

COVID and the faithful risks pastors have taken

This is a high-stakes time. Some churches need to take more creative risks than ever before.

by [Carrie Graham](#) in the [April 21, 2021](#) issue



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In 2013, I launched a group called the Church Lab, based in Austin, Texas. By that time I had served as a pastor in a church plant and in a struggling traditional church. I'd been a "secret shopper" for a denomination, visiting churches and writing up my experiences with suggestions for how they could be more welcoming. I'd also been a program director at a seminary. In all those roles, I saw an urgent need for experimental ministry work to help the church find her way in the future.

I started the Church Lab as a place for testing out some possible solutions to the snowballing exodus from congregational life that was already well under way. But soon I realized that we needed to reach out to pastors, too, not just congregants or those trying to grow spiritually outside church environments. I saw how badly pastors needed encouragement from a community of their peers to take the risks that would be necessary to transform their congregations. I began to design

programs to help pastors anchor themselves spiritually in a time of dizzying transitions.

I have now worked with four cohorts of 20 pastors, from a variety of denominations and locations and with a spectrum of congregational challenges. I'd provide pastoral care to them while they discerned alongside their colleagues from diverse contexts. Walking together in a supportive community, they would watch each other grow, take risks, succeed, and fail (though I consider it "failing up"; failure always leads to surprising new opportunities). They would face challenges together and work toward creative solutions.

Then the pandemic hit.

Suddenly change was demanded, not suggested. Challenges mounted on top of the already heavy weight borne by church communities. Some of the pastors in our cohorts saw their budgets free-fall as their congregants' budgets did the same. When churches switched to Zoom or Facebook services, those whose participation had been hanging by a thread dropped off completely. Those without reliable internet access were cut off from church life even if they didn't want to be. The prospect of attracting non-churchgoers to become regular tithing members disappeared almost entirely. So too the notion of being creatively "invitational" grew dim in a world where church buildings could no longer stand in for being church.

But while the pressure for churches to survive mounted, opportunities for long-overdue changes grew, too. Yes, pastors were dealing with both personal and professional challenges at all hours of the day and night. Yes, expecting church leaders to do more than function on a basic level was ridiculous. We had been beckoned in this direction for years, but the pandemic demanded we take risks in ministry, not just for our individual churches but for the very purpose of church itself.

I noticed something about the pastors I worked with. Those who were spiritually grounded and connected to other pastors were more likely to find the courage to take necessary bold steps in faith. Together, we asked, what Good News exists in this crisis? What needs can we meet outside church walls? How can we be the hands and feet of Christ concretely in our communities, rather than focusing on the anxiety over the survival of our individual churches?

Some pastors abandoned concern for systemic survival altogether in favor of growing in the love of Christ, come what may. They have risked their lives, their

jobs, and the closing of their churches. They have given away their power and control and are learning to trust that God's church will grow as God intends when we focus on being faithful over and above our investment in a particular church setting.

This is a high-stakes time. Some churches need to take more creative risks than ever before, even if that risk means letting go.

Some of the most striking stories I heard were from pastors who are literally risking their lives. Latinx pastors serving on the US-Mexico border, already short on resources as they ministered to asylum seekers in Texas in the aftermath of a hurricane, found themselves thrust into an unimaginably perilous situation. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Hispanic people are four times more likely to be hospitalized because of the virus than non-Hispanic White people. But there is no online way to provide food to vulnerable families in tent cities in Matamoros, whose desperation to live another day outweighed their fear of catching a life-threatening illness. Resources to mitigate the spread of infection took a backseat to access to food and water. Many border pastors risked their lives to physically provide help to the powerless populations in their midst. They made risky decisions not just in board meetings but from day to day and moment to moment.

But those who aren't risking their lives may still risk their jobs. Many pastors I serve noticed that the pandemic's onset gave congregants the boldness to address long-standing controversies, for better or worse, COVID-related or not. One Lutheran pastor saw the pandemic bring to a climax a long battle in her congregation over affirmation of LGBTQ people. When the church took this particular moment in time—a global pandemic—to choose not to be affirming, this pastor knew hope for constructive dynamics had fled. Grieving, she resigned a few days later. That kind of risk demonstrates how a pastor can lead faithfully with her feet, taking a stand by walking away, even at great personal cost.

Another pastor, Katy Fitzgerald, left traditional ministry altogether. Fitzgerald was troubled by expectations of what should or should not be preached from the pulpit—especially when those expectations came with the threat of a loss of a job and stable income. She thinks that holding a pastor's job security hostage often results in pastors acting against the ministry of Jesus. She's now working a secular professional job with benefits, and she founded the Raven's Nest, a "radically inclusive, non-traditional, multi-generational, service-oriented" faith community in

Austin, where she pastors salary-free.

Meanwhile Amy Meyer, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Elgin, Texas, faced a familiar problem—dwindling membership, without enough new members to replace those growing old and dying. Church leaders had agreed even before the pandemic that it was time to go big or go home. In this case, they unanimously agreed to invest in external assistance that helps them come up with inventive ideas to serve one another and their community. They explored meaningful digital spaces for the nonreligious and were in some ways better prepared than other churches to meet the needs of the community when the pandemic hit. During the holidays, they surprised struggling families with Christmas gifts in parking lots. They distribute kits that help new households be more ecologically responsible. Meyer says they still dream of offering their community a multi-abilities playground. And the bold list goes on. She knows her days with this church are likely numbered, but she continues to explore creative possibilities for loving outreach.

