

The Last Pastor

Faithfully Steering a Closing Church

Gail Cafferata

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LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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Introduction

Closing a church was my worst nightmare. I fought it with all my being. We hoped we might survive as a congregation, yet our church died. Through the process, we struggled with many forms of grief—anger, sadness, confusion. Darkness hovered, like Good Friday or Holy Saturday. Afterward, I wondered how other pastors and congregations who experienced the closing of a church felt and, particularly, how it affected pastors who, like me, had accepted their call with starry-eyed hopes for renewal.¹

This book is informed by my experience as an Episcopal priest and, prior to that, as a sociologist. My theological perspective is Trinitarian with a focus on the ways God calls the church to make God's compassion and truth incarnate in the church and world. Here, I report the results of a sociological study of over 130 pastors in five historically established denominations who were called to serve churches that closed. I draw on their completion of written surveys and semi-structured, in-depth interviews.² I contacted clergy first by letter and found most of them eager to share their stories, even though it meant revisiting what was surely a painful time. Many (42 percent of those invited) completed the written questionnaire, and of these, most participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews. The rich stories that over eighty pastors shared were a great gift, which is why I chose to quote them liberally in the pages that follow. To maintain confidentiality, I have changed some identifying details, and I tell no one story completely, but much of what I share here is in the pastors' own words.³

This book evolved with prayer and guidance from the pastors who dared to answer my invitation, "Tell me the story of how your church closed." Some of what I learned might seem surprising. One pastor told me he would do it again "in a heartbeat," and another spoke about how his faith had grown as a result of the experience:

I would close another church in a heartbeat if that's what I felt God was calling them to do. I once met an elderly pastor, long retired,

and asked him, “So how was your ministry?” He replied, “Well, if you count closing five churches as a good thing, I had a good run.” I think God does at times move on to other things.

I can bring with it the assurance that we serve a God who’s a God of the living and use that imagery from Scripture to remind congregants that it is all about resurrection. We are an Easter people, and so death is part of life. And it is not the end of life. And we go on.

All the pastors I interviewed were changed by the pilgrimage journey to and through closure.⁴ Many moved smoothly into new churches. Some have scars. A few were grief-stricken longer than they had hoped to be. Others retired or left congregational ministry for another vocation. Yet nearly all shared wondrous stories of God’s compassion and presence in the midst of grief, and of hope and joy in new lives and ministries at journey’s end. Many have not only survived but thrived.

As practical theology, this study explores pastoral leadership, suffering, and healing.⁵ It is organized around the theme of God’s love for the church, and that of the sacred, yet flawed, human relationships between pastors, congregations, and judicatories. It explores how pastors accessed faith and leadership skills to lead their congregations. It also describes how the journey affected pastors’ lives and identities while they served and after the church doors closed. It concludes with the reflections and recommendations of these pastors, whose voices of wisdom and hope cry out to be heard.

Although the literature on pastoral leadership is rich with metaphors like “servant leader,” “potter,” “pastoral director,” “shepherd,” “spiritual interpreter,” “artist,” “gardener,” “administrator,” and more, one practical theologian explicates a biblical model of leadership from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians: it is called *kybernesis* (1 Cor. 12:28), the Greek root evoking the use of a tiller to steer a ship.⁶ Although leadership in a church requires the collective effort of all of God’s people, the pastor is called by God to hold the tiller of the ship.

Holding the tiller involves engaging in actions that embody the Christian values of justice, righteousness, and reconciliation. In closing a church, pastoral leadership becomes centered in resurrection faith, awareness of the pastor’s own pilgrim journey with the congregation, and an understanding that a church is not a building but a sacred

community of God's people journeying together. Minding the tiller means bearing hope when the journey seems hopeless.

