

The Vocation of First Call Congregations
Case Study Report
Nazareth Lutheran Church, Chatfield, Ohio
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Introduction

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear....and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us... (Ephesians 4:29, 32; 5:1, 2)

These words from the second reading for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, the Sunday I was present for worship at Nazareth, are a fair description of my interviews with 31 members of this congregation. I will endeavor in this report to illustrate the mostly implicit sense of call many leaders of Nazareth have heard and lived. The call to participate in God's mission includes for many the desire that their young pastor serving in his first call will "succeed." They have a high regard for the ministry of Word and sacrament and for the openness, thoughtfulness, compassion, and enthusiasm of this pastor.

While they didn't consciously think of themselves as having the vocation of a "first call" congregation when calling Bill Pavuk, they can see the hand of God in "setting them up" to be a fertile field in which a young and tender plant could grow. I will describe the recent history of Nazareth that predisposed them to calling a seminarian five years ago, the role of the synod, and the mechanisms, chiefly the Mutual Ministry Committee, that together make for fertile soil for a newly ordained person.

Nazareth is not a perfect congregation, but it appears to be an excellent gathering of "beloved children" for the growth and nurture of a first call pastor who would bring with him or her a spirit of humility and a "love for the Lord." As Nazareth is not perfect, neither is its pastor; but he has learned much. He is trading a striving for self-worth for a deepening trust in the grace of a richly gifted community of which he is but one valued member.

It has been a blessing for me to hear the story of Nazareth and its engagement with their first call pastor. I am grateful for the three days spent in their midst. This experience comes near the end of a summer sabbatical during which I interviewed a number of pastors who are in the first five years of their ordained ministry. These interviews together with this time with the people of Nazareth helped me revisit and more deeply appreciate the rich pain and joy of my own first call as a pastor, now more than three decades ago.

Chapter One: Old but Open

Nazareth Lutheran Church is a rural congregation of 343 souls many of whom live in or near Chatfield, Ohio (nine miles north of Bucyrus). The exact date of the beginning of the congregation is not clear, but the best guess (from a deed to the German Lutheran Society) is 1837. The two church cemeteries (one from a previous building site) reveal family names from the 19th century, several of which are still represented in the congregation today. Lots of members are related to one another, tracing their ancestry four or more generations in this part of Ohio.

I was struck in reading recent newsletters, council minutes, and the latest annual report of the valuing of individuals, their achievements (such as awards at the county fair) and contributions (to the life of the congregation and the community) as well as their struggles and challenges. I think that a greater than

average number of members are engaged in the ministries of this congregation. People are expected to be involved not unlike each member of a family would be expected to make a contribution to making the family “work.” There is a strong sense of belonging, of being connected, of caring quite deeply about one another, of noticing who is missing.

Yet in my interviews I did not see these strong connections as highly exclusionary of “non-relatives,” of those newer to the community. Many, though not all, seem to “get it” that we are all related in Christ. So there is room for a pastor and his new bride to be “adopted” into the family as a son or daughter or maybe grandson/daughter.

Nazareth is an old congregation (nearly 170 years) with large numbers of active members over 70 years of age. It is highly inter-related, yet open and welcoming. I suggest that there are at least three factors contributing to this openness:

1. **Deep roots** - *We have weathered many storms, experienced many highs and lows, and we are still here. The cemetery is a constant reminder of these deep roots and connections over many decades. We (as family) will not be easily blown away.¹*
2. **The emergence of strong lay leadership** - In part this is because of very skilled pastoral leadership and in part because pastoral leadership for a time was dysfunctional. This congregation is gifted with many leaders. It is not a clergy-driven or clergy-dependent church. As one person put it, “We have learned that we can survive without a pastor; it’s just that it’s better with one.”
3. **The loss of young people** - There is a willingness to risk, to try new ways to reach people with the Gospel, knowing that the culture has changed radically in the last 40 or 50 years. Going to Sunday school and church has long since ceased to be the norm, just what you did as a family. This factor is accompanied by frustration and some anxiety that can skew or distort the openness it also engenders. *(So we are open to calling a young pastor with great energy and new ideas hoping, maybe unrealistically, this may help us reverse this unsettling trend.)*

Chapter Two: The Field is Plowed

It was September 11, 2001. All of us probably remember where we were when we heard and saw the news of the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Pastor Bill Pavuk was on his way to his first day of work in the office at Nazareth. (Ironically, my weekend at Nazareth followed the news of the thwarted terrorist plot at Heathrow nearly five years later.)

