

When a Warm Welcome Becomes as Hot as Hell

Chapter 4

By Douglas Kregel

“The Family of Faith Lutheran Church is a small church with a big heart for little kids,” is how I often described the ministry of the congregation where I served as pastor. Such a description was accurate in that the church decided to support early childhood education and care at two different ministry sites in Northwest Houston. With millions of dollars of facilities dedicated to foundational education, the Director of Preschool Operations was a very important position. The basic duty of this position was to oversee all the work of the preschool in both of its locations. All the preschool workers, around three dozen, were to report-up to the Director of Preschool Operations.

With the duties being as described, when the Director chose to accept a call to a new church and preschool, I and the leaders at The Family of Faith were dismayed. From 2012 to 2023, the directorship was filled by a long-standing member of the congregation. She began serving as a classroom aid in the preschool. Over time she accepted positions with ever increasing levels of responsibilities: classroom teacher, Assistant Director, Site Director, and finally Director of Preschool Operations. During this time of advancement, this employee enrolled in an online study program (i.e., Colloquy Program). As a result of her successful studies, she was placed on the official roster of the denomination. This made her skills available to thousands of churches throughout the country and around the world. While I, as pastor, did support her learning, secretly I wished our church could hide this talented person away from other congregations. This secret was not well kept since I professed my sinful thoughts to the elders of the congregation, as well as to the Director of Preschool Operations herself.

After working closely together on numerous large projects (e.g., building a second ministry location, as well as me earning my Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership), this outstanding leader received and accepted a call to a new church. My “secret” concern turned out to also be an accurate one. While I and our congregation prayed for her, and sincerely hoped the best for her and her new church, we were also left with a challenge: to recruit a new Director of Preschool Operations.

At The Family of Faith, when a preschool teacher needs to be hired, the Director of Preschool Operations recruits the candidate and evaluates the new employee for his/her ability to serve in a preschool setting. I, the pastor, participate in the hiring process by conducting a brief interview regarding the religious nature and Christian culture the new employee will be asked to support. Working together, the Director of Preschool Operations and the pastor, hire new employees. The hiring process is also reviewed by the church leaders. However, because the Director of Preschool Operations position was responsible for so many students, and so much property, the congregation formed a special Search Committee for the purpose of recruiting a new Director.

I was charged by the Search Committee with locating candidates. When looking for a candidate for an open pastoral position, a Call Committee is formed by the congregation. In regard to finding candidates for the pastoral position, the congregation contacts the denominational leaders in that region of the country and a list of candidates who are officially

rostered with the denomination are then supplied to the church leaders. However, when such a process was undertaken for the Director of Preschool Operations position, no viable candidate was identified. Contacting experts in the field of early childhood care rendered no new candidates. After an extensive effort to work within the denomination, the Search Committee turned to secular sources that were accessed through the internet for a fee.

The Search Committee met with nine or more candidates using an online meeting venue. The list of candidates was reduced to two finalists. The finalists were again interviewed by the Search Committee – this time in person. After many meetings, prayers, and a great amount of discussion, the Search Committee hired the new Director of Preschool Operations. This new hire was done in time for the former Director to provide some orientation to the new Director. As the church said farewell and Godspeed to the previous Director in May, a well-planned transition seemed to be underway. The prayers of the church seemed to be answered.

During the summer months various behaviors from the new Director of Preschool Operations came to my attention. For example, her hiring process included the hiring of her own son for an unspecified amount of time and without noting the hourly wage. In addition, when staff members left the new Director did not hire new staff. Instead, she chose to employ very expensive substitute preschool teachers. I and many congregational leaders attempted to put the best construction on these and other behaviors. (See the explanation to the Eighth Commandment in Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*).

As the local public schools began their new academic year, so did The Family of Faith Preschool. Sadly, the number of students enrolled in either campus was not as large as the congregation expected them to be. Some pointed to the COVID effect as the cause of the decrease. Various theories were put forward. In all these approaches to the issue, I and the congregation chose to put our support behind the new Director of Preschool Operations to provide the resources needed during her first year of service.

