

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

There's a Woman in the Pulpit: Christian Clergywomen Share Their Hard Days, Holy Moments and the Healing Power of Humor

Edited by Rev. Martha Spong

A note for discussion leaders:

Because this book might be used either for a multi-session study group or a one-time discussion, this reading guide includes questions for each chapter and more general questions for a broader look at the book.

General Discussion Questions

- What chapter resonated with you most and why?
- What chapter felt most foreign to your experience?
- Which pastor who you met in these pages would you like to have as a leader in your own faith community?
- Which story brought tears to your eyes? Did any cause you to laugh out loud?
- How have you seen women's roles change in the church in your lifetime?
- Have you ever had the sense that God sometimes calls us to a particular way of living? How has that manifested in your life?

Fierce and Fabulous for Jesus

Rev. Ruth Everhart's mother and daughters represent very different perspectives on the place of women in the church. How have things changed for women in your church or denomination since your childhood?

Rev. Patricia J. Raube is one of many clergywomen in the book to leave a tradition where she could not be ordained to ministry. Sometimes the limitations we experience are more subtle. Have you faced a similar struggle? How did you respond?

Rev. Robin Craig discovered that one of the most important skills she needed for ministry was leadership. What kind of leadership styles make you want to follow? Engage? Walk away?

Rev. Dr. Teri McDowell Ott began wearing a clerical collar to help others recognize her pastoral role. What about your clothing identifies you, whether a badge of office, diaper bag or some other kind of symbol?

As she sits at her desk, Rev. Julia Seymour imagines several figures from the Bible and considers both the roles they have in our faith's stories and the different roles she plays in life. Is there a Bible character you identify with? Do any inspire or fascinate you? Why? What roles do they play?

Rev. Hilary Campbell explains that what one person hears in a sermon and finds unfaithful or even heretical may comfort another person who has similar questions. Have you experienced this as a preacher or as a congregation member? What happened? Do you think experience was for the better or for the worse?

Rev. Rachel G. Hackenberg got some strongly worded advice about wardrobe while still in seminary, but she worked out her own way of dressing professionally with space for personal flair. Do you think there should be a dress code for pastors? Why or why not? Is there a double standard for how clergywomen are expected to dress? Do any of these double standards for women appear in your own life?

Rev. Katie Mulligan received multiple challenges from people who find her orientation incompatible with a Christian identity, yet she finds a reason to love them and their churches. In the life of the church, who have you found hard to love? What are your resources—personal, spiritual or biblical—for loving difficult or disagreeable people?

Rev. Amy Fetterman had a particular hope for the congregation she left. Whether as a pastor or church member, how have you handled the situation when a pastor moves on to another ministry? If you had to leave a community you love, what would you hope to leave as your legacy?

Rev. Kathryn Z. Johnston uses humor to both deal with and describe some challenges to her authority as senior pastor of a large congregation. Have you ever experienced resistance while in a leadership role because of who or what you are? How did you handle it? Has humor ever helped you keep your balance in times of struggle?

Rev. Sally-Lodge Teel writes poignantly of the damage Hurricane Katrina did, not only to the physical landscape around her but also to her interior landscape. She did not expect a community she had just started to build would surround her with love. Who would you count on for help in a time of loss? When have you been surprised by an offer of help? What happened? Do you think an online community can foster real relationships?

A Taste of Heaven and a Splash of Glory

Suzy Garrison Meyer did her best to warm the communion juice before the moment came to pour it from the pitcher, but ultimately she had to trust the Spirit. Can you recall a time you had to let go and trust God? What happened?

Rev. Joanna Harader gives us some insights into the practical aspects of baptism by immersion. What other church mysteries have puzzled you? How have you made sense of these mysteries? What solutions have surprised you?

Rev. Julie Woods feels the constraints of a schedule for offering communion, but points out that there are many other times we have that experience of intimate community. Share a time when the company of others felt sacramental without the actual bread and cup.

Rev. Martha Spong reminds us that at the time of baptism the congregation promises to love and support the child or adult being named as a member of God's family. How has a congregation held you? Or, share a time when you needed holding and didn't receive it. Did it affect how you felt towards your congregation?

Rev. Catherine MacDonald's congregation marked World Communion Sunday by baking a variety of breads to share the next day. In your own church, would this be seen as too radical? Imaginative? Does your congregation do similar activities together? What kind of changes would take your congregation outside its "communion safety zone"?

Rev. Karla Miller offers many images of the communion table. Which did you find most engaging? "We come because our lives are a wreck," she writes. Have you found God's table to be a place of healing? Why or why not?

Rev. Jennifer Burns Lewis was surprised to learn her mother had never been baptized despite her many years of church attendance. What unexpected things have you learned about the beliefs and practices of your elders?

