

Ronald J. Allen, John S. McClure, and O. Wesley Allen Jr., eds. *Under the Oak Tree: The Church as Community of Conversation in a Conflicted and Pluralistic World*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, Wipf & Stock; 2013. 264 pages. \$29.

The editors and authors of this volume have given a gift to the Church through this collection of reflections on what it means to invite, listen to, and contribute to the process of conversation both within and outside of the congregational context. The title refers to the story from Genesis 18:1-15 where Sarah and Abraham encounter three visitors as they sojourn at the oaks of Mamre. Because of their intentional hospitality toward the strangers (even in the midst of their incredulity at the announcement of Sarah's impending pregnancy), they open themselves to a divine conversation that changes them and, consequently, the community around them. It is this extended metaphor that forms the basis of the premise of the book; that is, a conversational approach to theology, ecclesiology, ministry, and life in Christian community "seeks to interpret God, the world, and self through reciprocal give-and-take, speaking and listening, with the full range of others in and beyond the church" (xiv).

Part One consists of three chapters that provide the foundation for the conversational model in terms of how we understand the church, the minister, and God. The authors explore give-and-take between the Bible, tradition, culture, technology and social media, minoritized individuals and communities, and interfaith partners from the perspective of the church's as well as the minister's self-understanding. And all of these voices are both valued and critically engaged by the Triune God's welcoming and transforming presence. Divine presence provides the assurance that even in the midst of difficult conversations and serious disagreements, we may discover shared values and construct bridges of partnership. As John McClure reminds us, "Truth is always a matter of seeking *new* ground, rather than insisting on *my* ground" (36).

Part Two, "The Tasks of Ministry," applies the conversational approach to eight different aspects of ministry: preaching, worship, Christian education, evangelism, pastoral care, mission and ecumenism, social witness, and interfaith relationships. The format of each chapter follows a shared pattern. Each begins with a brief historical sketch of how theologians and church scholars have understood this particular area of ministry through doctrine. This format follows up with a snapshot of the current conception and practice within the ministry area. The author then explores what it means to apply the "conversation" model to this area of ministry, and its implications for reconceiving how we might be church in and among the world. They also suggest practical applications, allowing the reader to move from theory to ideas for praxis. A section containing cautions and possible critiques of this conversational approach follows, helping the reader troubleshoot and think through the inherent obstacles that one may encounter. Each chapter concludes with suggestions for further reading and questions for discussion.

These questions make the book an obvious choice for clergy groups looking for a volume to engage for study and continuing education. As well, seminary professors and their students will find this a useful book for heuristically opening a way to think about and discuss ministry within many different spheres. It would be especially well suited for students in the latter stages of seminary training who are looking to experiment with new approaches to ministry in internship and field education settings.

But, the reflections of this book should not be reserved only for pastoral professionals in academic settings. Groups of lay leaders and thoughtful study groups looking to expand their repertoire for engaging the culture, society, and interfaith context around them would be well served by this book. As a pastor, I could see myself using the chapters and discussion questions

of this book for a 12-week study with parishioners, or a 12-month series of discussions with the church's governing board. While some chapters are a bit heavy on the academic side, the majority of the writing is accessible for lay readers. And the insights gained from engaging the topics from the conversational perspective would be well worth the time and effort to engage the content.

As a pastor and social justice activist with particular interest in the role of the preacher and faith community in the public square, I see this book as making an important contribution to the ongoing dialogue about what it means to reclaim the public dimension of our faith and our role in society. While the church and the pastoral leader's contribution to the public conversation is certainly provisional and must be submitted with humility and openness to be transformed even as we seek Christ's transformation, the need for our voices is without doubt. This book is exactly what is needed for a Church in the midst of re-forming itself to address an age and planet in desperate need of deliberative dialogue about how we shall live, provide for "the least of these," and serve God through worship, invitation, service, and deep theological and spiritual reflection. The cool shade of the oak tree awaits us.

Leah D. Schade