



BOOK REVIEW

Stilling the Storm: Worship and Congregational Leadership in Difficult Times

By Kathleen S. Smith, Alban Institute, 2006

Reviewed by Ann A. Michel

What would your congregation's worship service look like next Sunday if your sanctuary burned to the ground tomorrow, if a beloved pastor announced that he or she was retiring suddenly, if a scandal came to light, or if another unexpected catastrophe like September 11th occurred? The thesis of Kathleen Smith's book is: When congregations go through difficult times, those difficulties affect the worship life of the congregation, and the practice of worship will itself be a key part of the congregation's healing process. The text explores how worship can be a vital avenue of pastoral care when congregations go through times of crisis, transition, and conflict.

Careful planning and deliberate preparation are essential in turbulent times – but they are also extremely difficult when one is caught in the throes of chaos. Smith has carefully outlined questions and options to keep worship leaders focused. Much of the book is devoted to identifying appropriate liturgical resources for difficult times and suggesting many helpful theological themes, scriptures, prayers, and hymns.

But the book rightly acknowledges that finding the best prayer or the most fitting passage does not alone guarantee that worship will help a congregation through difficult times. Some of the book's most valuable information comes in the final chapter, which considers the role and responsibility of congregational leaders in challenging times. Effective leaders know themselves and their congregation. They manage their own feelings in difficult times and work to keep all channels of communication open. They take great care in choosing the words they use – particularly in worship. Leaders have the opportunity to model the appropriate tone and language that will help the congregation move forward.

Leaders should expect that dealing with hard times will be painful. But with humility and faith in the power of God to still the storm, they can guide troubled churches toward healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness.