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# A soul under siege: surviving clergy depression

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## A Soul Under Siege: Surviving Clergy Depression

C. Welton Gaddy

Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991

174 pages

While taking a quarter of Supervised Pastoral Education, I remember my supervisor saying: “Last night I read this article on how lonely chaplaincy is. And you know with practically every word, I was saying, ‘Why that’s me. I can see myself there.’ ”

As I read Gaddy’s *A Soul Under Siege* similar feelings prevailed with me. Not that I have “stopped the show”, as did this Baptist minister, entered a well-organized psychiatric hospital and received psychiatric care there. But that much of what he says about the realities of being a minister, about the strains and struggles of being an on-going care-giver, of living with a pastoral identity, of what he has personally felt, thought, feared and hoped amidst active ministry—all this begins to feel “captivatingly true”.

Of course, such identification constitutes a primary purpose for this book. Gaddy says: “Here is one person’s experience, my experience, offered with the desire that a candid retelling of it can help those who have experienced, are confronting, or will face a bottoming-out moment in their lives to so deal with their situation that they will turn it around, thus transforming it into a time of bottoming-up” (28).

Throughout this confessional story the author affirms the wisdom in recognizing that “ministers are people who do ministry. Most essential in that observation is the recognition that ministers are people, persons” (34). In addition to denying that “I was human”, Gaddy states, “for several years I barely acknowledged the presence of depression in my life, much less attempted to deal with it... ignoring it when I could and never admitting it to anyone else” (63).

However, slowly but surely, as family and friends saw more sharply what was going on than did Gaddy himself, there emerged within him the candid admission that something wasn’t right. “In my experience, the absence of fulfilment personally, far more than the presence of a full schedule of ministries, was the essential factor in a submission to stress and the development of depression” (69). Guilt and anger and grief—how powerful these become! A sense of frustration, futility and loss accompany and result from these feelings of limited and/or no fulfilment to the point that self-esteem dissipates and self-confidence all but disappears. Gaddy takes the reader engagingly and reflectively into and through his journey into depression and his movement towards wellness.

Revealingly, Gaddy identifies in the hospital “a more honest community than he had ever known in churches” (9). “Tolerance was as much a given as acceptance in this hospital unit” (111). The author reflects, “Imagine the positive difference that could be made in people’s lives if they were encouraged to be themselves, spared acceptance based on performance, and

extended tolerance in the face of even radical uniqueness. Stress-related difficulties could be reduced significantly, the general level of people's self-esteem raised appreciatively, and relaxation experienced regularly" (112). "I can honestly say that I saw signs of health and principles of behavior among the people behind that locked door which, if embraced by people on the other side, could contribute to the enhancement of life in an open society" (125).

Although Gaddy did not enter the ordained ministry wishing to "serve as the Messiah", he notes significantly that "my actions revealed a 'messianic mind-set'" (129). "Who but the Messiah sees herself as indispensable in every ministry of the church, imagines that he never requires relaxation and rest, insists on being present at every meeting within a fellowship, determines to give leadership in all realms of an institution's life, always wants another challenge, refuses to acknowledge limitations, gives no thought to the needs of herself? Actually, no one, not even the Messiah" (130). Ironically, "efforts to do more and more are met with abilities to do less and less" (131). Gaddy's word of wisdom: Take seriously what is recorded in Exodus 18:17-18 and in Mark 9:24!

Some of the practical advice Gaddy offers to churches is: Be realistic in your expectations of ministers; remember that perfect pastors are as difficult to find as perfect parishioners; insist that your pastor participate in regularly scheduled experiences of continuing education and relaxation; practice love and grace (162-164). His counsel to ministers, which he inclusively calls "advice to adults" is: Trust God alone; remember that deception destroys more than it preserves; do not ever say "never"; be a friend; play; take care of yourself and your family; keep in touch with reality; ask for help (150-159).

In a day when many are the ministers who are feeling stressed, lonely and/or depressed, "the confessions" of C. Welton Gaddy have much to offer. I have a hunch that we all can find ourselves described somewhere on these pages, and in that recognition there may be some wisdom here for meaningful living and helpful service.

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### **God Calls: Man Chooses. A Study of Women in Ministry**

Grace M. Anderson and Juanne Nancarrow Clarke  
Burlington, ON: Trinity Press, 1990  
167 pages

As the title indicates this book is a study of women in ministry based on a questionnaire sent to 1985 female graduates of Eastern Canadian seminaries and other institutions providing training for full-time ministry in the