A Splinter, Then a Crack: Leadership in the Aftermath of Divisive Conflict

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Abstract

What can pastoral leaders and faith communities learn from congregations that have experienced relational rupture in the wake of serious conflict? Building on insights gained from a qualitative study conducted with a congregation that endured a painful split, this article argues for an approach to pastoral leadership that attends carefully to the traumatic nature of divisive conflict and to the disillusionment that often follows. For leaders helping congregations heal from communal fractures, the essay proposes practices of "restorying" collective narratives and cultivating organizational capacities to address pain and conflict in constructive ways.

Introduction

Conflict is a basic feature of all human relationships and communities. In the context of congregational life, conflict often feels like a threat to be avoided, or at least resolved quickly to maintain a commitment to shared beliefs and a sense of belonging. However, within and across communities of faith, encounters with difference naturally create conflict, which, if handled well, can serve as a catalyst for positive change. Conflict in congregations, then, can be instructive in what it reveals about how religious communities cope with and learn from their experiences of serious disagreement.

Data collected in the United States over the last decade suggest that conflict has become a particularly worrisome feature of religious life because of its perceived consequences for congregational vitality.

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The 2010 Faith Communities Today (FACT) study found that "Almost two of every three congregations [in the United States] in 2010 had experienced conflict in at least one of four key areas [worship, finances, leadership, priorities] in the past five years. In a third of the congregations the conflict was serious enough that members left or withheld contributions, or a leader left."[1] In 2015, the FACT report found that "the overall level of conflict in congregations remains unsettlingly high."[2] These data confirm not only that conflict is a common feature of congregational life in the United States, but that it is often attributed as the cause of major ruptures in the relational fabric of faith communities.

Over the past few decades, the reality of congregational discord has led to the publication of many books and articles on "church conflict." Most of this literature focuses on how to manage conflict once it begins, or how to prevent such conflict from occurring in the first place.[3] Few texts explore what happens in the aftermath of a serious conflict within a faith community, despite the fact that (as noted above) such conflict occurs quite frequently. What are the tasks of pastoral care and leadership *after* grave relational breaches have taken place within a community of faith?

This article explores what pastoral leaders and faith communities might learn from congregations that have experienced serious relational rupture, yet have found ways to begin healing. The insights presented here emerge from a review of relevant literature in the fields of pastoral theology, disaster ministry, and leadership studies, and from the initial findings of a qualitative research study

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[1] David A. Roozen, *American Congregations 2010: A Decade of Change in American Congregations, 2000-2010* (Hartford, Conn.: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2011), 8. It is important to note that the FACT study is not limited to Christian faith communities. However, because Christian congregations make up a significant portion of the communities surveyed, the FACT study still provides useful data for this discussion.

[2] David A. Roozen, *American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving* (Hartford, Conn.: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2016), 7.

[3] Indeed, my own previous work in this area focuses primarily on the origins and dynamics of conflict, rather than its aftermath. See Leanna K. Fuller, *When Christ's Body is Broken: Anxiety, Identity, and Conflict in Congregations* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2016).

conducted with a congregation that recently experienced a painful split and is in the early stages of a long-term healing process.[4] This essay argues for an approach to pastoral leadership that takes seriously the traumatic nature of divisive congregational conflict, and that attends carefully to the profound sense of disillusionment that many communities experience following a crisis. Given these unique challenges, I suggest that pastoral leaders can help churches heal through two specific practices: "restorying"[5] communal narratives and cultivating organizational capacities to address pain and conflict constructively.

The Story of First Church

> "Three years of turmoil, three years of knowing something was going to happen because we weren't coming together. We were fracturing. It was splinter here, splinter here, splinter here. Eventually you get a full crack." — A member of First Church, describing her experience of the congregation's divisive conflict

In the fall of 2019, I conducted qualitative research interviews[6] with members of a mainline Protestant congregation that had

[4] Here it is important to note that although this article draws on the experience of one particular congregation as a key resource, I am not suggesting that conclusions drawn from this case can be generalized to all similar cases in all places and times. Even so, case studies—like other qualitative approaches—do have the potential, through their unique particularity, to reveal connections and meanings that might otherwise remain hidden. As practical theologians John Swinton and Harriet Mowat argue, "While the findings of qualitative research studies may not be immediately transferable to other contexts, there is a sense in which qualitative research should resonate with the experiences of others in similar circumstances. . . . Qualitative research can therefore claim a degree of transferability insofar as it often raises issues and offers insights which reach beyond the particularity of the situation." John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 47.

[5] This term appears in Lisa M. Maddox's book, *Did God Abandon Us? Helping Small Churches Heal* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2013) and will be defined in a later section of the article.

[6] More detailed information about these interviews will be provided in the following section.

recently experienced a painful split. The congregation, which I will refer to as "First Church," is located in a predominantly white, semi-rural area adjacent to a major urban center. Prior to the split, First Church had about two hundred and fifty members, and it featured robust music, youth, and Christian education programs. I began my research with this congregation about eighteen months after its previous pastor, along with a significant number of parishioners, had left to form a new church located roughly a mile away.

Admittedly, the story of what happened at First Church is complex; however, research interviews revealed a sense of the general narrative arc. According to most of the people who were interviewed, divisions among the parishioners were occurring for many years. These divisions arose primarily between those who had been members of the congregation and/or its parent denomination for decades, and those who had only joined the church within the last fifteen to twenty years. In other words, there seemed to be a marked difference between church members who were deeply rooted in and familiar with the traditions and theology of the mainline denomination to which the church belonged, and parishioners who were primarily formed within other traditions. Some interviewees described this as a division between those who were committed to the more moderate theology of the church's parent denomination and those who espoused a more conservative approach to matters of faith.

