

Sarah Bereza. *Professional Christian: Being Fully Yourself in the Spotlight of Public Ministry*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022. 200 pages. \$25.00

As the title indicates, Sarah Bereza wrote *Professional Christian: Being Fully Yourself in the Spotlight of Public Ministry* with professional Christians in mind. With her engaging and intimate writing style, Bereza invites us to “explore the foundation for ...being fully ourselves in the spotlight of public ministry” (11). A church musician and worship leader with a PhD in music and theology, she based this book on interviews of church leaders including pastors, church staff, and denominational leaders, as well as seminary professors, chaplains, and activists. Her interviewees are mostly from North America but nevertheless represent various traditions, identities, and cultural experiences which provide a wide array of perspectives. Notable contributors include homileticians, respected preachers, and church musicians, as well as professors of theology, ministry, and Christian education. Regarding preaching in particular, the reflections of these scholars and practitioners provide insights about the importance of understanding self and the balance between the public face of the preacher and vulnerable embrace of one’s identity.

The book is organized in chapters outlining seven obstacles Christian leaders face all the while modeling the vulnerability Bereza espouses as the antidote. The end of each chapter provides “Key Takeaways” followed by a set of questions that become a guide for the reader to consider the relationship between their identity and their leadership role.

The first obstacle she tackles concerns the expectations placed on Christian leaders which she rightly argues are far higher than leaders in other professions due to the fact they “are often held to high moral standards as role models...” (35). Second, she explores some concepts such as authenticity, sincerity, and the multiple roles of a leader—all of which complicate a leader’s public presentation of self. Her reframe through the lens of vulnerability provides a “conceptual framework” she will use throughout the book to delve into what it means to be our true selves in the realm of public ministry (3).

Third, Bereza addresses the inherent barriers to full revelation in communication and obstacles when communicating through social media. Fourth, she discusses the balance between self-revelation and appropriate boundaries. Fifth, she encourages leaders to read their context when planning a message so they can bring their full identity to the moment while also enhancing the chances of their message being heard. Sixth, she shares the importance of acknowledging personal vulnerabilities without allowing them to obscure the message. And seventh, she explains the difference between performance within the role of Christian leadership as a means of caring for others and performance as theater. She suggests that even though there are times when a leader may not feel completely present or emotionally available, they can still trust that through a framework of vulnerability and willingness to care for the other, the Holy Spirit will allow their true self to shine through.

Bereza explains that this work originated with her research into “how vocalists communicate their personal beliefs while leading worship” (9). Expanding her research, she seeks to reveal the difficulties that arise when a leader proclaims the message they have been given based on their values and experiences. Ultimately, she wants leaders to understand how their “full self relates to the incomplete picture that other people have of you in public ministry...[and] develop the tools you need to engage with the challenges and opportunities stemming from this reality” (5). She states upfront that this book is not meant to engage the

reader in deep “interior work” of self-discovery but rather assumes the reader is already engaged in these practices of personal growth (15).

One of the most compelling aspects of Bereza’s work is her transparency about her own context and a clarity of her ongoing process of self-discovery that models a deep reflexivity for the reader. Through this lens she achieves her stated goals and provides a book that is useful for faith leaders within many contexts, especially for those who are new to ministry. *Professional Christian* offers both theoretical concepts and practical tools which will enhance faith formation and engagement with practical ministry. The concepts and the questions posed could lend themselves to worship teams as they grow together and develop into leaders. They would also be applicable for seminary classes in leadership, faith formation, or practical theological disciplines such as preaching and worship classes. Through the exercises, preaching and worship professors can help students discover their self-understanding of the role of preacher and worship leader, become cognizant of the ways their message can be heard within their contexts, and articulate how all the aspects of their lives and experiences come into their hermeneutic, liturgical theology and praxis, and their homiletic.

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