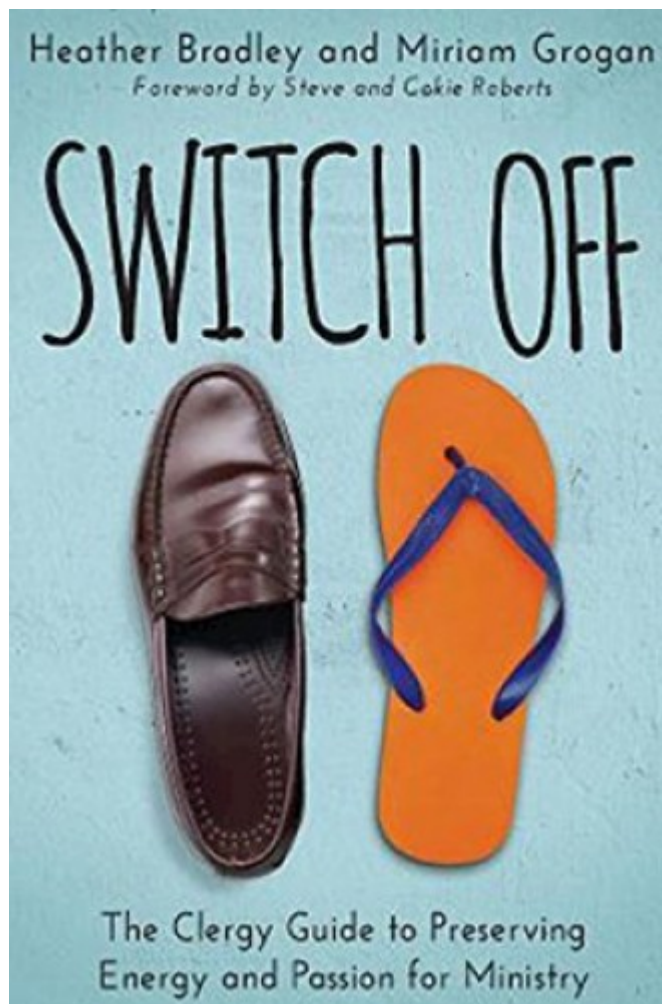


Practical wisdom from the business world

Heather Bradley and Miriam Bamberger Grogan offer a hard-working playbook for addressing ministerial overload.

by [Cynthia G. Lindner](#) in the [March 15, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Switch Off

The Clergy Guide to Preserving Energy and Passion for Ministry

By Heather Bradley and Miriam Bamberger Grogan
Abingdon

The complicated nature of religious leadership is well attested. Moses and the prophets register their frustrations with the overwhelming, often maddening responsibilities of public leadership. Generations later, Jesus' disciples seem flummoxed by every ministry assignment. In our own time, studies of congregational vitality and ministerial viability reveal clergy's struggles with the competing demands and conflicting needs of the communities they serve, and the seeming impossibility of satisfying others' expectations—not to mention their own. The rapid pace of social change, and the institutional and communal fractures that occur in its wake, suggest that these tensions will only intensify.

Sturdy pastoral wisdom that thrives in the midst of complexity remains an elusive, almost mysterious commodity. While we recognize and admire leadership that is focused, faithful, and non-anxious, we tend to believe that such qualities are either evidence of innate talent or the hard-won fruit of many years of experience. This book takes a different view. We can all cultivate the wisdom that funds energetic, productive ministry, and we do so one decision at a time.

Switch Off is a tiny book, short enough to read in a single sitting and light enough to slip into a briefcase alongside your Bible. But don't let the book's modest size fool you. This is a hardworking playbook for addressing three familiar symptoms of ministerial overload as they are articulated by clergy themselves: "My work never ends, it's never enough, I have to do it all."

The book's simple genius is that it transforms these common concerns into the occasion for self-awareness, teaching the tangible and essential skills of discernment that are the underpinnings of wisdom. These intransigent expectations are repurposed as useful analytical questions: "What am I taking on that isn't mine? How much is enough? What do I need to say yes to, to say no to?" Wisdom begins not simply with the recognition that ministers inhabit many roles, explicit and internal. It also requires the realization that we can and must choose in every situation which roles we can inhabit and which ones belong to others. "The important thing is making choices," the book advises, "rather than the choices making you."

At first glance, Heather Bradley and Miriam Grogan's professional experience working with leaders of Fortune 500 companies—Bradley's particular expertise is integrating mergers and acquisitions—seems an unlikely source of wisdom for pastors. Their book is not a work of proclamation or contemplation but instead a plainspoken epistle from experienced managers, a contemporary proverbial remix. A practical and strategic text, it intends to move its readers from contemplation to action, from aspiration to perspiration.

Each of the three chapters has a clear purpose. The first chapter offers knowledge, describing "role creep" and instructing readers about how to find their "off switch." The second chapter shows how that knowledge works "on the ground" as a fictional group of pastors engage the central questions together on retreat. The third chapter coaches readers in appropriating that knowledge for themselves by developing a personal action plan for finding and using their own "off switch." These three chapters present the knowing, the doing, and the being that together are the essence of wisdom.

Though the language of theology is largely absent, readers will find in these pages spirit, courage, and hope. Pastors' proclivities for "doing it all" are difficult to dislodge. It takes patience and perseverance to see ourselves and our actions as part of a larger system that must be apprehended and engaged by careful deliberation, rather than simply accepted by default.

Bradley and Grogan are nonjudgmental, compassionate, and clear. Like the wise leaders they hope to cultivate, the authors know when to teach, when to push, and when readers need a little humor to help defuse defensiveness or tension. While they may not have deep experience in ministerial matters, they have done their homework to understand what makes clergy tick. I was particularly glad for the chapter that modeled their method by narrating the conversations at a pastors' retreat, which convinced me that the best way to engage this exploration of roles and choices would be in a community of trusted peers and accountability partners.