

Where do we go from here? As the old saying goes, "We're in a world of hurt." Things have become incredibly more complex. What was secure and known before as a result of 28 years of marriage is now quite uncertain. We're receiving some great prayer ministry and counseling from a retired pastor and his wife. For my part, I know that I've contributed to the distance in our relationship by not listening well enough; by being too busy with church stuff; by not taking time for dates, devotions, or children; by being too passive and not investing real energy, etc.

We've heard and continue to hear a lot about pastors' affairs, indiscretions, and various forms of sexual misconduct. I wonder how many situations like ours there are. Pastors' wives suffer silently for the most part while their husbands preach shining sermons, lead congregations, and get plenty of "strokes" for simply doing their job. And meanwhile, the wives—or reverse the gender if it's a female pastor—serve

at whatever task they're given, sit at home, and grow more distant from their partners. And one day, along comes someone who'll pay them the attention they deserve.

Take time for each other. Listen. Work hard at your romance. Put each other first. Grow with each other. Pray together and pray for this unnamed pastor and wife while you're at it. Have fun together. Have a life outside the church. Honor God by honoring each other.

*The author, whose identity is known to the editorial staff, asked "for obvious reasons" that his story be printed anonymously, saying, "It is somewhat scary for me even to send this, but I feel I should." May God be with you both.*



## About Books

# Understanding Church Conflict

by Ted Smith

Penny Edgell Becker has made a fresh, vital contribution to the literature on conflict in the church through her new book *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). Becker explores the institutional dimensions of congregational conflicts to illumine their sources, shapes, and outcomes. While the book offers absolutely crucial practical insights for anyone dealing with church conflict, Becker does not rest content with a book of church management strategies. She uses conflict as an analytical lever

to open up the inner workings of religious institutions in America. And when she opens these institutions up, she finds surprising evidence about the state of religion and public life.

Becker grounds her study in careful field research in 23 religious institutions in the Chicago area. She considers Roman Catholic parishes, Protestant congregations from a variety of denominations, and Jewish synagogues. Focusing her attention on conflict, she develops four "models" of congregational life: house of worship, family, community, and leader.

In Becker's hands these models demonstrate enormous explanatory power and reveal the poverty of most current books on church conflict. Too many of these works approach conflict through psychology and treat it as a symptom of individual dysfunction. While family systems approaches are a step in the right direction, they fail to offer the nuances of Becker's multiple models. Becker argues that the institutional life of the congregation shapes what kinds of issues conflicts tend to be about, why conflicts get acted out as they do, how conflicts get resolved, and why some conflicts "escape" the normal processes and become toxic. Some of her insights simply confirm what anyone familiar with church life knows. For instance, conflict in "family" congregations tends to be expressed in personal language rather than language of abstract principle, is usually about church property, and sometimes can only be resolved by the departure of one party to the conflict. Becker's

approach describes and explains these familiar facts with precision.

Becker's study also yields real and important surprises, especially as she uses conflict to get into the larger life of a community. Becker's work "on the ground" lets her overturn expectations from theory and stereotype. Liberal activist "leader" congregations—like their conservative kin—tend to have a traditional, hierarchical model of religious authority. A suburban mainline church functions in the family style while an urban A.M.E. church functions as a more loosely connected house of worship. Becker concludes that denomination and liberal/conservative categories are only loosely linked with the ways congregations live.

The most important surprise Becker describes concerns religion and public life. A host of recent books has argued that individualism and voluntarism have undermined religious involvement in public life. Because people understand themselves as independent of any commu-

nity and free to "shop around," congregations become more interested in meeting the needs of religious consumers than in working for the common good. Becker forces a reconsideration of this thesis. She shows first that voluntarism does not lead to a single model of congregational life. Then she describes how some of the most "individualist" congregations are also the most publicly engaged. The decline of mainline elites must not be mistaken for the decline of religion and public life. Becker's research can not refute the narratives of decline traced in books such as *Bowling Alone* and *Habits of the Heart*. These books describe the loss of something real and important in American life. But *Congregations in Conflict* keeps this loss in perspective, showing its limits and beginning to point toward the new life that is already emerging.

*Ted Smith is a Ph.D. candidate at Emory University and a member-at-large in the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta.*

# Another Story

by John Pickrell

You asked for stories following an article about "Tiny Churches." Here are some of my experiences as a pastor of small congregations, including Kingman Memorial in Adrian, Oregon, and First Church of Homedale, Idaho.

On candidating at the Homedale congregation, where there were 12 or 14 of the faithful gathered for worship, I remarked to my wife, Kay, "Well, with so few people in the congregation, we'll bring the five or six in the choir down from the balcony, along with the piano. That way we'll actually make it a whole worshipping congregation." It was a good idea from all kinds of perspectives except, apparently, the choir's. Twelve years later—it didn't happen. I soon forgot it was a concern, I guess. More likely, I realized that I