

Heart of the matter: Shepherding souls

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 3, 2005](#) issue

At ordination Presbyterian ministers promise to give their “energy, intelligence, imagination and love” to ministry. Sometimes just managing the institution of the church exhausts such capacities. Sometimes attending to the committees, task forces, program evaluations, staff supervision and budgets is all-consuming. (And sometimes it is secretly satisfying because it reassures us that ministry is “real work,” like running a business.) I know that management is important, and needs to be done well. Administration is a form of ministry. But I don’t like it when being a pastor, a shepherd of souls, gets put on the margins—at least until a reminder comes in the form of a telephone call from someone who wants to “to talk about my faith” or even “to talk about God.” Then we recall why we’re here.

I got such a reminder from Tony Hendra’s book *Father Joe: The Man Who Saved My Soul*. Hendra, an actor, satirist and founding editor of *National Lampoon*, writes about his relationship with a Benedictine monk in a monastery on the south coast of England. Taken to the monastery after an emotional-spiritual crisis during adolescence that Hendra describes as almost a psychotic episode, he meets Father Joe, an eccentric, very wise, altogether human pastor who becomes his spiritual guide, his strong anchor in stormy times—which describes most of Hendra’s frenzied life in London, New York and Hollywood.

As a youth Hendra wanted to join the Benedictines. He longed for the safety, security and certainty of the monastic routine. He loved the music, the hard work, the fresh air. Father Joe dissuaded him, however, and urged him to accept an opportunity to go to Cambridge University, where Hendra began his life as a writer, editor and producer.

Hendra stayed in touch with Father Joe, who remained a keen listener and, when necessary, a wise and firm counselor. He reminded a skeptical and cynical Hendra that “seeking faith is an act of faith,” that “you can’t love anyone until you know

yourself loved.”

Near the end of the book Hendra returns to England to visit Father Joe, who is dying of cancer. After a failed marriage and much unhappiness, Hendra again says he wants to enter the monastery. Again Father Joe dissuades him. Your vocation is not to be a monk, he tells Hendra. It is out there in the world, he says, and it includes being a husband and father, in spite of your failures.

For pastors with busy, distracted lives, Hendra’s portrait of Father Joe is a reminder that that the shepherding of souls is at the heart of the pastoral vocation.