Most of the interviewees stated that this division had been growing within the congregation for years, but it took on a new significance with the hiring of Rev. John Cooper in 2013.[7] Though not entirely apparent at first, Rev. Cooper's theology was much more in line with those who had joined the congregation over the last decade or two, and who had been formed in religious traditions other than the mainline denomination to which First Church belonged. Over time, Rev. Cooper's sermons became increasingly focused on issues that many in the church considered controversial (for example, same-sex marriage), and ultimately he began preaching about his conviction that the congregation should leave

[7] "John Cooper" is a pseudonym used to protect the pastor's identity.

its parent denomination. At that time, First Church's governing board was evenly divided on whether to leave the denomination. Rev. Cooper suggested the board take an additional year to study the issue. By the end of that year, the governing board voted to leave the denomination.

The denomination's local judicatory leaders held a series of meetings with the congregation to ascertain whether or not its members truly supported this decision. At the end of that process, the congregation held a vote—and voted by a substantial margin to stay within the denomination. At that point, Rev. Cooper was asked to resign, and he left a few months later along with roughly half of the congregation's active membership. Many of these members formed a new worshipping community called Agape Community Church[8] about a mile away, and they soon hired Rev. Cooper as their minister. In the wake of this congregational split, which—by all accounts—was extremely painful, First Church called Rev. Jane Smith to be their interim pastor.[9] When I interviewed her in the fall of 2019, Rev. Smith explained that she felt her primary job at First Church was to help the congregation heal from what she called the "trauma" of divisive conflict that had occurred there. She further explained that the exodus of so many members from First Church, and their establishment of a new congregation just down the road, felt like a "betrayal" to many of the members who had remained.

When I initially met with First Church's governing board to ask permission to conduct research with the congregation, the tenor of the gathering was surprising. The atmosphere in the room was light-hearted; people joked with one another before the meeting began. As I presented my hopes for the research project, the board members asked good, probing questions and engaged the matter seriously but without a sense of intense anxiety. In short, the group's attitude did not match what I expected to see in a governing board of a congregation that had experienced a split the previous year—an

[8] "Agape Community Church" is a pseudonym used to protect the congregation's identity.
[9] "Jane Smith" is a pseudonym used to protect the pastor's identity.

event the interim pastor described as a "trauma." I had expected to see a group of leaders weighed down by the loss of roughly half its membership and income, wracked with anxiety and intense grief. Instead, the leaders, though clear-eyed about the challenges they faced, seemed generally relaxed and cautiously optimistic about the congregation's future. This led me to a question I wanted to explore more deeply: What had helped the remaining members of First Church move from a place of profound relational rupture in their congregation to the place of relative calm and hopefulness that was evident in this meeting? More specifically, What role might church leadership have played in helping the congregation move forward from such a painful event?

Analysis of Themes and Patterns at First Church

To delve into these research questions, I conducted a qualitative study[10] that involved semi-structured interviews with ten members of First Church, most of whom currently serve in a congregational leadership role.[11] In addition, I interviewed Rev. Smith (the current pastor of First Church); First Church's administrative assistant, who was also a long-time member of the congregation; and three local judicatory leaders who were involved with addressing the conflict at First Church prior to the split. The goal of the primary interviews with church members was to learn more about how these individuals had experienced the conflict at First Church as well as its aftermath. I was curious to know if or how these respondents

[10] In contrast to quantitative approaches, which tend to gather large amounts of numerical data and seek causal relationships between variables, qualitative research aims to discover "*how* social experience is created and given meaning." Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2000), 8, emphasis in original.

[11] Interviews represent one tool among many others (e.g., participant observation, analysis of artifacts, participatory inquiry, focus groups, etc.) that may be used in qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews are based on a set of open-ended questions, but they allow flexibility for the researcher to follow the interviewee's lead. A list of the interview questions used with the respondents at First Church can be found in the Appendix.

saw evidence of healing within the congregation, and if so, what they thought had helped it to happen.

After conducting and transcribing the interviews, I began to look for themes or patterns that might provide a more robust understanding of how the conflict and ensuing split at First Church had affected the congregation. Although twelve central themes could be identified within the interview data, only four that are particularly relevant to the challenges of leadership in the wake of congregational rupture will be addressed here: (1) the intense pain that resulted from the split; (2) the longstanding divisions that existed in First Church prior to the split; (3) the central role of pastoral leadership in helping First Church move toward healing; and (4) a sense of cautious optimism that First Church could grow through this difficult experience into a hopeful future.

Themes of pain and woundedness were by far the most common to emerge from the interviews conducted at First Church. The pain interviewees described seemed to come not only from the broken relationships with fellow parishioners, but also from the sense that many who remained at First Church felt "judged" by those who left. Several interviewees used the metaphor of divorce to describe what the church split had been like. Others described the conflict, and the split that ensued, as "ugly," "vicious, mean, and nasty," "horrible," and "a bloodletting." Rev. Smith, the current pastor of First Church repeatedly used the word "trauma" to describe this congregation's experience—a term that seems to be justified given how parishioners framed what happened.

