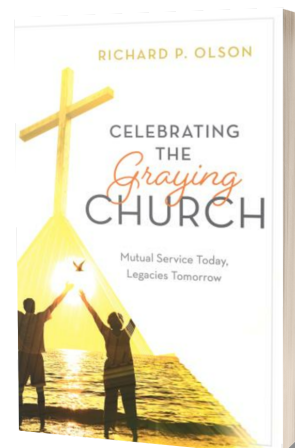
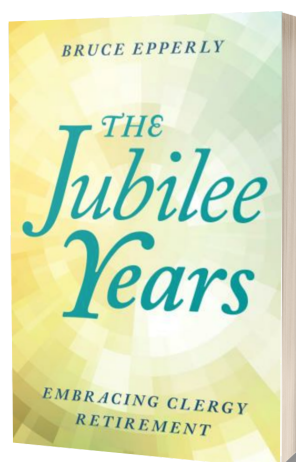
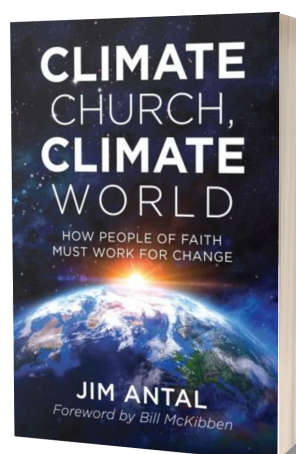
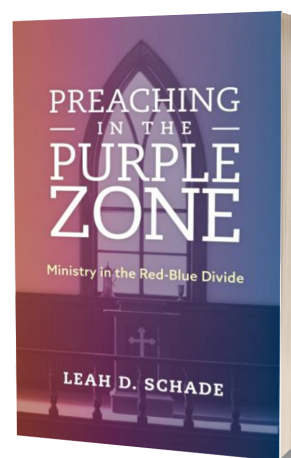
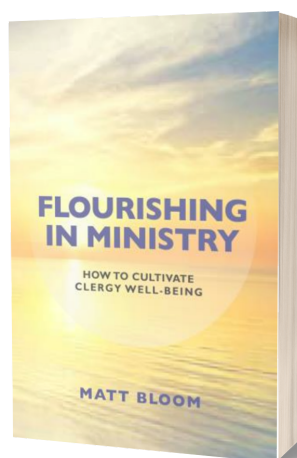
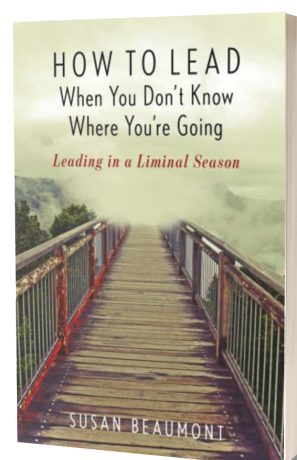
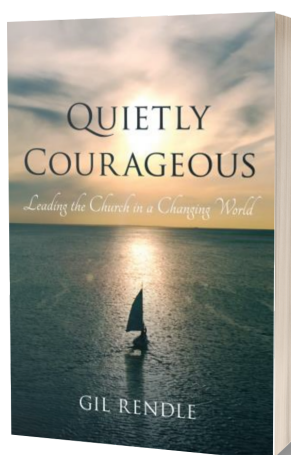
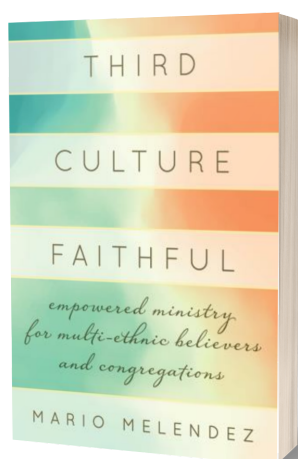


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# STILLING the STORM

Worship and Congregational  
Leadership in Difficult Times

Kathleen S. Smith



Foreword by Arthur Paul Boers

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# The Vital Worship, Healthy Congregations Series

John D. Witvliet, Series Editor

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Cover design by Wendy Ronga, Hampton Design Group.

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smith, Kathleen S.

