Prof's Picks

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The Rev. Joyce Mercer, Ph.D., The Arthur Lee Kinsolving Professor in Pastoral Theology at Virginia Theological Seminary, recommends the following books as part of the Bishop Payne Library’s monthly series highlighting a faculty member’s “picks”:


Hunsinger and Latini team up to offer a resource for church leaders dealing with conflict—both the interpersonal and the institutional varieties. What makes their book unique is its grounding in the practice of *nonviolent communication* taught by Marshall Rosenberg. Nonviolent communication is a practice premised on the idea that our capacities for communicating with compassion and empathy have been hijacked by patterns of engagement focused on being right, and on continual evaluation and assessment of others. Hunsinger and Latini suggest that nonviolent communication methods are compatible with and expressive of gospel values, and are therefore particularly well-suited as a process for dealing effectively with conflict in churches. At the heart of nonviolent communication is the awareness of human needs and feelings that underlie all communication and especially conflict. *Transforming Church Conflict* approaches interpersonal conflict (such as discord between two staff members in the church) and institutional conflict (such as a struggle between different factions in the church) through nonviolent communication’s components of separating observations from evaluation; valuing human needs; identifying and expressing feelings; positive ways to make requests of others instead of making demands; empathy; compassion directed toward ourselves; and the need for appreciation. This book will be of interest and useful to church leaders in congregations that are not in conflict, as well as for those experiencing discord, because its emphasis on the skills of communicating with care are valuable across a wide range on situations beyond conflict itself.


Sociologist Nancy Ammerman’s latest book explores the ways people experience religion and spirituality in their everyday lives. While many who study contemporary religiosity in American focus anecdotally on the phenomenon of “spiritual but not religious” or on the statistics showing that the largest growth group in terms of religious identity are those who declare no religious preference (often referred to as “the nones”), Ammerman brings her careful empirical research to the question of what it is that people mean when they say they are religious and or spiritual in terms of their everyday lives. She and her research team in Boston and Atlanta elicited spiritual narratives from among the stories people tell about their everyday lives, using a combination of interviews, oral journaling, and photo elicitation interviewing, as a way to learn about religion and spirituality. The focus of this book is on “everyday religion,” or the presence of religion in the practices of everyday life. The chapter on “everyday life at home,” for example, explores stories of households in which people identified sacred dimensions to ordinary activities like ironing and cooking, and lifted up the presence of sacred spaces in their homes. They told relationship narratives such as courtship accounts shaped in part by religious or spiritual conversations, and a large number of the research participants told stories that framed the role of pets in spiritual terms. Other chapters explore the everyday spaces of work, public life, and health or illness and the body, as contexts in which people narrated religious or spiritual dimensions of their everyday practices. This book is of interest to church leaders and others interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the changing American religious landscape.
In this book which is part textbook, part self-help guide, psychiatrist Dan Siegel presents information based on interpersonal neurobiology to help make sense of the time of life called adolescence, which he defines for purposes of his book as inclusive of the years between 12 and 24. Describing the teen years as a time of significant brain growth unparalleled in previous years of human life, Siegel identifies four features of adolescent brain growth and how they relate to the behaviors most associated with the teen years: novelty seeking, social engagement, increased emotional intensity, and creative exploration. Each of these features has its positive side. For example, the novelty seeking dimension of adolescent brain development allows for a quality of passionate living and a sense of adventure. The downside is impulsivity and risk taking, two phenomena well-known by parents, youth ministers, and others who care for adolescents and their wellbeing. Did you know that it is a matter of brain chemistry and development, and not willful stupidity, that causes teens to overvalue the positive results of a behavior (such as getting peer affirmation for a daring stunt), and simultaneously to give less weight to the negative impacts of that behavior (the harm to self or others caused by the stunt)? Siegel’s explanation of how adolescent brains interpret social cues such as facial expressions through a mechanism that moves directly to the so-called “reptilian” parts of the brain and bypasses rational input, helps make sense of why teens often interpret the benign signals sent by adults as critical or hostile. Siegel also provides helpful brain-based explanations of why addiction is a particular possibility for teens who begin using alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs. The overall message of this book is that our brains are extraordinarily plastic, i.e., malleable to change, and the ways we focus our attention and exert our energies shape the formation of the brain’s neural pathways and connections. The author therefore provides what he calls “mindsight tools” to strengthen integration in the brain. This book will be of interest to parents, youth ministers, educators, and even young people themselves.