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Take My Hand: A Theological Memoir

Andrew Taylor-Troutman (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2012)
 Reviewed by Brent A. R. Hege

The first year in the parish, fresh out of seminary, can be an experience that is at once daunting and exhilarating for any new pastor. The same might be said for the parishioners who welcome the new pastor into their midst to begin their ministry together. The first year of ministry is an opportunity to build relationships, to experience the joys and frustrations of shared ministry, to discover strengths and weaknesses, and to put into practice years of valuable seminary training. For pastors and parishioners alike this can be a time of great anticipation and excitement as they embark on their journey into the future together.

Many church bodies, including the ELCA, offer opportunities for newly ordained pastors to gather together during their first years in ministry for continuing education, practical workshops, and what Luther called the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints. What is perhaps less common in the first year of ministry is cultivating a discipline of reflecting and writing about these experiences of first-call ministry in all of its many ups and downs and sideways turns. In addition to settling into a new community, adjusting to the rhythms of life in a new parish, establishing ties with parishioners, writing sermons, visiting the sick and homebound, teaching Bible studies and attending council meetings, the thought of writing about these experiences would surely seem to most new pastors to be one burden too many.

But for Andrew Taylor-Troutman, recent graduate of Union Presbyterian Seminary and pastor of New Dublin Presbyterian Church in the mountains of southwestern Virginia, the discipline of reflecting and writing about his first year in the parish has enabled him to integrate the various threads of his training and experiences into a cohesive narrative that throws into sharper relief the complex, challenging, immensely rewarding and indeed sometimes poignantly beautiful moments of ministry in his small-town parish. Taylor-Troutman has carefully chosen the title *Take My Hand* to grace the cover of what is a deeply personal and honest portrayal of his experiences in a small congregation in a small town, very much like the small congregations in the small towns inhabited by so many readers of the *Seminary Ridge Review*. The guiding metaphor of the book, first shared in

the introduction, is taken from a statement by the twentieth-century philosopher and theologian Martin Buber, who said, with no small measure of self-effacement, "I am no philosopher, prophet, or theologian, but a man who has seen something and who goes to a window and points to what he has seen" (xviii). In the pages that follow, Taylor-Troutman invites readers to take his hand and embark on a journey through the window, to discover together what God is doing and what God is calling us to do.

The book is arranged in chronological order by the date of sermons Taylor-Troutman preached at New Dublin Presbyterian Church over the course of his first year as pastor of that congregation. Each chapter begins with a personal anecdote, either recounting something that had happened in the parish or something more personal that had happened in Taylor-Troutman's life. These anecdotes then give way to a deeper theological reflection on a particular aspect of life and ministry in the parish and include such diverse issues as pastoral visits, administering the sacraments, evangelism, death and dying, responding to natural disasters, teaching Bible study, reflecting on interreligious dialogue, eschatology, and difficult theological doctrines, and coming to terms with the unanswerable questions that, almost inevitably, turn out to be the most important questions of all. Each chapter then closes with a sermon delivered at New Dublin that incorporates many of the themes of the chapter. These sermons concretely illustrate Taylor-Troutman's gift of thinking deeply about the relationships between the Bible, ethics, and the church's theological tradition as these issues are lived in a particular community of faith. Each conversation, episode, and encounter is drawn into a deeper theological commentary on what it means to be a pastor in a community with very deep roots and earnest questions about the future. Taylor-Troutman draws from his rich relationship with the Bible, his considerable knowledge of the theological tradition, his passion for issues of justice and ethics, and his obvious love and respect for the people he is called to serve. Furthermore, the sermon at the end of each chapter illustrates just how intertwined these perspectives are and ought to be in the work of parish ministry; by including these sermons, Taylor-Troutman offers a model of how preaching, at its best, grows organically out of the rhythms of daily life among the people of God in a particular time and place.

