

Book review

April Yamasaki

The Heart of the Matter: Pastoral Ministry in Anabaptist Perspective, ed. Erick Sawatzky. Telford, Pa.: Cascadia Publishing House; Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2004.

In chapter 14 of this excellent volume, Rebecca Slough relates the story of a seminary student who always seemed to be looking for the how-to manual of pastoral ministry. Only later, in his first congregation, did he finally realize that there could never be a comprehensive set of instructions. Instead, like good jazz music, pastoral ministry requires improvisation.

In chapter 12, Arthur Paul Boers offers the image of pastor as “spiritual orienteer”—one who helps orient people toward God.

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In his pastoral theology approach, leading worship, preaching, praying, pastoral care, administration, and other tasks of ministry are meant to orient and reorient people toward God.

These two ways of understanding pastoral ministry are just two of the many reasons that I highly recommend this book to pastors and

to anyone interested in pastoral ministry and education. Written by the faculty of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, this collection of seventeen essays is clearly grounded in the AMBS experience, particularly as it has developed since the late 1960s. The concern for theological education is evident throughout and is underscored by two appendixes of AMBS documents on theological education and curriculum design.

But this book is not only for educators or for those who have studied at AMBS. In fact, perhaps it's because I did not receive my pastoral training there that I find this book so valuable. The historical essays give me a sense of how pastoral ministry has

developed in the wider Anabaptist church and help me reflect on how ministry has developed in the particular congregation that I serve. The biblical and theological essays help ground and shape my ministry practice in the context of scripture. The discussion of pastoral identity, function, and office helps me think about my wide range of ministry tasks and relationships in a more integrated way. This is not a how-to book; instead, using the terms supplied by Slough and Boers, it provides an Anabaptist orientation to pastoral ministry with plenty of room for improvisation.

To make the most of the book, I recommend that you read it the way I did. Start with the introduction, written by AMBS dean and New Testament professor Loren L. Johns, which provides an overview of all seventeen essays. Then read the last essay by editor Erick Sawatzky, who taught pastoral ministry at AMBS, for his understanding of “the heart of the matter.” Then read the rest of the essays in the order most relevant for your current ministry. For me, that meant turning next to Rebecca Slough’s essay on “Pastoral Ministry as Improvisatory Art,” then “Paying Attention” by June Alliman Yoder, followed by “The Pastor as Healer” by Willard M. Swartley.

I read the entire book in this way, over the course of several weeks filled with leading worship and sermon preparation, working with our church council and committees, making hospital visits, hosting a guest speaker, supervising a pastoral intern and other staff, hearing the painful story of a member with a difficult past, praying with someone who is new to our church. Reading this book as I practiced ministry was an exercise in praxis as Erick Sawatzky describes it in his preface: “Practical experience in ministry and formal thought need each other in education for ministry. Without careful reflection, the church loses its vision, its focus. Without experiences of life in the church, formal theological thought loses its context, its locus.” I have found that kind of praxis vital for ongoing ministry, and this book makes a valuable contribution to that end.

About the reviewer

April Yamasaki is senior pastor of Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Abbotsford, B.C.