Rev. Julia Seymour claims with joy her intention to break the rules about who may receive the bread and cup in her denomination. Have you ever broken a rule to serve a greater good? What did you do? Do you believe that that breaking a rule under such circumstances is permissible?

Rev. Jemma Allen shared the story of the baby in China with the RevGals group online, and members around the world prayed for his family, eagerly awaiting updates on his health and progress. Do you think prayer helps even at a distance? Why or why not?

Rev. Monica Thompson Smith works as a supply pastor, so she contends with the logistics of the unknown on a regular basis. If a pastor came to visit at your church, what important information would you want to give her or him first? What would a visiting worshiper need to know in order to feel at home?

Rev. Bromleigh McCleneghan had to admit that in her form of Christianity there are surprisingly few things a faithful person is required to do. What do you consider an essential element of your religious practice? Has this element changed over the years?

Rev. Martha Spong's daughter created a family tradition of deeming certain events the "worst _____ ever," and the last-minute communion service on the ship certainly had the potential to qualify. Can you think of a holiday or special event that seemed sure to go wrong but turned out to be wonderful? What happened?

Ashes to Angels

Rev. Deborah Lewis makes a point of trying to establish contact with each person she marks with the ashes, feeling the weight of God's love for each person. Do you observe Ash Wednesday in your own tradition? If so, do you find the act of giving or receiving ashes to be a loving one? Why or why not?

Rev. Joanna Harader found herself without a Bible at a hospital bedside and told the story of the women who went to Jesus's tomb from memory instead of reading it. What Bible story could you retell from memory? Why has it become one you can't forget? Is there a story you would like to learn more deeply? What draws you to these stories?

Rev. Liz Crumlsh contrasts the peaceful death of an elderly woman with the tragic and perhaps questionable circumstances of a child's death. Both feel like affirmations of her call to accompany people as a pastor. Have you ever felt a similar assurance about your life's calling, particularly in the midst of a difficult time? What form did it take, and how did it make you feel?

Rev. Elizabeth Evans Hagan brings us into the midst of an emotional funeral for an infant further complicated by the fact she has also lost a baby of her own. She goes off her script for the service by singing "Amazing Grace," offering its words as a comfort not only to the family but also for her own grief over pregnancy loss. Is there a hymn or prayer that comforts you? What is it? What about that hymn or prayer holds special meaning for you?

Rev. Martha Spong sat beside a deathbed and remembered specifics of her parishioner's life from stories he had told her over several years. What would you want people to recall as you lay dying?

Rev. Anna Scherer did not expect to conduct a funeral service, but had gone to church simply to open up for another pastor to be in charge. She felt grateful to have the Book of Common Prayer as a resource that works in many different circumstances. What faith resource helps you in life's unexpected moments?

Rev. Karla Miller's prayer reminds us that we are always in the process of letting go of things and dying, but that we are also always in the process of being resurrected to new life. What might you allow to die in your life in order to permit something new to be born? What deaths and renewals have you already experienced?

Rev. Deb Vaughn, in her role as chaplain, admits that the loss of a child is not something that will somehow become "okay" or bearable. The mother of the dead boy is shocked by her honesty but also strengthened by it. Has someone ever given you the gift of a hard truth? Did you appreciate it in the moment, or did you need time to reflect? Have you ever given this gift to someone else? Do you think your honesty helped?

Rev. Julia Seymour describes two networks of online connections that overlap as part of her effort to get pastoral support for a friend whose baby had died at birth. What is your experience with online or long-distance relationships or communities? Have any angels come to you through them?

They Don't Teach That in Seminary

Rev. Diane M. Roth describes the unique view a pastor has of the gathered congregation. Some pastors say they never found their right place in church until they stepped into a pulpit or stood

behind a communion table. How do you find your “right place” in church? What parts of the church do you have a unique view of, literally or metaphorically?

Rev. Jan Edmiston faced what may sound like an unusual situation when she was a young pastor, but most pastors have had something similar happen at least once: a collision between legitimate pastoral needs and personal or family plans. What advice would you give a pastor in similar circumstances? Have you ever had a pastor choose your congregation over their own private life, or vice versa? How did it change your opinion of them? Your congregation’s?

Rev Jennifer Garrison Brownell names a familiar situation for many churches: there are so many copies of church keys floating around that a pastor never knows who might have the power to open the doors and walk in at any time. (One pastor only learned about a Girl Scout troop meeting in her building after changing the locks. Someone had given them a key once upon a time.) Have you ever been in a situation where you had to figure out who the “keyholders” in a group were? How did you figure it out? Did you ever feel like a “keyholder” yourself?

Rev. Sharon M. Temple admits she almost failed the Good Samaritan test when she saw three young women sitting on the church steps, despite her vivid memory of not receiving help from the church when she herself was stranded. When have you offered help to an unlikely other? What happened? When have you been on the receiving end of the Samaritan’s aid? How did it make you feel?

