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**BOOK REVIEW****FOR LIFE ABUNDANT: PRACTICAL THEOLOGY,  
THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION, AND CHRISTIAN MINISTRY**

BY: DOROTHY C. BASS AND CRAIG DYKSTRA, EDITORS

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008

372 pp. Paperback

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Have you ever envisioned practical theology? What does it look like in your context of ministry—in our various disciplines, ministry locations, across the academy, places of worship? The gift Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra offer us with this collection of writings on practical theology is that vision with fresh ideas for forming God’s people.

Bass and Dykstra are not new names to the discipline of practical theology, having contributed much over the years toward its shape and formation. What they have done for us with this text, however, is cast a broader net to include a team of authors who glean and polish an essential collection for the field. From the opening remarks, the challenge is set down to demonstrate that “discipleship, ministry, and education and formation for ministry are inextricably related to one another and grounded in God’s gift of abundant life in Jesus Christ” (1). The authors draw us into a reflective reading that causes us to consider the character of Christian ministry. The book offers indispensable resources for the North American church and academy.

The book begins by dividing the writings into topics that examine the abundant way of life in terms of ministry, theological education, and the academic field of practical theology. It is the overall contention of the book that pastoral education and formation are life-long learning processes that begin in early family life, move through church life, are nurtured in seminary life, and refined in ministerial life. They are processes of faithful and life-giving ways of living in and for the world.

Part One helps us envision practical theology. Bass begins the section with a conversation, leading us to consider our own lives and “ways of abundant life.” She sets the stage

and shows how useful “questioning” can be in a section that is enhanced by the details in and the careful use of footnotes. Other authors in the book use the same style, but Bass has mastered it well. Her chapter addresses key areas through “questioning,” such as “What particular ways of thinking and living are embodied in practices that take seriously God’s grace to all the world in Jesus Christ?” The questions throughout are helped by footnotes that expand the discussion. Dykstra follows with a chapter focused on the pastoral and ecclesial imagination. He reminds us that at the heart of intentional and reflective ministry are questions that challenge and hold us accountable. Those questions ask how we reflect the life of God, how truly life giving is our way of gathering as church and community, and how we can foster such a way of life that is good for all creation. Cahalan and Nieman conclude Part One by mapping the field of practical theology. The mapping pulls together a diverse field and highlights a common purpose to begin the conversation among likely neighbors. Their conceptual map of practical theology involves elaborating several connected claims—discipleship, various forms of ministry, teaching, research, current events and life-situations, and directions for action.

Part Two addresses practical theology in the classroom. The authors, all gifted faculty in the practical field, were asked to describe the theology and pedagogy that shape what they do in their courses. “What do they hope students will learn to perceive and understand and do, and why?” “How does their sense of God and of their students, materials, and purposes in relation to God inform their pedagogy?” (89). Topics are engaging and the authors offer insightful tools for planning and conducting courses. Cahalan’s chapter introduces us to the bookends of a master of divinity program—introducing ministry and fostering integration. She challenges readers to prize and pursue the goal of theological and ministerial integrity in their teaching. In the second chapter of this section, Witvliet gives us insight into teaching worship as a Christian practice. He offers a “pedagogy of and for deep participation, a pedagogy resolutely set against disengagement, neutrality, and cynicism” (148). In Chapter Three, Nieman shares reflections on the multiple substantive,

pedagogical, and theological choices that teachers make. He addresses several matters such as pastoral formation and integration of theological study across disciplines. Miller-McLemore concludes Part Two, with her chapter on embodying theological “know-how.” Her chapter anticipates the emphasis in the fourth section of the book, practical theology in ministry, and leads the reader into the third section with suggestions for important conversations.

Part Three, practical theology in a wider academy, looks at examples of work on the boundaries between practical theology, systematic theology, and history (Jones); history, practice, and theological education (Daniels and Smith); and a doctoral study in practical theology in a university context (Long). It gives us hope for greater collaboration between colleagues in diverse fields.

Part Four concludes the study and shifts the focus of *For Abundant Life* to the congregation. The editors note that the conversations leading to the book consistently included both pastors and professors (263). Chapters eleven to fourteen are key for drawing these conversations into the practical and integrative work of day-to-day ministry. Scharen talks about embodying practical wisdom in Chapter Eleven; Wood crosses the boundaries between seminaries and congregations in Chapter Twelve; Marty shows us the dance between pastoral leadership and congregational formation; while Mikoski reflects on the youth and formation of disciples. Each gives a help tool chest for reflective work beyond the academy.