Stilling the storm : worship and congregational leadership in difficult times / Kathleen S. Smith ; foreword by Arthur Paul Boers.

p. cm. -- (The vital worship, healthy congregations series)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-1-56699-327-2

ISBN-10: 1-56699-327-X

1. Worship. 2. Suffering--Religious aspects--Christianity. 3. Change--Religious aspects--Christianity. I. Title.

BV15.S49 2006

264--dc22

2006028444

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# Editor's Foreword

## Healthy Congregations

Christianity is a “first-person plural” religion, where communal worship, service, fellowship, and learning are indispensable for grounding and forming individual faith. The strength of Christianity in North America depends on the presence of healthy, spiritually nourishing, well-functioning congregations. Congregations are the cradle of Christian faith, the communities in which children of all ages are supported, encouraged, and formed for lives of service. Congregations are the habitat in which the practices of the Christian life can flourish.

As living organisms, congregations are by definition in a constant state of change. Whether the changes are in membership, pastoral leadership, lay leadership, the needs of the community, or the broader culture, a crucial mark of healthy congregations is their ability to deal creatively and positively with change. The fast pace of change in contemporary culture, with its bias toward, not against, change only makes the challenge of negotiating change all the more pressing for congregations.

## Vital Worship

At the center of many discussions about change in churches today is the topic of worship. This is not surprising, for worship is at the center of congregational life. To “go to church” means, for most members of congregations, “to go to worship.” In *How Do We Worship?*, Mark Chaves begins his analysis with the simple assertion, “Worship is the most central and public activity engaged in by American religious congregations” (Alban Institute, 1999, p. 1). Worship styles are one of the most significant reasons that



people choose to join a given congregation. Correspondingly, they are central to the identity of most congregations.

Worship is also central on a much deeper level. Worship is the locus of what several Christian traditions identify as the nourishing center of congregational life: preaching, common prayer, and the celebration of ordinances or sacraments. Significantly, what many traditions elevate to the status of “the means of grace” or even the “marks of the church” are essentially liturgical actions. Worship is central, most significantly, for theological reasons. Worship both reflects and shapes a community’s faith. It expresses a congregation’s view of God and enacts a congregation’s relationship with God and each other.

We can identify several specific factors that contribute to spiritually vital worship and thereby strengthen congregational life.

- Congregations, and the leaders that serve them, need a shared vision for worship that is grounded in more than personal aesthetic tastes. This vision must draw on the deep theological resources of Scripture, the Christian tradition, and the unique history of the congregation.
- Congregational worship should be integrated with the whole life of the congregation. It can serve as the “source and summit” from which all the practices of the Christian life flow. Worship both reflects and shapes the life of the church in education, pastoral care, community service, fellowship, justice, hospitality, and every other aspect of church life.
- The best worship practices feature not only good worship “content,” such as discerning sermons, honest prayers, creative artistic contributions, celebrative and meaningful rituals for baptism and the Lord’s Supper. They also arise out of good process, involving meaningful contributions from participants, thoughtful leadership, honest evaluation, and healthy communication among leaders.

## Vital Worship, Healthy Congregations Series

The Vital Worship, Healthy Congregations Series is designed to reflect the kind of vibrant, creative energy and patient reflection

that will promote worship that is both relevant and profound. It is designed to invite congregations to rediscover a common vision for worship, to sense how worship is related to all aspects of congregational life, and to imagine better ways of preparing both better “content” and better “process” related to the worship life of their own congregations.

It is important to note that strengthening congregational life through worship renewal is a delicate and challenging task precisely because of the uniqueness of each congregation. This book series is not designed to represent a single denomination, Christian tradition, or type of congregation. Nor is it designed to serve as arbiter of theological disputes about worship. Books in the series will note the significance of theological claims about worship, but they may, in fact, represent quite different theological visions from each other, or from our work at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. That is, the series is designed to call attention to instructive examples of congregational life and to explore these examples in ways that allow readers in very different communities to compare and contrast these examples with their own practice. The models described in any given book may for some readers be instructive as examples to follow. For others, a given example may remind them of something they are already doing well, or something they will choose not to follow because of theological commitments or community history.

In the first volume in our series, *One Bread, One Body: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Worship*, Michael Hawn poses the poignant question “is there room for my neighbor at the table?” and explores what four multicultural congregations have to teach us about hospitality and the virtues of cross-cultural worship. His work helps us step back and reflect on the core identity of our congregations.