Indeed, sailing as a metaphor for a church moving toward the mission of closure is a useful hermeneutic, or interpretive tool. The gifts of all the baptized are needed to keep the ship working and safe on its journey. When the congregation confronts strong winds or crosscurrents, the company of the faithful moves their ship ahead by loving God and one another. They gather in prayer and community to discern God's call, what route to take, and how to organize themselves and care for one another. On this journey in response to God's call, the denomination and its midlevel administrative representative, the judicatory, are in the background, like the coast guard, to clarify values, norms, and roles and to intervene when a church calls out in distress.⁷

For some sailboat enthusiasts—like me—racing adds another exciting dimension to the sport. Racing a sailboat is all about discernment. Choices begin at the start line and don't end until you cross the finish. Although some decisions leave you behind the pack for the duration, others are life-giving, moving you steadily ahead of the field. It's often a gamble. When a group of us raced recently on San Francisco Bay, the choice was whether to sail to port, far into the fierce, steady wind blowing through the Golden Gate, or to starboard, into an unpredictable wind closer to the mark, and about half the distance of the other option. As the fog rolled in, we thought maybe we'd pick up a header or two to lift our sails on the short course. The crew was divided. I argued for the shorter course. It cost us the race. I should have known better. It's always about the wind. That's all that matters.

As in a sailboat, the wind of the Holy Spirit lifts the sails of a congregation and propels it forward. Wind fills our faces with hope and expectations for a good future. When the wind shifts, a good skipper follows it. The best way isn't always the shortest. There is no easy way. It's all about discernment—choices—throughout the life of a congregation. Sometimes they are the most difficult choices we could ever make. To ask, "What is God calling us to do?" or "What kind of people is God calling us to be?" is to make a brave choice. It is to let go of preconceived assumptions about our destination and to invite God into the conversation.

What does it mean for a congregation and their pastor to follow the wind? It means to be and become a sacred community intentionally seeking God's guidance, God's call. What made closing our church so

difficult was that I wouldn't let go—we wouldn't let go—of our vision to relocate to another church building. Like many mainline churches, we took the short course with unpredictable winds, hoping against hope there would be a header to save us.

When we took the shorter course in that San Francisco race, we didn't have enough wind to overcome the swift tidal flood entering the bay. Sailboats that had chosen to reach into fierce winds could do so. With 25-knot winds in their sails, they overcame the longer distance to beat us to the mark. Likewise, the church and I mistook the course of relocating to another building for being faithful to God. We missed the mark. God's "mark" isn't the survival of a congregation. It's being and becoming more and more the people God is creating us to be, even if that means leaving the ship that carried us with peace, joy, and hope for so long and so far.

By the grace of God, Christian faith yields a harvest of healthy grieving: the recognition that loss, while painful, is also transitory; that God is present in the darkness; that resurrection is happening and will continue to happen; and that we are blessed with a community of sojourners to share our burdens. It means that no pastor has to go through this alone. If it is a slow, slow death, it may seem that grief will never end. Yet faithful pastors who served their congregations to the end have experienced grace and hope and light splitting through their darkness. This book tells their stories in hopes of offering insight to others who may face similar sailing conditions someday and need encouragement as they mind the tiller.

PART I

*The Pastor, the Sacred Community,
and the Judicatory*

1

The Pastor

Minding the Tiller

From my journal, four years before our church closed:

Precious Lord, I am incomplete without you. I am like my boat without a wind direction indicator. The wind was there, but I didn't perceive it. Where is the wind to carry Holy Family Church forward? I feel that I'm not perceiving it. I have to look around and see and feel where the wind is coming from. Help! I feel like our boat is stalled. I feel stupid. Help us, Lord. Amen.

As a pastor, you're at the start line of a race on a glorious sunny day. You hear the sound of the mainsail flapping and fluttering overhead, but the boat doesn't leap forward. The wind blows from bow to stern, and your hat would fly off if it weren't tied under your chin. Yet you remain still: the boat doesn't move; it may even drift backward. The first leg of a sailboat race is straight into the wind, but a sailboat can't fight that force—if you try, the wind whips past the sail on both sides, teasing you but not filling the sail with the power that would lift your boat like wings and launch you on the journey. You are stuck “in irons,” to use a term from the days of square rigging when leg irons secured prisoners to the deck.

