

5 books for ministry

selected by [Debbie Blue](#) in the [May 4, 2010](#) issue

***Brother to a Dragonfly*, by Will D. Campbell (Continuum).** Will Campbell distrusts institutions, the religious enterprise, and faith that is too settled. He's often irreverent, finds church in a tavern, and will offer visitors a sip of whiskey and call it communion (so I hear). In this memoir about growing up and working for civil rights in the south, he somehow manages to smudge the lines between virtuous liberals, Ku Klux Klansmen, his brother's drug addiction, and his own efforts to do good in the world. I'm sure he never meant to be anyone's model for ministry, but he's been one of mine.

***Church Dogmatics Index with Aids for the Preacher*, by Karl Barth (T & T Clark).** For years I never wrote a sermon without searching this comprehensive index and kissing the page when I found a bold reference (meaning an express treatment of a passage rather than a passing one). Reading Barth often gets me believing in God, which is helpful for a minister.

***The Beginning of Desire*, by Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg (Image).** In this midrashic, psychoanalytic, literary interpretation of Genesis, Zornberg's intention is to "loosen the fixities, the ossifications of preconceived readings." Writing to make the strange stranger, she opens up the text's lush, equivocal and unruly qualities. Encountering midrash through Zornberg has changed the way I read the Bible.

***Raising Abel: The Recovery of Eschatological Imagination*, by James Alison (Crossroad).** Examining the biblical witness with the help of René Girard's mimetic theory, Alison writes like someone whose heart and imagination have been transformed by "an utterly vivacious God who lives entirely without reference to death." Though Alison is a tremendous scholar, this book doesn't feel academic to me—it feels pastoral. I use it like a devotional to remember daily that it's possible to build a church, create a culture and learn to feel intimacy without bonding over against anyone or anything else, without playing by the rules of the machine.

***For the Time Being*, by Annie Dillard (Vintage).** In this "nonfiction first-person narrative," Dillard weaves together stories of mystics, rabbis, paleontology, history,

science and theology while asking questions about pretty much everything that is or might be. I've learned some good habits from her: look whatever happens straight in the face; don't oversimplify, sentimentalize or be foolishly optimistic; know that hopelessness is as unwarranted as glib promise.