The editors offer meaningful summaries and reflections in the final chapter. One particular statement stood out as the reading was concluded—“the Christian life cannot be lived in isolation, for God’s promise of abundant life is received and realized in and through relationships with others”—so simple and yet so profound—a summons for future conversations.

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**Book Review****GOD'S TAPESTRY:  
UNDERSTANDING AND CELEBRATING DIFFERENCES**

BY: WILLIAM M. KONDRATH

Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008

xxviii + 285 pp. Paperback

ISBN: 978-1566993630

In William Kondrath's work, the "diversity of human beings and all of creation" creates a tapestry crafted to recognize, understand more deeply, and celebrate differences. *God's Tapestry* offers religious leadership and theological educators what Alban Institute readers have come to cherish: concrete narratives and practical guidance for deepened multicultural practice in faith communities. Kondrath's theological thesis is that God intended and declared good the amazing diversity of human beings and of the entire creation (37). Furthermore, faith communities may be renewed with *appreciation* of differences, not in their neglect or denial. Illustrative of pastoral experience and affective competence, this volume extends an invitation to a journey. Those dissatisfied with how faith communities confront difference will find here a "road map for transformation" (xxiv).

The strongest contributions come within the articulation and concretizing of *relational theory* as a way of valuing difference. Not only are healthy relationships constructively described (132-35), but feelings are coined as *messengers* available for cognitively developing *emotional literacy* [how we come to know what we know and our ability to *read* our own and other people's feelings] and *affective competence* [the ability to integrate the affective dimension into our behavior, especially in service of bringing about a transformation or change (77)]. Those willing to develop greater awareness of the affective dimensions in cognitive and systemic analyses are promised new vision and potentially deeper connection. Additionally, the notion of the self instead of relationship is challenged as a basic analytical category. Well-suited to cross-cultural engagement, relational theory confronts the Western-European and North American propensity to construct a self

(usually over and against an “other”), providing instead various community practices that value relationship as a more constructive node of human development. The potential to transform human behavior then becomes imaginable. For example, Kondrath describes the ways that men and women get stuck in working together [impasses of dread/yearning, product/process, power-over/power-with (161ff)] and suggests patterns of institutional redress through naming, norming, negotiating, and networking—behaviors that manifest a value of relational practice within shared institutional life (177ff). Relational theory becomes a flesh-and-blood way to live differently with difference.

Modeling his approach, Kondrath begins with practical guidelines: try on; it’s okay to disagree but not to shame, blame, or attack oneself or others; practice self-focus; practice both/and thinking; be aware of intent and impact; take total responsibility for one’s own learning; maintain confidentiality; messy is okay; say ouch. Good examples flesh these out and Kondrath invites readers to engage them as spiritual practice, not unlike Ignatius’s examen. After all, multiculturalism is a process of seeing, understanding, and appreciating differences toward transformation (xvii). Chapter Two examines power and difference (with an eye to racism in the United States) through helpful theoretical constructs and exercises for the reader to enter into personal experiences within both nontarget and target groups. Implicit here is the assumption that each of us has experienced both sides of perceived-imposed difference. The myth of the melting pot is addressed along with examples of *old-fashioned* and *modern* racism. Kondrath offers five types of modern racist behavior exhibited by both nontarget and target groups. For the former, these behaviors include dysfunctional rescuing, blaming the victim, avoidance of contact, denial of cultural differences, and denying or misunderstanding the political, social, economic, historical, and psychological significance of differences (51-55). For target groups conditioned by the system to internalize oppression, these behaviors include system beating, blaming the system, reactive avoidance of contact, denial of cultural heritage, and misunderstanding or minimization of the

political, social, economic, historical, and psychological significance of racial or other types of oppression (55-61). Readers are empowered to reflect upon their own behavior in the dance of oppression and to learn from Kondrath's reflective objectivity from decades of engagement.

The analysis of imagination in transformation is less persuasive, as is his synthesis in the concluding chapter. Transactional analysis, especially its construct of the Natural Child ego-state, informs the approach to imagination, which is then logically developed further in communal settings with appreciative inquiry. For a pathway into difference pregnant with potential and feeling—rooted in *desire* instead of *obligation* or *duty* as it is encouraged to be—imagination is here clothed with a starched business suit and an even heavier briefcase to carry. The final chapter moves the reader into synthesis mode, but the categories and timeline exercises pull the reader back into self vs. community analysis, a directly-felt contrast with relationship as the primary theoretical category. The focus is the management of disequilibrium, but the resources brought to bear upon these two areas contrast with the work's strongest contributions.