Gillian Hoyer describes the tension in our faith between promising a heavenly home and recognizing that there are many people in need of that home right here and right now. Do you or your church help people whose housing is insecure? If not, how could you start? Have you ever been in that position yourself? Did someone help you?

Rev. Rachel G. Hackenberg prays for help with the ordinary tasks of ministry, from tracking down the plunger to finding the punch bowl. What mysteries plague you in the life of faith? Who holds the answers in your church family?

Rev. Kerri Parker writes about trying to schedule her time and having to let her plans give way to the things that happen in an average day of ministry. She began to hear echoes of the story of the prodigal son and his family. Have you ever sensed a connection between a biblical story and your own? If not, try to think of one now. Which story is it? What part do you play?

Rev. Rosalind C. Hughes lived what sounds like a ministry nightmare: bedbugs in the church building. Whether we have bats in the belfry or the manse, or mice in the cellar or the cornfield next door, or skunks in the backyard or the board room, pastors may find themselves engaged in pest control. Yet even in that difficult moment, she made new connections. When has something that appeared to be a complete disaster brought meaningful relationships into your life? What happened? Did you see the positive effects instantly, or did it take some time?

Rev. Cheryl Harader resisted the idea that she should sit in the office a certain number of hours each week. Does your church have an expectation for how often the pastor will be in the office?

Does the congregation care about how that time is used? What other things might a pastor be doing outside her office walls that could enrich the life of the church?

Rev. Liz Crumlish admires the main character of a television show, *The Vicar of Dibley*, and her ability to laugh at herself. Crumlish never wants to take herself too seriously, believing we find God in the midst of both tears and uproarious laughter. When was the last time you laughed in a spiritual setting? How did it feel?

Rev. Denise Anderson had a long wait before she found a call to ministry and a service of ordination. For many women in ministry, a geographic tie to family obligations or a partner's career may limit possibilities. When have you lived through a long period of waiting before you could do something you felt called to do? How did you find the strength not to give up? Did the wait—or your eventual success—affect your faith? Why or why not?

Rev. Erin Counihan lived the mixed blessing of being a new pastor in a neighborhood experiencing crisis. She never took a class on what to do when protests and curfews arise in your own community. What do you think of her church's response? How has your church reacted to news events in the area?

It's Complicated

Rev. Michelle L. Torigan writes, "Some would say that I'm not qualified to lead a couple through pre-marital pastoral care sessions because I've never been married." Pre-marital counseling, for the clergy person, is a combination of short-term therapy and pastoral triage, answering the question, "Do I feel okay about assisting this particular couple in creating a legal and religious covenant?" Whether you are a pastor or a layperson, what do you think about an unmarried person offering counsel to a couple preparing to marry? Do you think their personal experience or their spiritual experience matters more? Why?

Rev. Robin Craig shares the tender, painful story of returning to seminary after her son's death by suicide. She knows from experience that preachers cannot always feel the hope they try to communicate to others, and although she resisted the Twenty-Third Psalm, somehow she made a sermon out of it. What helps you hold on to hope during dark or dry times? How does it help you?

Rev. Beth Birkholz and her husband met in seminary and have adjusted their vocational and family expectations throughout their marriage and ministries. That includes changing from a tab to a Roman collar to eliminate confusion about whose is whose. What compromises have you made to balance work and personal life?

Rev. Stacey Simpson Duke finds spiritual solace and renewal in making things by hand. She resists the urge or pressure to make things for charitable purposes, instead using this gift for the sake of creating rather than in service of usefulness. Do you have a similar activity in your life, one that makes you feel like a whole person, even if it does not directly serve anyone else? What is it? What do you enjoy about the activity? If not, what do you suspect this activity might be? What keeps you from practicing it?

Rev. Holly S. Morrison may not have the most typical life for a bi-vocational pastor, but she draws us into her universe with earthy good humor. What wisdom might a farmer bring to their church? (Bonus question: What's the strangest reason you've ever heard for being late to work?)

Rev. Julia Seymour paints a picture of the busy life of a pastor who is also a parent. The skin on top of her reheated coffee sounds familiar to those of us who multitask. Like a psalm, her prayer unfolds the stresses of life, asks God for aid, then resolves into a word of praise. What is the reheated coffee in your life—the thing you want and mean to get to, but are always distracted away from?

Rev. Teri Peterson offers a primer about being a vegetarian in the church, a life choice about which she is passionate and committed. She also recognizes that our personal food rules or restrictions might seem like a symptom of privilege to those who have no or few choices about what they get to eat. What other personal choices do we get to make every day that might seem like a symptom of privilege to those with no other option? How might we come to appreciate our ability to make these choices?