In our second volume, *Designing Worship Together: Models and Strategies for Worship Planning*, Norma deWaal Malefyt and Howard Vanderwell enter the trenches of weekly congregational life. They give us helpful insights into the process of how services are planned and led. It is hard to overstate the significance of this topic. For without a thoughtful, discerning, collaborative worship planning process, all manner of worship books, conferences, and renewal programs are likely either to make no inroads into the life



of a given congregation or, when they do, to damage rather than renew congregational life.

In the third volume, *When God Speaks through Change: Preaching in Times of Congregational Transition*, Craig Satterlee addresses the question of how worship (and particularly preaching) might best respond to times of significant congregational transition. The vast majority of published perspectives and resources for preaching and worship unwittingly assume a level of constancy in congregational life, taking for granted that the congregation will have the resources (emotional and otherwise) to absorb some significant new message or practice. However, on any given Sunday, a strikingly large number of churches are simply trying to cope with a significant transition in community life or leadership. These transitions do limit what preachers and worship leaders can do on Sunday, but they also present unparalleled opportunities for the reception of the gospel. For congregations in transition, this book provides a useful and necessary frame for viewing almost all other advice and resources about what should happen in public worship.

In the fourth volume, *Where 20 or 30 Are Gathered: Leading Worship in the Small Church*, Peter Bush and Christine O'Reilly probe a topic that is instructive not only for small congregations, but also for large ones. When representatives of small congregations attend worship conferences or read books about worship they are frequently confronted with practices and resources that are entirely impractical for their purposes, requiring time and money that simply aren't available. Yet, as Bush and O'Reilly demonstrate, "small" certainly does not mean "deficient." In fact, smaller congregations have the potential to achieve participation, flexibility, and intimacy that larger congregations find much harder to achieve. In the upside-down world of the kingdom of God, could it be that those of us from larger congregations should be attending conferences in smaller congregations, rather than just the other way around?

In our fifth volume, *With All Thy Mind: Worship That Honors the Way God Made Us*, Robert Glick turns our attention to the people who gather for worship. As alert pastors know so well,

when worshipers assemble they bring with them remarkable differences in aptitude, temperament, and preferences. For leaders who eagerly desire that their congregations participate in worship in knowing and engaged ways, coming to terms with this diversity is essential. It is otherwise too tempting for preachers to prepare sermons and musicians to prepare music for people who are just like themselves. Recent writers have given us several ways to understand the diversity of persons who worship: personality type indicators, theories of multiple intelligences, and right-brain/left-brain differences. Glick works with the latter approach to help us understand that some differences among us can't be resolved by simply asserting our own point of view more loudly.

By now, readers can sense an important pattern in this series. Our goal is to probe several pastoral realities that many books about worship often ignore. This is especially true of this volume, Kathy Smith's *Stilling the Storm: Worship and Congregational Leadership in Difficult Times*. Moments of crisis, transition, and conflict are those in which congregations most need well-grounded, vibrant worship practices. Yet they are precisely the times in which the leadership capacity of many congregations is most threatened.

This is particularly true when worship itself is the source of conflict. We feel out of balance precisely when we most need pastoral poise. Yet worship experts in many traditions continue to offer advice mostly for periods of stability, growth, and resource expansion, ignoring the simple fact that pastoral ministry is more often practiced in the messiness of uncertain and challenging circumstances. Rev. Smith begins to fill this lacuna here, drawing on her years of experience as pastor, teacher, administrator, and leader. As she suggests, it is during times of uncertainty that we learn the habits of trust, vulnerability, and patience that are so fundamental to a vital Christian life and, ultimately, to worship itself. Indeed, in the surprising upside-down world of the gospel, worship is yet one more place where to lose our life is to find it. May this book not only instruct many of us to prepare for difficult times, but also buoy those who are caught in the middle of them.

By promoting encounters with instructive examples from various parts of the body of Christ, we pray that these volumes will

help leaders make good judgments about worship in their congregations and that, by the power of God's Spirit, these congregations will flourish.