Even so, *God's Tapestry* is a must-read for pastoral leaders. Theological educators will harvest much from its practical guidance, especially in areas of racial and gender equity lived out in observable, institutional behaviors. Congregations will be challenged with the fruits of emotional literacy and affective competence on offer. Not surprisingly, Kondrath is at his best speaking from the heart: “As I have become less scared of differences and less frightened about what I do not know, I have realized how lush life can be when I notice, deeply understand, and appreciate the multitude of differences I encounter in people. The more I have been able to embrace people...the more I have become at home with myself and understood how inclusive God's love is” (xviii).

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## Book Review

### THE NEW MEASURES: A THEOLOGICAL HISTORY OF DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

BY: TED A. SMITH

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007

340 pp.

ISBN: 978-0521871310

Ted Smith has subtly emblazoned a much-needed conversation on the mortifying and redemptive aspects of American Evangelical history and practice. His volume, *The New Measures*, is a thorough evaluation on the history of American *democratic* preaching. Even more, it is a theological methodology that engages cultural studies, theatre performance, American religious history, ethics, and constructive theology to develop redemptive theological practices for homiletics in America.

Smith's opening question is provocative and appreciatively directed at several contemporary ecclesial movements in North America: "And what would be the shape of [Stanley] Hauerwas's vision, if his sense of the wiliness and persistence of God allowed him to hope that even a flag-waving mega-church might be made into the material condition of witness?" (22). Current ecclesial movements are notorious for defining the right or wrong ways to "do" or "be" church, and Smith moves beyond right and wrong toward an eschatological vision for engaging historical and contemporary ecclesial practices redemptively.

Smith develops the *new measures* as the standard practices of preaching that occurred through the daily life of the preachers and the people they served. Using nineteenth-century American history as his text, Smith borrows the metaphor, *new measures*, from the 1817 congressional commission that standardized weights and measures for American farmers and consumers. He then evaluates six *measures* of early nineteenth-century homiletical performance: effectiveness, novelty, decision, equality, celebrity, and illustration. These measures are detailed as *practices* that were dynamic and flexible patterns of daily life; in this way, Smith

argues that new practices or measures constantly emerge over time and space amidst recognition that current practices are failing to sustain daily patterns of living.

Smith's cultural study of nineteenth-century preaching seeks to uncover the history of each preaching practice in order to put to death (*mortify*) the destructive and manipulative forces, while resurrecting (*redemptoris*) the life-giving, gospel-forming forces of these very same measures. Smith refers to the hermeneutic as *eschatological memory* (42). Smith's methodology does not seek a middle way for evaluating history but an entirely new genre, "that refuses to resolve the argument, that manages to keep both poles in play" (the poles referring to death *or* life; ideology critique *or* idealist traditionalism).

Smith's volume is light hearted and narrative. Even more, however, his methodology moves beyond the disruptive ideology critique that so many execute in analyzing American Evangelical history. Smith's redemptive posture recognizes that God is at work even amidst historical practices that have too often appeared oppressive and manipulative. Smith seeks a critical yet redemptive engagement of historical practices in order to discover the possibility for freedom and justice.

Smith's volume is technical (a revised dissertation), yet his methodology would be interesting to borrow as professors and students of leadership. Though his work centers on homiletics, he is working the terrains of cultural analysis throughout, and ecclesial questions abound regarding eschatological evaluations of leadership theory. What would it mean to read twenty-first-century popular leadership theories within Smith's theological hermeneutic of death and redemption? How might new practices or new measures of faithful leadership be uncovered by engaging current church leaders and leadership structures, whether conservative, progressive, or otherwise? What would it mean to engage organizational studies on mega-church movements according to Smith's hermeneutic?

Smith's volume is substantial, yet one weak edge of the volume is his operative understanding of *democracy*. Smith limits democracy to American enlightenment notions of individualism, social changes in the religious disestablishment

of religion, and white middle-class standards (6). I found Smith's definition of democracy naïve of thicker and more historical democratic traditions. Overall, however, Smith's theological methodology is a new measure itself for engaging American religious practice, whether homiletics, leadership, or otherwise. Smith is asking important questions with cultural sensitivity and ecclesial practicality. In the end, the book is formative and timely for preachers and church leadership.

