

Barbara Sutton and Victor Klimoski. *Sustaining a Healthy Ministerial Workplace*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2024. 200 pages.

The genesis of the book *Sustaining a Healthy Ministerial Workplace* began with a 2019 symposium of the same name hosted by the authors, Barbara Sutton and Victor Klimoski. The primary purpose of the book, which emerged from multiple years of research on the topic, is to “advance a broader conversation among pastoral leaders about how to ensure that the structures of ministerial practice serve the effectiveness of ministry and enrich the lives of ministers themselves” (p. xvii).

The book is focused on the experience of Roman Catholic lay ecclesial ministers and what might be done within that specific context to create a healthier workplace. Ministry leaders from other denominations may benefit from the content, but it is grounded in Roman Catholic data within the United States.

The book is divided into six chapters, with chapter 1 presenting eight stories from a varied group of lay ecclesial ministers. Each of the stories is carefully curated to illustrate one of the eight elements of a healthy ministerial workplace: community, control, fairness, reward, workload, values, financial well-being, and vocation. For the most part, these stories identify a particularly painful event which reflected a less-than-healthy workplace for the writer.

Chapter 2 offers the reader an opportunity to “pause-for-reflection” on their own experience of each of the previously named eight elements of a healthy ministerial workplace, while chapter 3 offers insights into understanding the role of culture within the context of the workplace. Once again, the book invites the reader to become familiar with theory and then reflect through different exercises on the various dimensions of culture and how that may be lived out in a particular context. I appreciated the invitation to “cultural humility,” which “invites us to be curious about another by listening with the ear of our heart” (p. 58).

Chapter 4 builds on the importance of the biblical framework of covenant as essential for a healthy workplace. The authors argue that grounding workplace relationships in an understanding of God’s unique call to each member of the team, and understanding covenant as a spiritual and pastoral discipline, offers the possibility for a transformed workplace. The authors are also clear that this will not be easy, especially with the ingrained hierarchical structure of the church. “Creating a covenant culture requires a courage, resilience, and faith, calling forth each person, ordained and lay, to be the best they can be” (p. 81). Once again, the chapter offers excellent “pause-for-reflection” opportunities for the reader to reflect on their own unique situation.

Chapter 5 returns full circle to the original eight stories from chapter 1, where the writers engage in more robust theological reflection, helping uncover greater personal and professional insights.

The final chapter offers a hope-filled way forward while also acknowledging that the path will not be easy. I appreciated the candor of the authors when they wrote, “We are aware that the work of our contributors, the participants in our online Co-workers Vinyard of the Lord Conference, and six months of crucial conversations about the workplace may all end up being one more elaborate description of the problem” (p. 166).

This book will be most valuable to parish or diocesan teams where those with the greatest hierarchical power are willing to lay their power down and participate as one among equals, focused on creating or sustaining a healthy workplace. The series of assessment tools included in the appendix offers individuals and groups valuable resources to allow them to assess their workplace in accordance with the eight aspects of a healthy workplace, along with its covenantal attributes. Once the data have been gathered, the book provides one more tool to move the process forward: principles for productive discussions, including designing an ordered conversation with the use of a facilitator. The authors note that an outside facilitator would be most helpful but might be a luxury. I maintain that an outside facilitator is imperative so the whole ministry team may participate.

The work of transformation will not be easy, especially in systems where power is enshrined and lay ecclesial ministers often serve with limited power or autonomy. However, the book provides a path and resources for those willing to take up the challenge of creating and sustaining healthy workplaces.

Susan MacAlpine-Gillis
Atlantic School of Theology
Halifax, Nova Scotia
Canada