John D. Witvliet  
Calvin Institute of Christian Worship

# Foreword

I must begin with an embarrassing confession: it took me an awfully long time to appreciate the importance of worship for Christian life and congregations. I was a pastor for a number of years before I recognized the centrality of worship. I was preoccupied with all kinds of good things—devotional life of congregants, pastoral care, Bible study, social action—but failed for a long while to see the primary rootedness of all these Christian practices in what happened on Sundays with the gathered community. Happily, the congregations I served set me straight and worship gained a prominent place in my imagination and has been central to my ministry ever since.

Worship is the venue where we bring and lift up our most important longings and yearnings. Here we name what matters most to us. Here we uncover, recover, and discover our true identity in God. Here we are swept up into God's salvation story. How I could have missed the primacy of worship for so long leaves me baffled even now.

Of course, worship itself often misses the mark and falls short, and it becomes easy for us to misunderstand or misconstrue it. While at times our highest hopes are fulfilled there, at other times we experience our deepest disappointments there too. While at times we come with expectations of renewal, other times we leave feeling drained. One of the most troubling realities of church worship is that all too often it does not address the disruptions and dislocations of day-to-day life. If here creature and Creator do not meet, if God remains abstracted from our world and struggles, or if we do not embody God's love, redemption and call, then worship becomes worse than meaningless.

Kathleen Smith is mindful of the importance of Christian worship addressing us in the very places where we hurt, suffer, and experience difficulty. Church bodies—not to mention the bodies who attend and participate in church life—are particularly vulnerable during crises, transitions, and conflicts. What church has not known the trauma of tragic death, fire, natural catastrophe, conflict, schism, difficult transitions, loss of beloved members or leaders, change, or worship wars? And how many churches know how to address any of these forthrightly and with appropriate sensitivity on Sunday? Ironically, our congregations get a bad reputation when we avoid, smooth over, or ignore such realities and perform our worship “as normal,” as if nothing else is wrong. Even more troubling, worship life is affected by those troubles whether we ignore them or not. And to add one more complicated wrinkle, worship itself can often be a lightning rod for intense dissatisfaction and grievances.

Thus it is best to face into the situation directly and name dynamics at work. But all too few resources are available for us to know how to do this. Thus stymied by both our own anxiety and our paucity of ideas, we often do nothing. Kathy Smith offers a remedy for both problems. Her approach is compassionate, responsive to real needs, and missional—addressing some of the most pressing challenges to church life and witness today.

This book is filled with useful insights, whether for pastors, elders, other church leaders, seminarians, or seminary professors. Smith handily introduces us to family systems and its implications. She explores why change is difficult. She alerts us to pay attention to the unexpected. She honors the importance of lament in Biblical traditions. She teaches us about the various wrinkles of four kinds of frequent transitions (leadership, space, membership, vision). She explores the possibilities of appreciative inquiry. She lowers the anxiety on facing conflict in the congregation. She alerts us to people who may easily be alienated or overlooked in worship: newcomers, children, youth, and folks who are hurting. She shows us how to embody both clarity and hospitality. She offers examples, as well, of liturgical elements and approaches that can be employed during congregational worship. She succinctly instructs us in what it means to be a Christian leader in the face

of such challenges. All of this is set in the context of clear-sighted theological reflection, told alongside stories and case studies that will sound all too familiar to most readers. Smith writes with passion and a pastor's heart for the well-being of the wider church and all those within it.

I envy Kathy because she is obviously way ahead of me on the importance and possibilities of Christian worship. She knew long ago that worship is the congregation's main event. She did not need to be converted by congregations she served. Rather, she has been in conversation with many churches for many years about the rich possibilities of worship in the most difficult circumstances. Her engagement has not just yielded the good stories and rich examples that abound in the text but helped her think systematically and theologically about the issues at stake. Kathy does not fall into the trap of turning worship into a means for pastoral care, conflict transformation, or whatever. Rather, she helps us name worship's healing potential and take seriously the hope and priority of orienting ourselves to and before God. One reason that she does this so well is that she is grounded in clear theological thinking and priorities. One expects no less, of course, from a disciplined Reformed thinker.

