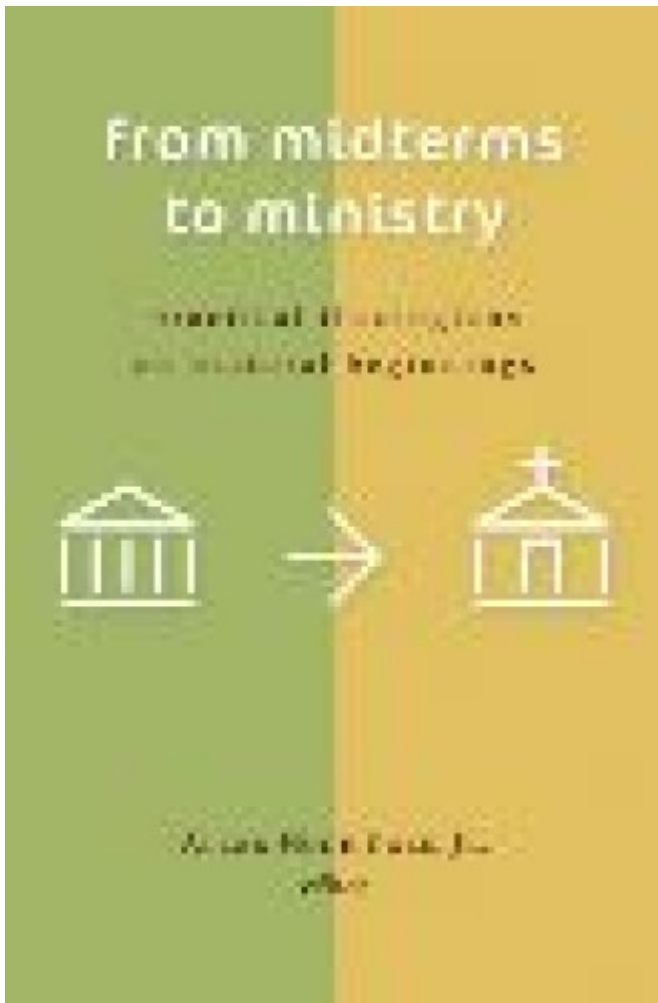


From Midterms to Ministry: Practical Theologians on Pastoral Beginnings

reviewed by [David J. Wood](#) in the [November 3, 2009](#) issue

In Review



From Midterms to Ministry: Practical Theologians on Pastoral Beginnings

Allan Hugh Cole Jr., ed.
Eerdmans

Over the past eight years, I had the privilege of serving as program coordinator for the Lilly Endowment's Transition into Ministry grants program. This work has helped me to see the fruitfulness of attending more closely to those who are in their earliest years of ministry. When the program began back in 2001, "transition into ministry" was little more than the name of a program. Since then it has become a category of reflection and inquiry.

In *From Midterms to Ministry*, 24 people who have been ordained to ministry, mostly in mainline denominations, reflect on their transition from preparing for ministry in seminary to practicing ministry in a congregation.

Many of the essays touch on the untidiness of ministry in congregations, and two offer especially helpful insights on how to appreciate and navigate the quotidian realities of pastoral ministry. The first is by M. Craig Barnes, one of only two contributors who are currently pastoring a congregation (the other is Earl F. Palmer). Even though he now teaches regularly in a seminary, Barnes's primary vocational identity and domain of practice is in the congregation—specifically, Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. In his essay, "The Meandering Ministry," he recalls that his biggest surprise after he left seminary was the dawning realization that "effective pastoral work in a congregation is impossible to measure." Looking back, he can now see that much of his early ministry was characterized by a yearning to escape the circularity of pastoral life. It was not until he left pastoral ministry for the more ordered, linear life of the academy that he discovered how deeply formed he was by and for the peculiar shape of the pastoral life.

Barnes's loss of wonder amid the wandering will resonate with many pastors I know who are embarking on their third decade of ministry. He tells us that his return to the pastoral life was paved by a realization "that my calling has been only to wander through the desert with the people I have vowed to love, pointing out the manna and the thin stream that flows along the way. That journey is never linear or easily measured. . . . Watching faith develop is a long, slow, meandering way to spend one's life. It is also a far more wonderful life than I could have ever imagined." One of the reasons Barnes's essay is so compelling is that he reveals how his transition into ministry was left unresolved for decades and how only now, in the midst of his third decade of ministry, he is finding his place and making his peace. It is not accidental that this resolution coincides with his reengagement with the academy.

The second essay that uses the quotidian reality of pastoral life as its point of departure is Palmer's "Sustaining the Pastoral Life." His essay centers on one of the most important and enduring discoveries he has made about ministry:

Most pastors have been given what I call the *gift of time*; that is, the privilege of organizing time with more flexibility than those in most other professions. As each of us knows, however, this gift of time has its own snares, particularly for those who are not self-starters, or who allow the hours of the week to confuse themselves into a random jumble of low-quality segments.

He suggests ways to embrace this freedom that far too many pastors seek to escape. Palmer helps us to see that the ordering of time is essential if pastors are to keep their bearings amid the meanderings of their work. He writes of the importance of thinking in terms of weeks rather than days or months or years, and of cultivating weekly rhythms of work, rest, worship and play.

Perhaps the deep struggle that often plagues beginning pastors is sounded most clearly in the final essay, by volume editor Allan Hugh Cole Jr. Reflecting on one of the lowest moments that led to his resignation from his first call, Cole relates how he moved from "strong feelings of isolation, then to boredom, and thereafter to a kind of vocational disorientation." He writes that he became "restless in my calling, disillusioned with the pastoral life, and probably a bit depressed as well." Many beginning pastors find the pastoral life to be a congenial, exhilarating, energizing and captivating experience. But the kind of struggle that Cole names is not uncommon. Unfortunately, in the remainder of his essay he fails to connect his experience to the habits and practices that can help pastors to address this kind of struggle.

As I made my way through these essays, I could not help hearing in the background the voices of the hundreds of beginning pastors I've talked with over the past few years. While there is much to be found in these pages that would resonate with them, several key themes are absent or addressed only in passing. For example, beginning pastors speak eloquently and at great length about the importance of relationships with mentors and friendships with peers in ministry. Only three essays develop this relational dimension at any length, and even in those the talk of friendship and mentoring relationships is presented more as advice than as personal testimony. The personal narratives of a few contributors illustrate the unique way in

which the pastoral life interweaves with public and private spheres, personal and communal experiences, family life and work life, but this topic is considered at length only by Bonnie Miller-McLemore, whose context is the academic life. Only Palmer takes up the challenge of ordering time.

Although this volume is worthwhile reading for transitioned and transitioning pastors, the scarcity of pastors among the contributors betrays a pervasive bias in the academy against practitioners' ability to reflect meaningfully on their own work. Until all our talk about valuing the knowledge that is embedded in practice and embodied in the practitioner expresses itself in genuine regard for the witness and intelligence of pastors, the divide between academy and congregation will persist and deepen.