

Jennifer S. Ripley, James N. Sells, and Diane J. Chandler, eds. *Ministering to Families in Crisis: The Essential Guide for Nurturing Mental and Emotional Health*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2024. 354 pages.

Pastoral leaders often respond to individuals facing emotional struggles, family conflicts, trauma, and significant life changes. In *Ministering to Families in Crisis*, Jennifer S. Ripley, James N. Sells, and Diane J. Chandler combine their expertise in counseling psychology, marriage and family therapy, and spiritual formation to offer a practical, multidimensional guide for clergy and caregivers. Their main message is clear: effective crisis ministry is not about becoming a therapist but about developing a calm, present, and ethically grounded pastoral identity that can support families in crisis while collaborating with mental health professionals.

The authors start by describing the challenges families face during a crisis. In times of loss, conflict, or emotional distress, people often turn to ministry leaders first. However, many pastors feel unprepared for the psychological and relational issues that come with these situations. The authors address this gap by presenting a model of pastoral engagement based on emotional stability, reflective awareness, and role clarity. Their approach aligns with reflective practice, highlighting that ministry identity depends not on technical solutions but on continuous discernment, self-reflection, and relational presence.

A major strength of the book is its integration of family systems theory with pastoral theology. Instead of viewing crises as problems that affect individuals alone, the authors highlight the interconnected dynamics within families: communication breakdowns, changing roles, heightened emotions, and patterns of reactivity. They turn complex psychological ideas into accessible language without oversimplifying. Case studies throughout the chapters help readers reflect on their own emotional responses and pastoral instincts, making the book both a practical guide and a tool for professional growth. While the book's accessibility is a key advantage, readers looking for detailed clinical crisis intervention strategies may find the psychological discussions broad rather than in-depth.

Pastoral presence stands out as one of the book's most powerful themes. Ripley, Sells, and Chandler caution against rushing to solve problems and against offering quick theological fixes or advice. Instead, they advise caregivers to first stabilize themselves by staying attentive, centered, and calm. This approach encourages better listening, empathy, and connection. Formation supervisors and ministry mentors will value the book's focus on how personal anxieties, urgency, and unresolved stories influence a caregiver's presence during crises. The emphasis on reflective self-awareness makes the book particularly relevant for chaplains, clinical pastoral education supervisors, and

those engaged in spiritual direction, where the quality of presence is central to effective care.

The authors' consistent emphasis on ethical boundaries is significant. They repeatedly stress that pastors are not therapists. Their proposed model of integrated care respects the limits of pastoral training while affirming the unique spiritual and relational support that ministry leaders provide. By encouraging clergy to work with licensed mental health professionals, the authors present a realistic and responsible view of modern crisis ministry. This clarity around the scope of practice directly supports this journal's readership, who often navigate the intersection of pastoral identity, supervision, and mental health collaboration.

Overall, *Ministering to Families in Crisis* is a valuable and well-crafted resource for pastoral care, spiritual direction, pastoral counseling, formation, and clinical supervision. It encourages ministers to view crisis work not just as a series of interventions but as a formative process that shapes their pastoral identity and enhances their ability to be present. Its integration of theory, reflective practice, and accessible case material makes it a strong contribution for those training or supervising emerging caregivers, offering meaningful insights into guiding families through challenges with humility, clarity, and compassion.

Robert Moya
Liberty University
Lynchburg, Virginia