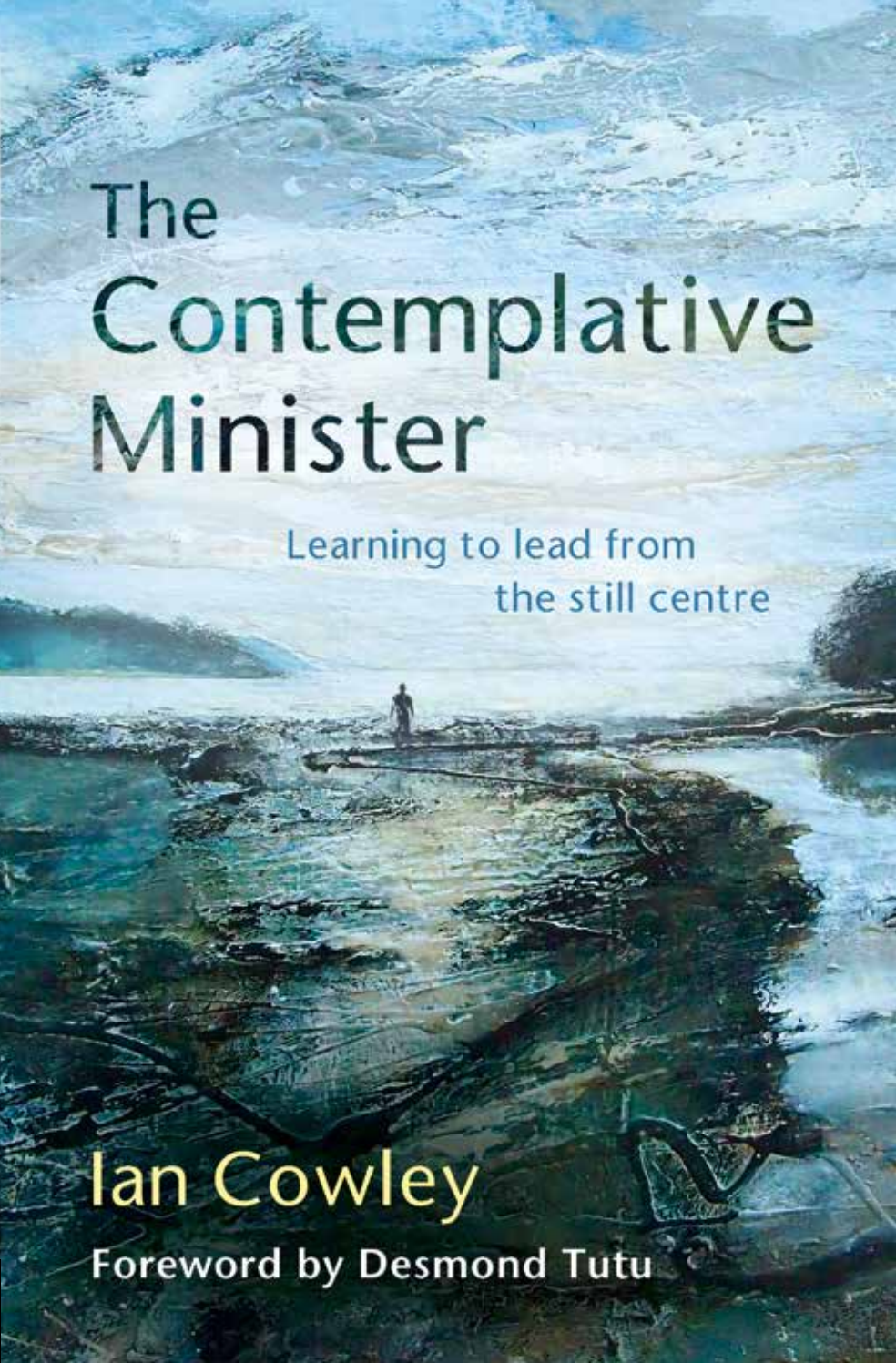
The
Contemplative
Minister
Learning to lead from
the still centre
Ian Cowley
Foreword by Desmond Tutu

The Contemplative Minister

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The Contemplative Minister

Learning to lead from the still centre

Ian Cowley

Contents

Foreword

THIS BOOK is concerned with the central vocation of those who are called to the ordained ministry. As priests, we are called to be people in whom others may see God. There is a great hunger for God among many people today. This is a hunger which is not just for things about God, for sermons, books, talks and videos, but for God himself. A contemplative minister is someone who is called first of all to God and to his heart of love, so that the world may also know God and his love for all that he has made.