Readers will find much of the book familiar, even if they have never been to southwestern Virginia and even if they have never set foot in a Presbyterian church. The rhythms of parish life come alive in the pages of the book and one grows to appreciate and respect the people of whom Taylor-Troutman speaks so fondly. What becomes clear after only a few pages is that Taylor-Troutman values relationships above all else; the word itself

appears dozens of times in the book and infuses his reflections with heart and soul. The relationship between the human being and God, the relationships we build with one another, the relationship between past, present and future, the relationships with neighbors near and far, with structures and systems larger than the sum of their parts, and with the natural world itself, all form the matrix out of which life and ministry are born and thrive. In several of the chapters these relationships themselves become a character in the narrative; Taylor-Troutman's wife, his dog, his family, his colleagues in ministry, his parishioners, his forbears, and the whole communion of saints, past, present, and future, all have starring roles in his memoir. He describes first meetings with pillar members of the congregation, learning valuable lessons from wise old farmers and precocious children, sharing a moment of holiness as his grandfather lay dying in a hospice, and forging a new relationship with a Sunday morning visitor thanks to a misplaced offering plate and the hasty passing of a baseball hat. These relationships are not treated as peripheral to the task of ministry; rather, they form the foundation of everything that follows, as Taylor-Troutman makes clear in his introduction: "Despite the risks of disclosure, this book must be personal because I preach to people I personally know. As the eternal Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, so our faith as his disciples is embodied in our community" (xviii).

Readers looking for heartwarming stories of life and ministry in a small town will certainly be rewarded by reading this memoir, but it would be a mistake to assume that there is nothing more on offer here than a collection of touching anecdotes and some self-effacing tales of first-year gaffes and Sunday morning bloopers. Rather, *Take My Hand* is what it purports itself to be: a theological memoir. Each chapter includes an anecdote or two, not as ends in themselves, but as invitations to think more deeply about the theological issues that bubble up from the quotidian moments, glimpses of the sacred shimmering within the mundane, intimations of the infinite always borne in, with and under the finite. It should therefore come as no surprise that Scripture, too, plays an essential role in Taylor-Troutman's reflections on life and ministry in his first year in the parish. Drawing on a wide range of biblical texts and images, Taylor-Troutman's reflections on ministry never stray far from the Bible as the beating heart of his ministry with the people of New Dublin. But as Karl Barth famously said, the preacher ought to prepare sermons with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Taylor-Troutman lives this model of engaged preaching and ministry and this practice clearly informs the thinking that culminates in his memoir. The sermons are particularly rich and rewarding examples of thinking critically and faithfully about Scripture and tradition as they inform, shape, and guide the Christian life.

The Christian life means being and acting in concrete situations, always open to the promptings of the Spirit and never satisfied to rest comfortably on the false assurances of knowing all the answers. What makes this possible, quite simply and quite improbably, is grace. Grace permeates the pages of *Take My Hand*, both as a theological concept and as a recipe for daily life. Grace appears as a thunderbolt, a still small voice, a sudden memory, a way where there is no way, a stranger's gesture, a selfless act of love, a child's boldness, a good death, a walk through a cemetery, an autumn afternoon spent pressing cider, caring for victims of a tornado, passing the peace, sitting in silence, sharing a meal. Accompanying this profound awareness of the extravagance of grace is a healthy dose of humility and an invitation to remain open to the unexpected, the surprising, the discomfiting, and the unforeseen. It is grace that fuels the Christian life, grace that opens up the future before us, grace that keeps us pressing on without all the answers or a clear map to point the way.

To get to where we need to go, it helps to have the company of fellow travelers, someone who will extend a hand and walk with us on our journey. From beginning to end, *Take My Hand* is an invitation to do just that. Despite the rather specific nature of the book's genesis, it taps into something profoundly true and important across the lines that threaten to divide us and will accordingly appeal to a wide range of readers: seminarians curious about what awaits them after graduation, first-call pastors who will no doubt be comforted by the familiarity of many of the stories and encouraged by the sermons and theological reflections, and pastors now several years past first call who will remember fondly those first years of ministry. But perhaps most importantly, *Take My Hand* will appeal to lay women and men eager to follow the journey of a young pastor on his first call, to learn from his experiences with the people with whom he shares his ministry, and to find refreshment and rejuvenation for the work to which we are all called together: to be the body of the crucified and risen Christ, in and for the world.

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