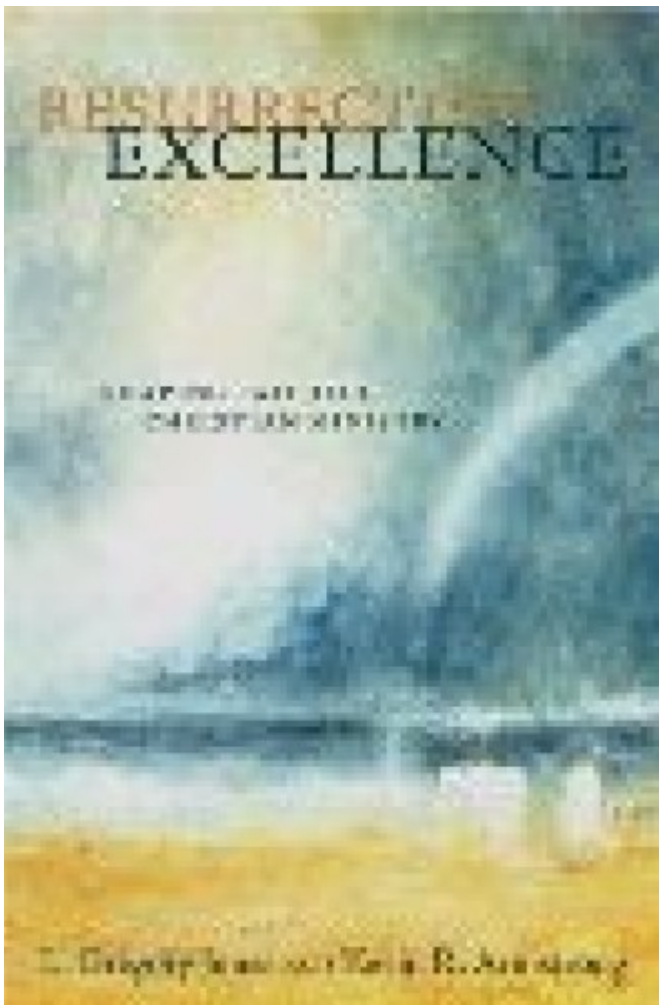


Resurrecting Excellence/ God's Potters

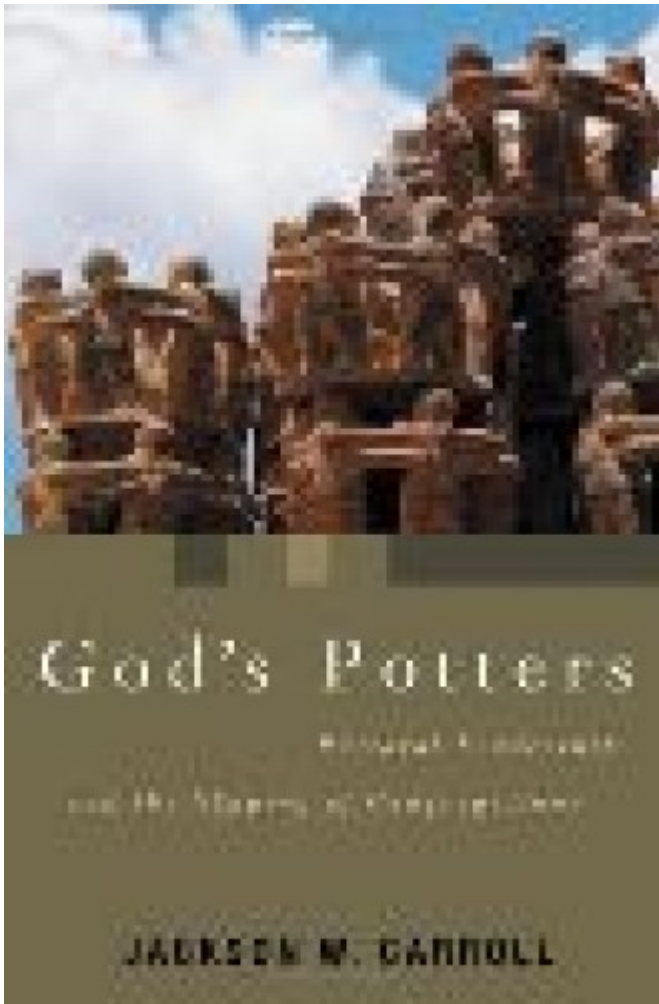
reviewed by [Christian Scharen](#) in the [November 28, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry

L. Gregory Jones and Kevin R. Armstrong
Eerdmans



God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations

Jackson W. Carroll
Eerdmans

Growing up in rural Montana, I loved the spring plowing in the huge fields near my home. After the winter snows melted, the fields looked barren, and the horizon was an endless vista of grayish-gold stubble of half-rotten straw. But after a pass with the discs, the turned-over soil glistened, and the earthy smell wafted through the air, filling my nostrils with a palpable sense of richness and potential for the harvest to come. I might liken the Pulpit & Pew project at Duke University Divinity School to that plow. Perhaps the most compelling result of this ambitious project is that it helps us to view the same old field of ministry with fresh eyes. Because of the project's work, instead of seeing a tired field long past its fertile peak, we glimpse the dramatic potential and promise of ministry today.

