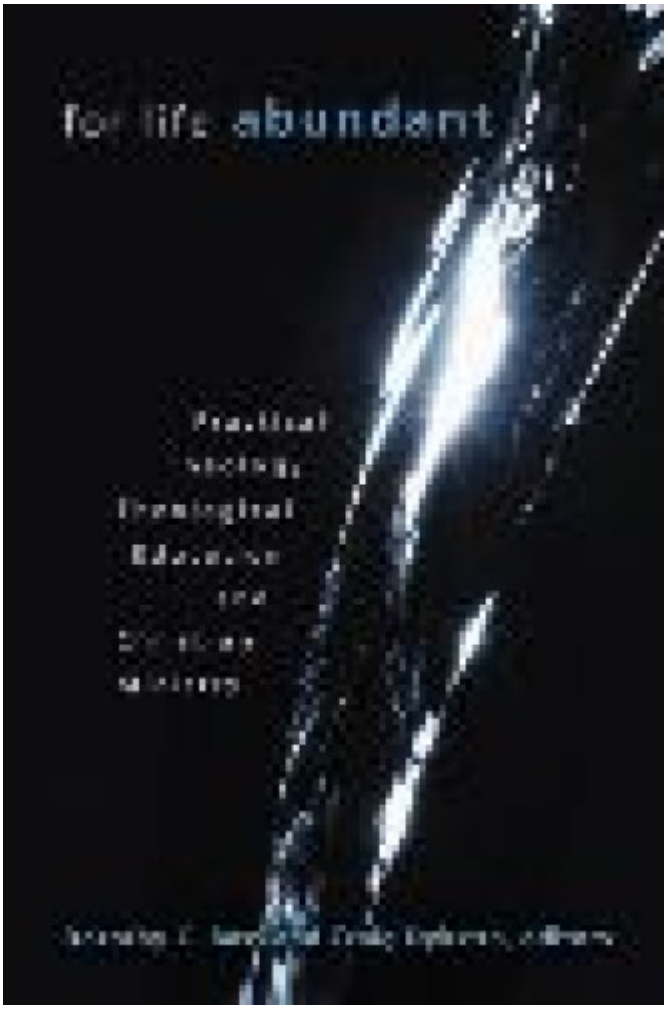
Teaching pastors

By Lillian Daniel in the February 24, 2009 issue

In Review



For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry

Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, eds.
Eerdmans

No one can accuse Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra of thinking small. In this volume they tackle the macro questions: What is life abundant? How can we live it more fully? How does the church foster it? How do pastors lead it and lead others to it? How does theological education need to change to make this happen more readily?

This collection of essays grew out of conversations between pastors and academics, all of whom care about practical theology. The contributors set out to make us care about it as well, seeming at times defensive and at other times apologetic about the field. We are told that doctoral programs in practical theology are getting stronger and that specialists in other fields now admire this one. Unspoken is the concern that the rest of theological education still does not take the field seriously.

How do you teach pastors to be pastors? Bible professors have a clear definition of their job and the subject matter they are trying to teach. But how do you teach ministry? How do you teach someone to move from one conversation to another at the church coffee hour, to balance the whispered prayer request against the news that the coffee maker has exploded?

In her delightful essay “Practical Theology in Two Modes,” contributor Serene Jones, a systematic theologian, tells of teaching a class with a colleague who was in the practical theology field, and of how the two brought very different gifts to class. In admiration of her colleague, Jones admits, “There are imaginative plays of mind and patterned habits of thought and analysis that are learned in practical field classes that I simply do not have the background or the wisdom to teach thoroughly and well.”

But who does do it well? And how do you know you are doing it well? These are questions that are answered not by papers or exams, but by pastoral lives well lived and the fruits of such work. So one can see how specific questions about practical theology as a theological discipline quickly mushroom into questions about life abundant.