Another common theme that emerged from the interviews was that the split that ultimately occurred at First Church had been brewing for a long time—perhaps for decades. Many interviewees described the "fault lines" that had long existed in the congregation, primarily between those who were lifelong members of the church's denomination and those who had come to First Church within the last fifteen to twenty years, many of whom did not have roots in the congregation's denominational tradition. Interviewees also described the longstanding divisions within the congregation as falling along lines that are primarily political or ideological: more "conservative" views versus what were perceived as the more

"liberal" views of the local judicatory and the national church body, and therefore (in some congregants' eyes) tacitly endorsed by those who wished to remain in the denomination. These conservative/liberal dichotomies emerged primarily around social issues such as same-sex marriage, abortion, and attitudes toward Israel. In this sense, the congregation's conflict appears to mirror much of the polarized political climate that has been building in the United States over the last few decades.

When asked what had helped First Church to heal after the split, the interviewees were nearly unanimous: almost everyone named the current pastor's leadership as a key element in the congregation's ability to imagine a future beyond the rupture. More specifically, interviewees mentioned the pastor's efforts to make space for church members to name their hurt and anger; her provision of a special prayer to use in the midst of sorrow and resentment; her efforts to bring the church back to their sense of identity and mission; and her ability to cast a hopeful vision for the future without glossing over the pain of what the church had endured. In addition to the pastor's leadership, interviewees talked about the "camaraderie" of the church, or the sense of "being in this together," as a healing element. Others mentioned the importance of maintaining yearly church events (e.g., the live nativity, the church rummage sale) as a primary mode of healing. These were community-oriented events that allowed the remaining members of First Church to pull together toward goals that mattered to them. These events seemed to give parishioners the sense that they could still do the things that they had always done, even though a large portion of their congregation had left.

Despite the sharpness of the conflict and the pain of the split that resulted, those I interviewed at First Church generally expressed a sense of hopefulness about the church's current circumstances. They generally expressed a renewed sense of relying on one another, getting to know one another more deeply, and even becoming more open to one another's differences. One interviewee put it this way: "From my perspective, this process has been so painful that I believe, if we're open and we see those differences, I think we're more likely to address them before they fester and get bigger

because none of us want to go through this again, just in no way, shape, or form." There seems to be a sense that those who remain at First Church have learned from this experience and want the healing process to include growing in their relationships with one another, so that a similar conflict will not split the church again in the future.

Conflict, Trauma, and Disillusionment

As the previous section has illustrated, the story of First Church contains deep and lasting pain. Though I did not enter into this study with the concept of "trauma" explicitly in mind, the vivid language church members used to describe the conflict (for example, "vicious," "horrible," "a bloodletting") depicts a traumatic experience. Because of my work in the fields of pastoral theology and pastoral care, I am familiar with trauma literature and I noticed the resonance between aspects of that literature and the data emerging from the interviews I conducted. In what follows, I correlate elements of trauma theory with the interview data in an effort to get a clearer picture of the conflict at First Church and the leadership practices that proved most helpful in its wake.

Conflict as Relational Trauma

Trauma has become an increasingly common term in the wider culture. Although trauma may once have been understood as occurring only in situations of extreme physical violence (e.g., war), more recent research on trauma offers a different perspective. In his bestselling book, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk writes, "One does not have to be a combat soldier, or visit a refugee camp in Syria or the Congo to encounter trauma. Trauma happens to us, our friends, our families and our neighbors."[12] As van der Kolk explains, trauma can result from many different kinds of experiences: childhood abuse, sexual assault, addiction, or domestic violence, for example—all of which are fairly common in

[12] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 1.

the general population.[13] Trauma, therefore, is much more a part of the daily lives of ordinary people than was previously known.

What differentiates trauma from other stressful events, then, is not the frequency of its occurrence but the effect it has on those who experience it. Psychiatrist and trauma expert Judith Herman explains that "Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life."[14] Yet, as Carolyn E. Yoder notes, "what is traumatic to one may be only stressful to another."[15] How someone will respond to trauma, then, is highly individualized and often cannot be predicted. This helps to explain why, when a deeply upsetting event happens within a group, the reactions of individuals within that group can vary widely.

In addition to its diverse effects on individuals, trauma also can affect entire communities, including congregations. Natural disasters, mass shootings, the homicide or suicide of a beloved leader, or revelations of sexual abuse are examples of events that can overwhelm a congregation's usual ways of coping with problems, or even "permanently alter the relational structure and environment of a congregation."[16] In recent years, many resources offering guidance for congregational leaders facing traumatic events have emerged, most of them focusing on the critical tasks of ministry following

[13] According to van der Kolk, "one in five Americans was sexually molested as a child; one in four was beaten by a parent to the point of a mark being left on their body; and one in three couples engages in physical violence. A quarter of us grew up with alcoholic relatives, and one out of eight witnessed their mother being hit." *The Body Keeps the Score*, 1.

[14] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 33.

[15] Carolyn E. Yoder, "Trauma, Polarization, and Connection" in *When the Center Does Not Hold: Leading in an Age of Polarization*, ed. David R. Brubaker, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 68.

[16] Laurie Kraus, David Holyan, and Bruce Wismer, *Recovering From Un-Natural Disasters: A Guide for Pastors and Congregations After Violence and Trauma* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), x.

a disaster, whether natural or human-caused.[17] Yet, few of these resources specifically address divisive conflict within a religious community as a potential source of trauma.[18] In one sense, this is understandable; congregational conflict, even when it is intense, does not usually create quite the same kind of shock or horror as the other kinds of crises named above. Even so, the experience of congregations like First Church suggests that such conflict has the potential to leave lasting wounds and generate chronic stress in much the same ways as other forms of communal trauma.