In the odd providence of God on that tragic day in 2001, Nazareth and the surrounding community had a new resident pastor to help them process a new sense of vulnerability. And Pr. Bill learned even that day of the importance of ecumenical partners. He met and gathered for prayer with the pastors and people of the Evangelical Pietist Church (perhaps one of two or three remaining in the U.S.), the United Church of Christ, and the Roman Catholic Church as well as members of Nazareth. He would later learn from both the dissonance of his views with many in his congregation about the American reaction and the invasion into Iraq, and the incredible graciousness of the congregation even as they struggled with his public disclosure of his political leanings.

Pr. Bill’s views on war and his talk about the doctrine of “just war,” met with resistance and strained some relationships (perhaps even to this day). His disclosure to a local paper of his leaning to vote for John Kerry (in response to the reporter’s inquiry about Bill’s political thoughts) was deeply troubling to the congregation, many of whom had friends who wondered aloud about the propriety of a pastor doing this. But he recognizes the abundant grace that followed. Members stood by him even though he had

¹ The italicized words in this document are not quotes but my sense of unspoken, underlying messages in the interviews.

caused them embarrassment, and they continued to trust him as their pastor.

My interviews revealed that part of what has endeared Pr. Bill to the congregation is his openness to admitting when he has erred. But it was also clear to me that members will confront him in ways that are loving, that presume the relationship will not be broken because of differences or questionable decisions.

The field was plowed well before 9/11. Almost all those interviewed spoke of Pastor Schambach who served the congregation from 1991 to 1999. He was clearly an agent of change. The shift from a pastor-led/driven church to one led by empowered lay leaders in partnership with a pastor happened mostly during this era. He is remembered as one who laid out clear job descriptions for leaders and used processes like Kennon Callihan's Twelve Keys to help the congregation own its ministry. He trained leaders but then set them loose to do their work without micromanaging them. This is, I think, a critical factor in Nazareth's preparedness and giftedness to be a first call congregation. In the world view of Natural Church Development, Nazareth would probably score high in the quality characteristic called "Empowering Leadership." This strength of leadership predisposed the call committee to recommend a candidate without experience as a pastor.

But the field was plowed in another way. Surrounded by short term interim/supply pastors, Pastor Schambach's successor brought with him an addiction he had hoped to escape by moving. Unknown to either the synod from which he came or the Northwestern Ohio Synod of which Nazareth is a part, this addiction soon imperiled the effectiveness of the pastor's work. In consultation with the bishop his pastor resigned as pastor of Nazareth within months of his beginning. This was a deep wound both for him and his family and for the congregation. What is significant here is that the congregation recovered. Through this process, said one of the leaders of the Mutual Ministry Committee, "We learned how strong we were. We thought we could be a good place for someone to come and learn and be supported. We couldn't have done this without the adversity. We would not have seen ourselves as a first call place."²

Chapter Four: A New Strain of Wheat

Pastor Bill Pavuk was one of four candidates under consideration as the call committee was reconvened. Bill "jumped out" as the best candidate. He was "young, right out of seminary. It couldn't hurt. I thought it would be good for our congregation," noted one of the deacons. (Synod protocol meant that if a seminarian was to be seriously considered, he or she would not be interviewed along side experienced pastors; the formal interviews began and ended with Bill since the call committee was so positive about him.)

While it might have been predicted that Nazareth would seek a seasoned pastor after the very short and tumultuous tenure of the last pastor, they instead decided after this interview to move in a new direction. Another deacon: "This experience gave us an understanding that no pastor will be perfect, everyone will be flawed. So we extended the call to Bill believing we can work with this person, and hopefully he with us." Another who served on both call committees: "We thought, we can try something different. I was open to someone who was young, progressive, creative." The call committee was mindful that with the shortage of pastors, it would be foolish to wait for the perfect match.

So there was this openness, even yearning for a new strain of wheat, for someone with new ideas and with energy who could help the congregation move in some new ways. Because the lay leadership was strong, "It couldn't hurt." The leaders had learned that they and the congregation would survive even if this didn't work out. But in everyone I talked to there was a confidence that this new pastor would succeed. "We did not want him to fail...I expected this to be okay."

² The underlined portions of this document lifts up some key emphases emerging from these interviews.

In hindsight, some members realized there was an unstated expectation. A couple of generations ago, there were many children, many young families regularly involved in the life of Nazareth. For many years in its early history, Nazareth had a school (dedicated in 1884) with 40-50 children in attendance. The school is now a meeting room and the offices for the pastor and the secretary. Few children are part of Sunday school. The Nazareth Youth Organization advisor, a young woman, and an octogenarian concurred: "Parents today don't put much effort into religious education. There is other stuff. It is hard to schedule NYO activities. Young people have so many other options."

