

A Roundtable Review

Müller, Sabrina.

*Lived Theology: Impulses for a
Pastoral Theology of Empowerment.*

Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2021.

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Hagley, Scott J., Karen Rohrer,
and Michael Gehrling, eds.

*Sustaining Grace: Innovative
Ecosystems for New Faith
Communities.*

Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2020.

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REVIEWED BY PATRICK TODJERAS

University of Greifswald, Germany
patrick.todjeras@uni-greifswald.de

IN THE FOLLOWING REVIEW, I want to challenge you readers. I want to introduce two books that deserve to be presented and discussed together. A connection is not only given by the fact that, Sabrina Müller, Scott Hagley (as an editor), and Kristine Stache (as a contributor to the second book) are on the editorial board of this journal or that both books were published by the same publisher. Rather, the spirit of the books is quite similar. The authors want to empower and help those who try to figure out what discipleship looks like as lived theology for Müller, or what it looks like in an innovative ecosystem of communities of worship and witness for the editors of *Sustaining Grace*.

Sabrina Müller has a rather concrete practical-theological conviction: “The concern here is that people who have not studied theology be perceived and taken seriously as representatives of lived theology, in order for them to be able to become constitutive part of ecclesial and theological praxis” (85). The central term of her book is “lived theology.” Lived theology is based in experience, a change of the self and its system of meaning “that brings the entirety of the past, present, and future into God’s presence” (85). Lived theology must support and serve everyday life; it continually changes; it empowers people; it remains in need of interpretation in daily life; it requires a conversation partner; it reveals itself plurally, multifacetedly, and sometimes controversially. Sabrina Müller makes a significant contribution to emerging debates around lived theology. Rooted in qualitative empirical research, she situates the conversation around the theologizing of people in congregations with the theological notion of the priesthood of all believers. This book also contributes to the debate around discipleship. She defines “discipleship” as more of a search movement than a know-it-all indoctrination. She sees it as “a way of life and of faith that describes a movement in searching of common priests” (18).

She uses five reference discourses to help her put the term into perspective. First, she explores the connection between common priesthood and volunteer work (5–23). Although her system of reference is the German-speaking theological landscape, her approach supports a deeper understanding in general. She says,

“Volunteer work is an active expression of the common priesthood, but only when the theological level and function of priests, namely their ability to ‘appear before God’ independently and to express themselves theologically, is not neglected” (15). Secondly, she explores religious experience as the origin of a lived theology (25–46). Third, she discusses the public realm of lived theology—digital and analogue (46–60). Fourth, she elaborates on lived theology as an aspect of empowerment (62–73). Finally, she moves on to a pastoral theology of empowerment (74–84). Müller doesn’t focus in her interpretation of lived theology on traditional congregational forms, nor does she return to parochial core congregational structures. Rather, social religious network phenomena are also the subject of this study. For in such digital places, lived theologies are emerging at a rapid pace and new leadership structures are being formed. Sabrina Müller thus adds an essential new aspect to the concept of the “common priesthood” and advocates for ordained and non-ordained people to meet on theologically equal footing. This is precisely why the question arises as to how “priestesses” and “priests” present themselves today, what their life plans are, and what their lived theology looks like, which has to change and prove itself again and again in everyday life.

Sabrina Müller’s book is captivating not only because of its multi-layered perspectives, but also because she summarizes each chapter with a picture to increase the understandability of her arguments. She is thus forced to simplify argumentation structures in a comprehensible way—which she certainly succeeds in doing.

Sustaining Grace explores the dynamic between new faith communities and denominational systems through the lens of stewardship and sustainability. *Sustaining Grace* is an outcome of a group convened by the Church Planting Initiative of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and the 1001 New Worshipping Communities program of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The editors Scott J. Hagley, Karen Rohrer, and Michael Gehrling bring together both the academy and practitioners from church judicatories, church plants, and traditional church communities to offer a theologically grounded, practical, and generative conversation.

Scott Hagley is Associate Professor of Missiology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He is the author of *Eat What Is Set Before You: A Missiology of the Congregation in Context* (2019). Karen Rohrer is the director of the Church Planting Initiative at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Before coming to Pittsburgh, she was an organizing copastor at Beacon, a new faith community in Philadelphia. Michael Gehrling serves the Presbyterian Church (USA) as an associate for the 1001 New Worshipping Communities initiative.

The editors have collected eleven essays, which are divided into three sections. The three sections are preceded by an introduction—better described as a “vision” by Scott J. Hagley, who discusses the programmatic term “Sustaining Grace” (1–20). Three sections follow: Part 1, “Sustainable Ecologies for New Church Development” (21–56); Part 2, “Cultivating Care” (57–100); and Part 3, “Leadership Development in a Sustainable Church Ecology” (101–30).

As a collection, these essays suggest that to facilitate ecologies for innovation in our current era, established congregations and new faith communities must model the sustaining grace of God to one another in creative ways. Thus, problems of sustainability are not for church planters to solve alone, but rather are related to the theologies of stewardship and the ecclesial system to which they belong (18–20). Hagley says, “Stewardship campaigns are not enough. We need systems that can institutionalize the ways in which legacy and new church developments need one another” (19). Issues of vision are not for denominational systems to theorize alone, but are given shape on their historic foundations in the creative and prophetic structures practiced in new faith communities. Scott Hagley requests, “sustaining ecologies of innovation will require practices that form and inform faithful and sustained leaders to do the work of new and inherited faith communities” (19).

I will only highlight a few inspiring insights of this book. Karen Rohrer’s essay certainly deserves attention. She investigates the question, “What practices might bring us closer to sharing all things in common across the broader church ecosystem, rather

than channeling resources toward particularly well-heeled corners and using them only in service to more highly valued forms of community?” (29–30). She provokes with the idea of a signing bonus for leaders called to convene new faith communities. She proposes this as a disruptive practice and discusses how money can create gratitude and partnership.

The four essays in the second section give a particularly impressive account of how “cultivating care” as discipleship for new church development deserves attention. The suggestions are varied and range from truth-telling and truth-hearing in communities (Michael Gehrling) to the stewardship of prayer and play, as Aisha Brooks-Lytle proposes (because they “are like partners on the dance floor,” 71). Another aspect of care is learning to listen (Kristine Stache). Stache encourages the seeing of the relationships of individuals in their particular place as vocation (81). Finally—and here the connection to Sabrina Müller’s book is certainly the most obvious—Michael Moynagh, next to two other contributors, talks about leadership development. He pleads for the democratization of church planting and concludes: “Let the Spirit free it [church planting] from the clutches of an aristocratic band of gifted specialists. Put it into the hands of ordinary Christians, as part of their twenty-first-century discipleship” (112).

These bright spots that I have been able to briefly highlight here show the range of suggestions for an innovative ecosystem that are offered. This edited book is excellent for all those involved in innovative church development, as theoretical and practical impulses are interwoven. It deals fruitfully with the conditions necessary for new faith communities to flourish. This book speaks to a central tension in the growing movement of church planting—the mutual need of and the mutual frustration between establishment leaders and innovators, conservators and risk takers.

Both books are inspiring, and one can wish them to be read and worked through!

