

5 books for ministry

selected by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [May 4, 2010](#) issue

***Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*, by Eugene H. Peterson** (*Eerdmans*). Peterson remains the wisest person I know when it comes to understanding the pastoral life and gaining a pastoral heart. His insights into pastoral hubris and spiritual immaturity are sterling, and his appreciation for the beauty of a congregation is as rich as Iowa topsoil. Using the book of Jonah as a backdrop, Peterson distinguishes between religious careerism and vocational holiness in unforgettably honest ways.

***Open Secrets: A Memoir of Faith and Discovery*, by Richard Lischer** (*Broadway*). There is something about seminary training that leaves too many graduates infatuated with their intellect and with the office of ordained ministry. Lischer will not let any soul, including my own, get away with believing that ministry amounts to anything if we trample or ignore the smallest and simplest person. His journey through farm fields, cemeteries and the mundane routines of daily life in a country church leave me checking for mud on my shoes every time I set the book down. The writing is that vivid.

***A Pretty Good Person: What It Takes to Live with Courage, Gratitude and Integrity*, by Lewis B. Smedes** (*HarperCollins*). Some critics have accused Smedes of infusing theology with too much psychology. I see him otherwise—as an astute observer of the human condition who really knows and loves God. His writing is always substantive, pithy and brilliant. Truth in ministry is directly related to congruency in a pastor’s life, a life in which gratitude, courage and integrity must be thoroughly embodied. In this little book, Smedes reminds me how to lean toward goodness.

***The Art of Pastoring: Ministry Without All the Answers*, by David Hansen** (*InterVarsity Press*). If I set aside a section or two on decision theology, and the author’s small obsession with the doctrine of hell, which I find theologically unhelpful, this little-known book is a gem on pastoral ministry. Hansen is full of common sense, and he knows that task-driven ministry does not compare with a rich

pastoral life. Unafraid to talk about the importance of suffering, self-denial and ego restraint in a pastor, Hansen never lets go of the cross as the best plumb line for good ministry.

***A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*, by Gerald L. Sittser** (Zondervan). Every time someone asks me for my top-ten list of all-time favorite books, *A Grace Disguised* is on the list. No one could write about tragedy and suffering at this level of meaning without possessing Sittser's level of authenticity and depth of character. I have found that few things in ministry will ever go well or work well if one cannot grasp the difference between grace and fairness. No writer I know of navigates this distinction as beautifully as Sittser.