The day I wrote the journal entry above, I felt like our church was in irons. The wind of the Holy Spirit was blowing, but somehow we couldn't catch it. Even so, much was going well. Our leadership team's

annual mutual ministry review affirmed our congregation's increasing engagement with the community: a growing food bank we had cofounded, a consortium of community gardens we had newly joined, and a winter overnight shelter program for families. We shared our majority Anglo congregation's worship space with Latino and Antiochian Orthodox congregations and multiple 12-step groups. And our community garden, "The Neighborhood Farm," would be a reality in the spring.

However, during that summer, our leadership team had weathered a painful interpersonal conflict ending in several people leaving the church. Our expenses had exceeded our income, which would soon diminish further when one of our sister congregations moved away; in the new year, subsidized congregations like ours would be fully responsible for the payment of clergy health insurance. We were vital in mission but weakening in our capacity to sustain our ministry.

I had faith that God would lead us forward—if only we found the wind to empower us. If it weren't money, which we always hoped for, it would be the movement of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that would open us to a new life. I longed for the fulfillment of the Celtic hope "May the wind be always at your back," yet the church doesn't often sail with that blessing. More often, we must search for the wind in trees upon the shore or feel it on our cheeks as it dances around us. Once we recognize it, we must harness that wind and move the tiller to embrace its freshening power, the surge of new life in Christ. We have to pray, study, worship, and open our hearts and minds to the new thing God calls us to do and to be, even if that means ending ministries and dissolving the church.

Nonetheless, I couldn't imagine abandoning our pilgrimage and closing the church. No one could. Just one year before our church went onto the real estate market, our senior lay leader wrote, "If you looked at last year's annual report like I did, you would have seen the amazing rebirth [that] happened at Holy Family." The lay leader responsible for property wrote, "This has been a very productive year for Holy Family Church." He noted the painting of the church, a new sound system, and landscape improvements including a new church sign. Hope for the future of our congregation dwelled deep in my heart as well. I had faith in the unseen spiritual gift that steadies the ship of the church and transforms the power of the wind into forward movement.

However, something I said a year earlier at the annual meeting

presaged our church's failing roof: "Yes, the skylight still leaks, but what is that in the midst of such blessings!" Just two years later, the dissolution of the church felt precipitous and devastating, like St. Paul's ship crashing on the rocks. Leading a church in the best of circumstances, let alone in crisis, requires a strong and sturdy faith, imagined here as the ship's rudder. When the Holy Spirit blows into the sails, the rudder transforms its energy into forward motion. The tiller controls the movement of the rudder, especially when the winds are not at our back but flowing across the ship and threatening to push the church sideways. With the guidance of the rudder, the power of the Holy Spirit pulls and lifts the church forward on its journey—even a journey to closure.

Reflecting on surveys and interviews with pastors in five historically established Protestant denominations who have had the experience of closing their churches, this chapter describes the faith of the pastor, the ship's skipper, as the church journeys toward closure. I sought to understand the aspects of faith that strengthen pastors' rudders so they will hold their congregation's course steady on its passage in the presence of unexpected storms, hidden currents, or tidal waves. These pastors differ from one another in many ways—age, gender, years of experience, vocational and avocational backgrounds, urban/rural living, census region, and especially denomination. Unfortunately, people of color were less likely to respond to the survey than whites.

In the narratives of over eighty pastors who were interviewed, I identified three essential commitments to God's hidden spiritual reality. What strengthens pastors for ministry wherever they serve is, first, their call to preach the gospel of hope in the resurrection; second, God's call to each congregation and pastor to journey with God into a new future; and third, the belief that the church is the people of God serving the world in Christ's name. I found that pastors called to serve a fragile church employed these three elements of faith to help guide their sacred community safely through grief and the letting-go process that allows church members to begin their journey to a new future. One pastor said, "The good news of Christ is not going to be an easy thing to bring. Belief can be upsetting, but without it, nothing really matters."

