

Unequipped: A pastor's continuing education

by [Barbara Melosh](#) in the [May 4, 2010](#) issue

“You are not equipped.” The preacher looked straight at me as he repeated this sentence in a stern refrain. Looking across the worship space, I could see some uncertain faces, as the warning rang through a room festively decorated in red and filled with the heady scent of flowers.

In a few minutes, I would be coming forward to be ordained as a Lutheran pastor. As the preacher set before us the solemn charges of ordination, he followed each one in turn with the same stark pronouncement. “You are not equipped.”

I felt flooded with relief, the deep relief of hearing the truth spoken boldly and plainly. It is the truth acknowledged in the rite of ordination itself, in which the candidate responds to each charge with a promise and a prayer, “I will, and I ask God to help me.”

A week later, I began my ministry in the small urban congregation I have served for the past five years. There I began almost immediately to discover just how true those words were. I was not equipped for the weekly demands of sermon preparation, the immersion in the biblical word and the way it kept bringing me to my knees, over and over again. I was not equipped for the long tedium and occasional grace of council meetings; not equipped for the sadness and valor of those failing in health and preparing to die. I was not equipped for the discouragement of a congregation long in decline; not equipped for the tenacity and loyalty that held members enthralled to the hope of restoration to an imagined golden age, which burns ever more brightly as it recedes inexorably into the past. Most of all, I was not equipped for the failure of my own delusions of rescue.

I knew better, really I did. But in some part of my mind, I imagined myself as the one who would turn around two generations of decline, who would lead the congregation to new life. Like Pollyanna in one of the movie versions, I'd be the pastor who would sweep away the dust, who would scrub the begrimed windows and hang prisms in

them, so the sun would scatter sparks of light and color across the worn floors.

When things didn't go quite that way, I did what I always do. When the going gets tough, the tough get going . . . to the library.

A plethora of advice, exhortation, admonition, inspiration and consolation awaited me.

First there were the how-to manuals, the ecclesial version of self-help literature. Freely borrowing from business management, organizational strategy and popular sociology, this genre can often be spotted by its propensity for enumeration. The three-minute pastor! Six strategies for stronger stewardship! Ten ways to improve your prayer life! Thirty-five building blocks of successful congregations! Forty days of purpose! These books are bursting with a can-do optimism conveyed in neologisms, whether euphemisms like "growing edges" (formerly known as "weaknesses") or nouns conscripted into service as gerunds like "visioning," "discipling" and "fellowshipping."

Even as I cringed at the clichés, the promise of redemption drew me like a moth to the flame. Time after time, I seized onto some project of "transformational ministry," promoted it, sought to inspire others to join and lead it. Week after week, I exhorted the congregation to embrace risk and change. People listened with a long-suffering patience that I mistook, at first, for acquiescence.

As one proposal after another hit the wall of their vast and impenetrable indifference, I found myself caught in a soul-crushing loop. Some new idea would fill me with fresh enthusiasm and renewed energy, followed by frustration and anger as the congregation schooled me in the inexorable law of Leadership 101: you can't lead if no one's following. I blamed myself; and, yes, I blamed them.

Eventually, I realized that the problem was bigger than all of us. Though these books all contained potentially fruitful proposals for congregational life, they also posed a deadly temptation. Salvation by programming led us away from the One who really could raise us from the dead.

By contrast, the books that I turn to again and again point to a kind of *via negativa* for pastoral work, rendered with the depth, seriousness and passion of the best preaching. Instead of offering strategies for success and effectiveness, they provide steady counsel about humility, attentiveness, obedience and surrender. As Gordon

Lathrop puts it in *The Pastor*, “At its deepest, the spirituality of the pastor is exactly about the things that you cannot do.” Or as Eugene Peterson says in *Leap Over a Wall*, “What we don’t do for God is often far more critical than what we in fact do.” These writers offer unflinching truth-telling about the challenge and risk of the pastoral calling, even as they also bear witness to the grace of God that sustains it. Theologically grounded and biblical, they are conceived and written in the language of faith, not the language of management or therapeutic culture or self-help. Many of them include advice, but none of them are instruction manuals; instead, they invite the reader into searching self-examination and deeper discernment of the life and work of ministry.

I read the first of these before I ever thought of becoming a minister. Somewhat to the bemusement of the author—who was also the preacher at my ordination—I found Thomas R. Swears’s *The Approaching Sabbath* a helpful companion in my first vocation as a university professor. Returning to this book as a pastor, I have often needed to hear its admonition on the necessity of a centered and focused life. Swears offers much useful practical advice on the shape of a week and the practices that help nurture the pastor’s spiritual formation. Fundamentally, it’s a book that calls pastors to a vocational integrity and to resist the pervasive overwork, distraction and people-pleasing that so often subvert ministry.

