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## Book Review

### HOW TO GET ALONG WITH YOUR PASTOR

BY: GEORGE B. THOMPSON, JR.

Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006

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This helpful book seeks to answer the question: how can churches and pastors avoid “things going wrong” between them? How can we help promote thriving, healthy, and fruitful ministry partnerships, rather than the stunted, frustrating, short-term, and damaging relationships that we see too often, and lament?

Written for lay leaders of local churches, it offers tools to help them understand, begin, nurture, and sustain the pastor-people relationship. Thompson is well aware that this relationship is crucial for the sake of the church. More, he understands that if the church is to live the gospel for the sake of the world, positive and healthy pastoral relationships are essential. Thompson’s book joins others such as Friedman’s *Generation to Generation* (1985), Frank’s *Soul of the Congregation* (2000), and Galindo’s *Hidden Lives of Congregations* (2004), as well as Thompson’s other work, in exploring how the less visible and less rational aspects of life together work decisively to shape our churches, particularly in regard to “creating partnerships for doing ministry.”

Thompson’s introduction is a helpful overview of how the book offers three lenses with which to see and address less-obvious church dynamics, all working from an anthropological “cultures” understanding of communities. Congregations in particular, as faith-centered communities, are “complex, culture-creating, and culture-bearing groups” (xiii). The cultures of a community often exert control in ways that are hidden and surprising. We can become more aware of the function and impact of cultures within communities—in long-established and unseen ways, over the congregation’s life cycle, and in relation to all the various streams that flow together in our communities. When we do,

we can help our pastoral leaders be less likely to (in pastor-speak) “step on a landmine.”

I like Thompson’s primary metaphor of the congregation as “swamp,” and I think it useful in illuminating the various levels at which culture exists in a community—the activities and “stuff” that are visible around the edges of the swamp, the explanatory and justifying sayings that float on the surface (where most of the explicit communal theology is found), and the hidden and deep beliefs and behaviors that only emerge from the mud when something comes along to disturb or contradict them—an unwitting new pastor, for example. My guess is that this metaphor will communicate well with laypersons and help them to think in more careful and complex ways about what rules their communities, and how they might broaden and share that insight.

I also like the way the book employs organizational lifecycle theory as a way of understanding “culture over time,” mixed with the understanding of a multilayered communal culture. Lifecycle theory sometimes seems simultaneously too obvious and too deterministic, but when Thompson lays out the impact of stages in organizational life on the various levels of the culture, I find it making more sense. In particular, I thought helpful his discussion in the second part of the book on the normalcy of church conflict and why it happens more at certain phases in the organizational lifecycle, based on its impact on the cultural swamp.

Thompson also makes clear that congregations are not monocultural entities. He helps people to understand the impact of living in the world, the way in which communal cultural coherence both diversifies and dissipates if not tended to, and how lay leaders might assist pastors in gaining “cultural capital” (or communal trust) as they seek to assist communities in the strenuous work of re-aligning the three levels of their life so necessary to vitality.

The second half of the book is a very specific and helpful application of the preceding discussion to four areas of partnership, always with a focus on lay leaders as sharing responsibility: facilitating pastoral entry and adoption into a community, assisting a pastor in gaining

power to lead, helping move the community through change and difference in peaceful and edifying ways, and learning to share leadership.

This was, to me, familiar ground. But Thompson is lifting up pivotal moments for building congregational health, and most of the time I found myself intrigued, learning, reading, and nodding in agreement; smiling at Thompson's skill in putting tricky, important concepts clearly for non-professionals; appreciative of the specific ways in which he draws out the usefulness of these tools for understanding important episodes and chapters of church life; and deeply grateful for his commitments to the strength and health of the all-important relationship between pastor and the whole church for the sake of the Gospel, and to the important role wise and caring lay leaders can play. It is provocative and filled with wisdom.

This is an excellent resource to place into the hands of committees charged with the task of searching for and calling a new pastor for their congregation. It would be a great study for a group of leaders in an interim between ministers, or as a new pastor begins (if led appropriately). It presents useful and important understandings of dynamics of congregational functioning as culture in an accessible fashion and always stresses its primary aim: if the church is to be faithful and effective in living the Gospel, pastor and people must work well together.

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