I remember working as a seminary intern at a mental hospital at the age of 23. “What am I supposed to be doing in this internship anyway?” I asked my supervisor. “Frankly, I don’t see what I can do to help these people before their medications kick in.”

“Just wander the floor,” she told me. “Talk to the patients. Embody the loving presence of Christ. Make conversation.”

“Can’t I lead a spirituality program or a worship service?” I asked.

“You’ll get to do that eventually,” she said. “But why don’t you start by leaving this office and going out to talk to that gentleman?”

I looked out from the womb of her office to see a lone man rocking back and forth on the couch, muttering and shaking his head, as if to disagree with his own last comment.

Church coffee-hour conversations are hard enough for me. The idea of making conversation with someone who was already making conversation with himself did not appeal to me. I wanted a role, not a relationship.

I thought of that moment as I read many of the chapters in *For Life Abundant* and entered into the world of gifted authors who, in very different ways, seem to be pointing in the direction my supervisor was leading me. I wanted to lead Bible studies, to preach and to teach. She wanted me to go out there and meet the people. Like contributor Peter Marty in his beautiful essay “Shaping Communities,” she was trying to shape community, and in a situation that defied the odds.

When I was new to the ministry, I still wanted to shape myself—very much in keeping with the subjects of David Wood’s excellent essay “Transition into Ministry.”

Like the Lilly-funded Transition into Ministry residents Wood has studied, I remember that at that stage in my life I was consumed with my own calling, whatever it might turn out to be, and in particular with my pastoral authority, or what really was my lack of it. I wondered why my supervisor at the mental hospital wasn’t more eager to reflect on this with me, and instead kept sending me out to listen to the patients.

In his essay “Educating and Forming Disciples for the Reign of God,” Gordon Mikoski describes the remarkable ministry of Father Elias Chacour and the summer evening chats he had with 30 American high school students. After all that the young people had seen in the Middle East, it was these chats they remembered most. Father Chacour seemed endlessly ready to go out on the floor and spend time with the people.

The writers featured in *For Life Abundant* spent a great deal of time learning from one another and listening to one another. It seems that part of the project was getting academics to go out on the floor and spend time with clergy, and vice versa. Yet sadly, out of a project that brought together a mixed group, only two out of 15 essays were written by parish pastors, and only one by someone who is still serving a church today.

Why is it that we have so few pastors writing in the field of practical theology? It strikes me that there is a tension in this evolving field. In the past, a seminary might have hired pastors as teachers of ministry, and many still do. But with the field developing its own doctoral programs, there is a growing sense that a seminary no longer has to settle for a pastor or someone without a Ph.D. in the field.

The logic then continues: if the practical theology faculty members have Ph.D.s, they will be more respected by other faculty, and thus the whole field will be more respected in the theological community.

But what exactly is the goal here? Is it to raise the self-esteem of one slice of the academic pie? Or are we aiming for life abundant?

At an American Academy of Religion panel devoted to this book last November, a professor complained that the one working pastor who did write a chapter did not quote any practical theologians. The implication was that the pastor was not a practical theologian himself because he had not used footnotes. Yet that chapter is one of the best in the book. Quotations or references might have raised its stature within the guild, but they would not have strengthened the essay.

Will a Ph.D. one day become the only appropriate training for teaching the skills of coffee hour or the art of preaching? Are seminaries that hire pastors merely settling, or are they perhaps adding something generative to the teaching mix? And why would a project that brought together clergy and academics produce a book that feels like a conversation within the academy?

Clearly, this project was not about excluding pastors but about including them. Bass and Dykstra have both devoted their time, talent and treasure to encouraging pastors to write, and to write theologically. So the absence of written material may point to another issue. Academics, in their own practical training, are taught how to write, and specifically to write for publication in their field and in a certain style. Clergy are not trained in the same way. Hence the exchange about footnotes.