Pastors “have gone whoring after other gods,” Eugene Peterson asserts bluntly in *Working the Angles*, one of three volumes in a series on pastoral work that I reread every year (his others are *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* and *Under the Unpredictable Plant*). Peterson has long been a forceful critic of clergy captive to secular professionalism and a fierce advocate of pastoral vocation and discipleship. Steeped in the biblical word and often proceeding inductively from biblical story to contemporary application, Peterson’s work embodies what it advocates. Among many memorable examples are his imaginative reading of the pastor as Jonah, longing to flee God and go instead to Tarshish (*Under the Unpredictable Plant*); and his extended consideration of the pastoral epistles as guides for becoming an “unnecessary pastor,” one focused on God’s work rather than on the agendas of management and self-improvement (*The Unnecessary Pastor* is coauthored with Marva Dawn).

Not least among his prodigious gifts, Peterson’s acerbic humor often sends me into helpless laughter. And in this too Peterson’s writing enacts the theology it describes; his deft irony and unpredictable twists wake us up to the surprise of an

unpredictable God, making all things new.

Richard Lischer's *Open Secrets*, a rare memoir of a first call, finds the *via negativa* by way of unlearning. He describes his initiation into ministry and how his ambitions for a "significant" call are steadily challenged by the unlikely place he finds himself, a small, rural congregation set within a declining rural economy. Lischer's intellectual gifts at first seem a painful mismatch for his taciturn congregation; with self-skewering irony he recounts reaching "homiletical gridlock" as his parishioners ignore sermons shaped by concerns and questions they do not share. At times distant and even alienated from his parishioners, Lischer wonders in retrospect, "Why couldn't I see the revelation of God in our little church?" But his memoir shows his growing appreciation for the unlikely gifts of life together.

As Lischer sheds programs, therapeutic approaches and pastoral ambitions, he finds a witness and talisman of the pastoral role in the dying former pastor: "He was not, as one of my friends says of Protestant ministers in general, 'a quivering mass of availability.' He did not personalize his every act of ministry. Unlike ministers who make a career of getting along with people, Erich's approach was to do his duty, and to let the duties symbolize something larger and more important than his own personality."

To walk the *via negativa* one must also leave behind illusions about Christian community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* proclaims the grace of such relinquishment. "The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together is like and to try to realize it. But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams."

M. Craig Barnes applies that insight for ministers in *The Pastor as Minor Poet*: "A pastor's ability to enjoy church is directly related to knowing its limits. The church is not Jesus. It may be the Body of Christ, but only sort of." Or as Peterson puts it with characteristic directness: "Every congregation is a congregation of sinners. As if that weren't bad enough, they all have sinners for pastors" (*Under the Unpredictable Plant*).

On the *via negativa*, relinquishment leads back to the center. These books emphatically refuse one kind of pastoral identity in the service of recovery and renewal. Lathrop's *The Pastor* gently draws us back to baptismal spirituality as the

template for pastoral work, as for Christian life. Shaped by the catechism, the book invites us into a lifelong orientation to the “central things” of Christian assembly. Written mostly in the third person with direct address to the reader, *The Pastor* also includes some italicized sections of first-person narrative, giving the reader glimpses of how the author himself has been shaped in ministry and Christian life.

As he writes about the central symbols that Christians gather around, Lathrop also insightfully observes how pastors themselves are symbols, and how this identity both enables and threatens faithful pastoral work. Peterson discards the “necessary” pastor to call us instead to be agents of “subversive spirituality,” pointing to the mystery of God hidden in plain sight all around us. In Barnes’s compelling depiction of the “pastor as minor poet,” the ordinary rhythms of one day in the life of a pastor open to theological reflection on vocational identity and Christian life. “What the congregation needs is not a strategist to help them form another plan for achieving a desired image of life, but a poet who looks beneath even the desperation to recover the mystery of what it means to be made in God’s image.”

Tending to the Holy, by Bruce G. Epperly and Katherine Gould Epperly, explores ways of cultivating attentiveness to the sacred. Even as I appreciated their wide-ranging discussion of spirituality, informed by process theology, at times I feared their enthusiasm for “practices” might send this recovering Pelagian into relapse. Still, this is a book to read and reread for its joyful invitation into spiritual renewal.

These writers sustain me in pastoral work by holding it in the perspective of a baptismal theology of vocation. As Peterson writes, “My work, as such, is no more difficult than anyone else’s. Any work done faithfully and well is difficult. It is no harder for me to do my job well than for any other person, and no less” (*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*). Barnes offers this salutary counsel: “Pastors have higher callings in life than being a pastor, and foremost among them is glorifying and enjoying God.”

All these books have shaped my own vocational identity through their clarity about what pastors are not. In doing so, they brought me back to the lesson that my congregation had been trying to teach me all along. Their own desire, finally, was for a pastor who walked the *via negativa*. I wanted to diagnose and fix our dysfunctional structures, to shake off habit and open the windows and doors, to lead the charge into new life. They wanted me to pour water and blessing on new Christians, to show up every Sunday to preach the gospel and place bread and cup in their hands, to

visit them in the hospital, to bring communion to homebound members, to stand with them in accident and illness and catastrophe, to bury their dead.

At first it hurt my feelings that they seldom called me by name. Instead, they called me "Pastor."