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**Book Review****ARTISANAL THEOLOGY: INTENTIONAL FORMATION  
IN RADICALLY COVENANTAL COMPANIONSHIP**

BY: LISA M. HESS

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009

128 pp. Paperback

ISBN: 978-1-55635-875-3

Theological education and professional ministry today exist amidst deep tensions—the highly programmatic, often rigid and competitive structures and expectations of traditional academic study, and the isolating and exhausting demands of congregational leadership, on the one hand, and the deeply relational, vulnerable practices of spiritual growth and wisdom at the heart of our faith traditions, on the other. *Artisanal Theology* engages these tensions and offers a constructive alternative focused on small-group companionship aimed at fostering lived theological wisdom in community.

Written primarily for an audience of teachers, scholars, and other leaders in theological education and ministerial formation, *Artisanal Theology* aptly names dynamics that leave many theological educators and students spiritually frustrated. Author Lisa M. Hess, a professor of practical theology and contextual ministries at United Theology Seminary in Ohio and an ordained Presbyterian (PCUSA) minister, describes her intent as follows: “*Artisanal Theology* has been written to name and redress the divergence between the instigating relational formation of leaders in covenantal companionship and the necessarily programmatic education offered by institutionally- or traditionally-defined theological education” (xv).

At the heart of these tensions is a superficial view of “community” in our culture that fails to incorporate diverse others. Hess writes, “Few religious leaders I know are able, amidst the overwhelming demands of congregational ministry today, to relish their own families or foster a delight that empowers companionship of the stranger, the lost, the poor. Community has become ‘social enclave,’ with little

awareness about the yearnings of ‘the other’” (3). Drawing from Miroslav Volf, she suggests that genuinely covenantal relationships within many faith communities have been replaced with mere contractual relationships.

Yet our hunger to know God, ourselves, and one another deeply only grows stronger. Hess proposes practices of small-group interaction as a solution, what she calls “radically covenantal companionship.” It is in such spaces of mutual sharing, discernment, storytelling, and gentle confrontation that spiritual wisdom emerges in and among us.

Two specific practices inform her proposal for those small groups (both helpfully detailed in appendices). The first is a process of writing and sharing spiritual autobiographies: “facing the entirety of one’s personal story within an intentional, listening community offers a daring but genuinely theological path to authentic voice, faithful witness, fearless service, and perfected wisdom” (47). The second is the use of ministerial case studies brought by participants as catalysts for learning and discussion.

For Hess, the goal is gaining wisdom, not merely information or knowledge. Informed by feminist theology, the book builds upon and contributes to the recent stream of literature on practices, practical wisdom, and spiritual formation. While affirming the value of traditional theological education, she sees the practices of covenantal communities as a necessary corrective and supplement.

The term *artisanal* in the title derives from the author’s experience as a bread-baker, in which traditional methods (“yet reasonably modernized”) are used to make bread in one’s own kitchen or small bakery. This image becomes a central metaphor for doing theology: “*Artisanal theology* describes an articulate and traditionally-rooted faith perspective that is resourced, kneaded, stretched, even punched down and risen again within covenanted companionships sustained in contexts of church, denomination or tradition, and schools” (14).

Hess offers her own “artisanal loaf” in the final chapter—a brief, autobiographical, constructive theology rooted in her personal story. The explicit disclosure of Hess’s own theological perspectives is helpful, though it reveals one

of the book's limitations. Throughout most of the book, Hess tries very deliberately to be as theologically inclusive as possible, affirming various world religions and calling God "One (with many names)." Her impulse—a generous one—is to make the practices she is suggesting as widely available to multiple traditions as she can by downplaying the Christian theological basis for her proposal.

Yet this approach paradoxically limits the power of her own argument. For instance, a relational view of the Trinity is at the heart of Hess's own theological perspective and no doubt shapes her imagination for covenant communities. Yet the connection between the Trinity and her proposal is never developed. This is unfortunate, because the resonances are striking. Similarly, the central theme of covenant is not explored very fully within the biblical tradition or Christian theology, even though it is a normative concept for the book. The author's Reformed heritage seems to be at work here, and a more explicit argument for the covenant theme drawing on those resources would have strengthened the book.

Additionally, it would have been helpful for the author to have explained in more detail how diverse voices in covenant community shaped her own constructive theology. Such disclosure would help the reader envision the fruitful interaction that her method envisions. Nonetheless, *Artisanal Theology* makes a rich contribution to the literature on theological education and holds promise for those seeking to live and lead others more fully into the vitality, wisdom, and reconciliation at the heart of our faith.

