

Reading devotional poetry with Kim Johnson

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

July 3, 2014

Ministry is one of the only professions besides writing where a person has daily need for poetry. Poetry refreshes and renews language and adds insight to stories we've heard many times. It can be woven meaningfully into sermons, and it bolsters the human spirit.

But pastors often turn to the same poets over and over again, and time to explore new territory is limited. This is why [I recently interviewed poet Kimberly Johnson](#), one of the editors of [an extensive compilation of devotional poetry](#) from the ancients to the contemporary.

After our interview, I asked Johnson to highlight some of the lesser-known Christian poets to whom pastors might turn for fresh lyrical material. Here are some of her suggestions and comments:

- **Richard Crashaw** (1613-1649) was a convert to Catholicism at a time when this was not a common spiritual path in England. In 1646, the exiled English (Catholic) queen Henrietta Maria helped Crashaw to secure an administrative position in Rome, but he died after only three years in Italy. He wrote a volume of original religious poems and a number of translations of familiar Latin hymns. His work is exuberant, sensual, and gloriously longing for contact with the divine.
- **Edward Taylor** (1642-1729) was a nonconforming Calvinist minister who left England for reasons of conscience on the heels of Charles II's Act of Uniformity, which attempted to regulate public worship and to eliminate nonconformists from clerical positions. Taylor became the minister in the small town of Westfield, far in the Massachusetts frontier. He wrote a poem every month in preparation for his administration of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to his congregation. These *Preparatory Meditations* are dynamic and sometimes strange wrestlings with his own despair about sin.
- **R. S. Thomas** (1913-2000) was born in Wales and spent 42 years as an Anglican minister. He wrote a number of volumes of poetry and earned himself a reputation in the U.K. and beyond. Throughout his work, readers will find devotional addresses with a psalm-like variety of mood. Thomas was nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1996.
- **John Berryman** (1914-1972) was an American poet who was very well known during his lifetime, though not best known as the author of many, many devotional poems. The most moving of these spiritual monologues is perhaps "Eleven Addresses to the Lord," a series of 11 prayers, but Berryman incorporated spiritual themes into all his writing, whether it's overtly devotional or not.

- **Mary Szybist** (1970-) won the National Book Award for poetry in 2013. She is the author of two collections, *Granted* and *Incarnadine*, both of which feature spiritual themes and concerns generously. *Incarnadine* meditates on, among other ideas, resonances for the Annunciation in 21st-century life.