I have known Kathy for some years. I deeply respect her work and involvements in teaching ministry and worship in various settings throughout the church, and I am in awe of her quiet-spoken pioneering as one of the first women ordained in her denomination. Thus when I first heard of her project, I was sure that it would be fresh, intriguing, and fruitful. As a latecomer to the priority of worship in Christian life, I feel indebted to her for teaching me a lot. Because of her work here and in her other ministries, I am deeply hopeful about the church's ongoing ability to worship meaningfully, faithfully, and with integrity even in the hardest of situations. With her pastoral approach, worship can be an avenue of pastoral care and healing, a means of grace.

Arthur Paul Boers  
Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary



# Preface

This project began with a question: “Are any liturgical resources available for churches going through difficult times?” The question came to our staff at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship from a pastor working in a denominational ministry for pastor-church relations. We explored the inquiry by brainstorming about the difficult times that churches experience and imagining how they might be addressed in worship. I researched denominational hymnals, service books, and Web sites, and found that liturgical resources are indeed available for times of transition in congregations—pastoral retirements, building additions, congregational closings, and the like. But these liturgies still need to be contextualized for a particular situation. To be effective, they need to be nuanced to fit the congregation and the specific transition it is experiencing.

As we discussed these issues further, we realized that providing a compilation of worship services or even an annotated list of resources would be an inadequate way of addressing the original question. We discovered that before liturgies can be chosen or designed for worship in a difficult time, certain basic questions must be asked about the nature of congregations, worship, and leadership. All of these must be considered in planning worship for a difficult time.

My assignment as part of the discussion group was to research the topic and to write a paper summarizing the questions and issues that needed to be addressed for worship in a congregation’s difficult times. That summary also served as a paper for a course in my Master of Theology (Th.M.) degree program and later became an article in a theme issue on “Worship in Difficult Times” in

*Reformed Worship*.<sup>1</sup> The discussions with the advisory council of *Reformed Worship* and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship (CICW) were influential in that writing. Subsequently, the paper became my Th.M. thesis and was accepted by the Alban Institute as a proposal for this book in the CICW book series the institute publishes.

This book arose out of that original conversation about liturgical resources for difficult times, as well as many conversations about particular congregations and the difficulties they have faced. In fact, as I reflected on my own life and ministry, I realized that many of the situations in our discussions had happened in one or another of the churches in which I had grown up or served.

To research the matter further, I surveyed a number of pastors who were likely to have dealt with congregations in difficult circumstances, including all the regional and interim pastors of the Christian Reformed Church in North America and its general secretary emeritus, Leonard J. Hofman (my father). Furthermore, I discussed the topic with pastors and church leaders in the context of workshops that I led on this subject in Langley, British Columbia, in November 2004, and at the 2005 Calvin Symposium on Worship in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

I also consulted with several pastors, professors, and congregational consultants with specific expertise to offer. These included Craig Barnes, Meneilly Professor of Leadership and Ministry at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and pastor of the Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Richard Blackburn, director of the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center in Lombard, Illinois; Robert DeVries, professor of church education at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Jaco Hamman, associate professor of pastoral care and counseling at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan; Ron Nydam, professor of pastoral care at Calvin Theological Seminary; Robb Redman, author of *The Great Worship Awakening* and pastor of a Presbyterian congregation in Texas; Gilbert Rendle, senior consultant with the Alban Institute and United Methodist pastor; and Joseph Smith, Presbyterian pastor and rural-ministry consultant at Oak Hills Fellowship in Bemidji, Minnesota. Each of them pro-

vided insights into the issues and pointed me toward resources and readings.

Finally, I participated in a pastors' consultation in Chicago that led to the publication of another book in the CICW/Alban Institute's Vital Worship, Healthy Congregations Series, by Professor Craig Satterlee of Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, titled *When God Speaks through Change: Preaching in Times of Congregational Transition*.<sup>2</sup> These pastors and priests, and especially my small-group members at that event—Christian Reformed pastor Mary Hulst of Champaign, Illinois, and Rabbi Ken Chasen of Los Angeles, California—provided many stories and insights for my thinking on this topic. And I had several discussions with pastors Norm Thomasma and Duane Visser of the Christian Reformed Pastor–Church Relations office, who had first asked the question.