First, pastors receive the call from God to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, with the sacrament (or rite) of ordination setting them apart for a ministry of leadership. When ordained clergy and members of

Characteristics of the Clergy Sample ($N = 132$)

<u>Demographic</u>	<u>Distribution* (%)</u>
Gender	
Male	60
Female	40
Age ($M = 59$ years)	
< 45 years	12
45–64 years	62
65+ years	26
Denomination	
Lutheran (ELCA)	14
Presbyterian (PC(USA))	13
Episcopal (TEC)	30
United Church of Christ (UCC)	12
Methodist (UMC)	30
Race/ethnicity	
White	91
Nonwhite	9
Ordained experience ($M = 14$ years)	
0 to 5 years	30
6 to 10 years	18
11+ years	52
Multipoint charge (yes)	44
Bivocational (yes)	31
Years serving congregation ($M = 6$ years)	
1 to 3 years	41
4 to 6 years	22
7+ years	37
Location of church (2010 census categories)	
Rural area	28
Small town or city (pop. 2,500 to 50,000)	30
Urbanized area (pop. 50,000 or more)	42

**Some totals may not reach 100% because of rounding error.*

a church hover in prayer over someone in a service of ordination, the Holy Spirit transforms that baptized person into a servant committed to and gifted for serving God's people as their pastor, spiritual leader, and teacher.

God's call is often mysterious, unexpected, and gripping, blessing pastors with charisms such as spiritual wisdom, faith in the resurrection and hope for new life, and the gift of faithfulness or perseverance. One pastor, a guest preacher in a congregation, observed about his first service with them, "As I was distributing Communion to people, I just felt this really tremendous sense of being drawn towards the people and felt like 'Oh my God, I feel called to serve this church.'" He applied that day and was chosen. "I was the only candidate that they didn't know. The congregation knew the other two candidates, yet something in them wanted to choose the unknown. The Spirit was always present in them and in me." Another pastor noted his surprise: "When I interviewed, it felt like it was a calling." A different pastor noted how difficult it was to find a position when one is older than fifty, but was determined that "where God wanted me, I was going to go."

A call to lead blesses a pastor's faith and natural gifts and recognizes that "God doesn't call the equipped; God equips the called," as one pastor put it. One's gifts may include spiritual wisdom such as "seeing other people's gifts, enabling them to do ministry in ways that are good for the kingdom of God."

God bestows spiritual gifts on called pastors inexplicably, as needed. For example, one minister had tried multiple strategies to renew the church. When she thought the end was near, the church resisted and wanted to keep on working. She went home from a leadership team meeting in tears. "The whole weight of trying to save this church for three years just poured out of me," she said. She then had a dream that she was preaching:

My co-pastor in the dream, a black man, tapped me on the shoulder and said, "You need to go sit down." He was right, so I went to the front of the church and knelt down. He came over, put his hands on me, and prayed over me. I started to cry. He said, "When this pastor kneels, cries, and prays, the Holy Spirit will come to this church." And I turned around, and in my sanctuary, there were a diversity of people: black, white, brown, young, old, [from] all over the world, and the Holy Spirit was there. And I woke up from this dream and thought, "OK, I've been visited. What is this?" I told the

congregation this dream, and they thought I was crazy. [But three months later] I got a knock on the door of the church. An African pastor from down the road needed a place for his refugee church. He was Kenyan. The church had been Sudanese. They didn't speak the same language, so they started meetings in English. Buffalo is one of the places where refugees are resettled; this particular set of apartment buildings is like the United Nations. He was passing out flyers saying, "Come learn about Jesus. Come learn English. We're starting this refugee church of people from all over the world."

