

Holding steady: The nonanxious pastor

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [April 5, 2003](#) issue

When war or national crisis sets our hearts churning, people normally accustomed to taking their cues from the daily news suddenly discover that Pentagon briefings, op-ed pieces and Oval Office updates provide little consolation for their deep spiritual distress. They turn to the one source they believe might have a spiritually significant word to utter—the church. And well they should.

The way communities turn toward the church in the heat of a crisis is fascinating. Conflicts and tragedies generate their own sense of urgency. Much of the public response quickly assumes a range of feverish emotions. Fear, nervousness, shock, dread, anger and despair all figure in. Clergy phone lines light up with calls from local media hungry for announcements of impromptu worship services and special vigils. Denominational headquarters e-mail helps for Sunday prayers and pulpit perspectives. Church members inquire about what they can do to address the anguish. Anxiousness reigns.

A reactionary sort of Christianity easily emerges in such times. Something about sudden distress compels many pastors to respond with their own nervous energy. They interrupt meaningful routines and commitments to focus entirely on the crisis. Instead of thoughtfully answering the worries of people, and listening for God with them, church leaders often become part of the we-must-do-something frenzy. They end up scurrying around to implement suggestions that pour in the door. The response may spring from an eagerness to please. Or it may reflect an inability to gain critical perspective in troubled times. In any case, urgent requests—to get the flag up, post photos of service people, design a series of crisis-inspired worship services or issue special proclamations—vie for the pastor's attention.

Some of the ideas for responding to the crisis have merit. They may strengthen the closeness and vitality of the congregation. They may be helpful responses to hurting people. Others, though, are distractions from the church's larger reason for being.

They muddy the mission of the church. They foster the illusion of a short-term fix for individuals' long-term distress. Implementing these ideas will hardly nurture long-term confidence, provide any reasonable peace of mind or settle deep spiritual anxiousness. If anything, they ignore the sustaining qualities of the Christian faith and encourage people to believe that they suddenly have to do something or behave in a new and unusual way.

There is a better way for pastors to lead in times of crisis, national or otherwise. This path has to do with sustaining a steadiness in the face of disequilibrium. This mode of leadership helps people situate themselves within the large Christian narrative. It refocuses nervous energy among souls searching for a way to be faithful. It assists them in trying to view the crisis within a broader framework.

In my office I have a small object that reminds me of this kind of leadership, the kind I want to embrace. A glass prism sits atop my desk. On a day when the sun beams through my window I can hold this prism in my hand and light up the walls and ceiling with spectacular light. A magnificent continuum of color from red to violet bathes the room. As light passes through the polished cut angles of the prism it refracts and separates the white light into the glorious colors of the spectrum. If my hand is relatively steady, the colors on the wall hold still. If I've overindulged in caffeine, my hand trembles and the colored light on the wall bounces chaotically. When my body gets between the sun and the prism, the colored light disappears altogether.

This little chunk of glass is my reminder to be a certain kind of pastor in troubled times. When I look upon the people in our congregation, I sometimes imagine them as a palette of gorgeous colors—an array of talents, ideas and experiences—all waiting to make a difference in illuminating the world. Together they are like the colored light refracted from the chiseled glass. As for the white light that first strikes the prism, I think of that as symbolizing the light of Christ and the comforting presence of God, beaming their way into the center of a community.

The task of pastoral leadership in anxious times is to stand in awe of both the white light and the colored light, and to hold the prism steady in between. Someone in the community has to balance the prism so that every member's color can shine, even in times of disarray or sadness. If the one holding the prism is quivering, caught up in the dizzying turn of events of whatever is at hand, the light of Christ will never diffuse with the magnificence it deserves.

This is not to suggest that leadership in the awesome presence of God is easy. All we have to remember is the story of Uzzah. When the ark of the covenant was resting on a cart along the sidewalk one day, the harnessed oxen got feisty. As the cart shook in tumult, Uzzah, the son of Abinadab, reached out to steady it and keep the ark from tipping. The very attempt to steady “the holy” was too much to bear. Poor Uzzah was smitten by God right then and there (2 Sam. 6:1-7).

Effective ministry recognizes the huge responsibility of dealing with divine realities and tightly wound human lives at the same time. But pastors with the gift of a steady hand in hard times delight in helping people appreciate the long view. They notice individuals craving a larger sense of purpose. They make it their task to help these people imagine a confident future that is grounded in the best of the past.

A faith that is well grounded has an evenness about it. It doesn't rise and fall with the Dow Jones average or the inflection of a physician's voice. If you are a person living without any sign of cancer or ill health today, and suddenly tomorrow were to receive a diagnosis of malignancy, would you need to alter your prayer life dramatically? Why, in the eyes of faith, would you entertain adding a dimension of panic to your prayers tomorrow when it's not in them today? Shouldn't the gratitude and hope that are part of your spiritual life today be perfectly suited for tomorrow?

As we all know, however, it takes a lot of work to fashion a faith that is alive and well on the most ordinary and uneventful of days. We need a spirituality that can deal with the bumps in life. But this is why the church is in the world. It exists to help form the kind of faith that's ready for the long haul. This is also why pastors play such a crucial role in retaining perspective in times of crisis and tragedy. At their finest, pastors are sitting with people who are in anguish, learning with them and from them, yet not becoming personally overwhelmed by the struggles at hand.

When Jesus found his disciples quivering in a boat tossed by a storm, he did everything he could to get their attention off the wind and waves and onto something greater. Pastoral leadership in trying times faces a similar challenge. Shaken lives need spiritual equilibrium. They want to know that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, and forever.” And they can know this truth, and thrive because of it, if only someone will help hold the prism steady.