The thesis of this book: *When congregations go through difficult times, those difficulties will affect the worship life of the congregation, and the practice of worship will itself be a key part of the congregation's healing process.*

Chapter 1 sets the stage for understanding difficult times and their impact on worship through the stories of six congregations and the difficulties they faced. Though the stories are real, the names of the churches have been changed to protect their identities and to indicate that these situations can and do arise in many locations. The congregational stories offer two examples each of the three categories of difficult times discussed in this book: crisis, transition, and conflict. The chapter introduces some of the questions raised about worship in each of these difficult times.

Chapter 2 offers more examples of difficult times and explains the congregational dynamics that accompany such times. In doing so, the chapter looks at the congregation as a living system and considers how it will react to the stress of difficult situations. Learning how congregations typically respond to change will help church leaders to deal with the changes that come along, whether planned and carefully carried out, or sudden and disturbing. Understanding these changes and the likely congregational reactions will also help worship leaders and planners to offer appropriate

help in worship. The basis for the material in this chapter can be found in family systems theory as it is applied to congregations and in a biblical ecclesiology of the church. The chapter also looks at three main types of difficulty that congregations can face—times of crisis, transition, and conflict—and considers their differences and similarities and their implications for worship. Most difficulties that congregations experience fall into these three categories, although there is some overlap. For instance, a crisis can lead to a conflict or a transitional period, a poorly handled transition can result in conflict, and a conflict can intensify and lead to a crisis. This chapter also explores the transitional nature of all congregational life—congregations are always changing or responding to some kind of issue or dilemma.

Chapter 3 takes a closer look at worship itself to consider its meaning and purpose and its function in congregational life. Better understanding of the role of worship helps to clarify how it is affected by changing times in general, as well as by difficult times in particular congregations. This chapter reviews some basic principles of worship and applies those principles to worship in difficult times. It looks at the formative aspect of worship—the way the unique moments and regular habits of worship shape the congregation and its members. It also reveals the potential of worship to be a means of healing and a primary occasion for the congregation both to stop to lament, and then to move through and beyond the turbulence of the difficulty. Worship leaders are provided with questions and case studies for coping in crisis, taking time for transitions, and keeping calm in conflict. Specific examples are given for accomplishing these tasks in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4 looks more specifically at the effects of crisis on congregations. It explores the role of worship as pastoral care in crisis, and especially the important function of lament in worship to express the sadness and anger that come with a crisis. In addition to lament, the chapter suggests some other important themes for congregations and their worship planners to pursue after a crisis, and offers a sampling of liturgical resources for such times, making suggestions for the various elements of the liturgy.

Chapter 5 does the same for worship in times of transition, especially transitions of congregational leadership, space, member-

ship, or vision. Major topics in this chapter include fittingness and discernment, appreciative inquiry, and practices of worship, with a list of suggested liturgical resources.

Chapter 6 considers worship in times of conflict, with an emphasis on confession and reconciliation. The consequences of changes in congregations that affect worship are explored, as well as situations in which worship is the focus of the change and the conflict.

These three chapters give a sampling of resources for use in worship, but not an exhaustive list. They are intended to guide worship planners and worship leaders in thinking about how to help the congregation respond to difficult times in worship.

Chapter 7 offers specific advice for pastors and church leaders in difficult times—worship leaders as well as leaders who serve in governing or staff positions in the church; those employed by the church in leadership roles, as well as volunteers selected by the congregation to supervise the ministry of the church (the board, council, session, or vestry, depending on the organization and terminology of the congregation). The need for planners and leaders of worship to be in close connection with those who govern or supervise the congregation is explored, and suggestions are offered for doing this effectively.

The peculiar nature of leadership in a congregational setting is considered from the understanding that a congregation is a unique organization because of its relationship with God, and this reality has implications for how leaders and followers relate to one another. Here again we draw on a systems perspective, which recognizes the reciprocal nature of leadership. Not only are followers necessary if leaders are to lead; the leadership that results is a function of the relationship between the leader and the followers—the dynamic system of the entire group. Suggestions are offered to leaders for dealing with their own stress while leading a congregation through a difficult time.

This book is intended to apply to all congregations, regardless of their historical and theological traditions. As a pastor in the Christian Reformed Church in North America, I belong to an evangelical Protestant denomination with roots in the Calvinist traditions of Switzerland, France, and especially the Netherlands.

