

Clear call

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [January 25, 2011](#) issue



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He is almost 30 years old, rustically handsome and one of the smartest students to come through our seminary in a long time. But he hid his brilliance beneath a bushel of deferring shyness. On the few occasions when he spoke up in my classes, he would always begin by clearing his throat and pushing horn-rimmed glasses back up on his nose as if he were imitating Clark Kent. Then he would suggest a profound insight.

He finished seminary at the head of his class and could have gone on to graduate school to earn a Ph.D. Since he was my advisee, we shared many conversations in my office, and I confronted him with his amazing gifts. "To whom much is given, much is required," I tried. He would nod deferentially, but he was always clear about his calling. He wanted to serve a local congregation—preferably a small one, perhaps in a rural part of the country.

He said yes to the first church that offered him a job. Last fall I preached at the worship service when he was installed as the pastor of this small congregation. From the airport I drove three hours through the countryside—and got lost more than once before I found the church address that MapQuest had overlooked.

Once the ordination worship service began, I looked out at the congregation of worried farmers, worn-out homemakers and bored teenagers. A yellowed fluorescent

light hummed its way through the service. The microphone on the pulpit squealed when the speaker got too close. The radiators banged as the hot water rushed through them. It seemed as if even the laments of the building were part of a sacred conversation between congregation, God and the new pastor. It occurred to me that I had never written an exam as challenging as the one that he would face here every Sunday.

The great scholar Karl Barth claimed that his early years as a pastor of the blue-collar congregation in Safenwil, Switzerland, were formative for the insights that led to his major theological breakthroughs as a professor. But as I sat in that chancel and watched my former student kneel to accept the laying-on of hands, I wondered how many brilliant Karl Barths came to but never left Safenwil.

My former student has no strategic plan for "turning this church around." His only ambition is to be the next in a long line of faithfully anonymous pastors who never move on to prestigious positions. But he isn't anonymous to these people who know his name.

He'll spend his years baptizing their babies, helping to deliver calves in the middle of the night, serving on the school board, burying husbands who die too soon, attending Fourth of July picnics, negotiating debates about how to pay for the new church roof—and then every Sunday he will stand in the pulpit and try to make holy sense of all of it.

When the ordination service was over, we all made our way to the basement fellowship hall for a potluck dinner. Tables perched on beige linoleum floors were adorned with red-and-white-checked vinyl cloths and small handmade arrangements of daisies. Families and friends plopped into the gray metal folding chairs and ate, laughed, gossiped and teased. Several women fussed over serving tables filled with casseroles, salads, fried chicken, and Jell-O with slices of pears trapped inside. Children squealed as they chased each other around the room. I overheard a story about snow tires.

They could have been discussing their anxieties about the future of family farms, the economy or "just where is this country heading?" But there was none of that on this day. Even the small talk had a lilt to it.

I understood why when their new pastor entered the room, and I saw how many of his parishioners just wanted to touch him. He never even made it to a chair. One

after another they got up from the tables, wiping their hands in order to shake his or giving him a hug or a few pats on the back. One man had tears in his eyes.

This was a eucharistic feast. A new pastor had come, and the congregation took it as a sign that God knew how to find them. The holiness of the room was so apparent that I almost took off my shoes. No one wanted to leave—certainly not me, and certainly not the new pastor.

This was my glimpse into a mystery about the mainline church that is hidden from the statistics and anxiety about its decline. I have no idea what hardships lie ahead for this congregation, or how long it will even exist. But I know that its people are filled with expectancy. In their midst is another highly capable pastor who is prepared to bring thousands of years of theological hope to bear on their community—a pastor who finds holiness by sitting in a church basement swapping stories about the new snow tire that is sure to get you through the winter.