

First-call congregation: A place for rookies

by [Louis B. Weeks](#) in the [December 14, 2010](#) issue



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Congregations billed as "teaching congregations" are plentiful these days. Many evangelical churches advertise their teaching role and support seminaries of their own. A number of mainline congregations host "transition into ministry" programs for seminary graduates. But a self-conscious "teaching church" with only 100 members?

"Calypso Presbyterian is a teaching church for sure," affirms Lewis Galloway, senior pastor at Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis. Galloway, who directs a pastoral residency program of his own, served in Calypso, North Carolina, 30 years ago. He found Calypso Presbyterian to be a place where members feel free to guide rookie pastors "gently, always gently, in better directions," and where the members are also eager to grow and learn.

"For a small church, it has a wealth of strong lay leaders," said Galloway, who said that the church has continued to make room for new pastors to develop as ministers.

Chris Currie, the pastor at Calypso since 2004, speaks of his apprenticeship there: "The first lesson I learned? Preaching and teaching are crucial, but it's the pastoral

care that bonds us most deeply." He tells of how he learned this lesson right away.

"On the day after the church reception welcoming me as the young pastor straight from seminary, a third-grader in the congregation was hit by a car." The child was airlifted to a university hospital in Greenville with severe brain trauma. Currie had no time to ease into his pastoral role.

"I learned quickly they didn't need me as an organizer, or to help the family deal with the doctors. Lots of others in the congregation did that, and did it well. They needed me to be there, to pray with them and to stand with them in times of trouble."

That lesson was indelibly imprinted on Currie. He can see how his preaching and teaching have improved as well during his tutelage at Calypso.

For over 60 years the congregation has called young seminary graduates for their first years in ministry—offering a gift to the wider church while benefiting from the enthusiasm and skills of those in their first calls. Of the 16 pastors serving the church since the end of World War II, 15 have come straight from seminary.

Currie spoke of other things that members of Calypso have taught him—how to build trust among leaders, when to rely on informal structures and when to buttress the formal work of governing bodies, how and why his involvement in the community builds the church, how a good congregation provides badly needed social capital for the wider community. "Lots of people participate in leadership," he said of the church. "It's not just one or two."

"At first we really had to make first calls," explained Frances Parks, a lifelong member. "We didn't have the money to do anything else. We were even yoked with another congregation. Gradually, however, we have grown in numbers and resources. We could call somebody with pastoral experience, but each time we keep deciding that young recent graduates are just right for us. And we keep getting really good ones."

In a time when many rural churches are tottering or dissolving, Calypso Presbyterian is thriving. It sits on a dusty road across a train track from the abandoned storefronts of what used to be a small town. Calypso retains a post office, a fire station for a volunteer department and a few blocks of houses. Mount Olive, the nearest real town (population 4,800), is three miles away.

On the day of my visit, 38 children were attending vacation Bible school. The children come from the community and from churches in Mt. Olive and Faison, as well as from the families of the congregation.

Calypso Presbyterian has active youth groups, and some families have joined as a result of the participation of their teenagers. Three adult Sunday school classes are offered. Every other Wednesday night during the school year, church members gather for supper, educational programs and meetings. Adult and youth members participate in Habitat projects and supply and staff a food pantry. Cooperating with other congregations, the church offers a regular dinner program for poor people. The congregation generously supports the work of the presbytery.

The congregation has grown over the past six years, but it still numbers only 112.

Lay leaders at Calypso agree on what constitutes a constructive and faithful life together—biblical preaching, opportunities for the pastor and lay leaders to teach, mutual care of members, contributions to the community, and broader mission work.

Keith Evans, retired from the power company, took a break from providing refreshments for the vacation Bible school. "I see us as being mentors to young pastors," he told me. The church helps seminary graduates "develop what they already know. They help us grow in Christ. We keep flexible with the pastors coming one after another every few years."

"We were one of the first churches in this area to have a woman minister," Parks noted. Rachel Kennedy observed that the church was one of the first in the region to adopt the denomination's new hymnal.

"I just think it's beneficial all the way around. The young pastors do learn from us, but we surely learn from them. I think our making first calls to them means we are attractive for young families, and for everybody else," said Kennedy.

Currie is leaving Calypso to undertake a doctoral program in theological ethics, but those I talked to were confident that the church will call another excellent pastor. "It'll doubtless be another first call," mused Grey Morgan. "After all, we've surely benefited from the ones God has blessed us with so far."