Here it is helpful to draw on the distinction between situational and relational trauma as described by pastor and clinical counselor Lisa M. Maddox. In her book *Did God Abandon Us? Helping Small Churches Heal*, Maddox explains that situational trauma typically involves one-time events that are external to the congregation.[19] Relational trauma, by contrast, is "usually caused by a series of events that originate within the church organization, such as divisive conflicts, abusive relationships, and misconduct by clergy or lay leaders."[20] Maddox further notes that relational trauma "may impact the congregation even more than situational trauma, because relational trauma also threatens the integrity of the church and its viability for the future."[21] Relational trauma, Maddox argues, creates chronic stress within the congregation as members

[17] Examples of such resources include Kraus, Holyan, and Wismer, *Recovering From Un-Natural Disasters*; Jamie D. Aten and David M. Boan, *Disaster Ministry Handbook* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2016); Stephen B. Roberts and Willard W.C. Ashley, Sr., eds., *Disaster Spiritual Care: Practical Clergy Responses to Community, Regional and National Tragedy*, 2nd ed., (Nashville: SkyLight Paths, 2017); Clayton L. Smith and Matt Schoenfeld, *Growing Through Disaster: Tools for Financial and Trauma Recovery in Your Faith Community* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019); and the Institute for Collective Trauma and Growth website: https://www.ictg.org/ (accessed January 21, 2021).

[18] Two notable exceptions to this claim are Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Bearing the Unbearable: Trauma, Gospel and Pastoral Care* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2015) and Lisa M. Maddox, *Did God Abandon Us? Helping Small Churches Heal* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2013).

[19] Maddox, 15.

[20] Maddox, 16.

[21] Maddox, 16.

begin to internalize the conflict in an unhealthy manner.[22] Framing the aftermath of divisive conflict as "relational trauma" is helpful in two specific ways. First, it allows us to place events like the ones that occurred at First Church within the broader conceptual framework of trauma, which opens up new understandings of what congregations may need in order to heal from these kinds of experiences. Second, it acknowledges that trauma resulting from within a congregation has distinctive features that might complicate a congregation's journey toward healing.

Trauma and Disillusionment

Many resources in the field of disaster ministry note that healing from communal trauma (such as natural disasters, mass shootings, etc.) typically involves a progression through different phases: emergency/heroism, relief, disillusionment, and recovery.[23] In a situation involving divisive congregational conflict such as the one that took place at First Church, the emergency/heroism phase would include the period when the conflict was at its most intense and when difficult decisions were being made. In First Church's case, this phase stretched over a period of many months, unlike most other kinds of crisis that might span only a few hours or days. Counter-intuitively, the relief phase of a divisive conflict in a faith community might occur during the period when a segment of the congregation leaves because that is when the tension in the group is finally released. One interviewee told me that after the vote at First Church and the exodus of many of its members, she felt a huge sense of relief because "It [the conflict] was three years of hell, quite frankly" and the vote meant that "It was over."

The disillusionment phase, which comes after the relief phase, is often the most challenging part of the journey toward healing from

[22] Maddox, 18–19.

[23] Jill M. Hudson, *Congregational Trauma: Caring, Coping & Learning* (Lanham, Maryland: Alban Institute, 1998), 55. It should be noted that other resources frame the phases slightly differently, with different names for them. For example, the authors of *Recovering From Un-natural Disasters* created a framework for understanding the specific challenges of human-caused disaster, which includes the following four phases: devastation and heroism, disillusionment, reforming, and wisdom (Kraus, Holyan, and Wismer, xiv).

trauma, for individuals as well as for communities.[24] In a sense, the disillusionment phase feels like a profound letdown after all of the frenetic activity that took place in response to the immediate crisis. This phase also can produce intense feelings of loss of control, rage, hatred, or hopelessness. Disaster ministry experts Laurie Kraus, David Holyan, and Bruce Wismer note that disillusionment "is a difficult season and is often resisted. The disaster—the trauma—happened. It is as bad as it feels. We cannot go back to the way things were . . . There is only a different life forward from the way things used to be, a way forward that is unfamiliar and hidden in shadow."[25] From a spiritual perspective, disillusionment might also include changes in individuals' or communities' understandings of God. Some may begin to question the nature of God's activity in or intentions for the world.[26] Others will experience spiritual challenges such as disconnection, isolation, or a struggle to find meaning.[27]

Further, in congregations where trauma has created chronic stress, people may no longer feel spiritually renewed by their participation in worship or other aspects of church life. On this point, Maddox writes, "In churches that have a high degree of chronic stress, people stop attending because the church is no longer a place where they feel renewed and supported; instead they may feel deeply hurt and abused by their interactions with other people in the church."[28] This observation matches what several interviewees at First Church expressed, one of whom said that during the most intense phase of the conflict she felt that "there was no worship happening" on Sunday mornings. Instead, there was only "anger and angst," which led this interviewee to stop attending worship altogether until after the congregational vote was taken. Another interviewee stated that during the conflict, he knew some members were "getting to the point where they didn't even want to come to church on Sunday morning because they felt judged."

[24] Kraus, Holyan, and Wismer, 49.
[25] Kraus, Holyan, and Wismer, xv.
[26] Hudson, 3.
[27] Aten and Boan, 98-99.
[28] Maddox, 19.