The refugee church came to the historic congregation for a while before moving on; the older, dying congregation eventually dissolved. The pastor's spiritual discernment and faithfulness blessed her congregation as they offered hospitality to another congregation and then closed with dignity.

Besides prophetic visions such as this, God blesses called pastors with other spiritual assets. As the above story reveals, a call to a church on the precipice of a transformation or death can be difficult and frightening. It may mean a pastor's exhaustion from powerful emotions of loss, being seen by colleagues or by oneself as a failure, or anticipating a hard time finding another position. Nonetheless, by the grace of God, pastors called to this challenging ministry may find their rudders full of hope in resurrection. This allows pastors to let go of what cannot be changed, to believe that their call commands faithfulness, and to trust their congregation's own call and spiritual gifts.

For one pastor, a call to serve a fragile church meant having faith that "God was my strong rock, in a Psalms kind of way." He continued: "I realized that this is not my fight. It's not my decision. It's like any other death in a way. We can die with hope, or we can die in bitterness, but we all have to die." For him, every liturgy is

like a resurrection occurrence of the Lord. This is where hope is. Hope can be found here. If the organization falls apart, the hope doesn't go away. The hope is still there because the true God who loves us remains. God was my hope and my present foundation while going through the emotional upheaval. God helped me sort out what is my stuff as a human being, what is my stuff as a priest—as opposed to what is my call and what God is calling me to do. It helped me, that faith, that certainty, as in the resurrection itself. Good Friday looks like a disaster, and Holy Saturday is not much better, but who knew what God had in store?

A pastor's call to serve a weakened church may be blessed with the freedom to let go of what he or she cannot change. For example, church founders may have made overwhelming sacrifices in building new congregations, yet God asks even their called pastors to let their churches die.

"When do you know when to quit?" one pastor pondered. Yet he had "God moments" that helped him with his decision. After an out-of-town funeral, the judicatory executive and a retired pastor who was "kind of like the godfather of our judicatory" invited the young pastor out to lunch. Having had experience with church starts, the retiree "just talked about the time when he wanted to go, and then he decided it was time. It just gave me permission in my own mind. It's hard to do that." The pastor valued having "my judicatory executive there. It was kind of another God moment, a great liberating thing that helped me to say, 'OK, I can let go of this.'"

God often blesses pastors serving in struggling congregations with the certitude of resurrection with its blessings of resilience and perseverance. Despite the red ink in our church budget, I believed God had called me to be faithful in my ministry—to keep preaching, teaching, working with the community, and caring for those in need. I would not let fear or despair chase me away. A British study of clergy speaks of "sacrificial" faithfulness.¹ In this study, one pastor who had decided not to leave his congregation until the death said, "I'm not here for my own success." Another said, "I would say you just do what you're called to do and work faithfully and work hard, and so when you walk away, you can hold your head up and say 'I did my best; I did what God called me to do.'"

Faithful is a word used often by pastors who close their churches. "If I'm going to get nailed to that cross," said one, "I'm going to get nailed to the cross because I figured someone else has been down this path; this is nothing compared to what he did. I had to be faithful to Christ [even when it was clear that the church would not be faithful]. The ministry and the leadership I was trying to provide them could not happen."

To commit to perseverance in a call to ministry means for one pastor "I'm doing what God wants me to be doing. This isn't an occupation. This is a call. If I didn't have a strong sense of call, then a lot of things would be a lot more difficult—like, why am I not getting as rich as fraternity brothers that were goof-offs and, you know, now are retired

and living in Hawaii [laughing]?” The pastor continued: “I’m called to ministry. This is where I should be, I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing, and I’ve got all kinds of satisfactions they’ll never know . . . like the discipline of understanding that this is where God wants me.” Another pastor concluded, “I also recognize that my call was very real. And I hear God when I’m thinking in that direction. God just says, ‘No.’”