God is the source of all life. In enabling people to see God, we enable them to know the One who is the giver of life, who is from eternity to eternity. Genesis 1:1 says, 'In the beginning, God…' We can't conceive of the beginning. 'But who made God?' ask our little darlings when we speak of these things to the children in our churches and schools. There never was a time when God was not. Our language is totally inadequate for this; it cannot contain the infinite mystery of God. Yet God calls those through whom he will make himself known to a hungry world. This is the wisdom of God, and it is our great privilege to be those through whom others may see and know the love of God.

In following our vocation to know God and to make him known, we have to live with paradox and mystery. God is infinite, and we are finite. 'My thoughts are not your thoughts,' says the Lord in Isaiah 55:8. In heaven we will want to tell everybody all the time our joy at our discovery of the divine nature. It will be just like being in love.

As priests we are exposed to the paradoxes of being familiar with God, and also the dangers of familiarity with

holy things. In this great calling we are continually walking on holy ground. We ought to take off our shoes like Moses when God called him from the fire of the burning bush. We are both drawn to God and held back from him, like a moth before a lamp, like Peter before the great catch of fish. Peter cried out, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' (Luke 5:8). In God we encounter a mystery tremendous and fascinating. It both attracts us and pushes us back; it is too great for us. Yet God is continually offering us revelations of himself every day. Our response, like the wise men before the child Jesus, is to fall down and worship.

It is a grace and a mercy that God veils himself. When you have been in a dark dungeon, you can't rush out into bright sunlight and gaze on the sun. God is transcendent and he is also immanent. He has the whole world in his hands. God never leaves himself without witness. Now he has spoken fully and finally in the Son. 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father,' says Jesus (John 14:9). He is the one who searches for the one lost sheep, which is probably not a lily-white lamb, but an obstreperous, dishevelled, rebellious sheep.

You don't need to impress God. You exist only because God has made you and loves you. God accepts us because he loves us. Think of a sick child whose mother sits up all night by their bed. So often we feel inadequate. Could God really love me like this? We don't feel accepted, and instead we feel anxious and insecure. Then we become dogmatic, bossy, hogging the limelight, hyper-sensitive to criticism. God gave Jesus all the praise and glory he needed. In knowing that God loves and accepts us, we find true freedom.

Friends, God loves you, from all eternity. You are not an accident; you are part of the divine plan. Every individual is unique, and God desires the love and contribution of every

individual, like the triangle in the orchestra. Can you accept that you are accepted? There is true freedom in this, even if your neighbours disagree with you and oppose you.

God created us because he wanted to, not because he had to. Creation is the result of the overflowing of God's love. Creation is the object of the divine love which was, and is, and will be. This means that all of creation has an immeasurable value. Jesus says, 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30), and yet I can wash the feet of my disciples.

For Jesus the cross was a leap of faith. Jesus walked the earth with the proper self-assurance of a human being, which comes from knowing that God loves us. This is as near to us as anything could be, but so often it doesn't sink into the very core of our being.

This brings an end to the obsessive dependence on the opinions of others. The cross is the mark of our discipleship. Suffering is the badge of all our tribe, as Shylock says in *The Merchant of Venice*. Jesus said that we would be hated as he was hated. We are going to share in the cross. 'Christ was trained in a carpenter's shop; and we persist in preferring a confectioner's shop,' said Evelyn Underhill (*The School of Charity*, Longmans, Green and Co, 1934, p. 40). A cross is an instrument of torture. If a church does not suffer, can it really claim to be the church of God?