For congregations that have experienced some form of communal trauma, sound pastoral leadership is especially critical during the disillusionment phase. As noted above, this phase will likely produce profound feelings of sadness, anger, or despair, and might even cause individuals to question their most fundamental beliefs about God's goodness and faithfulness. What, then, are the specific tasks of pastoral leadership and care in such circumstances? Based on the literature and my research with First Church, I suggest that leaders helping congregations to heal from relational trauma should focus on two primary tasks: (1) "restorying," or reimagining the congregation's narrative; and (2) building organizational capacity to address pain and conflict in constructive ways. The following section explores the shapes these leadership practices might take in a congregation like First Church.

Leadership Practices for Healing Relational Trauma

Restorying

Much of the literature addressing post-disaster ministry emphasizes the importance of *narrative* in healing from trauma. Individuals who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event need to find ways to tell their stories as a step on the path to healing.[29] In the same way, members of traumatized congregations need places to talk about what happened and to name the pain of the losses they have endured.[30] Pastoral leaders have a special role to play here, because they have unique power within their communities to "frame and interpret any traumatic event that has occurred" and to "offer space to the hurting to tell their story."[31] Here it is important to acknowledge that the role of narrative in healing goes beyond simply rehearsing difficult events over and over, which in some cases could inadvertently result in retraumatization.[32] To help congregations move beyond mere repetition, pastoral leaders must encourage their communities to find "ways (verbal and symbolic)

[29] Kraus, Holyan, and Wismer, 5.
[30] Hudson, 79–80.
[31] Hunsinger, 19.
[32] Maddox, 25.

to tell the story and *unpack the impact of the event*."[33] In other words, pastoral leaders are charged with helping their communities move from a place of rehearsing traumatic events to articulating what those events mean in light of their understanding of and relationship with God.

Pastoral leaders, then, are called not only to create space for church members to recount their individual experiences of the trauma, but also to invite the church as a whole to reimagine their narrative through the lens of faith. Maddox calls this process "restorying," in which pastoral leaders help traumatized congregations to move from "problem-saturated stories" to "hope-saturated stories."[34] According to Maddox, one step in the restorying process involves identifying "sparkling events," or "times when the congregation was able to resist the problems that resulted from the trauma."[35] Many of the people at First Church talked about sparkling events that occurred after the split, such as the congregation's decision to continue to hold its yearly live nativity, rummage sale, and strawberry festival. For these interviewees, such church-wide events served as a reminder that the congregation was still alive and could actively engage in ministry, despite the many difficulties it had endured. As Maddox notes, sparkling events are so significant because they "provide proof that there is another way to tell the story of the church that does not focus exclusively on everything that has gone wrong."[36]

How, exactly, might pastoral leaders guide their communities in the process of restorying? Here the experience of First Church is again instructive. Almost every parishioner I interviewed at First Church talked about how central Jane Smith's leadership was to the process of healing from the split. When interviewees were asked if they could specify just what Rev. Smith did that was so effective, their responses focused on three main areas: providing spaces to name hurt and anger, helping parishioners to integrate their grief

[33] Kraus, Holyan, and Wismer, 5, emphasis added.
[34] Maddox, 61.
[35] Maddox, 60.
[36] Maddox, 61.

and pain through spiritual practices, and focusing on the church's mission and vision for the future.

At First Church, having a space to name and process difficult feelings after the split occurred seems to have played an important role in the congregation's move toward healing. Several interview respondents mentioned that in January 2019, roughly nine months after the split, Rev. Smith held a "healing meeting" at the church for all congregation members. According to these parishioners, this meeting represented a unique opportunity for church members to share their individual responses to the split and to process the emotions that came along with them. One interviewee also mentioned how much she appreciated Rev. Smith's work with First Church's governing board to make space for the expression of difficult feelings about the split: "When [Rev. Smith] first came, I really respected the fact she would permit us to let out our anger… Our first couple of meetings, she would give us that space to let our anger out but always help us to stop it when it was done being productive." This interviewee's experience of expressing her anger provides a concrete example of restorying, as her anger became a viable narrative thread to weave into, rather than weed out of, First Church's collective story. The opportunities Rev. Smith provided for parishioners to name their difficult feelings thus seem to have contributed positively to individuals' healing and to the group's growth in their understanding of one another.[37]

Although many parishioners named Rev. Smith's help with processing their feelings as central to the healing process, Rev. Smith herself sees this as an area where her leadership sometimes fell short. Rev. Smith recalls that during the healing meeting, one member took the opportunity to strongly criticize one of the judicatory leaders who had tried to assist the congregation during its decision-making process. According to Rev. Smith, this parishioner expressed strong feelings of resentment toward the judicatory leader

[37] As pastoral theologian Jaco J. Hamman notes, "As your community recalls different (and even opposing) stories of the same event, intimacy between the participants is fostered and the possibility for a new future is created." Jaco J. Hamman, *When Steeples Cry: Leading Congregations Through Loss and Change* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 83.

in a way that seemed to lead the group toward blaming rather than healing. Rev. Smith remembers that in the moment, she had difficulty knowing how to respond to the statement of resentment, other than thanking the parishioner for sharing. Rev. Smith feels she may have inadvertently "given permission" for others in the group to get stuck in resentful feelings.[38]

In retrospect, Rev. Smith thinks it would have been more helpful to the congregation if she could have found a way to invite the resentful parishioner to acknowledge the pain of her feelings while also imagining a way to move forward with them. Rev. Smith now wonders what would have happened if she had responded to the parishioner by shifting the focus back to the larger group, perhaps by saying something like, "I hear how difficult this experience has been for all of you. Many painful things have been said and done. I'm wondering if we can find a way to honor the pain and still find a way to move forward." Rev. Smith describes this experience as a "failure" in her leadership at First Church, but reports that she learned a crucial lesson from it: following a crisis, making space for negative feelings to be expressed is a key part of the healing process. However, there is a fine line between giving voice to feelings and allowing them to trap the group in unhealthy cycles of blame and bitterness.[39]