At the outset of the work, project director Jackson W. Carroll described the task as one of taking stock of a “troubled profession.” Clergy sex-abuse scandals, mainline membership loss, a high drop-out rate among pastors in their first five years, declining GRE scores of those entering seminary, and anecdotal stories of lonely, depressed, burned-out pastors all combined to set a compelling stage for a broad assessment of ministry. Arising from this worrisome starting point, the project had both a descriptive and a normative purpose. First, the researchers were to describe the state of Protestant and Catholic pastoral leadership in the U.S. Second, they were to contribute to an understanding of pastoral excellence and how it can be called forth and nurtured.

These books, intended as complementary sociological and theological summations of Pulpit & Pew’s work of the past five years, do not take a Pollyanna stance on the difficulties of ministry. The books turn the soil of our assumptions, giving readers new eyes to see why despite difficulties so many pastors report deep satisfaction and great hopes for their vocation in ministry.

In *Resurrecting Excellence*, L. Gregory Jones, dean of Duke Divinity School, and Kevin R. Armstrong, senior pastor of North United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, argue that if we expect excellence from our nurses, physicians, teachers, engineers and lawyers, we shouldn’t so quickly suspect that those who talk of excellence in ministry are prideful or that they entertain misplaced ambition. The church can and ought to have a distinctive definition of excellence that is shaped by the self-giving life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *Resurrecting Excellence* persuasively argues this point and draws us into the conversation about what constitutes excellence in Christian life and in pastoral leadership in particular.

Drawing on the luminous work of Marilynne Robinson in *Gilead*, Jones and Armstrong portray pastoral excellence in aesthetic terms, as something beautiful to behold. One of the most compelling—and theologically significant—of the portraits of excellence throughout the book is that of finding in the cross and resurrection a model of ministry “in the intersections.” Anyone who has served in parish leadership for a season can feel the truth of a portrait of ministry that holds together youth and age, strength and weakness, joy and suffering, abundance and sacrifice, tragedy and hope, community and solitude, church and world. And equally key, Jones and Armstrong argue for a shift from the model of “learned clergy” to one of “learning clergy,” to accent the apprenticeship process required to develop the agility to work “in the intersections” with grace and verve.

As a whole, the book never quite reaches coherence as a portrait of excellence in ministry, in part because it emerged from a three-year colloquium on the subject, sponsored by Pulpit & Pew. Jones and Armstrong often quote this or that story or idea from one or another member of the colloquium, a practice that makes the final product feel as much like pastiche as portrait. But perhaps this is the time for pastiche, a multivalent form that invites dynamic interaction and varied points of connection. In agricultural terms, it is the difference between a newly tilled field, bursting with fertile soil, and acres of corn as far as the eye can see—awesome in its own way, but not such a spark to the imagination.

Pastoral leadership takes a different aesthetic direction in *God's Potters*, the sociological volume of the pair, written by Carroll. Drawing on the lovely scriptural image of the church as an earthen vessel holding the treasure of the gospel, Carroll's term "God's potters" gives an artistic sense to his vision of the pastoral role as one that is fundamentally about shaping congregations. Carroll aims to "paint a broad, descriptive portrait of today's clergy," and his tightly interrelated chapters do just that as he summarizes data on the "who, what, where, and how" of pastoral leadership.

While the report confirms many well-known trends (greatly increased diversity of the clergy in age, gender and ethnic background; worrisome struggles with isolation and loneliness; and difficulty relating to a changing culture, for example), some surprises also surface. Perhaps most important among these is the overwhelming number of clergy who, despite various challenges, find their work enormously satisfying. This was not the expected finding given the early assumption of a "troubled profession," and it is a sign of hope. Where the researchers did find discontent, it resulted from fairly predictable causes: low pay, congregational conflict, stress and loneliness.

However, this is more than a clearly written report on the massive data gathering undertaken by Pulpit & Pew. As a self-confessed clergy watcher for the better part of 40 years, Carroll combines his own sage insights with the responses of focus groups to define excellence in ministry and to suggest means to encourage and sustain it. His section on "Some Marks of Excellent Ministry" is alone worth the price of the book; it will be required reading in every ministry course I teach.

After noting the ways that various institutions can nurture pastoral excellence, Carroll ends with a rousing call for pastors to push themselves to be disciplined in seeking the means to learn and grow in their ministries. He humbly calls his

suggestions—such as regularly practicing spiritual disciplines, nurturing a habit of reflection, engaging in lifelong learning, seeking holy friendships and taking time away from work—“a litany of the obvious,” but he knows the secret: such obvious things, when practiced by clergy, produce a culture of excellence that in turn inspires joy and hope in the common work of shaping congregations.

These books will not draw attention to themselves so much as provoke fresh and fertile thinking about congregations and the leadership of pastors who are called to work on their behalf for the sake of the world God loves. If this is so, then we can give thanks that their publication is not the end of talk about pastoral excellence, but its intensification.