

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Living Reminder

by

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In *The Living Reminder*, written especially for those in the ministry, Henri Nouwen explores the essential connection between ministry and spirituality, service and prayer. He describes the minister as a living remembrance of Jesus Christ for his or her community. Like the book, this guide may resonate most with those involved in active ministry, but anyone could use the questions to reflect on Nouwen's spiritually nourishing words.

PROLOGUE

EXPLORING CONNECTIONS

1. According to Nouwen, how do many ministers separate ministry from spirituality? How might you have done this in your work?
2. Have you ever considered your work in ministry in terms of serving as a remembrance or a reminder of

Jesus Christ (p. 13)? How well do you feel this idea describes your work?

PART 1 THE MINISTER AS A HEALING REMINDER

1. “It is no exaggeration to say that the suffering we most frequently encounter in the ministry is a suffering of memories” (pp. 20–21). Has this been true in your ministry? If so, how have you helped others deal with this suffering?
2. Nouwen writes that good memories are often present in physical reminders such as rings, trophies, or photos, but painful memories we hide away (p. 21). What are some consequences of refusing to face these painful memories?
3. “The great vocation of the minister is to constantly make connections between the human story and the divine story” (p. 24). How can connecting our stories with Jesus’s story bring about healing? How does thinking of Jesus’s suffering and helping others remember it help us understand our own?
4. Nouwen warns that ministers must fight the temptation to think about the job as a technical specialty, and instead focus on walking in the presence of God (p. 30). What are some ways you have been guilty of seeing only the technical aspects of the job? What are some ways you can keep the focus on God instead of your skills, programs, and projects?

5. “Over the years we have developed the idea that being present to all people in all their needs is our greatest and primary vocation. The Bible does not seem to support this. Jesus’s primary concern was to be obedient to his Father, to live constantly in his presence. Only then did it become clear to him what his task was in his relationships with people” (pp. 30–31). Why are ministers in particular apt to put people first rather than putting God first? Why does this fail? How can we do better?

PART 2

THE MINISTER AS A SUSTAINING REMINDER

1. How has a memory sustained you? What are some of the benefits bestowed on a relationship by a period of absence, in which your connection to that person is largely through memory?
2. What do you think of Nouwen’s insight that only in memory could the disciples have real intimacy with Jesus, and hence experience the full meaning of what they witnessed (p. 41)? How have you experienced intimacy with Jesus through his absence?
3. Nouwen describes the importance of ministering through absence: “I am deeply convinced that there is a ministry in which our leaving creates space for God’s spirit and in which, by our absence, God can become present in a new way” (p. 44). What are some ways we minister through our absence?

4. How is celebrating the Eucharist a celebration of Christ's absence as well as his presence (pp. 45–46)?
5. What are some reasons why you might hesitate to take time out of your schedule to be in prayer or silent retreat? How do you think those you minister to would react if they could not reach you because you were in prayer or solitude? Could they view it as a consoling ministry, as Nouwen suggests (p. 49)? Does such a thought help you take time for God?
6. Nouwen rejects viewing prayer or days alone with God as devices to strengthen us for ministry; instead, he sees these practices as ministry in and of themselves (p. 51). What is the distinction between viewing your time with God as a method of strengthening or recharging *for* ministry and viewing your time with God as an essential part *of* your ministry? Which better describes how you view time alone with God?

PART 3

THE MINISTER AS A GUIDING REMINDER

1. What memories offer you the hope you need in dark times?
2. Nouwen views the prophets as urging their people forward through remembrance: “By reminding their people of the misery of slavery and the liberating love of God, the prophets of Israel motivated them to move forward, and challenged them to honor their memory

by their behavior” (p. 61). How has your outlook been shaped by the prophets, who act as “living reminders of God’s care and compassion” (p. 61)? Do you think of yourself as a prophet within your ministry? Why or why not?

3. Nouwen writes that confrontation is part of guidance, that we must challenge each other to make sure we have not narrowed our vision down to a comfortable illusion. Throughout history, reformers have recalled their people to lost or neglected parts of the great vision: Benedict to community, Francis to poverty, Luther to God’s undeserved grace, Wesley to living faith, many modern prophets to peace and justice (p. 64). What part of the great vision might God be asking you to call your people back to?
4. Nouwen believes we need to rediscover storytelling as a ministerial art. What has your experience been in using storytelling in your ministry? How do people respond?
5. Do you agree with Nouwen that more training in prayer would be helpful to pastors? How has training or education helped or hindered you in prayer?

EPILOGUE

A PROFESSING PROFESSION

1. How must ministers differentiate themselves from psychiatrists, psychologists, doctors, and others in the behavioral sciences?

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2. In what ways have Nouwen's writings on ministry encouraged or challenged you? What are a few points that you will take away to think over, pray through, or act upon in the coming days?