In the midst of the “little deaths” that accompany closing a church, God blesses the called with affirmation of their identity. For one pastor, her first appointment in a church “was a big affirmation.” For another pastor, his first church appointment “meant finally doing what God called me to do.” A pastor battling cancer felt strengthened by God to continue to serve despite illness: “He was with me all the way. I never questioned his love for me or his concern.” Her cancer journey went from Ash Wednesday through her last surgery on Good Friday: “That was my Lenten journey; that was my wandering in the wilderness and being on holy ground with God. My strength and my faith didn’t question it at that point.” God blessed her with grace to heal and a loving congregation, which confirmed her continuing call to serve.

Even when the church dies, a pastor’s call persists: “Our call to ministry is bigger than the congregation that we serve. Likewise, the congregation that we serve is bigger than us. At times, I have to remind myself of this.” That thought helps pastors sustain hope for the church and for themselves: “I remind myself that the ministry will continue after I leave, as it did for ninety years before I got here. My ministry will continue too, regarding what God has called me to do, my divine call beyond the congregational call.”

Besides this commitment to discerning and living out their own call to ministry, *a second spiritual commitment that empowers pastors in closing churches is that God calls congregations and their pastors to share a journey or pilgrimage with Jesus Christ.* “I am about the complete engagement and renewal of the people in the church so they can sense what God has called them to continue to do in the life of the church,” said one pastor. In a parish that was discerning what to do, another pastor recalled, “I just try to embody that gospel of hopefulness and promise, and that we’re called to be faithful, not necessarily successful. They claimed that, and they were OK with that. And sometimes that means you have to allow some things to die—yourself and [the church]. That’s the gospel.” While teaching, the pastor would “recall Scripture stories of Jesus,

of Moses, Jacob, Esther, Deborah—all the heartache and the battles and how they kept on going because they knew that this was God’s call to do that.” She encouraged her dying church to “stand strong and take whatever comes at you and make sure you get somewhere where you can really get angry and get healing.”

A pastor may inspire a congregation to sacrificial faithfulness as well: “Keeping our eye on the right thing. It’s not money. It’s not that. It’s about how do you conduct ministry as you’re dying or when you die.” This pastor noted, “I think that it’s important to tell anybody not to give up, because it’s easy at this point just to say, ‘I’m done.’ I think I never said, ‘I’m done.’ Even the day after I turned the key in.” He added, “Ministry doesn’t stop.” God’s call to witness to a gospel of resurrection hope is a reason pastors can bear the burden of grief, engage their congregations on a pilgrimage to discern a future, and eventually sacrifice their building and their life together for a higher purpose.

One grace of a call is to trust that God will be present in the chaos of the journey no matter where it ends. Let me explain with a personal story: Before I was a pastor, I was a professor of sociology. The university where I worked had offered my husband an appointment too, but it never materialized. What’s more, it was unclear whether I would be granted tenure. My anxiety grew. With our finances, the capacity to remain in our home, and an academic career now all uncertain, I sought the guidance of my priest. He invited me to join a women’s retreat focused on the spiritual journey that was scheduled to take place at a nearby Trappist monastery. Until then, my faith in God was in my head but not my heart. Through prayers with the monks, Bible study, and being in community with women like myself, I suddenly grasped God’s presence with me, as with “the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Matt. 6:26).

Now spiritually well fed, I came away from the retreat with hope that God would be with my husband and me even if I did not receive tenure. My priest had understood my need to trust God no matter where I was called. When I didn’t get tenure soon after, I believed God would provide for us, and God did. Just as my last year at the university ended, I was called to serve as a sociologist at the National Center for Health Services in Washington, D.C. My husband joined an industry where he is still employed. Our family grew as I enjoyed my new colleagues and our work to understand American health care. And it was

there I first felt called to the priesthood—though the bishop gently told me, “Not yet.” I did become a priest sixteen years later, but even now, I must keep learning this lesson: trust God no matter what.