It was hoped that a young, energetic pastor could help turn this around. Looking ahead to the next 20 years the thinking was and is, *We need to be bold, takes some risk or we won't be around. We are not unaware of all the churches that are closing.*

All those I interviewed concurred that Bill has tried to address this expectation. But the yield has been modest at best. The mean age of the congregation is still high, maybe in the 70's. Accession of new members has been minimal. Pr. Bill is not blamed for this. Yet I sensed disappointment that calling a new young pastor didn't translate into the return of young families. There was some conversation over the weekend about how prevalent this issue is for the whole North American church. Congregations look for "fixes," like a new, young pastor, but are learning that the forces in our culture working against this are deep and powerful. It is in the air we breathe that children will be involved in sports at very tender ages in order that they might have a chance to "make the team" by the time they are in high school. Respect in our culture for dedicated "church time" has evaporated.

That an enthusiastic first call pastor could change this looks now unrealistic; maybe the congregation was not as aware five years ago of how pervasive and difficult it is to change the values that have grown in our culture over the last half century.

Yet I heard no one say that it was a mistake to have called Pastor Pavuk. *In part we may acknowledge that our expectations were unrealistic.* But he has been a blessing. One 70+ man reflected on the contributions of the pastors since the 1930's: "God made each pastor for a particular time; each has brought a blessing."

Chapter Five: Weeding and Feeding

This research looks for the ingredients in a congregation that both support and challenge a pastor in the first call. There are several.

Nazareth benefited from its connection with the synod which had been helpful in the process leading to the previous pastor's resignation. One of its members served on the synod council and asked the synod staff about the possibility of Nazareth being considered for this first call candidate. One of the Assistants to the Bishop, Cathy Schibler, sensing the health of the congregation, was especially helpful in assuring the call committee that Nazareth could be a good place for a newly ordained pastor. "She knew that he could learn from us and we from him."

The call committee did its homework, checking references enough to be prepared to know the latent strengths and the probable weaknesses in their next pastor. They also consulted with two of their former pastors regarding the wisdom of calling a new seminary graduate. The last first call pastor, Ron Claussen, who served this congregation in the 1960's, and who now, though retired, was serving as their supply pastor, indicated to them that Nazareth would again be a good first call congregation.

Highly committed to the well-being of their pastor, the call committee transitioned into the Mutual Ministry Committee. Pastor Pavuk, while intending to listen more than suggest changes in his early

months, did invest himself heavily and widely early in his ministry here, inadvertently involving himself in ministries others had been accustomed to leading. This led to some irritation, perhaps even alienation. Pr. Bill described himself as “over functioning” in the first three years of his call. Not yet secure or clear in his role and filled with energy, he sought to keep up with the work ethic of the farming community, many who may put in 80 hours a week. In so doing he would unintentionally step into the province of ministries well handled by others.

But here the Mutual Ministry Committee, representing a good cross-section of the congregation, was a godsend. Led by two people with excellent relational skills, one a social psychologist/professor, one a businessman, the Committee was able to hear the complaints, prioritize the relative seriousness of the complaints, and talk with Bill about those most serious. Complaints deemed minor were not ignored, but in these cases the Committee would assign a member most appropriate to respond to the person upset, sometimes able to simply say, “Get over it.”

With the more serious matters, the leaders were able to talk with the pastor in a way that did not diminish or shame him, but named the problem and offered strategies that would correct it. They offered to accompany the pastor in making some necessary changes. I think a committee with this savvy may be a rare, but critical ingredient in the “weeding and feeding” of a new pastor.

Beyond the support of the synod and the Mutual Ministry Committee, the office secretary at Nazareth, Karen Grey, was and continues to be a blessing to the pastor. While gifted in preaching and pastoral care, he is not gifted as an administrator. The secretary is. Pastor Claussen described Karen as “the glue.” She has a high regard for the pastor, his energy, his new ideas, the new child he and Dana brought into the Nazareth family. She notes his respect for what Nazareth has done while introducing his ideas and his knowing that he has a lot yet to learn. Karen seems to have a good sense of her boundaries. She is one of those with deep roots, one whom people trust, but she does not usurp the pastoral role. She is able to tell dissenters to take their complaints directly to the pastor.

I found other leaders who work closely with the pastor to be supportive as well. The Council secretary, for example said, “I never told Bill, ‘We never did it that way before.’ I didn’t want to squelch his enthusiasm. I never thought he wouldn’t succeed. He needed to learn to delegate, but he has grown in this. He is a diplomat. He tends to think first, then speaks with care.”

