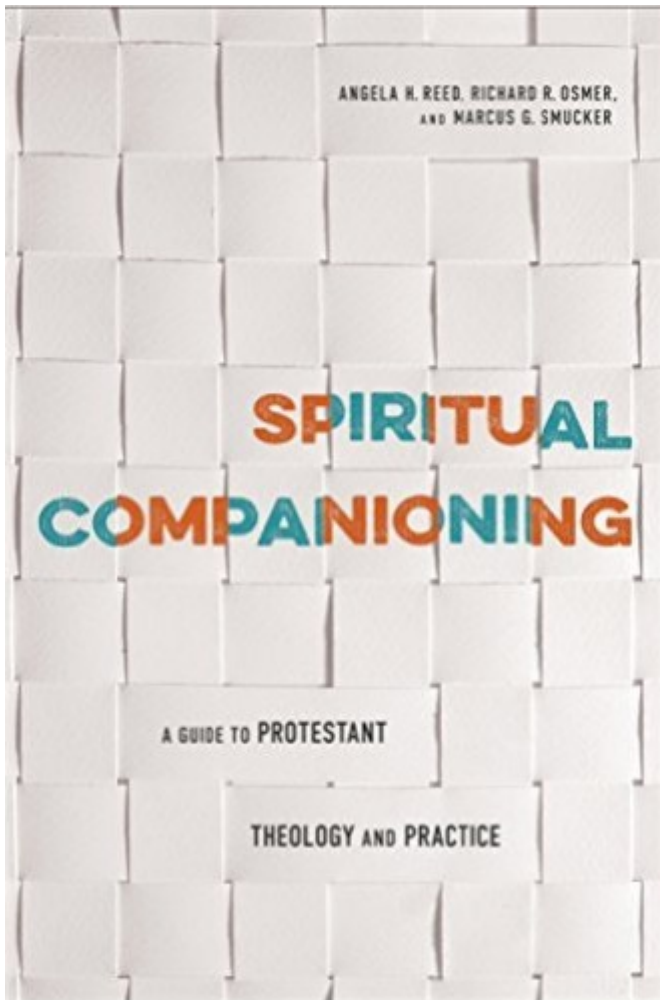


Spiritual Companions, by Angela H. Reed, Richard R. Osmer, and Marcus G. Smucker

reviewed by [Daniel Schrock](#) in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Spiritual Companions

By Angela H. Reed, Richard Osmer, and Marcus G. Smucker
Baker Academic

Marcus Smucker begins this book by telling about his burnout as an inner-city pastor. After 12 years of ministry, he felt emotionally dry and spiritually empty.

Though he continued to pray and read scripture, his passion for ministry had died, and preaching “was becoming a colossal pain.”

Spiritual and vocational rebirth began when Smucker took a private, multiday retreat at a cabin in the mountains. In solitude he rested, hiked, meditated with scripture, wrote in a journal, gazed at creation, and fasted. After three days he felt God’s presence not just around him but also in him. The retreat helped him realize that he needed to change his work habits and find ways to keep opening himself deliberately to God. After returning to the church, he began to offer others in his congregation some of the same spiritual practices that had refreshed him. In time he found his role in the congregation gradually expanding into that of a spiritual companion. It renewed his pastoral vocation.

Although not every pastor flirts with burnout, many pastors live with nagging questions they’d rather not answer: What if people in our church are mostly going through the motions of religiosity and live with little vital sense of God’s presence and power? As we work to run the church smoothly, what if people are not finding the deep fellowship with God and others they crave? Could we be missing what congregational life is supposed to achieve: growth into the image of Christ?

The three authors of *Spiritual Companionship*, a Baptist, a Presbyterian, and a Mennonite, suggest a way forward for pastors and congregations who find themselves disenchanted with casual Sunday morning encounters, polite potluck dinners, pressing programmatic concerns, endless worship planning, and shallow small groups. They write that burnout comes not from being too busy but from having stressful and distant relationships. Moreover, relationships in the church are often functionally utilitarian, revolving around such questions as, What can you do for me? What can you do for this church? What can you do for God?

Spiritual companionship takes us beyond the superficial and the utilitarian. God has designed us for deep connections, not isolation, and pastors and laypeople stand a better chance of flourishing when they develop relationships of spiritual depth with other human beings. In turn, the depth, honesty, and integrity of our human relationships influence the quality of our relationship with God. When the one thrives, so does the other.

Readers familiar with spiritual direction will quickly recognize that it lies at the heart of what the authors mean by spiritual companionship—joining one another on a quest

for deeper awareness of God in the human soul. In an inspired move, the authors take the skills and sensibilities of spiritual direction and apply them more broadly to other areas of congregational relationships, such as small groups, informal conversations, everyday life, and development over the lifespan. The result is a comprehensive vision of how spiritual companionship can flower in congregational life. The beauty of their approach is that readers do not need to know anything about spiritual direction to imagine ways of practicing spiritual companionship in their own lives and contexts.

Given the burgeoning number of books on Christian spirituality, it is becoming increasingly difficult for authors to find new and worthwhile things to say. However, Angela Reed, Richard Osmer, and Marcus Smucker do offer a handful of gems. Their analysis of the spiritual companionship that Jesus provided to the disciples on the road to Emmaus is the best treatment of this interaction I've seen yet. Their discussion of the approximately 20 "one anothering" texts in the New Testament brings to light an often overlooked theme. The material on using life course theory in spiritual companionship is also fresh. And their artful way of rooting spiritual companionship in the Protestant rather than the Catholic tradition demonstrates that as rich as the Catholic tradition of spirituality is, the Protestant tradition has its own intriguing resources for enlivening congregations.

The greatest strength of the book may lie in the authors' method. In each chapter they begin with an analysis of the cultural context, using insights from social researchers such as Robert Wuthnow and Nancy Ammerman. They then listen to scripture. Third, they mine the Protestant tradition for historical resources that are useful in the present, and then they suggest ways to practice spiritual companionship in contemporary congregations. The fifth step is to explore the stories of particular congregations. Finally, they conclude each chapter with exercises and practices to further the art of spiritual companionship.

I wished for a longer discussion of accountability, though that might require a separate book. The authors rightly argue that accountability is often thin in contemporary spiritual formation—whether in small groups, spiritual friendships, or spiritual direction. In my own work as a spiritual director for pastors and other church leaders, I sometimes hear them asking for greater accountability. Yet negotiating relationships that include this involves a delicate dance shaped by trust, transparency, vulnerability, gentleness, patience, and grace. To complicate matters, we humans have endlessly inventive ways of resisting accountability. When pursued

without the right spirit, spiritual practices can subtly become tools for avoiding it altogether. More work in this area needs to be done, though the authors have made a fine beginning.

The authors, practical theologians all, write passionately about the communal, relational nature of the church and the communal nature of the Trinity. They successfully skirt the individualistic approach that is sometimes found in books on Christian spirituality, and they make a compelling, winsome case for why spiritual companionship is a gift for the church.