

Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, eds., *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 380 pp.

ATS's commitment to outcome-based assessment finds an ally in Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra's *For Life Abundant*. The book is the culmination of over a decade of careful thinking and publishing grounded in these theological convictions,

God in Christ promises abundant life for all creation. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the church receives this promise through faith and takes up a way of life that embodies Christ's abundant life in and for the world. The church's ministers are called to embrace a way of life and also to lead particular communities of faith to live it in their own situations. To do this, pastors and other ecclesial ministers must be educated and formed in ways of knowing, perceiving, relating, and acting that enable such leadership (p. 1).

This book takes up the serious question of how theological education forms persons called by God to leadership and the practical theologians' role in the formation process. To do this, four angles of engagement are explored: envisioning practical theology, practical theology in the classroom, practical theology in the wider academy, and practical theology in ministry.

First, practical theology is envisioned as a field of scholarship with a commitment to ministerial formation. Dorothy Bass begins by asserting that the grace of God in Christ that frees is also a grace that forms. This formation is best nurtured and sustained by intentional practices. "A theological and normative understanding of practices...interprets practices, in short, as forms within and through which a Christian way of life takes shape" (p. 32). As a consequence, practical theologians are encouraged to instill in their soon-to-be-ministers a grace-grounded habitus that is biblically rooted, imaginative, contextually sensitive, community-oriented, and intentional.

Craig Dykstra snares his readers with this opening sentence: "It is a beautiful thing to see a good pastor at work" (p. 41). Thus "the point and purpose of practical theology are to nourish, nurture, discipline, and resource both pastoral and ecclesial imagination" (p. 43). Dykstra pictures a lively engagement between pastor and congregation in which each catalyzes the other and ministry energy is released. The challenge for seminaries, he acknowledges, is that the pastoral imagination "emerges over time...[and] it is always forged...in the midst of ministry itself, as pastors are shaped by time on the anvil of deep and sustained engagement in pastoral work" (p. 42).

In a third essay, Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman complete the envisioning of practical theology by commending their map of practical theology as a field. Their map is grounded in the conviction that, "The basic task of practical theology [is] supporting and sustaining lived discipleship. Rooted in Christian tradition, practical theology focuses on a called people who manifest a particular faith through concrete ways of life" (p. 67).

One consequence of this grounding perspective is that practical theologians will hold discipleship as the North Star that guides their research and teaching. This will, they assert, keep practical theologians from abstracting the arts of ministry from “particular communities, settings, or traditions” (p. 70).

The second conversation draws back the veil to see master teachers at work. Kathleen Cahalan discloses the route she took in constructing the introduction to ministry course and the capstone ministry course (formerly described a “catch-all”), each with an eye towards integration. She shares in detail how she creatively cultivates in her students the capacity to connect the dots between what they know and have experienced of the Gospel with how it informs their ministerial practice in appropriate ways.

John Witvliet chooses to describe an approach rather than a syllabus in addressing the teaching of worship. “Walk into a worship service on any given Sunday morning, and you will encounter a world that even a lifetime of study cannot fully comprehend” (p. 117). Witvliet then describes the various interpretive angles that anthropologists, psychologists, artists, and theologians might employ with each only capturing a portion of what is really going on. Witvliet’s conviction is that participation is the key. Not producing worship professors but worshipers and presiders or worship leaders is the goal (p. 119).

James Nieman draws upon the action/reflection theory in the work of Donald Shon to explore how ministerial leaders are formed in the practice of the ritual they are called upon to enact. Nieman provides examples of his own pedagogical strategies: engaging students own experience of meaningful ritual events, funerals for example, and drawing out the deep implications for these soon-to-be-pastors who would enact the rites that had impacted themselves so deeply.

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore seeks *phronesis* on behalf of her students: “an unspoken rule or movement or litany guides practical theological pedagogy: Experience the practice, practice it, tell about it, ask questions about it, read about it, write about it, practice it, do it, empower others to do it” (p. 178). Miller-McLemore understands the challenges faced by those entering ministry and the need for them to cultivate an embodied wisdom that is more than one knows or can describe.

The third conversation engages the role of practical theology within the larger academy. In drawing larger connections, each envisions a more vibrant seminary experience. Serene Jones in a chapter rich with metaphor explores the tension between theology as academic subject and lived theology: “Isn’t it obvious?—the faith we teach is through and through a practical faith. It lives only insofar as it lives in the tissue of our everyday comings and goings...in all their complex, messy, graced fullness” (p. 197). In other words, can theology be “impractical?”

David D. Daniels and Ted A. Smith share their pedagogical convictions as historians who understand their discipline’s formational power. Smith demonstrates how the richness of human experience in its socio-cultural

dimensions alerts ministers to see these clues in their ministry context. Daniels demonstrates how practices can be lifted up in the teaching of history (preaching, for example) for the sake of ministerial formation, providing seminarians with alternative perspectives on these practices. Tom Long makes the case for university-based PhD programs in practical theology. He employs Emory University as a case study. Long commends the university model imagining scholars on the Quad who are both “good citizens of the university and...who speak of their deepest religious commitments with clarity, zest, and passion” (p. 260).

In the final section, ministers reflect on practical theology and their own ministerial formation and practice. This section is rich in pastoral wisdom: veteran voices to feedback into the curriculum questions that faculty wrestle with. Christian Scharen reflects on his own formation and growth from reliance on “rules of thumb” to a professional proficiency—developed through practice—that is intuitive action. This is pastoral “know how.”

David J. Wood imagines a reconceiving of the boundary between seminary and ministry through the effective Lilly-funded Transition into Ministry residencies. Wood describes the programs assumptions and structure of the program utilizing trained mentors, peer reflection groups, selected readings, and a welcoming congregation.

Peter Marty considers formation through the challenge of shaping communities: “Reading the consecrating words of the Holy Eucharist is one thing; remembering that there are spiritually hungry people right on the other side of the chalice and bread is another. And they’re not just ‘people.’ They’re friends” (p. 322). Marty makes a number of practical suggestions that would benefit all seminarians by cultivating pastoral instincts that would guide them toward “fostering a community that is in love with the possibilities of togetherness in Christ and its responsibility of being available to the needs of others” (p. 325).

Finally, Gordon Miskoski reflects on the fascinating pilgrimages that his youth group took to the Holy Land. The pilgrimages “helped me to see that spiritual practices and worship should, whenever possible, be connected with social and political challenges posed by contemporary life” (p. 346).

This book commends a powerful vision of practical theology in service of the Kingdom of God. We can be grateful once again for the collaborative efforts of Bass and Dykstra. Here are three, among many, discussions the book might prompt among seminary faculty.

- “What if our teaching of ministerial practices and scholarship in practical theology always had as its horizon...public consequences?” (p. 167)
- Given the length of time and ministerial practice it takes to move from novice to competency, might the church partner more effectively with the seminary to forge a better pathway to competency? The Lilly-funded transition-into-ministry residencies are effective, but expensive. Are there other equally effective strategies?

- Each writer expresses concern for a place to practice ministry under capable supervision and space to reflect on the practice. How might practical theologians work more closely with field education directors to leverage the learning laboratories of internships?

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