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# Preaching God's compassion: comforting those who suffer

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Despite some shortcomings, *Pulpits of the Past* is a remarkable record of Lutheranism in Saskatchewan. It is impressive for its sheer scope and attention to detail, and it serves as a witness to the faith – and foibles – of a courageous pioneering society. I recommend it to anyone who wishes to gain deeper understanding of the church in western Canada.

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### **Preaching God's Compassion**

Leroy H. Aden and Robert G. Hughes  
Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002  
176 pages, \$20.26 Softcover

Preachers preparing sermons for moments of pastoral import will find in the pages of this book helpful guides for the journey. Why do I say “guides”? Guides are needed to take us beyond the beaten path to venture something new: a sermon that speaks to needs that arise out of sync with the calendars we normally live by. Aden and Hughes help us attend to matters we all know: even in the great fifty days of Easter, people can experience profound loss or grief; even in Christmas (perhaps especially so), people fail; even on sunny September Tuesdays of “ordinary time”, extraordinary death and terror can hem our hearers about with fear. The authors help us to speak in such moments when a departure from the prescribed calendars may just be called for. They are not the norm. Yet, as pastors know all too well, they are the interruptions we call “ministry.”

What makes these two guides so interesting is their differing specialties. Hughes is a homiletician and an able preacher. Aden taught pastoral theology with him at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. By combining their skills, they multiply the benefits to their readers. Too often, theological disciplines talk past each other as if the pastor who offered care on Monday to Saturday was almost a different person from the one who preached on Sunday. By showing

what pastoral preaching can be, Aden and Hughes help all of us to integrate our calling. Initially, they do so by focusing on three primary questions that show up in moments that call forth pastoral preaching: *Oh God, Why?*; *God, what did I do to deserve this?*; and *Oh, God, where are you?* Initially, Aden and Hughes bring a Lutheran understanding of the gospel and Luther's theology of the cross to bear on these issues. The bulk of the book, however, is dedicated to seeing how these questions and theological resources relate to the existential situations that call forth pastoral preaching in the first place: loss, illness, personal violence, fear, and failure. Interspersed throughout are personal reflections and sermons that will help you do some of the same integration.

Having noted the value of their project, however, I also need to point out its limitations. Too often the kinds of situations that Aden and Hughes set out are so therapeutically described, they can only be dealt with homiletically with the most indirect means. To be fair, such an approach reflects a healthy division of labour. Both Aden and Hughes take pains to point out that the pulpit is not the therapist's couch. What I would have liked, however, is a more frank admission of what *preaching* actually is.

Preaching is a word to congregations. Perhaps the way to proceed, then, is to talk about how such pastoral situations impact people not just in existential, therapeutic aloneness, but how they impact the fabric of congregational life. Our preaching is pastoral not just because we deal one-one-one with individual sheep, but because we have been entrusted with the care of a flock. This, in fact, is what makes the chapters on fear and failure so valuable homiletically. They actually speak to pastoral issues that arise not just out of personal crises, but of shared realities of living in fear *in shared times of terror* and dealing with failure in a culture of success. In fact, it is precisely this common graced ministry of Word and Sacrament that lends meaning to moments of pastoral import. Preaching is never just a pale imitation of the "real relationship" of one-on-one pastoral care. Were it not for Word and Table, there would be no such pastoral relationship in the first place.

Despite this critique, however, I recommend the book highly. Preachers who read it will learn how to add greater depth to their preaching. Pastors who are charged for caring for others in unique times of need will discover new venues for their work. Aden and

Hughes are to be commended for helping us all be means by which God's grace – better, God's compassion – becomes real at any time.

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### **Spiritual Care and Therapy: Integrative Perspectives**

Peter VanKatwyk

Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2003

224 pages, \$32.95 Softcover

In *Spiritual Care and Therapy: Integrative Perspectives*, Peter VanKatwyk brings together, in a very personal way, 25 years of experience in teaching, supervising and research in the field of pastoral care and counselling. However, much more than just a summary of his life work and insight, this volume invites the reader to explore the relationships between “care”, “spirituality” and “therapy.”

In the introduction, VanKatwyk suggests that there are two good reasons to move beyond the term “pastoral care.” First, we live in an increasingly pluralistic world where the Judeo-Christian image of shepherding is less meaningful. Second, the concepts of “soul” or “spirit” are being used more and more in the field of counseling and psychotherapy. With this as a starting point, the first section of the book looks at spirituality and care from a variety of perspectives. In the first chapter, VanKatwyk points out that the concept of connectedness is the key link between spirituality and caring. How we care reflects how we feel connected to one another, and spirituality is often defined as our sense of being connected to all life. Thus spiritual care is broader in scope than pastoral care. “Spiritual care embraces multiple spiritualities and bridges diverse theological worlds.” (18)

The second section of the book invites the reader to consider “the essentials of caring” as being clustered around the themes, “what to know,” “what to say,” and “what to be.” Here we are taken on a creative tour of therapeutic models, communication models and the use-of-self in the therapeutic relationship. Like a play with three storylines coming together at the end, VanKatwyk brings these three