

Starting out

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [May 23, 2001](#) issue

*Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey Through a Country-Church* by Richard Lischer

As a general rule, parish ministers should not read books about parish ministry for pleasure. In the first place, it is rarely pleasant to spend your "down time" reading about what you do the rest of the time. And in the second place, you can spot the lies. When the clergy person in one of these books spends all day having significant encounters with a variety of troubled but charming parishioners, then you know that you have a counterfeit on your hands.

This seems especially true of recent fiction written by people who have never served a parish as its parson. Where are the interminable committee meetings, the annual financial agonies, the church members who stop by every week to drain their pint of blood from the pastor? Such details do not constitute the whole truth about ordained ministry, but when they are omitted they feed popular illusions about the church that do the church no good.

That is why Richard Lischer's new book, *Open Secrets*, is such a welcome addition to the genre. The volume is not fiction but a memoir about Lischer's first pastoral assignment to Cana Lutheran Church, planted in the corn and soybean fields of southern Illinois. Looking back on those fields from Duke Divinity School, where he has taught preaching for the past 20 years, Lischer remembers how the fields reminded him of a scene from an Ingmar Bergman film: "Swedish winterlight exposing rot and depression in rural Lutherans."

"When you pull up to your first church," he writes, "it's a moment of truth, like the first glimpse of a spouse in an arranged marriage." For Lischer, who had just earned his doctorate from the University of London, that glimpse proved so grim that he stayed in his car. The faded red brick church sat at the falling-off place between the flat prairie in front and a deep gorge in back, with a cemetery that spilled down the hill behind the parsonage. The doors of the church were painted a "sickly salmon." The glass windows were also painted, and the copper cross on top of the peeling steeple was missing an arm.

"I couldn't even open my car door," Lischer recalls, "because that would have been an admission, if only to myself, that this assignment was acceptable." He accepted it nonetheless, and moved into the "Early Depression" parsonage with his pregnant wife, Tracy, and their young daughter, Sarah. Lischer's initiation began shortly before his installation service, when he set up a dialog with his parish leaders and discovered how few of them had actually voted for him.

According to Lischer, he and his congregation were both casualties of a larger process whereby the church identifies candidates for ministry, trains them and then sends them to places where they almost never belong. "At seminary we brooded over the mysteries of God for four years only to turn up later as chaplains to covered-dish suppers and car washes with the youth," he observes. "One part of the church goes to great expense in order to prepare a theologian for another part of the church that wants a guitar player."

As a 28-year-old newly minted pastor, Lischer charged into this breach with equal parts of peevishness and pluck. He was halfway through his first bedside communion before he realized that he had forgotten the bread. He helped an abused wife escape her spouse by luring the man onto church property to be arrested. He all but caused a church schism by urging a poor widow to bury her husband as cheaply as possible. The day after he talked her into a cloth-covered wooden box with no vault, three church elders stood in his study. "Only your poor white trash" is buried without a vault, they told him. Lischer buried the man in a vault paid for by the church cemetery committee.

As proof that truth is stranger than fiction, Lischer reports that his family's well was contaminated by run-off from the cemetery. "That was the joke of my first year. We couldn't drink the water because of its abnormally high Lutheran content."

While this book is filled with funny and touching tales, those attributes are never the point. There is nothing sentimental in Lischer's storytelling, nothing to raise a reader's suspicion that he is telling less than the truth. "All the humors were present in the humus," he says of the muddy field across the road from the church, which is one of the reigning metaphors of this book. Lischer's narrative is grounded in the full humanity of his characters, who know that they have come from dust and to dust they shall return.

The other strong symbol is the one-armed cross atop the church, which turns out to be made not of solid copper but of wood that has rotted from within. When Lischer's three-year ministry comes to an end, the broken cross is removed and the spire is capped. Looking out at the congregation on his last Sunday, Lischer says,

It seemed to me that I was looking at the church as God sees it, not as a series of individual quirks and opinions, but as a single heart of love and sorrow. The only thing that made us different from any other kinship group or society was the mysterious presence of Jesus in the community. We were his body, which is not a metaphor. The ordinary world really is capable of hosting the infinite Being.

There may be secrets in this book, but there are no lies. Lischer tells the truth about everyday life on earth: how love is hardest among those who are bound together by it, how faith in God offers no protection from loss and how ordinary people regularly save each other's lives by their simple willingness to be human. In this elegantly written memoir, Lischer gives us reason to hope in the transforming power of a community that lives not by virtue but by grace.