If our churches are comfortable, we must worry. We are called to identification with those who are suffering; with the poor, the weak, the broken-hearted. The church has spoken too long from the perspective of the rich. This is what Jesus taught. Martyrdom means witnessing. God has given us in South Africa the privilege of witnessing, and it has been very costly. What do you do when so many of the laws of your country are unjust? What is the calling of the church when

society keeps mixing up what is morally right and what is politically or economically expedient?

God calls us as his ministers to be witnesses, and he calls us to be faithful, not successful. We have a wonderful gospel if only we would believe it. God's love and mercy is so great. Let us not crush ourselves with harshness. We are not here to impress God. We are here to express praise and thanks for the love that God has showered upon us.

Let us relax. We leave all the problems and anxieties, the tensions, hurts and inadequacies, at the foot of the cross. We offer our joys and triumphs to be transmuted to God's praise and glory. God calls each of us to be a kind of Simon of Cyrene, carrying the cross of Jesus. This is the mystery of our calling, the privilege that is greater than anything we can put into words. God's love has been given to us, to be poured out in serving his beloved world.

God, you endow us with such infinite value.
I can only fall down and worship you.
Thou art God whose arms sustain the world.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Introduction

WHEN I WAS a parish priest in the Diocese of Natal in South Africa, the Bishop of Natal invited Archbishop Desmond Tutu to spend a day with the clergy of our diocese. Archbishop Desmond spoke about events that were taking place in South Africa at that troubled time. He spoke about the role of the Church, and about the confidence we have in God, who will ultimately triumph over all injustice, violence and evil. Desmond also spoke to us about prayer, and about the priority of prayer in our lives as ministers of the Church. He said, 'Our people will not expect that we will be experts in drains or in finance, but they will expect us to be experts in prayer. And that is what they should expect from us.'

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is an outstanding example of a contemplative minister. He is a man deeply rooted in prayer and spiritual discipline, with a passionate concern for justice and for all that hinders God's good and loving purposes for his people. Being a contemplative minister is not likely to mean living a quiet and stress-free life. This is not a call to sit in the garden all day watching the flowers grow, although there may well be times for that. Becoming a contemplative minister is about being deeply rooted in God, and thus sharing his concern and compassion for all that he has made.

'Deep calls to deep' says Psalm 42:7. Perhaps the most important quality which is needed in Christian ministry in contemporary Western culture is depth. Richard Foster writes in his book *Celebration of Discipline*[1], 'In contemporary society our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in "muchness" and

"manyness", he will rest satisfied.' We are a distracted and often weary generation, driving ourselves on from one complex set of demands to the next. There is no time for depth, because we are too busy with other things. Many of us know that this is not how we want to live, and we long for a way for our lives to be different. But how?

These questions have a particular urgency and relevance for all those involved in Christian ministry. For those who are seen by others to be God's ministers and the instruments of his peace, this is a tough call. Many Christian ministers occupy a dual identity; the public persona of the robed and respectable minister of religion, and the private world of struggle, frailty and weakness. For a considerable number the outcome is an unequal struggle to live up to seemingly impossible demands, leading sooner or later to burnout or bailout.

There was a time where Christian ministry offered, for those who were so inclined, the opportunity to spend one's life in the study of God's word, in reading and reflection, in prayer and sermon preparation, and in the quiet and faithful pastoral care of a community. The world has changed, and with it most of the expectations that govern Church appointments. These days there are very few jobs in full-time ministry which do not require a heroic combination of stamina, multitasking and change management.

I was recently asked to provide a reference for a friend who was applying for an appointment as rector of a group of small rural churches in a beautiful part of England. There were eleven questions on the form that I was asked to complete. The questions asked me to write about the candidate's gifts and weaknesses, and their ability to relate to people of different backgrounds and ages. Another question asked, 'How would you rate the candidate's ability to cope with pressure, a heavy

workload and balancing the demands of work and personal life?' There were also questions about the ability to cope with conflict and whether the candidate had a sense of humour. There was nothing about prayer or prayerfulness.

I suspect that this reflects the reality of much contemporary full-time Christian ministry. How then are clergy and ministers to sustain and nurture their spiritual lives in the midst of a busy and demanding church or team of churches? The short answer is that it not easy. Ann Morisey says, 'I think the clergy task has become unsustainable.'[2] From my own experience of working with those in ordained ministry in the Anglican Diocese of Salisbury, I know that there are many who are looking for a better way of serving Christ than the relentless busyness and pressure which has become the norm for so many.

