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Martha Ellen Stortz

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Pastoral Responses to Sexual Issues

William V. Arnold

Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993

xiv + 144 pp. \$12.99 U.S.

William V. Arnold is convinced that many of the issues that float through a pastor's study are sexual issues. Parishioners address these issues directly, indirectly, or not at all, depending on what they sense to be their pastor's level of comfort with them. Thus, Arnold's first move in a book dealing with pastoral responses to sexual issues is to tackle the pastor's level of comfort with body, boundaries, and sexuality. He targets his book to "those who believe in or want to explore the importance of sexual issues in ministry and who have not yet done a great deal of work in it" (p. xii). That "work" begins with the pastor/reader. The first third of his book invites the reader to explore conditioned or enculturated responses to gender, family of origin, sexuality, and professional and personal boundaries. The pastor must be in touch with his/her own sexual issues, before offering counsel to another.

This initial section is impressive, because Arnold is here less interested in egregious violations of the pastor-parishioner relationship, than in how these are the accumulated effect of more subtle statements of distance and limitation. He demands that we attend to what many pastors take for granted: space, where one meets and how the space is arranged; time, how much and how contained; touch, how it is offered and received; and feelings, attraction and inclinations. Each holds the potential for manipulation or abuse by either party, but each, used justly, is an important ingredient in an appropriate pastoral encounter. Taken together, they are important emphases in a growing field of clergy sexual abuse literature that focuses on worst-case scenarios and forgets to document how these are the inevitable outcome of a series of seemingly ordinary moves.

Only when Arnold has invited the pastor to a greater awareness of his/her own sense of body, boundaries, and sexuality does he move to a discussion of some of the sexual issues pastors confront: sexual dysfunction in marriage, extramarital affairs, sexual discrimination and abuse, adolescent sexuality, and homosexuality. Case studies illumine each of these situations, inviting the reader to move from considering them coldly as "issues" to recalling them as the embodied stories of parishioners. To each of these issues Arnold brings theological, psychological, and physiological perspectives.

Because sexuality itself is multidimensional, sexual issues in ministry demand a multidimensional address. Most impressive is Arnold's attention to the theological dimensions of these questions, as he explores understandings of sin and grace refracted through the lives of the people in his case studies. It is a strong argument for the limited place and certain power of pastoral counselors, alongside clinical psychologists—to whom pastors ought always refer parishioners in need of more specialized assistance.

Arnold integrates the first section on pastoral awareness into his discussion of specific issues by including a section on the appropriate pastoral response to the situations described. Here he refers to the earlier discussion of boundaries and attitudes, using them as a resource for counseling. In the mine-filled terrain of human sexuality, where church social statements fear to tread, this book offers sage advice to practitioners in ministry—and its first section ought to be a required exercise for pastors and their mentors.

Martha Ellen Stortz
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
Berkeley, California

Eyes Wide Open, Spiritual Resources for Healing from Childhood Sexual Abuse

Louise Cummings
Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1994
124 pp. \$19.95

I must admit that I approached this book with a great deal of caution! So many “spiritual” resources that relate to issues around sexual abuse are heavy on forgiveness and light on reality. I wondered if this book could be any different. The need for good material for sexual abuse survivors made reading this book worth a try!

Beginning with the introduction one can see that this is going to be an honest look at a survivor’s journey. At the outset, the author points out to the reader that the chapters are not numbered because there is no “correct” order to the way one would experience them. This underscores the importance of understanding the path a survivor needs to travel in a world that struggles to make everything appear to be linear.

The outline of the book is brilliant in its simplicity. Each chapter begins with a candid description of the author’s abuse experience. Cummings does not dwell as much on the historical description of her abuse as on the impact that it had and continues to have on her.

This description is immediately followed by the question—“Where is God?” In this part, the author draws on her rich knowledge of Old and New Testament passages that have supported her in her healing. She offers the reader those passages that gave her support as she faced each new feeling and experience.

Finally, each chapter ends with the question—“Where is my community of faith?” This is a rich lesson to any of us about the value of cultivating a deep relationship with our faith community. It speaks of the obvious support the author finds in her community. Also, it points out the importance to the community that lives through a difficult experience in concert with