

Cody J. Sanders and Angela Yarber. *Microaggressions in Ministry: Confronting the Hidden Violence of Everyday Church*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015. 172 pages. \$20.

One of the things I know as a clergyperson and pastor is that aggressive behavior occurs in the church often. I teach my seminary students that the best thing about working in the church is the people. But the worst thing about working in the church is also the people. In this book, the authors look at some of the “microaggressions” that occur in the church when people do not live up to their best selves when dealing with one another. Blatant acts of bigotry, oppression, and discrimination are often condemned, but small acts continue in the church, often unabated and unchallenged.

According to Sanders and Yarber,

Underhanded slights that assault the souls of oppressed groups still rage from the pulpit, the pew, the Sunday school class, the hymnal, the seminary curriculum, the ordination process, and in pastoral counseling. These everyday slights, insults, and invalidations are called microaggressions, and they accost the spirits of women, persons of color, and LGBTQs on a regular basis in our churches, seminaries, and denominations (2).

This helpful description of microaggression sets up the book well for the reader. The authors divide the book into three sections. The first part, Chapters 1 and 2, delves more fully into the reality of and definition of microaggressions. The second section, Chapters 3, 4 and 5, explores the persons and groups that are typically targets of these occurrences, especially around race, gender, and sexuality and gender expression. The final part of the book, Chapters 6, 7 and 8, looks at the specific ways that microaggressions take place in elements of ministry: “preaching and education, worship and spirituality, and care and counseling” (6).

One of the sections that I found especially intriguing was the authors’ explanation of the reasons why perpetrators exhibit microaggressions. These include: being unaware, acting unintentionally, and preserving one’s self-image (15–18). They couple these reasons with the responses of targets of these microaggressions: ambiguity about what happened, questioning one’s action as a result of these instances, and assessing the impact of these behaviors (18–22). Looking at both sides of each issue was an excellent choice.

The second section of the book (Chapters 3–5) specifically examines the issues related to microaggressions around race, gender, and sexual orientation and gender expression. The use of case studies by the authors is helpful in relating the ways microaggressions occur in ministry. These real world scenarios are both aggravating and inspiring. I can hear the pain in the experiences of folks who have been the victims of these microaggressions, but I also sense a desire on the part of the authors to teach their readers how to react more intentionally and with a deeper passion of justice. Understanding the harm that microaggressions inflict on persons who are marginalized is important. But an interesting thing to note about this book is that the authors reflect on the ways that perpetrators are also harmed by their own behavior (55). “In order to remain in good conscience, perpetrators must engage in a great deal of denial and live with a constructed false reality that ultimately diminishes their ability to understand the experience of marginalized groups” (55). This kind of balance is intriguing and adds a deeper level of authenticity to the book.

Addressing white privilege, pastoral authority and race, and raising/supporting minority communities for resistance and resiliency are important to the work of avoiding microaggressions in race (Chapter 3). The next chapter on gender microaggressions addresses

the issues that clergywomen and laywomen experience in ministry, the importance of the use of gender neutral language, and the ways male privilege impacts the church. The authors in this chapter, like the others, offer action steps to address microaggressions in gender roles in a four-pronged move. These include: individual, organizational, theological, and societal changes (75).

LGBTQ persons experience significant prejudice on a daily basis in many significantly painful ways. The microaggressions occurring in the church are another way they experience pain and violence due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. Some of the ways microaggressions occur include: heterosexist and transphobic language, “the endorsement of heteronormative or gender-normative culture and behaviors,” assuming a universal or normative LGBTQ experience, making the LGBTQ experience seem exotic or odd, the disapproval or assuming an abnormality of LGBTQ persons’ lives and experience, or denying heterosexism or transphobia (85–89).

The final section of this book looks specifically at the ways microaggressions occur in the midst of ministry. Authors Sanders and Yarber examine the microaggressions that occur in the midst of proclaiming the word, choosing music and liturgy, crafting prayers, setting up liturgical space, and in pastoral care and counseling. The authors provide helpful insights that can bring congregations, ministry partners, and the congregants into a deeper and more intentional relationship with an astute awareness to avoid and/or diminish the microaggressions that happen all around.

The organization of the book is well thought-out and helps move the reader forward in an efficient and effective manner. The authors provide sufficient evidence and examples for the reader to gain insights into the intentional and unintentional behavior of members of their ministry communities that can cause harm both to others and to themselves. I believe that this book would be helpful for both laity and clergy in any size congregation or ministry and I recommend it wholeheartedly.

Karyn L. Wiseman, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA