



Open Secrets: A Memoir of Faith and Discovery

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In the tradition of Garrison Keillor, *Open Secrets* captures the friendships, rivalries, and rumors of small-town life by chronicling the lives of the citizens of a small Midwestern community through the eyes of a young minister.

Fresh out of divinity school and bursting with enthusiasm, Richard Lischer found himself assigned to a small conservative church in an economically depressed town in southern Illinois. It's an awkward marriage at best--a young man with a Ph.D. in theology, full of ideas and ambitions, determined to improve his parish and bring it into the twenty-first century, and a community that is "as tightly sealed as a jar of home-canned pickles." In *Open Secrets*, Lischer tells not only his own story but also the story of New Cana and its inhabitants. With charm, openness, and humor, Lischer brings to life the clash of cultures and personalities that marks his pastoral tenure, including his own doubts, as well as those of his parishioners, that a twenty-eight-year-old suburban-raised liberal can deal with the troubled marriages, alcoholism, teen sex, inadequate farm subsidies, and other concerns of the conservative, tightly knit community. But the inhabitants of New Cana--lovable, deeply flawed, imperfect people who stick together--open their arms to him in their own way, and the result is a colorful, poignant comedy of small-town life and all it has to offer.

Open Secrets: A Memoir of Faith and Discovery Details

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From Reader Review Open Secrets: A Memoir of Faith and Discovery for online ebook

Sumangali Morhall says

This is the story of a Lutheran pastor taking his first post in a rural American town, fresh out of seminary, believing himself amply equipped for the task, if not somewhat above it. As the community inadvertently gives him one character-building challenge after another, Lischer realises the true complexity of his role, and observes his own transformation with candour and humility. I often found myself somewhere between tears and laughter, frequently thinking, "poor fellow! whatever next?," as I witnessed him reconciling his training, his conscience, and his earnest faith. That which seems outwardly banal is turned into a study of human strength and goodness, as heart-warming as it is eye-opening.

Rev. Linda says

From inside front cover: "Open Secrets is Richard Lischer's story of his early career as a Lutheran minister. Fresh out of divinity school and full of enthusiasm, Lischer found himself assigned to a small conservative church in an economically depressed town in southern Illinois. This was far from what this overly enthusiastic and optimistic young man expected. The town was bleak, poor, and clearly "not" a step on his path to a brilliant career.

It's an awkward marriage at best, a young man with a Ph.D. in theology, full of ideas and ambitions, determined to improve his parish and bring them into the twenty-first century, and a community that is "as tightly sealed as a jar of home-canned pickles." In their own way, they welcome him and his family, even though they think he's "got bigger fish to fry." Thus begins Richard Lischer's first year as a pastor: bringing communion to the sick (but forgetting to bring the wafers); marrying two unlikely couples--a pregnant teenager and her boyfriend, and two people who can't stop fighting.

Often he doesn't understand his congregation, and sometimes they don't understand him; for instance, why does his wife hire a baby-sitter and instead of leaving, put on her bathing suit, grab a stack of novels, and hide from the kids? Or why can't Pastor Lischer see how important it is for a woman with little money to buy an elaborate coffin to bury her husband in?

There are also the moments of grace, when pastor and parishioner unite for a common goal: when he asks for prayers for his infant son, and can feel everyone in the congregation ministering to him; when old hurts are put aside to help a desperate young woman finish college and raise her baby; or when he helps save a woman from dying of a drug overdose.

In Open Secrets Lischer tells not only his own story but also the story of New Cana and all of its inhabitants--lovable, deeply flawed, imperfect people that stick together. With his sharp eye and keen wit, Lischer perfectly captures the comedy of small town life with all of its feuds, rumors, scandals, and friendships. In the end he learns to appreciate not only the life New Cana has to offer, but also the people who have accepted him, at last, as part of themselves

Ron says

This book may be one of a kind. It's a memoir of a young parish minister accepting his first call to a Lutheran church in rural Illinois, and although there's a reference to the classic "Diary of a Country Priest" at

the outset, any comparison with Bernanos' dying, saint-like character ends there on page one. Lischer, schooled in what seems to have been the excessively conservative Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church, finds his 1960s liberal sensibilities set on a collision course with the deeply rooted religious and cultural traditions of his farming congregants. If there's anything classic about this, it's his role as a fish out of water.

This may sound like grounds for some modestly Lutheran hilarity along the lines of Garrison Keillor, but Lischer has other things in mind. In chapter after chapter, he reveals how he discovers the bonds of community that have held his church families together for generations, and in his three years there, while he never really finds himself at home with them, they help him learn a great deal about what the parish ministry really means - a kind of mutual support that he had not been prepared for in his years at the seminary.

Lischer has a wonderful gift as a writer. He takes his time to find the right words, the right metaphor to bring his subject to life, and like a well-crafted sermon, they illuminate the everyday world, if only briefly, with an other-worldly light. When he and his family leave at the end of his tenure, there is a sadness of parting - and nostalgia for a time gone by - that accompanies the reader long after the last page has been turned.

Rob says

This book is a must read for anyone who has ever been a young, inexperienced pastor in a small church. It is pure gold. Even though my own context was much different than Richard Lischer's, I could relate to so many of the stories he told.

Matthew Hilbert says

This book is an autobiographical tale of a bright young seminarian who leaves school ready to change the world and winds up being assigned to pastor a tiny country church in the middle of nowhere. Lischer honestly describes his struggles with his own pride, unmet expectations and failures as he pastors his first church. He goes into this small town thinking he has so much to offer to them when in reality these simple country folk are the ones who truly show him what it means to follow Jesus.

This book really struck a chord with me as a current seminarian headed towards pastoral ministry. I've often struggled with my own pride and no that I also have many unrealistic expectations about what I hope my future ministry will be. But as Lischer points out in his book, you don't have to be a mega-church pastor or New York Times Bestselling author in order to have a meaningful ministry. Lischer portrays the beauty and significance of ministering to others, no matter where that happens to be.

Jonelle says

I'm leading a discussion on spiritual memoirs for a Sunday School class soon and I decided to read memoirs written by pastors. This was the second book that I've read on the topic. Lischer, a Lutheran who now teaches at Duke, recounts the story of his first church in a rural, conservative midwest town in Illinois in the 60's. It was a very revealing story about many of those in his congregation, and really seemed to showcase all the things that he would have, or should have done differently. I found myself wondering if he used the real names of his congregants. Of course, if he didn't, I'm sure that they could figure out who all the characters were anyway, but I might be a little angry with him!

Alex Stroshine says

Beautiful, precious, and moving - this might have just become my favourite memoir. Richard Lischer recounts his near three-year tenure in a rural conservative Lutheran church in the early-mid 1970s as a young, progressively-minded pastor fresh out of school with a PhD. Lischer draws out astonishing and poignant glimpses of grace in the lives of his parishioners who are beset with all manner of personal problems and flaws but who are tightly-knit and committed to one another. Highly recommended.

Jennifer Roberts says

This memoir of a pastor's first years serving a parish was so moving. As someone who is currently in seminary this book was an honest and accurate picture of the joys, struggles, and moments of life in the parish. Reading this book gave me excitement, hope, and some caution for what it looks like to walk the journey of faith with people, not only in the parish, but also in the wider community!

I would highly recommend this book for anyone (clergy, parishioner, or those not involved in a faith community at all). It was a quick read because I could not put it down and wanted to know what was going to happen next!

Autumn says

Slow start, but it's like you can picture the characters and the place...loved Lischer's memoir. So many reminders of a church my dad pastored for many years. Absolutely beautiful.

Liralen says

When gossip serves the gospel, it exhibits historical, moral, and pastoral dimensions. It works like this: Let's say the teenage baby-sitter comes home from the parsonage where she has been minding Pastor and Mrs. Lischer's two kids, and reports to her grandmother that Mrs. Lischer does not really leave the property when she hires a baby-sitter. What she does is she puts on a bathing suit, takes a lawn chair and a stack of books out behind the garage facing the cemetery, and *hides* from the kids for hours on end while she reads books. Not only that, her poor daughter Sarah plays a game she calls *Dissertation* in which she puts her dolls down for a nap and then she pretends to read books. (97)

Wonderfully thoughtful memoir of Lischer's first days as a minister. New Cana was the opposite of the community Lischer hoped for: he wanted a big church, a vibrant one, somewhere he could make his name as a minister. New Cana, by contrast, was small and insular, a fading congregation, the kind of place where new ministers cut their teeth before leaving for greener pastures.

Lischer wrote this long after his time in New Cana, and the book is better for it: he'd had a lot of time to reflect, and also to mature. He had the confidence and the emotional security (for lack of a better term) to examine not only the situations he encountered but also how he was and wasn't prepared to deal with them.

The quotation I pulled above really has very little to do with this review; if anything, it's only an example of how Lischer and her family felt like misfits in this community where he was meant to provide guidance. Mostly, though, I just loved the humour in it. The book is full of that sort of humour, and of stories that illustrate his points well.

Like those who came before him, Lischer left New Cana when his contract was up: it wasn't a match made in heaven, and his yearnings for somewhere bigger (and his more general ambition) hadn't abated. But there's ambivalence in Lischer's telling of that decision: he was yet another person who chose to leave, and yet he could not bring himself to stay, and perhaps he was not the right person to stay anyway. Lots of things to ponder.

Ian Caveny says

Memoir and biography are such tricky genres. To be able to tell an effective story while still effectively communicating the "Big Story" - lessons learned, pains earned - of a person's life takes narrative artistry, for one, and poetic vision, for another. It is not simply enough, for instance, to recall a direct diegesis of the subject's life-events - else it becomes journalism - nor to provide thorough exegesis of every moment - else it becomes banal sentimentalism or (worse yet!) propaganda. Rather, one must do the precise same narrative art as a novelist, weaving words together for emotional and aesthetic effect, with the vision of a poet, observing in the mundane the elements of the unique, the powerful, the spiritual, even.

Richard Lischer, of course, enters into memoir with one major strength on his side: he is a Lutheran, and, thus, he is Sacramental, and there is something special about the kind of person who looks a bread and wine or water and identifies it as something special when it is mixed with the Word, as Martin Luther would say. Not all Sacramental Christians (e.g. Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Orthodox, etc.) become poetic because of their views on the Sacrament, but some do, and when they do, the whole world is transformed in the light of the notion that God manifests His Grace in visible signs combining the mundanity of the world with the supernatural power of the Word.

Open Secrets is a unique little delight of a book. For me, it is a story about Home, even though for Lischer it is one about being "far-from" Home, so to speak. The memoir follows his first pastoral appointment at a small Lutheran congregation in "New Cana," IL. (Based on Lischer's directions and descriptions - and a little help from *The Alton Telegraph* - my wife and I were able to determine its location with precision; the town is about thirty minutes from where I grew up.) Lischer, a progressive intellectual who, at one juncture, teaches at an "illegal seminary" for ordaining women, finds himself in the tradition-entrenched world of rural Illinois, amidst farmers and working-class folks whose largest theological crises are not on how to read the Book of I Timothy, but, instead, in which direction to increase the cemetery plot or how to refinish the wooden floor of the church.

There's a sense of pastoral honesty in the work, an intimate recollection of failures and "successes" (there were times in which Lischer would do or say something, and my wife and I would gasp and say "He did what?!"; of course, being a pastor in the 70's had some fundamental differences from our current day and age), and a large dose of the humility necessary to learn how to care for people who are far different from

you. In that sense, Lischer is, in every possible way, a pastor for us in our day and age of dichotomized communities, and the story he has to tell is one familiar to anyone who has done some amount of missionary work - of building trust with an unknown community, learning their social and cultural standards and values, and developing a liturgy that is legitimately "theirs."

Of course, unlike all the copious texts of missiology coming from today's theologians and thought-leaders, Lischer's missional experience is largely one of humiliating (re: humbling) disaster. My personal favorite (re: the one I found most distressing) was when Lischer stands up against an avaricious funeral director, only to have his own cemetery committee turn on him.

But this is better medicine for the modern pastor (and for the modern parishioner) than page-upon-page of "how-to" manuals that are crafted (so it would seem) for the precise purpose of avoiding humiliation. Is it any surprise, given such resources available, that we see "big pastors" and "big churches" (and even "small pastors" and "small churches") implode due to the ever-mounting pressure of avoiding humiliation? Lischer, instead, is baptized into humiliation, thrown into a world outside of his control, and confronted by a stubborn people who may well have more to teach their pastor than he has to teach them.

I cannot express how vital I think a book like *Open Secrets* is for the modern Church, especially in the West. Lischer's wisdom (and the sources of his wisdom) are a grace and a blessing, and his frank pastoral experiences reveal a whole network of the "work of the pastor" that are far more Christ-like than our typical evangelical understandings (i.e. "pastor as teacher-preacher"). He also makes for a good companion with Marilynne Robinson's fictional John Ames in *Gilead*; both intellectual pastors with high theological aspirations, but Lischer strives to be more a pastor while Ames strives to be more a theologian. It is needless to say that the memoir account is more realistic.

All future pastors ought to read *Open Secrets*, despite its poorly-designed cover (downstate Illinois doesn't look like that **AT ALL**) and strange choice in title, because it is one of the few honest written works about pastoral ministry. Put simply, it needs to be required reading for every M.Div. program in the country; this is far more important than yet another systematic theology.

Erin Goettsch says

A churchy/theological memoir that reads like a novel. This is far lovelier than I was expecting.

Bill says

Powerful book about a new pastor's first church. Insightful reflections on the struggles, joys, and adventures of a first church as a pastor out of seminary. Highly recommended for pastors or anyone who wants a little window into the life of a pastor.

Heather says

I really enjoyed this book. It is about a pastor at his first call to a parish in southern IL. He's just spent the past 12 years or so studying theology and getting his PhD. Finally, here he is in a real-life ministry situation,

and it's nothing like he dreamed. But he does a great job of writing about flawed people, telling stories, and showing what down-and-dirty ministry looks like. It's not glamorous, but it's beautiful in its own way. I was disappointed to hear that this pastor was at least temporarily teaching at a seminary that served pastors who walked out of the Concordia St Louis seminary, and that could explain why this author is now teaching at Duke Seminary and doesn't seem to be a Lutheran pastor anymore. (The congregational president was right, by the way, in being upset that the pastor didn't talk to him about it first before doing this!) But this is a very peripheral part of the book and doesn't really take away from the beauty of the whole. The pastor appreciates the Sacraments, the liturgy, and ministering to the sick and dying, and that offsets the small negative that is in the book.

Joe Szklarski says

Amazing book!

As I myself am stepping into a small church, I could relate to much in this book. His honesty was refreshing, and his profound reflection on life is inspiring.