However, the biblical theology and understanding of worship, leadership, and congregational issues advocated here go far beyond any particular tradition. In fact, they have been embraced by many churches. Furthermore, the systems-based understanding of leadership and group dynamics endorsed here has been influential in many organizations, both religious and nonreligious. It is my hope that this book will help educate leaders and congregations about the worship we offer to God in all times and situations, and serve as a resource for congregations when they encounter difficult times.



## Chapter One

# Stories of Crisis, Transition, and Conflict

The congregation of Resurrection Life Church discovers on a Tuesday morning that a fire has destroyed most of its church facility, leaving just the badly damaged sanctuary standing. Devastated by the loss of their building but gathering strength from calm leaders who pull them together, the members look for a place to worship together. Amid several offers from community organizations and local businesses, they decide to return to the local school gymnasium that they used at the beginning of their history—before the small group of people forming a new congregation even had a building. In an act of faith that will communicate to all observing this church in crisis, they string across the front of their charred church a banner displaying the words of Romans 8:28: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.”

A second congregation, at Faith Community Church, is grieving along with its pastor the tragic death of his daughter in an accident on a wintry Saturday. Congregational leaders initially deal with the crisis by making some last-minute changes for the next morning’s worship and later make more significant adjustments when the pastor is given a leave of absence for several months. But now that he has returned and more months have gone by, they are trying to decide how to observe the various services of the liturgical year with appropriate sensitivity to those who are grieving, and especially through a grieving worship leader. As winter approaches again, they wonder how long they will stay in the “longing” of Advent, and if they will ever be able to sing Christmas carols with joy again.

A third congregation, First Presbyterian, is facing the loss of a large portion of its membership to a new church established nearby,

and therefore the loss of many volunteers who had used their gifts in the church, especially in worship. They are slowly sorting through logistical frustrations. They don't have enough people to perform various roles, and not enough of them know exactly how to do their tasks. Beyond that difficulty, they also face feelings of resentment toward the new church that "stole" too many of their "sheep," and lingering sadness about the loss of a pastor who wasn't able to keep them together. They wish she had been a better preacher or a stronger leader, but despite those weaknesses her departure has, all the same, left them grieving.

A fourth congregation, Unity in Christ Church, is adjusting to a merger—the consolidation of a smaller congregation into its membership and its leadership. Suddenly, new people are in the pews and new leaders in the board room, and the older congregation—the mother church of this homecoming daughter—wonders what this merger will do to the family. The leaders had undertaken this change willingly to help out the smaller group that had struggled to remain viable in its location on an out-of-the-way city block. The members were happy to gather them into their spacious main-street facility. But they wonder what other kinds of changes will result. In fact, their greatest fear is that the smaller, more conservative congregation will move them backward on issues like worship style and evangelistic outreach. Members of the smaller congregation have their own concerns—about getting lost in the crowd, and being accepted and finding a niche for their gifts—even as they grieve the loss of their own church and their congregational identity.

Fifth, the congregation at Peace Lutheran Church is struggling to keep together factions that have polarized over changes in worship. The members have been caught in the "worship wars," but they realize that other issues also underlie the debate—issues of direction and mission. They tried holding two worship services of different styles, "traditional" and "contemporary," but the people didn't like being separated. So even before the end of the six-month trial period, they have gone back to one service. Now they are trying to figure out how to do "blended" worship, but they face a lot of hurt feelings and accusations about lack of good process. They are no longer trying to please all of the people all of the time; they wonder if it's possible to please *any* of the people at *any* time!

And finally, the congregation of the Independent Church of God is dealing with a major conflict between the pastor and the elders. The disagreement centers on leadership style and who has the authority to make important decisions. Can the pastor decide to change the worship style and hire staff members to support that style without consulting the elders? Can the elders make counter decisions at meetings called in the pastor's absence? Who is in charge? Who really runs the church? And how can this congregation avoid becoming a house divided?

