

**John Patton, *Pastoral Care: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 122 pp.**

John Patton, emeritus professor of Pastoral Care at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, has been a formative influence upon modern pastoral theory and practice. The shaping of the art of pastoral care into a professional discipline has largely proceeded within the Protestant milieu, and Patton is a deeply committed Christian. Yet clinical pastoral education is now conducted on a fully multi-religious basis, and a growing number of those who may wish to take advantage of Patton's insight and experience do not share the particulars of his faith. Patton's *Pastoral Care: An Essential Guide* belongs to the Abingdon Press "Essential Guides" series, which is primarily aimed at students of Christian ministry. This review, however, will examine the book from a perspective outside the fold, or at least outside a doctrine-based conception of the fold.

Hospital chaplains who address their care to people of a wide range of religious beliefs, and of no religious belief, have been obliged to develop a more radical notion of the flock and of who is in it. A concomitant and intriguing issue is in what manner one may be "shepherded" by a person of different creed. Can I trust that I will be led where I need to go? Both those who seek out pastoral care, and pastoral trainees, may legitimately ask that question. Patton, without directly confronting the matter, in this book supplies valuable material for formulating an answer.

*Pastoral Care: An Essential Guide* falls roughly into four "movements." A brief introduction offers a concise Christian theological rationale for pastoral care and lays out the author's governing theses. Patton offers a powerful (and Islamically sympathetic) definition of pastoral care as founded upon "the wisdom to know, be, and do what is necessary to restore persons to the way that God created them" (p. 3). Yet he limits the function of pastoral care to retrieving a community's "lost sheep," a task that, for congregational ministers, must be balanced with other forms of public responsibility. Patton derives the kinds of work necessary to reclaim those lost sheep from the words of twenty-third Psalm, and employs the psalm's resonant images as the unifying figures for the entire book. He also speaks to the limitations of books, citing clinical pastoral education as the most accessible training in the living action/reflection process that makes acquiring wisdom possible.

The book's second "movement" consists of three invaluable chapters. Each is devoted to the nature and cultivation of one of the indispensable yet elusive pastoral virtues: wisdom, presence, and guidance. Wisdom—"the ability to make sound choices and good decisions"—is both the crown of these and the gateway to them all. When this reviewer started out in CPE, it seemed a revolutionary notion that wisdom, instead of simply being venerated as a divine gift, might be explicitly sought out, learned, and taught through a sensitive attention to the details of experience. Yet the idea ought to have been familiar. How often the Qur'an calls upon us to act with

intention and to re-reflect on what we observe! The secret of the training, however, as Patton points out, turns out to be situating the process in relationship: “the best place for the interaction of these components of wisdom to take place is in a small group of colleagues in ministry where the often messy, personal, and necessarily confidential aspects of human life may be discussed freely” (p. 11–12). The circle of the Prophet’s companions was exactly such a place. In later times, such interactions have often been dismissed as pernicious gossip, and so the technique has proven difficult to transmit. It would have been very useful to have had some pointers on precisely how one prevents circles for pastoral wisdom from degenerating into something more common and less savory, but perhaps some topics fall outside the purview of an Essential Guide.

The third “movement” of *Pastoral Care* presents chapters on four challenging types of problems that pastors regularly encounter in those they serve. “Limit, Loss, and Grief” and “Care for the Sick” deal with painful universals: fields of suffering that are inevitably present in every life. Patton gives good solid advice on “What Carers Need to Know,” “What Carers Need to Be,” and “What Carers Need to Do” in the commonest situations of human distress. The following two chapters, “Abuse of Self and Others” and “Care of Marriage and Family” deal with what one might regretfully call the routine dysfunctions: addiction, violence, and fractured relationships. Here the author picks his way more carefully, suggesting perspectives that he has found useful and dimensions of care that are suitable for religious caregivers, while not loading on ministers responsibilities more appropriate to members of other helping professions.

In the last “movement” of *Pastoral Care*, “Pastoral Counseling” emphasizes proper boundaries in offering care to those who seek out personal help, delineating a heart-centered approach to hearing problems and making referrals as a “ministry of availability” and a “ministry of introduction.” “A Final Reflection” recapitulates the central arguments of the book and reiterates its theological bedrock.

The style of the book is elegant, simple, and full of gentle recapitulations of ideas. Patton gracefully includes a sample CPE “verbatim” (which he does not name as such) and other helpful exercises as elements of the argument in several chapters, but *Pastoral Care*, while written for beginners, is thankfully free of the rigidities of textbooks. Patton never condescends to his audience, but opens to readers the forms of pastoral wisdom that he himself has managed to acquire.

As a Muslim chaplain, who is a sort of educated freelancer attached to one or another secular institution, I catch myself envying the established church structures that Patton takes for granted as the underpinnings of pastoral practice. However that can’t be helped: my religion has no clergy, only scholars and elders. Theologically, we have no clerical “calling:” there is only the human calling, to which one may attach oneself with greater or lesser passion, and to greater or lesser depth. In a sense, all Muslims are theoretically in the position of lay ministers, while ordained ministers

simply do not exist. This makes for boundary issues different from those that Christian pastors must wrestle with, and these Patton cannot help us address. Muslim chaplains cannot, with theological accuracy, view our pastoral care as the single-handed pursuit of lost sheep, but rather as our small share of a global function that maintains the health of the whole. What is missing in the Christian presentation, from a Muslim spiritual point of view, is a certain reciprocity between the minister and the ministered-to. All of us are continually re-presenting God, for better or worse.

Despite doctrinal differences between us, fruitful commerce may easily be conducted between Patton's religious world and the one I know. The simplest solution to the problem of trust, whether between persons or across cultures, is to recognize that sincerity travels well. Circles for pastoral wisdom can be most productive when complex, and *Pastoral Care* offers high value to students of all backgrounds.

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