Sharing stories represents a vital way individuals and congregations can begin to heal from trauma. Yet, as Rev. Smith's experience at the healing meeting illustrates, it is also important for this story-sharing to go beyond repetition or "venting" and move toward meaning-making within the context of faith. For this reason, spirituality must be at the center of the healing process for congregational trauma.[40] The interviews I conducted at First Church revealed that Rev. Smith encouraged parishioners to adopt spiritual practices aimed at helping them integrate the loss and pain they had experienced as a result of the split. For instance,

[38] "Jane Smith," personal communication, February 11, 2021.
[39] "Jane Smith," personal communication, February 11, 2021.
[40] Maddox, 21.

Rev. Smith said that when she arrived at First Church, one of the greatest sources of pain for the remaining members was that so many of their friends and neighbors had left and founded a new congregation, Agape Community Church, close by. In response to this insight, Rev. Smith began encouraging those who remained at First Church to think of Agape Community Church as simply a "new church plant" or a "new part of the body of Christ" in the neighborhood.

Rev. Smith then invited the members of First Church to pray for this new congregation. She wrote a special prayer for First Church members to use regularly in their private devotional time, when they felt ready to do so. It became known as the "Godspeed prayer," and it asked God to bless those who had left First Church and to surround them with God's loving presence.[41] As Rev. Smith put it, "I wrote the Godspeed prayer because I wanted to turn betrayal into prayer."[42] Almost every parishioner I interviewed mentioned the Godspeed prayer; they talked about how it had assisted them to helpfully reframe[43] the split, as well as to ground them spiritually during a time when they were experiencing many difficult emotions. Rev. Smith's use of the Godspeed prayer is a concrete example of helping the remaining members of First

[41] The full text of the Godspeed prayer reads as follows: "We ask your blessing upon our friends as they move to another fellowship. Bless their lives. Bless their new church. Bless their work and play. Through all the changes, surround them with your loving presence. We know that in you there is no east or west, no south or north. Thank you Lord Jesus for your Church. Amen." Rev. Smith stated that she used this prayer once or twice during worship, but primarily encouraged members to use it as a private devotional practice. ("Jane Smith," personal communication, January 29, 2021.)

[42] "Jane Smith," personal communication, October 18, 2019.

[43] "Reframing" is a psychotherapeutic technique that rose to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s and that is still widely used today. It involves encouraging clients to look at situations or events from a different angle and thereby to alter their meaning. See, for example, Richard Bandler and John Grinder, *Reframing: Neuro-Linguistic Programming and the Transformation of Meaning* (Boulder, Col.: Real People Press, 1982). For an example of how the technique of reframing has been adapted in the practice of Christian pastoral care and counseling, see Donald Capps, *Reframing: A New Method in Pastoral Care* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

Church to move from a "problem-saturated"[44] version of their communal story to a more hopeful one.

One other area of Rev. Smith's leadership that stood out was her focus on the congregation's mission and vision for the future. Pastoral theologian Jaco J. Hamman argues that one of the most critical tasks for congregations navigating loss and change is "settling on a new identity that incorporates the loss or transition that has occurred."[45] Rev. Smith led First Church to begin redefining their identity by encouraging members to acknowledge the hurt they had experienced, while at the same time holding on to hope for their future as a faith community. According to one interviewee, Rev. Smith would often use the phrase "It's a new day!" to remind parishioners that First Church did not have to be defined solely by the painful conflict it had endured. Rev. Smith was also instrumental in supporting the congregation's efforts to continue some of its primary ministry activities (i.e., the "sparkling events" mentioned above) in order to maintain its sense of identity, even in the midst of profound change and loss. As seminary professor Darryl W. Stephens notes, "We must find ways to re-tell our congregational narratives to open us to the vast possibilities of God's future, so that we are neither continually reacting to a traumatic past nor obsessed with nostalgia for a previous era."[46] At First Church, Rev. Smith's leadership helped the congregation to restory its life together by affirming the congregation's sense of identity and mission, while at the same time encouraging parishioners not to get stuck in the pain of the conflict or in longing for "the way things used to be."

Cultivating Organizational Capacities to Address Pain and Conflict

In *Recovering From Un-Natural Disasters*, Kraus, Holyan, and Wismer note that pastoral leadership during the disillusionment phase following a communal trauma presents unique challenges. They write, "Navigating this phase well requires a consistent and less anxious presence, effective communication skills, the capacity

[44] Maddox, 61.
[45] Hamman, 102.
[46] Darryl W. Stephens, "A Deacon's Eye for Healing Congregations," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 42(3) (2015): 217.

to tolerate intense emotions, and a commitment to maintain boundaries."[47] At First Church, Rev. Smith seems to have embodied all of these traits, which helps explain why so many interviewees cited her leadership as a key factor in the congregation's healing process. As important as these characteristics are for individual pastoral leaders, however, it is also vital for churches to develop *organizational* capacities to cope with pain and conflict. Cultivating these capacities can help congregations respond to crises "from a place of communal strength" rather than getting stuck in individuals' intense emotional reactions.[48]

From a physiological perspective, pain in response to a serious injury is normal and serves as a signal to the body that the organism needs to slow down and tend to its own healing.[49] Similarly, congregations or organizations that suffer communal trauma must find ways to address their wounds, rather than pretend nothing has happened or try to "push through" without acknowledging the pain.[50] For faith communities that have endured the trauma of divisive conflict, dealing with pain effectively will likely require the expression and processing of difficult feelings, both immediately after the conflict and for weeks or months afterward—particularly during the disillusionment phase of a congregation's recovery.

