

Angela H. Reed, Richard R. Osmer, and Marcus G. Smucker. *Spiritual Companionship: A Guide to Protestant Theology and Practice*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015.

In their introduction to *Spiritual Companionship*, Reed, Osmer, and Smucker correctly note that while many fine books have been written about spiritual guidance and spiritual direction, most of them rely on Catholic resources and theology. The central contribution of this volume is to make a case for spiritual guidance with a Protestant “coloration.” This starting point affects not only their method of argumentation but also the practices and relationships they group under the rubric of spiritual companionship.

The book’s seven chapters are all organized in the same way, and each includes a section on cultural context, the contributions of Scripture, resources from the Protestant tradition, ways to imagine spiritual companionship, case studies or congregational examples, and specific, concrete practices for deepening spiritual community.

Chapter one suggests presence as a key way to understand spiritual companionship, while chapter two makes a case that spiritual companionship is central to congregational vitality. In chapter three the authors explore one-to-one spiritual direction or guidance, and in chapter four how the rubric of spiritual companionship might profitably adjust the ways small groups organize and conduct themselves.

Chapter five focuses on discerning God’s presence in daily life, chapter six combines life course theory with the notion of Scripture as a metanarrative to suggest how people might claim their own story and put it into conversation with the Bible, and chapter seven explores the need for leaders, especially, to have spiritual companions for their own growth and health as well as for the good of their ministries.

What I found most compelling was the strong case the authors made for spiritual companionship as central to congregational life, and the specific and varied examples they provided of ways this companionship could take form: in spiritual friendships, spiritual direction, pastoral care relationships, various kinds of already established small groups and support groups, and groups formed explicitly to encourage and deepen spiritual formation. I have been thinking about Christian formation in the congregation for a number of years as both a practitioner and a scholar; nonetheless, this book

expanded my imagination for ways spiritual companionship could both flow with and expand congregational life.

My chief complaint concerns a missed opportunity in the final chapter. The authors could have made a stronger case for congregational leaders to have spiritual companions themselves, on two counts.

The first is that pastoral leaders must practice what they preach. A congregation that is going to strengthen its ministry of spiritual companionship needs leaders who are on board not only intellectually but experientially. The second has to do with the authors' treatment of the pastor's personal covenant (168). They suggest discussing it with family members, church/ministry staff, and church members. This is a step in the right direction. Yet the temptation for pastors to fudge their answers to the authors' excellent questions (What is your prayer life like? Do you practice Sabbath-keeping? How are you attending to your relationships in ministry?) may be most lively precisely when they must be most truthful. The process the authors recommend doesn't sufficiently attend to the self-deception to which virtue-driven organizations and leaders are especially prone.<sup>1</sup> Blind spots are called "blind" spots for a reason. This is true for everyone, but the consequences of blind spots are more significant for those who lead, and thus the need for strong processes to tend to spiritual health is even more imperative for them than for "ordinary" congregational members. Every minister should have either a peer group or a spiritual director, and perhaps both, and I wish the authors had said as much.

Overall, however, I highly recommend this volume. As the testimonials on the back cover note, it could serve as a guidebook for pastors and lay leaders, Christian formation committees, or Sunday school classes, and could help congregations develop or strengthen ministries of spiritual companionship. It should become required reading in Protestant spiritual guidance training programs and other seminary classes that focus on Christian formation in the congregation.

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<sup>1</sup> See Maureen O'Hara and Aftab Omer's chapter in Arthur C. Bohart, Barbara S. Held, Edward Mendelowitz, and Kirk J. Schneider, *Humanity's Dark Side: Evil, Destructive Experience, and Psychotherapy* (Washington, DC: The American Psychological Association, 2013).