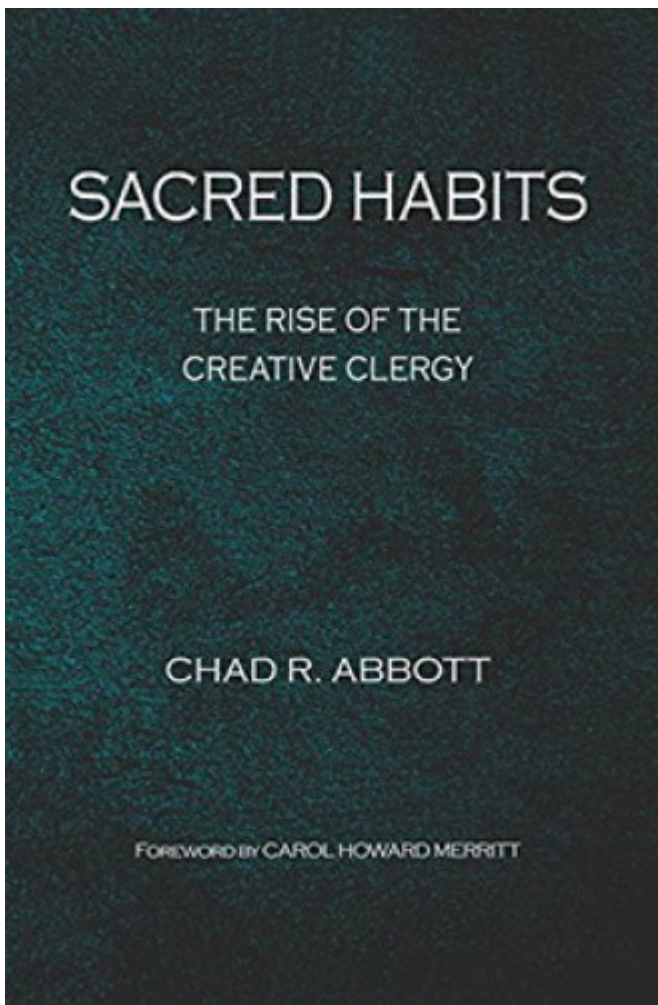


How spiritual practices can foster creativity

The most useful essays in this new collection are the ones that tell stories from parish ministry.

by [Rob Muthiah](#) in the [April 12, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Sacred Habits

The Rise of the Creative Clergy

Edited by Chad R. Abbott
Noesis Press,

Creativity gives rise to further creativity. At our church this past Advent, we arranged the chairs in our worship space into a circle so that the congregation itself formed the Advent wreath. Candles were placed on stands at four points on the perimeter of the circle, and each Sunday's service began with the congregation processing in song around this living Advent wreath. With the creativity expressed in this liturgical event, our worship planners not only honored church tradition and brought the congregation bodily into Advent; they also nurtured a congregational imagination for future creativity in our life together.

Stories of how others creatively approach congregational life spark my own creativity in ministry. For me, the most useful of the 22 essays in this new collection are those in which the authors—all of whom are active in parish ministry—tell such stories.

Jeffrey Gallagher describes how he took up running early in his clergy career. His running time became a time of prayer, envisioning sermon illustrations, and viscerally connecting with God's creation. As a runner, I nodded my head in appreciation as I read, having shared these experiences. But the essay gets more interesting—and more inspiring—when Gallagher describes how running became connected to other aspects of his pastoral ministry.

During Lent one year, Gallagher challenged the congregation to run cumulatively the total number of miles from their location in Maine to Jerusalem. As the congregation embraced this challenge, they not only received health benefits. They also experienced the deepening of community as people shared their experiences of connecting with God through running. Later members of the congregation formed a running team that met weekly to prepare for a 5K race. Then, in a moving response to the Boston Marathon bombing, the church sponsored a 2.62 mile run on the streets of their town as a way of praying for all those impacted by that tragedy. As a result of promotional e-mails and Facebook postings, over 100 people showed up for the run—many of them not from the church.

Gallagher's story is, on one level, about the creative possibilities for ministry of a particular practice: running. But more broadly, it inspires me to ask: What do I love to do that might serve as a means of congregational formation and outreach into the

community?

Another pastor, Michelle Torigian, describes several creative worship experiments her church carried out. For example, on snowy Sundays when it would be too hazardous for congregants to venture out to the church building for worship, the pastor notified members that a worship service would be held for the church's Facebook group beginning at 6 p.m. The Facebook worship service began with Torigian welcoming people and providing an opening prayer. The service continued with video clips, confession and assurance, a recent blog post the pastor had written, and a few questions to ponder. The time together ended with a blessing from the pastor.

Despite my ambivalence about the role of technology in our lives, I found myself imagining variations on this approach that might work for my congregation. I couldn't simply replicate what Torigian's congregation did—we don't get snow days where I live in Southern California. But I was able to riff on what they did in creative ways that fit my own context.

Another pastor, Zayna Hart Thompson, uses public spaces creatively in her pastoral ministry. Every Wednesday afternoon, from 2-5 p.m., she sits in her local coffee shop for "public office hours." Her congregants know that she will always be there and that they are welcome to drop by.

One congregant, Jane, sat down to chat, claiming to be just stopping by while out running errands. But she eventually shared with Thompson that she wasn't really running errands. She was coming from a support group for families with loved ones suffering from dementia and Alzheimer's. That moment in the coffee shop with her pastor provided a sacred space for reflection before Jane summoned the courage to return home. Another congregant, Roger, serves on the church's governing board, works full-time, and partners with his wife in parenting three boys. His schedule is complicated, so he appreciates being able to pop into the coffee shop on Wednesdays as his schedule allows to talk with his pastor about church projects he's working on.

By committing to this weekly practice, Thompson has also established a consistent presence in the community square. When she's not in conversation, she embraces the opportunity to keep watch from the coffee shop's front window, open to what God is doing and how God might show up.

While the book contains many inspiring stories of creativity in congregational life, its emphasis—as the title *Sacred Habits* implies—is on personal and communal spiritual practices. In this respect, I found the book less helpful. Many of the essays encourage clergy to attend to practices such as writing a rule of life, forming a clergy group, taking a sabbatical, and seeking spiritual direction. The premise is that creativity often emerges from such practices. It's a solid premise, but I don't find it particularly novel.

The chapters focusing on spiritual practices may be useful to those who aren't yet convinced that creative ideas can emerge from times of “doing nothing,” meditating on scripture, and practicing the simple art of being present. But if you're seeking a source of creative stimulation, focus on the essays that tell the stories of experiments in congregational ministry.