So it is with diminishing churches. Pastors called to this challenging ministry know it will be a journey on which, as with the birds of the air, God is always present. Yet many anxious and grieving people in a declining congregation can’t imagine leaving their church home, or that God has a need for them elsewhere, or that by God’s grace, a new faith community will welcome and love them. So with a pastor’s call to serve as a leader comes this other needed gift—to teach or remind congregations that God is with them wherever they go.

One pastor observed, “The clergy really operate out of a theology of journey. Abraham journeyed from one place to another. The laity operate more out of a theology of place.” The pastor continued, “That’s why the promised land for the Israelites was so important. [People] attach themselves to these things a lot more. The people that you’re ministering to are not focused on this journey; they’re focused on place. They go through a much deeper sorrow when the church closes.”

A theology of place comes from experiencing the transcendent God within a church building.² In one congregation, named St. Andrew’s, when a youth in the church died tragically, “the first place that members needed to go was St. Andrew’s,” reported the former pastor. “When they got that call, and they got that news, where they went was the church.” In the building, people experience God holding them and their pain in love. Although “the church is the people, that sacred space is where the Word is proclaimed, where the sacraments are administered, where a word of hope has been preached. In our difficult times, there’s something about being in that space [where] we can still find hope.”

One pastor invoked Isaiah to call his congregation to trust God on their journey into a new future: “Isaiah is trying to help the people understand that God isn’t just the God of Palestine. God can also work with them while they’re in exile, there in Babylon as well, so God doesn’t have boundaries.” Jesus was not “a settled person,” said another. “His ministry was not a settled ministry. It didn’t exist within four walls, set on a place. [His] ministry was in motion. We’re not called as Christians to settle in. We’re called on a journey. Our journey included one another for a while. Now it includes other people in other ways.”

Pastors called to the tiller continually encourage church members to participate in their church's spiritual journey. One diminishing congregation in a cathedral-sized building on the brink of death "still [had] this image of a 1,600-member congregation in their heads" when their pastor led them on a pilgrimage through weekly Bible study on seasonal readings. "Easter, Lent, and the resurrection story were critical," the pastor said. The pastor then asked the congregation to reflect on "what resurrection means and what it means to us, what it means to me and our baptism." When they realized that the new congregation assuming their building would be African American, the pastor recalled, "We had a manger with a black baby Jesus. It was a Christmas. It was a birthing of a new congregation within that building. The gospel was critical throughout."

A third spiritual commitment or gift that pastors may draw out from their rudder is what it means to be church in the world. A pastor and a congregation are called by God to journey together for a reason—to serve the world in Christ's name. For example, God called members of my church and me to join a group of clergy and community organizers intent on identifying the specific needs of our city. Out of that collaboration grew NOAH (Neighbors Organized against Hunger) Food Pantry, which our congregation served faithfully for over six years. For eight to twelve weeks a year, they attended to the needs of over two hundred families and worked with its board of directors to plan a sustainable future. As they embraced and celebrated this servant ministry, I joined them in being church.

Among those called to proclaim what it means to be a church was a pastor who reflected, "When I would preach and then do the benediction, I would encourage [the congregation] to let the light of Christ shine through them into the world and into the community." He added, "I really want to be the pastor of a church that listens to their call in the ministry, and I want to help them do that." Another said, "I'm always on the lookout; I'm always looking for God at work in people's lives and how we could use that in building the kingdom." By grace and faith, a congregation coming together to build the kingdom, with or without a building, is blessed with a resurrection hope even as they face the challenges of closure.

A pastor's gift for teaching that the church is the people of God on Christ's mission is salient within a congregation's process of discernment for its future. For example, one town had three churches

of the same denomination within a three-mile radius. The dwindling congregations agreed to hold only one service each Sunday, rotating among the three. The people liked the increased attendance at any given worship service, as well as the greater sense of fellowship. Yet after three months, recalled the pastor, “what broke down in negotiations is, everybody wanted it to be their church that would house this new reality, and nobody was willing to give up their building.” The pastor concluded, “They loved the building more than the idea of being a productive, mission-minded church. The building was almost like an idol. People were literally worshipping their building.”