Rob Mueller excels at that kind of creativity. He serves as pastor of Divine Redeemer Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, Texas, which sits in the city's poorest zip code. Divine Redeemer is known for its strong focus on building a safe, thriving community in the neighborhood. When the pandemic hit, Mueller's concerns around Zoom or Facebook services skimmed the surface of his church's struggles.

He had more congregants without stable internet access than other pastors I know. That didn't stop his creative engagement. They were already a resourceful church family; now they have applied that resourcefulness to help keep people connected when going digital isn't an option. He and other lay leaders do progressive drive-by visits in caravans with church members. His church buys about 1,200 pounds of beans, rice, and masa in bulk per week, which is then bagged for distribution by their nonprofit partners. They also invited those who didn't need their stimulus checks to donate them to a relief fund for other people's rent and utility payments.

Amid the pandemic, pastors have also been coping with intensifying racial injustice. After George Floyd's death, in the wake of too many named and unknown Black neighbors' deaths, many pastors were eager to call Christians to active antiracism commitments. My mentor, Thomas McKenzie, pastor of the predominantly White Church of the Redeemer in the Nashville area, did not hesitate to preach antiracism in the immediate aftermath of Floyd's death. He did not flinch at the possibility of discomfort, discord, or fallout. He seized the moment to call out collective racism

and preached the need to repent and commit to antiracism efforts.

But discerning when to risk in this way can be excruciating. One of my cohorts agreed to create a video of antiracism commitments earlier this year. As we prepared, it became clear that most of us lead populations who agree with us. We were not taking a risk in making this video. However, one of our colleagues had been working carefully on opening her community members' hearts to new paradigms around antiracism. With the entire group's support, she made the difficult decision not to participate in the video. Initially this pastor felt she was being too safe, but I suggested she was taking a faithful risk, knowing what would help her congregants move forward inch by inch rather than shutting down conversation completely. Her difficult decision reminded me that leadership is not one-size-fits-all. Taking a stand can mean crying out, but it can also mean nurturing quietly, depending on how the Holy Spirit is leading us toward progress.

Doing less, however, can lead the strongest of pastors to worry. Bart Roush works with Madison Square Presbyterian Church, a social justice-driven congregation in downtown San Antonio. He had major surgery weeks before the pandemic shut down public gatherings. While prioritizing his recovery and protecting his health, Roush had to learn to lean on lay leadership. He helped his church stay active by exercising personal boundaries that prevented his own burnout in a traumatic time. This made his calling sustainable and beckoned his congregation to ownership of their roles as a church body. It's very powerful when congregants lead the way in taking risks.

The Church Lab has partnered with the nonprofit Texas Impact, an organization of people of faith working in response to COVID-19's impacts on communities in our state. Through this partnership, called Reimagining Service, we designed more cohort experiences, but this time we invited lay leaders, not ordained ministers. The test cohort from University Presbyterian Church in Austin, pastored by Matt Gaventa, worked to imagine how their own dormant or shifting church resources could meet the rising community needs in 2020. At the end of their cohort experience, Gaventa supported them as they incorporated the rest of the church family into the process. In 2021, we will facilitate ten more cohorts of laity leaders across the state.

I wrote most of this article before a massive winter storm hit Texas in February, plunging most of the state into subfreezing temperatures our infrastructure couldn't handle, and I found myself quickly gathering additional years' worth of new stories of community and pastoral risk inside one week of struggle and suffering. There was

no time for lengthy discernment by pastors or their congregations. Churches that sat empty for months during the pandemic were opened to serve as warming centers. Pastors volunteered as drivers and did what they could to reach homeless encampments, transporting people to buildings that still had heat. When those churches lost electricity or water or were flooded, volunteers scrambled to find another church in which to keep their neighbors warm.

Getting information to people who could help, which was by default people who lived far away, was crucial. Those who could get online managed relief efforts. Since no deliveries or people could be transported in, donations had to be strategic. We worked together to make swift, detailed recommendations for where to direct aid. Those who could not donate strategized for mid- and long-term help when the ice melted.

As I write this in March, some Texans still do not have water. Houses are uninhabitable from the flooding. Pastors and congregants alike were already struggling, and our trauma has been compounded by the storm.

When I ask what the Good News is here, I hope we may serve as an example of meaningful risk-taking among communities in times of crisis. Faith communities whose zip codes are unaffected in a given season should prepare to step in to help those who are. I anticipate being one of hundreds of faith leaders who will now be working to take faithful risks for recovery but also to prepare spiritually and practically to help next time. "Next time" is the most painful phrase I've written, but I want to acknowledge that our energies and creative risks, at this point, are best directed to working toward mitigation, not just prevention.

Telling the stories of the pastors I know, I realize anew that all faithful work comes at a cost. In order to bear these costs, the pastors I see who are staying spiritually grounded and continuing to take faithful risks all have something in common. They are in community with other leaders, with varying roles and experiences. They are each other's teachers and friends. At the heart of surviving and thriving in ministry in a time of crisis lies the defiance of any invitation to isolation. Staying connected to each other keeps us connected to God's love.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Meaningful risks."