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## Book Review

### HOW TO GET ALONG WITH YOUR PASTOR

BY: GEORGE B. THOMPSON, JR.

Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006

127 pp.

ISBN: 978-0-8298-1713-3

This helpful book seeks to answer the question: how can churches and pastors avoid “things going wrong” between them? How can we help promote thriving, healthy, and fruitful ministry partnerships, rather than the stunted, frustrating, short-term, and damaging relationships that we see too often, and lament?

Written for lay leaders of local churches, it offers tools to help them understand, begin, nurture, and sustain the pastor-people relationship. Thompson is well aware that this relationship is crucial for the sake of the church. More, he understands that if the church is to live the gospel for the sake of the world, positive and healthy pastoral relationships are essential. Thompson’s book joins others such as Friedman’s *Generation to Generation* (1985), Frank’s *Soul of the Congregation* (2000), and Galindo’s *Hidden Lives of Congregations* (2004), as well as Thompson’s other work, in exploring how the less visible and less rational aspects of life together work decisively to shape our churches, particularly in regard to “creating partnerships for doing ministry.”

Thompson’s introduction is a helpful overview of how the book offers three lenses with which to see and address less-obvious church dynamics, all working from an anthropological “cultures” understanding of communities. Congregations in particular, as faith-centered communities, are “complex, culture-creating, and culture-bearing groups” (xiii). The cultures of a community often exert control in ways that are hidden and surprising. We can become more aware of the function and impact of cultures within communities—in long-established and unseen ways, over the congregation’s life cycle, and in relation to all the various streams that flow together in our communities. When we do,

we can help our pastoral leaders be less likely to (in pastor-speak) “step on a landmine.”

I like Thompson’s primary metaphor of the congregation as “swamp,” and I think it useful in illuminating the various levels at which culture exists in a community—the activities and “stuff” that are visible around the edges of the swamp, the explanatory and justifying sayings that float on the surface (where most of the explicit communal theology is found), and the hidden and deep beliefs and behaviors that only emerge from the mud when something comes along to disturb or contradict them—an unwitting new pastor, for example. My guess is that this metaphor will communicate well with laypersons and help them to think in more careful and complex ways about what rules their communities, and how they might broaden and share that insight.

I also like the way the book employs organizational lifecycle theory as a way of understanding “culture over time,” mixed with the understanding of a multilayered communal culture. Lifecycle theory sometimes seems simultaneously too obvious and too deterministic, but when Thompson lays out the impact of stages in organizational life on the various levels of the culture, I find it making more sense. In particular, I thought helpful his discussion in the second part of the book on the normalcy of church conflict and why it happens more at certain phases in the organizational lifecycle, based on its impact on the cultural swamp.

Thompson also makes clear that congregations are not monocultural entities. He helps people to understand the impact of living in the world, the way in which communal cultural coherence both diversifies and dissipates if not tended to, and how lay leaders might assist pastors in gaining “cultural capital” (or communal trust) as they seek to assist communities in the strenuous work of re-aligning the three levels of their life so necessary to vitality.

The second half of the book is a very specific and helpful application of the preceding discussion to four areas of partnership, always with a focus on lay leaders as sharing responsibility: facilitating pastoral entry and adoption into a community, assisting a pastor in gaining

power to lead, helping move the community through change and difference in peaceful and edifying ways, and learning to share leadership.

This was, to me, familiar ground. But Thompson is lifting up pivotal moments for building congregational health, and most of the time I found myself intrigued, learning, reading, and nodding in agreement; smiling at Thompson's skill in putting tricky, important concepts clearly for non-professionals; appreciative of the specific ways in which he draws out the usefulness of these tools for understanding important episodes and chapters of church life; and deeply grateful for his commitments to the strength and health of the all-important relationship between pastor and the whole church for the sake of the Gospel, and to the important role wise and caring lay leaders can play. It is provocative and filled with wisdom.

This is an excellent resource to place into the hands of committees charged with the task of searching for and calling a new pastor for their congregation. It would be a great study for a group of leaders in an interim between ministers, or as a new pastor begins (if led appropriately). It presents useful and important understandings of dynamics of congregational functioning as culture in an accessible fashion and always stresses its primary aim: if the church is to be faithful and effective in living the Gospel, pastor and people must work well together.

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