This book is about a different way of being in ministry. It is counter-cultural, because all authentic Christian discipleship is at its heart counter-cultural. Christians are called to be salt and light in our world: salt, which gives savour and prevents decay, and light, which drives out darkness and enables us to see things as they truly are. There is much in our world, and even in our church structures, that does not easily accept or understand a contemplative model for those in ministry. But for many, this is not just a matter of differing models of professional ministerial formation, but a matter of sheer survival. The Church needs to recognise anew in every age what it is asking of those it sets aside and ordains for the task of pastoral ministry and leadership. For the Anglican Church this is set out in the services of ordination. The Book of Common Prayer provides a particularly rich and enduring template for the meaning of ordained ministry as understood by the Church through many generations.

In the service of the ordering (or ordination) of priests or presbyters in the Book of Common Prayer, the bishop reads his charge to the candidates immediately before they are asked to make their ordination promises. He exhorts them to have in remembrance 'into how high a dignity, and to how weighty an office and charge ye are called: that is to say, to be messengers, watchmen, and stewards of the Lord.' Then, having described the wholly consecrated life and work to which the ordained person is called, the bishop says, 'We have good hope that… you have clearly determined, by God's grace, to give yourselves wholly to this office, whereunto it hath pleased God to call you: so that, as much as lieth in you, you will apply yourselves wholly to this one thing, and draw all your cares and studies this way; and that you will continually pray to God the Father…'

These are strong words, of great seriousness and consequence. Every time I come back to them, I find them deeply moving and impressive. These words continue to speak of what ordination means, for me personally, and for those with whom I work who are exploring the possibility of ordained ministry for themselves.

What does this mean in the context of Western culture in the 21st century? How do we make the connections between the enduring and still compelling call to pastoral and priestly ministry, and the demands of a world of relentless activity and the unlimited availability of information? Can we who are ordained ministers of the Gospel still see ourselves as having a calling to be 'holy men and women' who are able to point others to the grace and presence of the living God because we ourselves are living in first-hand knowledge of this truth and reality? These questions are the reason that this book has been written.

Part One

Vocation

Chapter 1

Being and doing

'I will not give you counsel, saying do this or do that. For not in doing or contriving, nor in choosing between this course and another can I avail; but only in knowing what was and what is and in part also what shall be.'

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*[3]

IN THE MID-1970s, when I was a student in South Africa, I first began to explore a call to full-time ordained ministry in the Anglican Church. This was not something that I had ever envisaged as a possible career choice. It was not a possibility that had seemed even remotely attractive to me as a young person leaving school. During my student days at the University of Natal I was drawn into the life and work of a number of university Christian organisations, and I began to encounter something which was profoundly attractive and life-changing. I saw a new community, an alternative society that at its centre was radically different from the established order of apartheid South Africa. I increasingly knew that this was what I wanted to do with my life: to be part of a Church which would be the hope of the nation, the salt and light in a land that desperately needed justice and transformation.

I made an appointment to see the local bishop, Kenneth Hallowes, at his office in Pietermaritzburg, Natal. Bishop Ken already knew me well, and he knew that God was calling me. He made the decision to accept me as an ordination candidate

of the diocese, and agreed that I should travel to England to train at one of the theological colleges there. Shortly before I left for England I went to see Bishop Ken again. I suspect he knew that I was a serious minded-young man, determined to make a difference by offering my life in the service of Christ. So he said to me before I left his office that day, 'Remember, Ian, being comes before doing.'

Those words have stayed with me and have been increasingly important to me over the years: 'Being comes before doing.' I have wrestled often, in different times and situations, with the balance between being and doing. My natural instinct is to be doing, to be making things happen, getting things done. I quickly discovered, though, that unless I made time for being, I began to run into difficulty. I would find a weariness and a frustration rising up in me to the point that it threatened to overwhelm me. I found myself like a swimmer in the open sea, only just keeping my head above the waves and the deep water. Surely this was not how it was meant to be.