These examples represent just a few of the difficult times that congregations can face. Many others could be listed, from natural disasters to planned building additions or relocations to major staff changes—both arrivals and departures. Furthermore, the uniqueness of each congregation multiplies the variety of difficulties that may arise. Just as each person and every family is unique, so too congregations with particular histories and makeup of membership have their own idiosyncratic ways of communicating with each other, showing appreciation or admonition to members, and dealing with change in their lives. In fact, transitional times tend to magnify a congregation's characteristics, quirks, and distinctive habits.

But though difficult times have a different shape and impact in each congregation, some factors are always in play in these situations. One is that no matter what the difficulty, it is certain to have an impact on the worship life of the congregation. Trying times affect various aspects of a congregation's life, but they especially affect its worship life. Even if the difficulty is not directly worship-related, it will affect the worship services in one way or another because the worshipers themselves are affected by it. The effects may be noticed in the decreased availability of volunteers for planning or participating in the service, or in an uncomfortable tone to the worship services owing to tensions in the congregation, or in the adoption of a new venue for the worship service, or in different people leading the worship service.

Worship is affected even in congregations that are not dealing with specifically worship-related challenges because it is in worship, more than at any other time, that the congregation gathers and expresses its identity as a community. The weekly worship service is the time when most of the members are together, so it is

the “main event” in terms of presence and participation. But it is also central because in the act of worship a congregation expresses its identity as the people of God. There the congregants act out the relationship with God that defines who they are—a people chosen by God and set apart for receiving God’s blessing and extending God’s peace to the world. A congregation may engage in many activities, but if worship is not one of them, and a central one, it cannot truly be considered a congregation.

Worship is somewhat like the holiday dinner, when everyone in the family comes home. These people are together because they have a family relationship with one another, and such relationships are usually more important than any others. “You can choose your friends, but not your relatives,” we often joke. But it is true. Families are important, and that’s why we go home for Christmas, Thanksgiving, and other holidays. Such occasions can be joyful or painful, depending on the circumstances. A family may celebrate a new in-law at the table or a new baby in the high chair, sigh over the empty space left by a family member who has died or divorced, or struggle with tension between members who have argued but not reconciled. Like biological or adoptive families, faith communities are shaped by the various changes and difficulties that the congregation faces, and these changes affect us as we come to worship, as we gather around God’s table.

That shaping includes the stretching and pushing and pulling that congregations experience as difficult times. Such difficulties raise the level of anxiety in the congregation, and this unease will be apparent in worship. These are some of the questions that arise from a look at congregations in difficult times:

- If a congregation is dealing with a crisis, a transition, or an ongoing conflict, what effect will this have on worship?
- How can congregations plan worship thoughtfully and meaningfully through the difficult time?
- How *can* congregations worship in difficult times?
- How can worship assist a congregation in the process of healing?
- And how can God work in these congregations through worship in a challenging time?

This book seeks to show how difficult times in the lives of congregations affect worship, and how worship can both reflect and affect the issues causing difficulty. Ultimately, I hope to show how worship can be part of a healthy process for a church dealing with a trying time.

Understanding how congregations tend to be affected by difficulties and determining a healthy process for dealing with them in worship will require much discernment on the part of congregations and their leaders. But the task must be undertaken because worship is the central aspect of congregational life, and ultimately, worship is the element of congregational life that offers the greatest potential for healing a congregation. Though most difficulties cannot be predicted, congregations can prepare for them to a certain extent by learning how changes will affect them and their worship. As a result, they can prepare for such changes when they face minor dilemmas, and will find themselves better able to deal with major turbulence in the future. Congregations can work today to develop healthy practices that will serve them well as future challenges arise.

We approach this possibility with confidence and joy because we worship the One who stills the storms of crises, transitions, and conflicts. To be sure, the gospel accounts of Jesus's nature miracles are about his encounters with natural forces rather than the human storms of crises, transitions, and conflicts. But the New Testament also teaches us that the church—Christ's body—is a place of healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness. So as congregational leaders navigate carefully to the other side of their particular stormy waters, they can have faith in the One who brings peace to our world and our churches. And then, in turn, they can instill calm in turbulent situations by keeping on with the practices Jesus commanded—gathering, preaching, praying, celebrating sacraments, and going out to serve as a powerful witness to the enduring peace of Christ in all times and places. Leaders must remember that at the end of the day, all their efforts will be for nothing without the power of God to still the storms in our hearts and in our congregations.