When another church decided to close, the pastor said to those who opposed the decision, “You see the church in this building. You have grown up coming to this place to find God. I have been to lots of churches. For me, church is the gathered body of people.” The pastor named a difficult truth: “Unless we come to the point where we agree on the definition of what church is, we won’t agree on the right answer for the church.” The church, the pastor knows from his call from God, is the body of Christ.

Some ministers called to a diminishing congregation may perceive in its spiritual community an inward-looking “family gathering” without commitment to serve the world in Christ’s name. For example, one pastor determined he was serving what he called a “family chapel”: “It wasn’t a congregation. It wasn’t a group of people striving to meet the purpose and mission of what Christ calls us to do as a church. If it’s not a church, then really there’s no purpose in calling it a church.” He added, “That sounds more negative than I mean it.” It wasn’t their fault, but the rural community was simply disappearing, and no one lived near the church anymore. During the week, there was no local connection, no local outreach. The pastor felt called to help them see what they had become.

One pastor, seeing the church as the hands and feet of Christ in the world, taught what it meant to love your neighbor as yourself. When his parishioners participated in a community food pantry, he encouraged them to “engage the people, sit down and talk to them. Find out their story.” He also encouraged them to “find a child who can serve as an interpreter to help you to understand the Hispanic person who’s immigrated here.” But that did not happen. “They would not step out of their comfort zone and do that. They would hand [out] the food [and say,] ‘Thank you for coming,’ but the relationship piece was not

there.” He tried to teach what it means to be a “church,” but “they wouldn’t do it.”

Having a gospel understanding of church is a pastor’s spiritual gift, but when pastors take a mirror and invite their congregations to look at their ministry through this lens, the congregation may feel defensive, as if being judged. When one pastor remarked that “the church has a different purpose and mission” than the Rotary Club, she had to explain herself: “[I had to] assure them I wasn’t trying to change them, and I wasn’t trying to change anything. I was just trying to reflect and be what we’re called to be.” Another lamented that teaching the gospel meaning of *church* may be “difficult to do because of your judging what they have. [It’s like saying,] ‘Your church isn’t enough.’ But it wasn’t,” she said. “If you’re reading Jesus in the New Testament, it really doesn’t look a lot like us sitting around loving each other inside a building. It looks a lot more like us getting out into the streets and bringing transformation to what we find there. If we’re not doing that, what are we doing? I think that’s part of the gospel too, just that challenge of, ‘Does our church look anything like the New Testament?’”

By the grace of God, I finally found these words to preach before our church closed:

The church is not a building, but God’s people gathered with a common purpose of reconciling humanity to God and us to one another. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30–31). This is how Jesus put it. Those are his commandments, and they are [for us] too.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has illustrated how pastors describe three spiritual gifts with which God blessed them: (1) a commitment to their call to pastoral leadership, with charisms of spiritual wisdom—resurrection hope and faithfulness; (2) a commitment to recognize God’s call of the baptized to their own spiritual journey or pilgrimage; and (3) a commitment to be the church as the people of God on a mission in Christ’s name. These three commitments provide a sturdy rudder to guide the spiritual lives of pastors and the lives of those they serve.

God grants pastors these charisms because church communities who face possible closure may be fraught. Unexpectedly, powerful tides or currents such as economic recessions, community transitions and attrition, disagreements, or alterations in leadership within the church may unbalance a congregation and challenge a pastor's ability to stay the course. Although not always visible, a pastor's rudder of faith can keep the boat firmly on course and responsive to the wind of the Holy Spirit. The church or the sacred community is the pastor's partner in this mission. Together they journey with faith in God to weather the storm even when the trip is perilous. To that community, we now turn.

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