This kind of emotional work is inherently difficult, yet pastoral leaders have a unique opportunity to serve as trusted spiritual guides for congregations in the wake of communal trauma. In addition to tending to their own feelings in appropriate ways, pastoral leaders can coach faith communities to practice sitting with intense feelings of pain or loss rather than denying or glossing over them. The role of pastoral leaders in these circumstances is to "move purposively but gently *toward* those issues that are generating anger, anxiety, or shame, refusing to let them be hushed up or

[47] Kraus, Holyan, and Wismer, xv–xvi.
[48] Hunsinger, 123.
[49] Sarah B. Drummond, "Leadership and Institutional Pain," *Journal of Religious Leadership*, 16(1) (2017): 7.
[50] Kraus, Holyan, and Wismer note that during the disillusionment phase of disaster, in particular, "There may be some who demonstrate resistance to relinquishing an illusion that things will go back as before if they can just keep busy enough." *Recovering from Un-Natural Disasters*, 47.

buried unhealed."[51] This work may take the form of large-group events, such as the "healing meeting" that Rev. Smith facilitated at First Church, or it might involve a longer-term process in small groups—or some combination of the two—depending on how the pastoral leader assesses the community's needs. Through these practices pastoral leaders can help congregations acknowledge that healing from communal trauma involves moving toward the pain of their experience rather than away from it.[52] As seminary administrator Sarah B. Drummond notes, leaders "cannot protect their communities from the acute discomfort" that accompanies deeply painful experiences, but they can "encourage the community to trust the pain process, believing that the pain will become more manageable and avoiding practices that make matters worse."[53]

As noted above, Rev. Smith's leadership was a key factor in First Church's healing process, particularly in terms of making space for the expression of difficult feelings following the split. Yet other congregational leaders also played essential roles in First Church's journey toward restored health. Rev. Smith has stated that when she came to First Church, she felt strongly that she had been called there to do two things: preach the gospel and help the congregation's governing board "order next steps" for the congregation.[54] At that point, just after the split, the governing board had shrunk from twelve members to four, so one of Rev. Smith's first tasks was to recruit new members to the board. Rev. Smith set out to identify leaders in the congregation who would be able to acknowledge the anxiety swirling in the church without getting swept away by it, and who could focus on the work that the board needed to do to make decisions about First Church's future. In other words, she was looking for leaders who could help strengthen the congregation's organizational capacities to address difficult issues head-on.

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[51] Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger and Theresa F. Latini, *Transforming Church Conflict: Compassionate Leadership in Action* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 176, emphasis in original.
[52] Kraus, Holyan, and Wismer, 47.
[53] Drummond, 15.
[54] "Jane Smith," personal communication, February 11, 2021.

According to Rev. Smith, two lay leaders played especially important roles in helping First Church grow in its abilities to deal constructively with change and loss. Linda Thompson, who was one of the four remaining members of the governing board when Rev. Smith arrived, became the leader of the new board.[55] By Rev. Smith's account, Linda was instrumental in setting the tone for the board once it was reconfigured. Rev. Smith describes Linda as "fundamentally unrattled" by all that had happened at First Church.[56] This does not mean that Linda did not have strong feelings about the split, but rather that she was able to accept that it had happened while still imagining a hopeful future for First Church. Linda never expressed hatred or malice toward those who had left the congregation; instead, she wished them well while remaining focused on the work at hand for First Church. Linda's ability to embody equanimity in the midst of so much congregational turmoil seems to have helped to stabilize the governing board and set a positive example for others in the church.

Rev. Smith also pointed to Ross Taylor as a key lay leader at First Church during the post-split period.[57] Shortly before the split, Ross had retired from the banking industry and up to that point had never served in a formal church leadership role. He agreed to become First Church's treasurer, and as part of his work in that role he instituted full financial transparency, which was a change from the congregation's past practices. According to Rev. Smith, Ross's commitment to transparency was critically important because it helped stop speculation about the church's finances (what Rev. Smith called the "rumor mill") and instead offered facts and figures to give a clear picture about what was happening at First Church. Due to Ross's leadership, transparency became a "modus operandi" for First Church in a way it never had before. Rev. Smith feels this was an essential factor in First Church's healing because, as she puts it, "Transparency is the core of what allows mutuality."[58] By fostering transparency and managing anxiety, and by supporting

[55] "Linda Thompson" is a pseudonym used to protect the parishioner's identity.
[56] "Jane Smith," personal communication, February 11, 2021.
[57] "Ross Taylor" is a pseudonym used to protect the parishioner's identity.
[58] "Jane Smith," personal communication, February 11, 2021.

Rev. Smith in her efforts, congregational leaders like Ross Taylor and Linda Thompson played a vital role in helping First Church to strengthen its abilities to address the pain it had experienced and to move toward healing.