Rev. Patricia J. Raube recorded her coming out process on a blog where she used a pseudonym to protect her identity. Her online friends pressed her on the difference between privacy and shame, questioning if she was upholding an appropriate boundary or protecting her self-interest. Pastors often wonder how much information to reveal to their congregations. How much do people really need to know? When have you had to walk the line between sharing and hiding too much? How did you find your balance?

Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell, one half of a “clergy couple,” keeps her eyes open during prayers to be sure things are going well for her son, A. J., who has autism. Her congregation has learned to love him and offer their assistance. How does your church respond to children or adults with special needs? If your pastor has children, how do they fit into the life of the church?

Rev. Katherine Willis Pershey writes about her decision not to compartmentalize so fiercely but instead to let all her roles blend together. A parson is a person first. What are the potential benefits or pitfalls of the pastor-parish relationships described? How do you understand the lines between the roles you play in your own life?

Rev. Martha Spong writes about taking pictures of feet at group gatherings, a habit left over from a time when many bloggers disguised their identities online. Although the advent of Facebook changed the way many of us relate to one another online, particularly by encouraging users to share pictures from their lives, the “pheeto” has a fond place in her life. How do you mark time spent with special people in your life? What traditions do you and your circles—whether they are friends, family, or part of a larger community—uphold even though you no longer “need” them?

Outside Over There

Rev. Sarah E. Howe Miller, PhD, introduces us to geocaching, a hobby she pursues with her daughters that takes them to unexpected places to find carefully hidden caches. The activity takes

her out of herself and refreshes her for ministry. What helps you get outside the ordinary concerns of daily life? How do you include friends or family? Do you want to?

Rev. Rachel G. Hackenberg seeks sacred spaces outside of church where she can find herself as a person and share with a vulnerability not otherwise possible in her role as pastor. What places and spaces allow you a sense of safety and community? Did you go looking for them, or did they find you?

Rev. Marci Auld Glass signed up for a belly-dancing class, hoping to keep her identity as a pastor quiet and do something separate from her pastoral identity. Now, dancing informs her ministry as she considers the importance of embodiment for the Body of Christ, the church. When has something outside the church changed your way of understanding the church itself? When have you done something inside the church that changed how you understood the world outside?

Rev. Laurie Brock learned to listen to guidance from her horse, feeling what she needed to feel and letting go of what she no longer needed to carry in her body. Our smaller pets can also help us gain clarity about what matters or simply be a furry shoulder on which to cry. What have you learned from interacting with animals? What do they know that we forget?

Rev. Martha Daniels joined a trivia team with some trepidation but found it was a great opportunity to be a person and not a clergyperson for a few hours. Where do you take off the masks for roles other people expect you to play? What do you use this time for?

Rev. Katya Ouchakof took and later taught water aerobics as a part of her life she saw as separate from her ministry. When another instructor died, her students and former classmates came to know her in another context, as the pastor presiding at a funeral. When have you been surprised to recognize (or be recognized as) a pastor out in the community? When have you ever had any of your own roles recognized in an unusual context? What happened?

Rev. Amber Belldene offers an affirming view of romantic love and sexuality in the playful context of her novels and in the serious context of her ministry. What have you learned about sex and love from the church? From the culture? Where could the church do a better job? Which view do you think is healthier overall? What do you think culture could learn from the church? What could the church learn from culture?

Rev. Karla Miller gives thanks for the people who make her coffee or serve lunch to schoolchildren. Think about people you passed along the way today. Who do you give thanks for?

Rev. Liz Crumlish had a homecoming of sorts when she offered chaplaincy in the shipyard. But although the landscape and the language felt familiar to her, as a woman she seemed out of place to some. When have you had the experience of not fitting in? Did you overcome initial reactions?

Rev. Julie Craig offers a reminder that not everyone wants to answer a question about what they do for a living. Whether we are professionals or not, successful in the world's eyes or not, there are essential things about who we are that may not match up with superficial social questions. Do you identify more with what you do for a job or what you do in your personal life? Why? How do you think other people recognize you? How can you approach others differently the next time you are in a social situation?

Rev. Sara Irwin considers her pastoral identity in light of an artist's preparation for a piece of performance art focused on presence. What do you think is the most important characteristic for a pastor to have? Is it something that can be developed, or is it an innate trait?

Rev. Stephanie Anthony went into the lion's den by attending a religious school assembly sponsored by a church in a denomination that does not ordain women. Her participation that day opened the door for many children to see their first woman pastor, and she was touched when so many children came to pray with her. When did you first see a clergywoman, and what was your response? When have you seen someone performing a role you didn't expect to see them in? How did it change your view of the role, or of the person performing it?

Rev. Julia Seymour uses running as a metaphor for our spiritual lives. She admires the people at the front of the pack—though she would like to be in the middle—and worries she is at the end of the line in her practices. How can you challenge yourself to increase the intensity of your spiritual life with the coaching of the Holy Spirit? What goals can you set for yourself? How will you achieve them?