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 117 pp.**

Once again, John Patton has demonstrated his passion for assisting pastors to enhance their effectiveness by incorporating caring and appropriate counseling in their ministry. He roots his presentation in one of the most powerful metaphors in the Old and New Testaments: the shepherd and the sheep. It is a tricky triangle regularly encountered by every pastor: the congregation (the flock), the members (lost sheep) coping with an (often unanticipated) existential dilemma, and the minister/shepherd. If each segment is properly cared for, they enrich one another and everyone benefits. But when, where, and how does a clergy person decide to allocate his or her resources in relation to the person(s) in need and the entire congregation?

Many ministers often find the “lost sheep” segment of the pastoral triangle the most challenging. There are so many variations—unemployment, divorce, adolescent rebellion, alcohol and drugs, a serious accident, a death, etc.—plus, “How do I avoid taking so much time with these few that the rest of the flock feels abandoned?” If this sounds like a familiar dilemma, then you will truly appreciate this book, which presents pastoral counseling as a wisdom ministry of care, connection, and restoration.

Drawing on his many years of experience as a pastoral counselor as well as his compassion for the church, the author provides helpful guidelines that enable min-

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isters to have a clearer sense of their identity and how to proceed appropriately with members in distress. In terms of identity, he underscores the importance of pastors accepting and acknowledging that they are not therapists (“Again, the pastor is not a family therapist and should not try to be one” [p. 68]). This does not mean, however, that the pastor is relegated to falling back on good intentions. And this is fundamentally important, for, “What the pastor most has to offer is a practical kind of relational wisdom, much of which is relevant not just for counseling but for most of the leadership activities that the pastor has responsibility for in the church or other institution in which s/he serves” (p. 95).

The importance and uniqueness of this “care-ful,” relational wisdom first became apparent to me when I was training to be a family therapist. Whenever our supervisor would emphasize the importance of making a home visit as a part of our family assessment, the discomfort of the psychologists and psychiatrists and some social workers was almost palpable. By way of contrast, having just completed six years as a pastor in Colorado, I had come to greatly appreciate the value of a home visit as an important part of connecting with members of the congregation.

The reader will appreciate the well-developed and helpful guidelines that recommend that the pastor’s relational wisdom extended to a person or persons coping with a serious personal problem generally be limited to no more than three sessions. Guidelines are provided for achieving designated goals for each session. Moreover, the pastor will be internally assessing, throughout the counseling sessions, whether the problem being presented will require the assistance of a professionally trained therapist. Should such a referral be made, it is generally more effective if the minister has established a prior relationship with the therapist.

This is the kind of book that could be recommended as required reading for all seminary students, especially those with the goal of becoming a pastor. If it is not required, then give a copy to each recently ordained and installed minister. While reading John Patton’s book I found myself recalling my early days as a pastor and the words of wisdom I received from a highly regarded colleague: “George, your congregation will forgive you if you are not such a hot preacher and/or administrator; but if you truly care for them they will always be in your corner.” This wonderful book on care-ful relational wisdom by John Patton shows you how to do it.

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