Chapter Six: The Pain of Change

Several people I interviewed spoke of the concern they had for Bill and his wife, Dana, moving from Columbus to a very small rural community. Less visible to the congregation was the role shift for Dana from being a “regular member” to being a pastor’s wife. More obvious was the pain caused by Pr. Bill’s public sharing of his liberal or partisan leanings described earlier in this report. In the words of one of his “coaches” here at Nazareth, he needed to learn that he would now always be Pastor Bill Pavuk, not just Bill Pavuk; he would be the representative of a community. Another change accompanied by some dissent has been the introduction of a contemporary service about which both Pr. Bill and Dana are passionate.

There are trade-offs, gains and losses, in moving from the city. The attention given to individuals in a small town or rural community, the chance to excel and to be recognized, just to be noticed, to matter, seems a lot more likely here than in the city. On the other hand, rural people have their networks of family and friends, may have their familiar ways, and long-standing traditions, and may not want them to be changed. As the president of the congregation put it, “Some of us yearn for the familiar, the traditional, to provide an anchor in a sea of change.”

So there is an openness and even joy about having a contemporary service at Nazareth (now on Sunday evenings), but also some resistance and concern. There is also some disappointment that the hope it would attract un-churched people has not been fulfilled.

I did not experience the Sunday Night Live service but did participate in worship led by the praise team at the annual outdoor service Sunday morning. The praise team of eight included a teenager, three couples (including Bill and Dana) who range in age from the 20's through the 50's, and a young man who serves on the planning teams for both this service and the traditional service. The music they led was a mix, some from the 1980's and '90's, others much older ("Just a Closer Walk with Thee" and "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?"). I would describe it as very mild contemporary, certainly not radically new nor difficult to sing. The team blended vocally and instrumentally quite well.

The young man spoke to me of mutual respect. He embraced the contemporary style but recognized that it's not for everyone. He saw his pastor as patient about making changes, such as the introduction of this service, and applauded this quality. Another member of the praise team expressed frustration. Mindful of the objections of some, she wondered if "we are too respectful," wondering if we are not bold enough to place such a service in "prime time" on Sunday morning. She too recognized and appreciated the pastor's patience, but worried about where the church will be in 20 years if bold changes aren't made; i.e., *Will we be able to attract or retain younger people?*

Some members object to the presence of the drum set in the chancel. Others are concerned about the potential fragmenting of the congregation, or just not seeing one another. (During the summer there are normally three services: 8:00 am, 10:00 am and 7:00 pm).

It occurred to me that what was intended with the offering of the contemporary service may not be the way God is using it. A number of the people who attend are not young people and certainly are already members. But its tempo, "upbeat" nature may be another way to touch and feed the souls of those who also appreciate the more familiar settings in the tradition of the Lutheran Book of Worship. The menu is just richer and more varied with the inclusion of both kinds of worship, especially if they are offered at different times of the day. The contemporary service may or may not attract un-churched people, but that may not diminish its importance.

The point here for this study may be that while there is some resistance and concern, most members are probably not stridently against it, as reflected in the sentiments of the president of the congregation: "This style of worship is not my preference but I'm for it. I am concerned about continuity. I just don't want to see it leading to the splitting of the congregation." A couple of those I interviewed guessed that 90% are supportive of changes like this that may better reach people; 10% may be resistant to any change. While Pr. Pavuk thrives in this style of worship, he may just be grateful that there is room for it at Nazareth, not that it needs to be the dominant way of worship.

On balance, it appears that this Sunday Night Live service is offering another way to glorify God, and that neither the pastor nor the lay leaders have made it an overly divisive issue. That it has not been wildly successful in drawing new people is disappointing for those most invested in it. It may be helpful to see it not so much as a tool for evangelism as a heartfelt way for some to praise God and to be re-inspired to live lives of love and service.

My impression of the so-called traditional service was that it was led well and with good energy, both by the pastor and the musicians (organist and trumpeter). The sound system is, I think, above average. It is held in a lovely, tastefully decorated worship space. People were welcoming at this service as well as at the outdoor service. At the Council meeting at the end of my visit here, I heard a proposal to combine the two worship planning teams (Worship I and II). This seems to be driven by the desire to keep before the congregation and the community the importance of frequent, regular worship (because we were created

for this) which can and probably needs to be done in different ways but with the same goal (to glorify God).

Nazareth may be on to something with the designations of Worship I and Worship II. This is probably more helpful than the language of traditional and contemporary, which tends to either/or thinking instead of the more enriching both/and. Both styles, well planned as they seem to be here, should lead to spiritual growth and, it can still be hoped, eventual numerical growth of those who regularly worship together.