When it comes to the future of theological writing, seminaries should ask themselves if they are preparing pastors to be perennial readers and students or to be teachers and writers themselves. When they exist, writing programs at theological schools are often aimed at those students who need help. But what if such programs also focused on gifted writers and on encouraging pastors to be writers in the parish? I imagine that, like academics, pastors could be trained to write regularly and with discipline if they were encouraged from the beginning to see this as part of their calling. Yet pursuing this goal would involve adding yet another ball to the already tricky pastoral juggling act.

In *For Life Abundant*, the participants were trying to bring together two separate ways of working. Here I do not refer to the obvious, which is the difference between the culture of the academy and the culture of ministry, but to another split that we wrestle with in a variety of fields: the great chasm between the culture of the expert and the culture of the generalist.

Academics who train ministers are by virtue of their own training experts in a discrete field. And ministers, if they have any hope at all of surviving the call and performing the juggling act, are by nature generalists. Throughout the book there is a tension between the expert teachers and the generalist practitioners. The tension is identified in the fine essay by John Witvliet and creatively wrestled with by David Daniels and Ted Smith, who have sought in their teaching to use practices to move beyond their own expertise and into the generalist work of ministry.

In a culture that values expertise, the pastor can feel like one who has been spread too thin. We pastors manage budgets, deal with physical plants, lead personnel and raise money. But we are also likely to work with church members who specialize in those fields in their own professions, and probably do each task better than we do. Part of being a pastor is realizing that no matter which particular task may occupy you in any given moment, there probably is someone very close by, and perhaps in your congregation, who can do it better and is watching you do it worse. So why do these experts sit in the pews and put up with us?

Like many of the authors in *For Life Abundant*, I would argue that the word to hold up against the model of expertise is the biblical and theological term *wisdom*. Wisdom is what the generalist, at her best, brings. Wisdom is what Bass and Dykstra look for in pastors and want to help cultivate, from their own spaces of expertise.

How do we meet in the middle? We can get there by working with the question of pastoral authority, which seems to be the crucible in which many of these practical theology matters get worked out, for better or worse. Pastors are not like the plumber who walks in the door with a tool kit and engenders enough trust to take apart a toilet upon a first meeting. We are not like the accountant who prepares your taxes so that you can sign off and be done with it. People trust us not because we are better at something than they are, but because over time, in various situations and in community, we have led wisely. Our wisdom is shaped by our practices.

In a culture that honors expertise, pastors are still allowed to be bad at certain things. The best ministers have the ability to pull out gifts and expertise in church members for the good of the body of Christ.

Do we have any expertise by virtue of our seminary training? Of course, but a wise pastor who wants to cultivate discipleship rather than a cult of personality will resist being seen as the God expert. She would rather be one who has the ability to lead others into deep faith. Besides, our expertise in Bible or theology can be trumped by someone at an educational institution who has put in more years of study. Even in that area, what we have is comparatively the wisdom of the generalist.

The flourishing of life abundant takes place in the vocational Petri dish of an unrepentant generalist. When Dykstra describes pastoral imagination, his definition is thick with his understanding of how impossible it would be to break such an imagination into individual slivers of expertise. Kathleen Cahalan recognizes this in her insightful chapter on tying together the first ministry class and the last. She argues that the integration of the expert knowledge taught in seminary into the generalist chaos that is ministry should begin in school, though it cannot end there. Perhaps the missing voice in this conversation is that of the other teacher—the congregation itself. It is in our common life together that minister and parishioners are shaped.

For Life Abundant is an enormous project that asks more questions than it answers, which is both its weakness and its strength. The many voices and distinct foci the authors bring can give the reader whiplash. But the richness of the conversation makes it well worth reading. These essays are written by people who are passionate about their work of shaping pastors and parishioners. If they see that work as nothing short of leading followers of Jesus to the abundant life he promised, so be it. In a culture in which academic disciplines can so easily balkanize, these boundary-crossing writers' broad dreams are bold and refreshing. With or without footnotes.