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BOOK REVIEW

The spiritual practices of South African clergy: State of the clergy

Joynt, S. (Ed.), (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2024), pp. 193, ISBN 9781666922387

The spiritual practices of South African clergy: State of the clergy, edited by Shaun Joynt, is a timely contribution to the field of practical theology, and specifically on the theme of clergy spiritual health. With this book, Joynt and the contributing authors set out to reflect on clergy well-being from the perspective of the Global South, addressing an important research gap on clergy well-being in relation to spiritual practices and health. Drawing from experiences in South Africa, this collaborative work employs an interdisciplinary approach, using sound theologically grounded methodology and arguments. The book, the first of a planned four-part series, takes Luke 5:52 – Jesus increasing in wisdom, stature, and favour with God and people – as point of departure to investigate the four inward spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, fasting, and Bible study, framing it through the biopsychosocial-spiritual model, as they reflect on the importance of these for clergy well-being. The contributions in the book not only reflect sound scholarly work, but also the necessary pastoral sensitivity as it engages with the narratives of clergy among five very different Christian traditions, namely the Methodist Church (Derek L. Oppenshaw), the Nederdutch Reformed Church in Africa (Annelie Botha), the Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa (Marius Nel), the Presbyterian Church (Graham Duncan) and the Roman Catholic Church (Anthony Egan).

Focusing on clergy spiritual practices from contemporary South Africa, the authors attempt to address, with this multid denominational study, the acute underrepresentation of empirical theological research on the theme of clergy well-being from the perspective of the Global South. In addition to the introduction, where he introduces the study, Joynt authored the first chapter, in which he defines and discusses spirituality and spiritual practices, highlighting its benefits for clergy. In the final chapter, he summarises the findings of the empirical studies and offers some recommendations for future research. The five chapters in between offer case studies authored by scholars from the five participating denominations. These case studies offer insights into the spiritual practices of clergy in the context of their own faith or denominational traditions. Each of the chapters explores the multifaceted milieu of clergy spirituality through quantitative and qualitative data analysis, and theological reflection.

The introduction deals with the notions of spirituality and spiritual practices. The text of Luke 2:52 serves as a lens for holistic development, and consequently spiritual well-being, which the author connects to the biopsychosocial-spiritual model. In this, “wisdom” is related to intellectual and mental health, “stature” to physical health, “favour with God” to spiritual health, and “favour with men” (people) to social well-being. This underlines the need for a holistic view and approach to clergy spiritual health, encompassing intellectual, physical, spiritual, and social dimensions in its conceptualisation and assessment of human life. With this, and the other anticipated volumes, the authors hope “to provide a description of the current situation concerning these four aspects of the lives of clergy” (p. 2). In this book, the concept of spirituality is described as referring

to lived Christian experiences” (p. 3) and “must necessarily refer to the intimate loving relationship between God’s Holy Spirit and the spirit [...] of believers – a relationship that can be characterized as kinship and communion (p. 3).

Spiritual disciplines, although defined in different ways, are viewed, in this instance, as a means of grace through which the divine-human interaction brings people closer to God where they can live under the lordship of Jesus Christ and be guided by the Holy Spirit. The study focuses on the four inward spiritual disciplines, namely prayer, meditation, fasting, and study (Bible study). Chapter 1 of the book highlights the benefits of these for intellectual/mental, physical, spiritual, and social health.

The empirical, qualitative study of the project was conducted over a two-year period (2019-2020). The main research question, namely “What are the spiritual practices of clergy in South Africa?”, directed the empirical,

qualitative study. Mixed methods were employed across the denominational samples and included the use of questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, and personal correspondence. Despite challenges related to the impact of COVID-19 at the time, difficulties with the recruitment of clergy to participate in the study, and the fact that varying methodological approaches resulted in a less uniform presentation of analysis, the study produced valuable insights which, in different ways, also reflect some of the contextual complexities and the theological diversity among the participating faith traditions.

Chapters 2 to 6 discuss each of the five denominational case studies, and present unique insights into clergy spiritual practices. Contributions highlight how this has been shaped by the theological, historical, and cultural contexts in each case. Each chapter provides unique perspectives and denominational insights. Some of the findings are:

- Clergy's ability to commit to spiritual practices is often impeded by the increasing tension between a commitment to holiness and secular demands.
- In at least one case study, the influence of institutionalism has been flagged as an impediment to following consistent and uniform spiritual practices.
- Denominational histories and spirituality often give rise to the preference of some of the inward spiritual practices above the other.
- While ministry fatigue and exhaustion may often result in the neglect of spiritual practices, the absence thereof, as well as a lack of theological reflection on it, will only exacerbate such fatigue and exhaustion.
- Despite an awareness of the importance of spiritual practices for clergy wellness, and, in some instances, even with formal structures encouraging it, the following of these practices often varies within and among denominations.

In Chapter 7, Joynt presents a summary of the findings and recommendations made by the authors. Although the four inward spiritual disciplines are practised by clergy across the denominations, the frequency and duration thereof vary. While prayer and Bible study are found to be the most common practices, and to a lesser extent meditation, fasting is practised mostly only occasionally and then often for specific reasons. Framing spiritual practices in relation to a "means of grace", instead of a mere set of techniques for self-care, is an important contribution made by the book. As ways of communing with God, these practices have the potential to facilitate clergy spiritual growth, a deepening of their theology, as well as an improved sense of vocation, leading to a potentially more fulfilling and sustainable ministry. Drawing from the contributions of the authors, it is recommended that the aspect of

spiritual practices for clergy be afforded more prominence in clergy education and training, including ongoing training, while constant conversations about its value should also be promoted. Recommendations also include the strengthening of institutional support, and the use of communities of practice to facilitate peer support structures. However, this should not be viewed as replacing personal commitment and responsibility. Lastly, the authors also recommend a few themes for possible future research on spiritual disciplines and clergy well-being.

While the study makes important contributions, its analysis would have been significantly improved through:

- A deepened analysis of and a more nuanced reflection on the dynamics and influence of gender and race.
- A more critical engagement with practical theology and its philosophical, theological, and hermeneutical underpinnings.
- A more theological-critical evaluation of the biopsychosocial-spiritual model as one must consider whether this model provides an adequate framework for engaging with the theological themes related to wellness.

Future studies will also benefit immensely from a more detailed analysis of the narratives of participants, and even more so if more participants could be involved in such studies.

The authors achieved their aim of describing clergy spiritual practices from a perspective of the Global South. They managed this through a collaborative, interdisciplinary, as well as a theologically and methodologically sound approach to the empirical study, involving clergy from multiple denominations in South Africa. Their contributions, however, more than simply describe spiritual practices. Instead, it manages to place due focus on the need for a more intentional and nuanced approach to address clergy well-being, as they navigate ministry in often highly contested and demanding spaces. Even more importantly, it implores the reader to view clergy in light of their identity as people being created in the image of God, called to minister and serve from a place of deep spiritual connectedness. This book is highly recommended for churches, faculties, seminaries, scholars, and anyone interested in ministry, ministry enhancement, and the well-being of clergy.