Chapter Seven: Is This a Call?

This research is meant to examine the ways congregations support and constructively challenge pastors in their first call. It is also meant to discover whether or not some congregations may have a sense of call, a vocation to be places where newly ordained people can be formed and re-formed for a blessed and effective ministry.

Those I interviewed at Nazareth did not at the time Pr. Pavuk was called think that they were specifically “called” to be this forming, reforming place for a new pastor. They had had a good experience in the 60’s with a first-call pastor, Ron Claussen, still dearly loved. So they had no memory of a bad experience with a person newly ordained. They didn’t think of it as a call as much as a sense that “We could be a good place for a new pastor. We could help this person.” I did not hear that this was a clear directive from God.

But when I asked if they would do it again, the only hesitation I heard was the concern that the day might come when we would not be able to afford a full-time pastor, whether newly ordained or not. No one I asked believed that Pr. Bill was called because this was all the congregation could afford.

Some spoke of a relatively small though influential group of members who are inclined to complain about things, no matter who the pastor is, nor what the proposed change might be. That may be about wanting to maintain some sense of control over things, or trying to hold onto the past, or having high anxiety about the future. But no one I talked with thought this had been a mistake, that they should not have called someone right out of seminary. Pr. Bill was not dismissed from having an important role as a spiritual leader because of his inexperience.

When asked about what a pastor needs to be, words like “caring, passionate, mature” came to mind. More than once people used words like “friend,” (especially in times of personal crisis), “visitor,” (including those who come infrequently), and “spiritual leader.” One person spoke of Pr. Bill as a “biblical guide.” He is seen as one well-informed biblically and also approachable, so that a person doesn’t feel embarrassed to reveal their ignorance about God or biblical teachings.

This is significant, I believe, because Pr. Bill shares the frustration of many who have learned much at seminary and elsewhere and want to impart this learning to others. He has offered classes, including the intensive Crossways course, with few or no takers. My guess is that in this rural setting, people aren’t much interested in taking classes, though the lay-lead adult class I attended Sunday morning averages 20 or more each week. People do value a pastor who is there when there is a crisis of faith or a personal problem. It is learning one-on-one, mostly informally, mostly when there is a felt need. Pr. Bill does seem gifted to provide this kind of personal environment for learning and growth. He may or may not find fulfillment as a teacher if this is considered the primary or even only way learning happens.

Is this a call? Is Nazareth called to be a first-call congregation? Much of what I heard over these three days leads me to say “yes.” The congregation is rich in thoughtful, articulate, and caring leaders. Recalling participating in an ancient but relatively new practice for the congregation, the foot-washing on Maundy Thursday, one member commented, “I felt I should do this; it is important that we support him.”

The Mutual Ministry Committee at Nazareth, as described earlier, was a huge factor in turning what could have led to lasting irritation or ill will into a positive change in the pastor's effectiveness. Nazareth is a first-call congregation, too, in the sense that they value enthusiasm – a mark, one hopes, of all in their first call. Pr. Bill's energy needed to be tempered, but not his passion for the gospel nor his desire to be a caring leader.

The "yes" has some qualifications. Pr. Bill appears to take criticism well. He genuinely wants to learn. Nazareth would be a tough place to serve if the pastor did not recognize or appreciate the inter-relatedness of most of the congregation, nor the need to move slowly. If the pastor is disposed to argue or insists on his or her way, this call would likely deteriorate. To a person, those I interviewed spoke appreciatively of their pastor's positive spirit. He does not appear to be easily discouraged or to remain discouraged when there are setbacks.

One person wondered, though, if in his "adapting to us," in being patient and not insisting on his way, he is happy. Another wondered about the possible social isolation or loneliness for a young couple without family or many peers in this community. Just this awareness, this wondering, speaks to the strength of this congregation. It may suggest that these leaders recognize that the first call may not be of long duration, and that the congregation may have been privileged to nurture, support and form a pastor for wherever he or she may be called to serve.

I ended my three days at Nazareth with the Council meeting. They affirmed what I had written to that point (about two-thirds of this document) as being on the mark. I believe they were grateful to be part of this research intended to help the whole church, and especially synod staffs, seminary faculties and congregation call committees, grow in understanding of what makes for a blessed first call.

One council member lingered after the meeting to share with me his appreciation of the God conversations he and his pastor regularly enjoy. In his own way he exemplified the words from Ephesians with which I began this report: "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up...so that your words may give grace to those who hear..." For three days I was the recipient of this grace.