

Review: The Last Pastor

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The Last Pastor: Faithfully Steering a Closing Church

By Gail Cafferata (Westminster John Knox Press)

There is a lot of speculation about how many churches may have to close due to the pandemic. This book's arrival is impeccably timed! But the book was written without knowing we would be in this unique time. So, it serves a critical need right now, as well as the ongoing need in normal times for when churches come to the end of their life cycle.

The Last Pastor is written by a pastor who went through closing a church herself. Now, more than two decades later, she takes us through the story of 130 pastors in churches that found closing to be the best option. The pastors are from mainline churches, but the applications are easily transferrable to Baptist life. Cafferata uses her sociologist skills to take an honest look at the many complicated issues involved in closing churches.

Readers will be engaged by the frequent sailing metaphors used to introduce many chapters. The author then weaves together stories, and conversations, to reveal what closing a church is like. We see things from the pastors' viewpoints and from members' viewpoints. It becomes obvious this is something a church—and pastor—should not be doing without assistance. Thus, a three-way partnership is needed between pastor, church and denomination. Any one of these can disrupt a healthy closure. All three working together can be used by the Holy Spirit to redeem the

situation. In fact, while she names the difficulties pastors and church members go through, the author also demonstrates that, overwhelmingly, pastors and members found themselves unexpectedly blessed by their church's closing.

So, if your church is near the end, *The Last Pastor* will help you to: initiate the conversation (Cafferata found laity do so 60 percent of the time); look at the skill sets needed in leadership; be aware of the negative reactions that will surface; find the silver linings for pastors and church members; and consider the ultimate ways the church might "live on" through a number of opportunities that come with closing. In other words, this book can help you move on with your heads held high.

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