Another way of helping congregations attend to pain is by assisting them to grow in their capacity to deal constructively with conflict. Many resources already exist to help congregations learn how to prepare for conflict and to manage it once it inevitably arises. One particular approach ties together trauma, conflict, and the need for communal practices of healing. In *Bearing the Unbearable: Trauma, Gospel, and Pastoral Care*, pastoral theologian Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger includes a chapter specifically addressing the challenges congregations face in the aftermath of communal trauma, including intensely divisive conflicts. In this chapter, Hunsinger advocates for a framework of *restorative practices* as a means of helping faith communities to cope with crisis or trauma. Hunsinger argues that congregations would be wise to establish such restorative practices *before* a challenging issue arises, noting that "When the entire church is reeling in pain, it can be difficult to invent structures and processes that will restore its equilibrium."[59]

The term *restorative practices* refers to a transdisciplinary field of study that explores "how to strengthen relationships between individuals as well as social connections within communities."[60] Hunsinger explains that "What unites the various disciplines and experienced practitioners in this field of study is a commitment (developed both theoretically and practically) to working *with* people in order to deepen community ties instead of doing things *to* them or *for* them (or alternatively, not doing anything at all)."[61] In other words, restorative practices aim to build capacities within groups of people and empower them to take responsibility for their own growth. Within this framework, then, the role of the leader is to guide and accompany, not to take ownership of or try

[59] Hunsinger, 123.
[60] International Institute of Restorative Practices website, https://www.iirp.edu/restorative-practices/what-is-restorative-practices (accessed January 28, 2021).
[61] Hunsinger, 125, emphasis in original.

to control the group's process. In this way, the leader assists the congregation to develop its own abilities to deal effectively with conflict, whenever and wherever it arises.

A restorative framework acknowledges that the specific practices needed will vary depending on the nature and intensity of the conflict. For less intense conflicts that involve only a few people, informal "restorative conversations" that focus on individuals' needs and feelings will likely suffice.[62] Conflicts that involve the whole congregation, or that are especially intense, might require a formal "restorative conference," a process that is often led most effectively by an outside facilitator.[63] With this restorative framework in mind, one of the most helpful actions pastoral leaders can take is to train parishioners in basic listening and communication skills so that they can resolve conflict at lower levels before it escalates in intensity.

When conflict moves beyond the interpersonal level to involve groups of people or even the whole congregation, the practice of "restorative circles" proves especially useful. Restorative circles are structured group processes aimed toward decision-making, yet they differ markedly from typical congregational approaches based on debate and majority rule.[64] Hunsinger explains that

> Restorative circles are not designed to be forums for winning proponents, persuading others to one's point of view, or making an opposing party look bad. Such tactics only increase ill feeling and lead to polarization. A restorative approach *encourages* those the majority disagrees with to speak up, not so they can be defeated, but so that their needs can be fully heard and taken to heart. A restorative church knows that if it operates within a win/lose paradigm, the whole church will lose.[65]

[62] Hunsinger, 133.
[63] Hunsinger, 133, 135.
[64] Hunsinger, 134.
[65] Hunsinger, 134, emphasis in original.

This restorative approach to conflict, Hunsinger argues, helps to reduce emotional intensity within the congregation and increase mutual understanding among all parties involved. In addition, congregations that develop the skills to practice restorative circles on a regular basis for routine types of conflict will be better prepared to handle more divisive or widespread disagreements.[66]

The restorative framework described by Hunsinger likely would have benefited First Church in many ways, particularly in terms of helping parishioners become familiar with specific practices (such as restorative circles) that they could draw upon in the face of a serious conflict. My interviews with First Church members revealed that for many years prior to the split, most parishioners tended not to engage in open disagreement, instead preferring more indirect modes of communication. As a result, parishioners often did not recognize the range of differences that actually existed within the congregation. Reflecting on the period of tension leading up to the split, one interviewee said, "We kept our thoughts to ourselves and felt as though that was the respectful way to go. I am now kicking myself that I didn't find my voice earlier so that perhaps other people knew, would have known that there was another opinion."

Unfortunately, because First Church had not developed strong organizational capacities for handling conflict, parishioners found themselves at a loss as to how to respond to the intense feelings and stress that emerged prior to the split. One interviewee described the experience this way: "Three years of turmoil, three years of knowing something was going to happen because we weren't coming together. We were fracturing. It was splinter here, splinter here, splinter here. Eventually you get a full crack." The members of First Church lacked the skills needed to understand each other's needs and feelings, which prevented them from being able to "come together" rather than break apart. In a recent conversation, Rev. Smith shared with me that this is an area in which First Church still struggles. From her perspective, although the congregation has managed to move toward healing in significant ways, the patterns of

[66] Hunsinger, 134.

indirect communication and reluctance to engage conflict openly run deep at First Church and will likely take a long time to change.[67] Rev. Smith's observations serve as a reminder that although helping congregations develop capacities to handle conflict is essential, it is also difficult, long-term work.

Conclusion

As the experiences of congregations like First Church powerfully illustrate, divisive conflict in faith communities leaves deep and lasting wounds. For these communities, healing requires leaders who can attend carefully to the trauma caused by grave relational breaches and the disillusionment that often follows. By inviting congregations to restory communal narratives and strengthen organizational capacities to address pain and conflict constructively, pastoral leaders can guide communities toward learning from the "cracks" that have torn them apart, while also remaining open to the possibilities of a hopeful future.

[67] "Jane Smith," personal communication, January 29, 2021.

Appendix: Interview Questions Used at First Church

1. Please tell me about what happened here in your congregation in 2018 (i.e., "the split").

2. Once members of your congregation left, what kind of contact (if any) did you or other members of your congregation have with them?

3. How did your congregation go about healing from this split? What has the time since the split been like for you, personally, as a member of this church?

4. Would you say there has been any kind of reconciliation between the people who stayed in your church and those who left? Is "reconciliation" even a word that seems appropriate for this situation? If so – how? What does that look like?

5. Is there anyone else you think I should definitely talk to?