



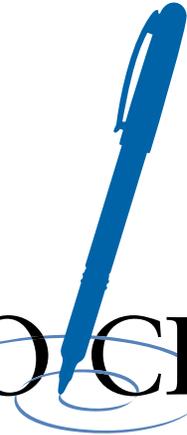
About the Author

The Rev. Dr. Gail Cafferata, PhD, is Priest Associate at The Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, California, and St. Andrews-in-the-Redwoods, Monte Rio, California, and Visiting Researcher in the Center for Practical Theology, Boston University School of Theology. She can be reached by email at gailc@bu.edu.

About Vintage Voice

Vintage Voice is a monthly publication written by beneficiaries of The Church Pension Fund. We hope you enjoy these articles and find them helpful. Articles are published with the authors' permission.

VINTAGE VOICE



Finding Redemption in Being the “Last Pastor”

By the Rev. Dr. Gail Cafferata

I was 67 years old when I retired from the small mission I had loved and served for nine years. We closed the church because we couldn't afford a new \$40,000 roof. We gathered on a sunny afternoon in May 2012 to celebrate the congregation's ministries and the congregation blessed me with a lovely retirement dinner. But I had no idea what lay ahead. No one else I knew had closed a church. Living through the death throes was hard on soul and body, and I felt like I had failed. I didn't want to attend any church where someone would know me, so we “church shopped” among Lutherans and Methodists or sneaked into services at large Episcopal parishes and left early. I played with updating my résumé a few times to get a job in health care, where I had worked before entering the ministry.

By grace, a friend who sailed a 30' boat on the San Francisco Bay offered me the opportunity to crew for races that summer. I raced my small dinghy on city lakes and hiked with my husband on Sonoma County's beautiful hills and coastal trails. The winds of healing were slow but steady. As energy returned I knew I wasn't ready to retire just yet. I worked as a medical sociologist before ordination and one day suddenly I wondered if other pastors who closed churches felt as lost and hurt as I did. I sent emails to five sociologists of religion I'd never met and asked them if they knew anyone who had done a study of pastors who had closed churches. To a person, they all replied, “No,” but added, “it's a great idea!”

I sat at my desk and wondered if I could do it. It had been almost 20 years since I had done academic sociology. I would need to learn how to do survey research in the 21st century, an academic library, and colleagues. I wrote the five sociologists back and asked if they had something like a visiting research position (without pay because I had my Church Pension and Social Security) where I could be in residence and design a study. One asked if she could pass my résumé on to the School of Theology. I interviewed over the phone and by the fall of 2012 I was a Visiting Researcher in the Center for Practical Theology at Boston University School of Theology.

It will be four years this autumn that I've been working nearly full-time on this study, which I've called "The Last Pastor: A Journey of Grief and Grace." The Holy Spirit is blowing over the American church. There's a flood of dying congregations in all the mainline denominations and, by grace, new forms rising in old and unlikely places. In some denominations more than four times as many churches are closing as opening. Many are served by seminary-trained pastors. I've been blessed by the privilege of surveying and interviewing pastors who have closed churches in five denominations (Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ). I asked them: What were the challenges? Where was God for you? How did you feel about yourself as a pastor of a church that closed? What do we as the wider church need to do better?

My husband and I have enjoyed four years of part-time residence at Boston University where he is also a Visiting Researcher (in the medical school). This summer I'm analyzing the data and planning a book. My hopes are to let the pastors speak and to write the book I needed to have when I began my ministry.

This research has been a healing journey. When our church closed I was angry about our circumstances, disappointed in colleagues who seemed afraid to talk to me, and sad at the loss of community ministries and relationships we had enjoyed over the years. I began to seek out a few pastors in other denominations who had closed their churches and were willing to talk about it. Some had even more difficult experiences than I had — conflicted congregations that were emotionally draining to serve, judicatory officials unwilling to help in their job search, or serious illnesses related to stress. I witnessed pastors' faith and faithfulness in serving their churches to the end. I saw how some pastors in difficult circumstances served with more resourcefulness and grace than I had. The sadness and anger have dissipated. I've seen unhelpful choices I've made and asked God's forgiveness. This work continues.

When I'm not working on my research I enjoy things retired people do. I race on local lakes and the San Francisco Bay and order the t-shirts for our annual Labor Day Regatta. My husband and I walk (striving for 9,000 steps a day), hike, and work out at our local YMCA. We have an East Coast daughter and grandchildren we visit whenever we're in residence at Boston University, and a newborn grandson a mile away. My husband and I attended our 50-year college reunions and renewed friendships. I've made many new friends through my research, and now serve as a Priest Associate in the church where I was ordained a priest in 2002. I'm glad to be a part of the Episcopal Church and feel great respect and gratitude for my brothers and sisters in other denominations. I've learned that what matters is not our theological differences or the way we organize ourselves, but our shared love for God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit and commitment to be servants of God's faithful people. No matter how hard the work, I'm so grateful each day for the new life God has given me.



19 East 34th Street
New York, NY 10016
www.cpg.org