

*Caring Liturgies: The Pastoral Power of Christian Ritual.* By Susan Marie Smith. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2012. viii + 152 pp. \$18.00 (paper).

How does one bring the theological and liturgical resources of the church into situations of transition, celebration, and loss that are not clearly described in official denominational worship resources? This is the question

*Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*. Edited by Christian B. Scharen. Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2012. v + 180 pp. \$40.00 (paper).

The basic aim of this work is to stimulate and deepen research and scholarship on the church in order to strengthen pastoral leadership, as well as the congregations they serve. The resultant understanding will enable church leaders to guide their congregations more effectively for the sake of faithful witness and service in the world (p. 3).

Ethnography, academically understood as qualitative research, and ecclesiology, academically understood as theological research, have generally remained distinct and distinctive disciplines (p. 3). However, this volume creatively employs the tools of ethnographic research to investigate more deeply the “meaning of life” questions and answers of people of faith who worship in congregations—people who are very diverse in terms of their psycho-social-spiritual-sexual-cultural points of departure as they live their lives on earth. This methodology presumes that the church does not live in strict isolation from the human condition, even as it draws upon foundational theological normative theory and praxis. Employing the tools of ethnography together with church studies arguably grounds the church and congregations in their actual experiences within and outside the church.

This volume has been divided into three parts (“On Congregations and the Church,” “On Congregations and Worship,” and “Congregations and Society”), mainly to cluster what the various authors have contributed to the broad topics in the various ways they attend to the life of the church or perhaps are attentive to the modes of the churches to which they attend.

Part one, for example, begins the explorations with rich reflections on what is to be unearthed for a deeper understanding of congregations when empirical and theological approaches work in collaborative ways. It also introduces the main proposal of the volume: in order for scholarship about the church to be most helpful to the church’s missional engagement in daily life, both through its pastoral leadership and its living corporate membership as a body of Christ, rapprochement between empirical and theological understandings of the church ought to be encouraged (p. 2).

Part two, which primarily discusses congregational worship, affirms that sacramental life concretizes theological understandings and praxis. However, it notes that understandings and praxis may be manifested quite differently within the same church. For example, and as revealed by the empirical data, significant differences can be seen with regard to both religious self-understanding and practice. Furthermore, the diverse realities of the church, such as the popular distinctions between “ordinary” Christians and “personal” or “confessing” Christians, are extremely important. Yet, even within

that Susan Marie Smith addresses in *Caring Liturgies: The Pastoral Power of Christian Ritual*. Smith offers principles drawn from the fields of ritual studies and liturgical theology that will give lay people and clergy the confidence to create "rites of transition and healing that may be one-time events particular to a person, a congregation, or a situation" (p. 2).

Smith begins by observing that ritual has often been construed as compulsive or manipulative at worst and arid at best. This ritual myopia has led to lost opportunities for pastoral care due to a lack of confidence and imagination on the part of lay and clergy leadership. Smith urges readers to "practice ritual resourcefulness, but only with ritual competence," which requires "the ability to know when and how to ask for, plan, lead, or support rituals that mediate healing, transition, and life" (p. 17).

As a counterpoint to common misunderstandings of ritual, Smith argues that ritual can be creative and generative, and that the church needs to reclaim its role in encouraging new rites for specific occasions that are essential to the "process of conversion in faith and growth in Christ" (p. 14). *Caring Liturgies* draws upon scholarship within the discipline of ritual studies, particularly using the work of Catherine Bell and Ronald Grimes, to describe how to create rites that speak to situations in which an appropriate liturgical response is unclear. The book progresses from defining and describing the nature of a creative rite (chapter 1), to suggesting who should take part in shaping and executing them (chapter 2). Chapters 3, 4, and 5 describe how to create actual rites, and chapter 6 concludes with the bigger picture of why creative rites are important, grounding them in the paschal mystery of Christ as "the lens through which to look at the focal person's life" (p. 124).

A particularly helpful insight is Smith's proposal that creative rites be shaped around one central, "defining metaphor" (p. 74). Smith employs a Ricoeurian understanding of metaphor and symbol to make the distinction that metaphors are a product of language, while symbols are expressed through "things, people, and actions" (p. 76). Thus, it is the doing of the rite, rather than its formulation on paper, that enacts its symbolic power. While Smith's theoretical summary will be familiar to scholars of ritual studies and liturgical theology, her application of these theories as a strategic starting point for those creating new rites is an incisive pastoral-academic synthesis. Thus, *Caring Liturgies* moves beyond merely advocating for the use of creative rites to being a guide that concretely describes how to get there without being formulaic.

*Caring Liturgies* addresses comparable issues to Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley's *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, particularly in its focus upon how ritual serves as a "container" for placing personal stories in relationship with the story of Christ's paschal mystery. What distinguishes Smith's work is the depth with which she explores how all of the baptized, lay and clergy alike, can have the imagination to recognize when rituals of healing or rites of passage are needed, and how to create them sensitively and

ethically. Practitioners will appreciate that when Smith describes the process of shaping new rites, she does not speak in terms of ideals, but presents examples of trial and error that accompany any creative endeavor.

Because Smith argues that the paschal mystery of Christ is the primary lens through which creative rites should be understood, it would have been helpful to have some of the material from chapter 6 integrated throughout the book. For example, Smith's observation that "rituals of Christian spiritual care . . . occur most appropriately when persons are nearing the point of Ascension or Pentecost in their situation" (p. 130) is one that would have been well worth mentioning in her section in chapter 1 about discerning an individual's ritual need. Additionally, for those unfamiliar with scholarly developments in ritual studies and liturgical theology, some of Smith's theoretical discussions will be challenging. Yet, Smith provides ample practical examples in narrative form of the theories she employs. For liturgical planners, pastoral counselors, clergy, graduate students, and seminarians, Smith offers an introduction to a range of ritual theories that will allow them to gain a deeper understanding of the breadth of ritual's capacity for spiritual formation.

MICHELLE BAKER-WRIGHT

*Fuller Theological Seminary  
Pasadena, California*