

# Ode to ministry

by [Susan B. W. Johnson](#) in the [October 9, 2002](#) issue

*Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry.* By William H. Willimon. Abingdon, 386 pp., \$25.00 paperback.

Recently a friend from my divinity school days came to worship at our church. She had just moved into the neighborhood and was making the transition from the pulpit to the classroom, away from pastoral ministry into the ministry of teaching pastors. At our church we pass the peace on Communion Sundays, but Cindy greeted me instead with an enthusiastic hug and a more collegial remark: "It's so strange after 16 years in a church to realize that this is not what I am doing now. I was watching you, and I was with you. I could feel every step, every breath, you were taking."

This sympathy, I thought, is the kind of pastoral yearning which is going to make her a very good teacher. Her comment also made me think immediately of William Willimon's latest book. More than a thoughtful exploration of the theology and practice of ministry, *Pastor* is an ode to pastoral ministry itself. It is the tribute of a lover to his beloved of many years, a lover whose affection has been deepened by both pain and joy and whose passion has not diminished with time.

The book moves from presenting a historical theology of ordination into an analysis of contemporary practice. Yet after 30 years in the ministry, Willimon cannot help writing pastorally, breaking out into "interludes" in order to preach, teach, succor or chide. These six interludes offer a more reflective tone than the analytical portions do and punctuate the book as illustrations punctuate a good sermon. The voice of these interludes characterizes Willimon's reflection as a whole. In one he reveals his tension with the lectionary, in particular over its neglect of the Book of Acts. Every preacher who preaches the lectionary wrestles with its preemptory choices; Willimon shows us how that wrestling, too, is part of our calling.

The interludes allow him to explore the messy parts of ministerial practice, the tensions and balancing acts. The reflection on sin is a thoughtful rebalancing of prophetic power and pastoral humility. By the time one arrives at the piece on "Failure in Ministry," Willimon has quietly become the pastor's pastor, taking his

readers right up to disillusionment, while also pointing us toward an abiding peace.

Willimon's theology of ordination is so brief as to be frustrating. Unable to adopt the dispassion of a historian or ethnographer in his attempt to describe 2,000 years of evolving Christian practice, Willimon expresses all the denominational bias of a true practitioner. He is fair at best to traditions besides his own, though kind enough to keep his proselytizing to a one-and-a-half page footnote on Methodism. (A companion volume of readings, *Pastor: A Reader for Ordained Ministry*, also published by Abingdon, offers extensive material by authors Willimon mentions in *Pastor*.)

Where Willimon's history and theology is limited, his analysis of the practice of ministry is refreshingly practical and thorough. He takes the complex work pastors do and articulates the variety of roles they play, each role with its attendant tasks. He does not overtheologize his classifications, but works hard to separate and describe each pastoral role in both theological and functional terms. His chapter on pastoral care, which he worries is focused too much on technique, is one of his strongest articulations of what pastors uniquely offer the communities they serve.

At the start of his reflection Willimon names what he believes is "the singular perversion of the pastoral vocation," namely the conduct of ministry "as if the ministry were the personal possession of the pastor, as if the work of pastors is intelligible apart from the work of the church that necessitates pastoral work." This remains a strong undercurrent and thread throughout the book. On every page, Willimon makes his case that healthy ministry is the result not only of balancing different kinds of work but of a creative tension among the sources of authority. With illustrations from a variety of denominations and periods in history (and some attention to the diversity of age, race and gender), he lifts up the ordained ministry as a risky and creative vocation in which multiple voices speak to one divine call. Ordained pastors strive to obey God through a prayerful balancing of their own perspectives with those of the laity, colleagues, church, scripture, tradition and prophecy. The Spirit of God resides not in any one of these alone, but among and beyond them.

Willimon warns his readers that he will not be "uncritical" of the clergy, but much of his criticism is expressed as concern over imbalances between these forces, their relative neglect or excess. Despite this openness, he cannot seem to resist gratuitous mention of his own conservative views on the hot-button issues of

abortion and human sexuality (while he wistfully wonders where the politically active pastors have gone). This is unfortunate in a volume that also fiercely recalls battles and threats over civil rights, economic justice and women's ordination, Yet the articulation of risk in ministry is still convincingly brought home.

In the end, Willimon is neither simply a promoter of the ministry nor its most penetrating critic. With tender passion and humility, he extols a vocation he admits is "a very difficult way to earn a living." One senses that Willimon's criticisms of the practice of ministry might easily have gone deeper, that he consciously delivered but also softened each blow. Perhaps he did not think that stronger criticism was his purpose; perhaps he did not think it would help.

I once struggled with a neurological problem, the mechanism of which my doctor finally confessed he would truly understand only upon autopsy, meaning not that my death was immanent, but that the complete revelation of some dynamics might do more damage than good. My doctor said he preferred, therefore, to abandon thorough diagnosis in favor of treatment of the symptoms, a decision for which I was naturally grateful. In like manner, perhaps, Willimon values ministry too much to dissect it completely. In the instances in which he seems to respond to the symptom of an illness in ministry rather than pursue the cause of the disease, we nevertheless can be grateful for such a sympathetic healer and faithful colleague.