In the years leading up to the birth of a democratic South Africa in 1994, we went through some exceptionally testing and traumatic times. During those days many of us who were part of the Church in South Africa found ourselves on the frontline of working for justice and reconciliation, in prophetic witness and in care for the poor and the suffering. No one can live through times such as those without experiencing a lot of stress and pain. Following Christ was never going to be easy or comfortable. How do we survive in ministry when the going gets really tough? I knew that my greatest need was to be more and more deeply rooted in the unfailing and unconditional love of God which is offered to us in Christ.

Gradually my understanding of God's call to me as a priest and minister in the Anglican Church has changed. During

the 1980s, when I was rector of a church in a suburban setting on the edge of Pietermaritzburg, I came to realise very clearly that I could not do the work of ministry unless I was, first and foremost, a person of prayer. Prayer had to become the priority of my life. To know God, and to live in relationship with God, was my first call. This had to come first, even before growing the Church or serving the poor or standing for justice. I would only be able to sustain the work to which I knew I had been called if I lived each day in active dependence and trust in God.

Indeed, I could see from those around me that the cost of taking on the work of being an activist in the service of the Lord and of justice and the poor could be very high. In such demanding contexts, unless we are deeply sustained by the resources which only Christ can give us, we are all too likely to lose our way, and perhaps even lose our vocation. Joan Chittister wrote, 'We have to remember that work is not prayer. It is at best an extension of prayer. We fool ourselves if we argue that we don't have to pray because we work so hard or our work is so good. Those who work without prayer—no matter how good the work, no matter how sincere the minister—soon dry up inside. They have nothing left to give. Or, the work fails and they have no faith to sustain them, no perspective to encourage them.'[4]

In the Diocese of Salisbury I help to lead regular days for those in ministry entitled 'The Contemplative Minister'. The starting point for all that I teach on these days is this: the heart of priestly ministry is the call to an ever deepening relationship of love for God, to lead others into that relationship and to enable them to respond to God in loving service and mission. The heart of our call, very simply, is to know God and to teach our people to pray and to respond to

God's call. Being comes before doing. Ministry is primarily about who you are, not about what you do.

The question that many of us are struggling with is this: how do we live this out? The demands of our role and the expectations placed upon us by others and by ourselves drive us on until we cry out to find a better way of being in ministry. Many times, in the midst of these pressures and demands, I have tried somehow to hold to the promise of Jesus in Matthew 11:28: 'Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'

In working this out, it has been important for me to be reminded that Jesus says in Luke 9:25, 'What does it profit someone if they gain the whole world and lose or forfeit their true self?' My experience of seeking to live a life of following Jesus is that Jesus is calling me to discover and to become my true self. It is only in becoming my true self that I will find the rest that Jesus promises. Yet the responsibilities of public ministry can make this very difficult. Thomas Merton, the great contemplative writer and thinker, wrote about the tension between the true self and the false self. Merton also wrote a chapter entitled 'Being and Doing',[5] and he points to the connection between finding my true self and finding the right balance for each of us in our being and our doing.

What is the false self? Merton identifies the false self as the person we wish to present to the world, and the person we want the world to revolve around.[6] Richard Rohr, in his book *Adam's Return*, says, 'Our false self is who we *think* we are. It is our mental self-image and social agreement, which most people spend their whole lives living up to—or down to. It is all a fictional creation. It will die when we die. It is endlessly fragile, needy, and insecure, and it is what we are largely dealing with in the secular West.'[7]

The false self is the part of us that is most concerned with outward appearances, with appearing strong, or self-confident or successful or busy.

If my main concern in any situation is 'What are people thinking of me? How do I appear to them?' then it is likely that my false self is playing a major role. In parish ministry we can easily find ourselves constantly responding to the pressures of meeting other peoples' expectations. Inevitably some people want to see their minister keeping busy, working hard, growing the church, visiting the church members, producing results. These are some of the expectations that constantly attend the lives of those in public ministry.

We also have to deal with the pressure of our own expectations of ourselves. Many of us are in full-time ministry at least partly because of our own personal history. This may well include a need to be needed or to be seen to 'be good'. It is important that we become familiar with the inner expectations which drive us and make us who we are. These may well be inherited from important figures in our childhood and youth, our parents, our teachers, even our friends and siblings.

Finding our true selves means moving away from those parts of ourselves that are mainly concerned with proving ourselves to others, whether they be our parishioners and colleagues or figures from our past who may even no longer be alive. Christ calls us to freedom. 'You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,' says Jesus (John 8:32). In becoming my true self I am set free in Christ to be the person I truly am, the real Ian. I am set free from all that hinders me in being close to God who loves me unconditionally and accepts me as the person that he made me to be.

In his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton

describes how so much of our energy can be used up in trying to maintain the agenda and the demands of the false self. Merton writes, 'Thus I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honour, knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface.'[8] Merton's life as a Trappist monk and hermit points us to our own need to look beyond the incessant demands and expectations of others and of our society, and to seek the depths that lie within. However, Merton is also clear that we find our true selves only through love and selflessness, and in relationship and in communion with others.

A better way

The false self is preoccupied with outward appearance, with what other people think about us and about what we are doing. Success and achievement become important because they seem to define our identity and give us a sense of significance. Gradually many of us discover how much of this is hollow, and increasingly we see it for the illusion that it is. No matter how hard we try to fill our lives with more experiences, more achievements, more power and influence, somehow we are no closer to finding real and lasting value or significance. Prestige and influence in society are fleeting, and their pursuit pits us against one another and makes us compare and compete, to very little real and lasting effect.

Surely there is a better way, especially for those set aside by

the Church to live the example of Christ. A few years ago the Bishop of Salisbury invited Timothy Radcliffe, the Dominican priest, writer and teacher, to spend Lent in the diocese, and to meet with small groups of clergy to reflect on important issues in our vocation and ministry. Timothy Radcliffe asked us, 'How did we get from sabbath to the Protestant work ethic?' He spoke to us about the violence of busyness and rush, and said that it is important for us to be seen to rest with God. 'We are those who believe that salvation is through grace, not works,' he said. He reminded us of the importance of 'divine leisure': hanging around with God. Timothy said that we need to remember who we are in Christ and refuse to be workaholics.

David Stancliffe, at that time the Bishop of Salisbury, reminded us of the words of St Irenaeus (c.112–c.202), 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive.' David Stancliffe then said to the gathering of clergy, 'Our words will only have authority if we are alive. The question is, "How may you have a life?"'

Becoming a contemplative minister is about taking this question seriously. At the heart of this vision of ministry is the call to become human beings who have discovered what it is to be fully alive in Christ. Our priority will become finding that which is life-giving for us and for those whom we serve. It is also about turning away from all that is life-draining and life-destroying for us and for those around us. We will have to face the insidious demands of the false self, and be willing to choose life and freedom instead of choosing the pursuit of success, pleasure and significance. We will need to be willing to get to grips with the deeper realities of personal transformation, so that we may find our true selves in Christ. Then, by our being in Christ, our doing will speak to those around us of life and peace.

At one time Christian ministry offered the opportunity to spend your life in the study of God's word, in reading and reflection, in prayer and sermon preparation, and in the faithful pastoral care of a community. These days there are very few jobs in full-time ministry which do not require a heroic combination of stamina, multi-tasking and change management. Drawing on his experience of developing and leading relevant training programmes, Ian Cowley assesses the stresses and pressures of the job and shows how to grow into a 'contemplative minister', prioritising a relationship of deepening love with God.

Ian Cowley is Vocations and Spirituality Coordinator for the Diocese of Salisbury and has led and developed 'The Contemplative Minister' programme in the Diocese. He has also written *The Transformation Principle* (Kingsway, 2002), *Going Empty Handed* (Monarch, 1996) and *A People of Hope* (Highland, 1993), and has been a parish priest in South Africa, Cambridge and Peterborough.

An honest and encouraging exploration to help us rediscover our still centre and dependence on God. It goes deep into the heart of who we are and what we believe about ourselves as well as about God.
The Rt Revd Nicholas Holtam, Bishop of Salisbury

This is not all about 'oughts' and 'shoulds' but about finding a humane and Christ-like way of prioritising in the midst of constant demands.
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