During this same period of time described above, my wife and I were eagerly awaiting the birth of our third grandchild. My wife, Amy, is a public school art teacher in a large elementary school. I serve as a pastor in a church with two ministry locations serving many young children. While both of us work with children professionally, we do not live anywhere close to our two adult children. Earlier than expected, our daughter informed us that her labor had begun. Amy and I raced to the airport in Houston and traveled through the night to support our daughter and her husband during the birth of their first child. God blessed, and we were able to be present for delivery of our third grandchild into the world. Thanks be to God!

As I drove home from the hospital alone and in silence, basking in the wonder of the birth, my cell phone's ring shattered the moment I was enjoying. The call was from church back in Houston. The caller explained that she had just witnessed the Director of Preschool Operations being arrested by Harris County Constables at the new ministry location. I barely put my cell phone down for the next five days. What happened? What were the charges? Were any children injured? The list of questions was ever growing in my own mind, as well as in the minds of the employees and church leaders. After over thirty-one years as a pastor, twenty-nine of which I served with a church that hosted a preschool, I was completely void the experience of having a staff member arrested. After earning a bachelor's, a master's, and a doctorate, nothing in my studies prepared me to address the arrest of a co-worker in Christ.

I should say that nothing prepared me for this ministry moment except for Holy Scripture. The story of Judas Iscariot is what seemed relevant to me. One commonality between the arrest of the Director of Preschool Operations and Judas was that there was a disciple of Christ who acted in a way inconsistent with the calling of a Christian. In addition, as Judas was enriching himself from the community chest maintained for the purpose of supporting Jesus and his disciples, so we later discovered that the Director was less than forthcoming about financial matters at our church and perhaps other churches where she had previously served. Thanks be to God no children were ever put in harms way. However, the injury to The Family of Faith was tangible. After confusion and distress, the church leaders asked and received the Director's resignation. The keys to the church property were surrendered. A final paycheck was presented. The Family of Faith elected lay leaders chose to forgo any legal action.

In the Bible, Judas did not tender his resignation to Jesus. Rather, Judas was never prosecuted for his financial impropriety. Instead, the wayward disciple was celebrated by the religious community – a celebration that included the payment of thirty pieces of silver. Judas quickly divested himself of his earnings as he discarded the coins and invested in real estate. The final purchase of Judas' career was a spiritual disaster.

While Judas escaped any prosecution for his choice, Jesus of Nazareth was fully prosecuted. Jesus' last interaction with Judas was the beginning of a series of judicial improprieties. During the night, the Savior was led to the private residence of the former High Priest, Anas. The beatings started there and then continued before Caiaphas who was serving as the High Priest at the time. Soon Jesus was transferred from the realm of the temple government to the realm of the secular government. From Anas and Caiaphas to Pilot and Herod and before Pilot again, Jesus was insulted and assaulted.

In the end, Judas Iscariot took his own life while Jesus gave his own life. Judas' desperate act was motivated by the satanic idea that he was beyond the reach of God's grace and mercy. Jesus sacrificed his life in order that all his disciples, and all of humankind, including Judas, would be assured of one fact: their sins were completely paid for, atoned for, and thus they were all well within the spiritual reach of the most gracious and merciful God. This spiritual fact stands yet today – even for those who would neglect their duties at a church and its preschool.

No public or private confession and absolution was undertaken by the Director of Preschool Operations at The Family of Faith Lutheran Church. While I reached out to her through every means available to me, she chose to forgo any response to my efforts at communicating. Through the means of intermediaries, I was informed that she did have access to pastoral care. She would only contact the lay leaders of our church. To my knowledge, she was released from her incarceration within a day or two of her arrest. No additional exchanges have occurred to my knowledge since she received her last check and surrendered the keys to the church facilities.

Within a few weeks of writing this chapter, I will be officiating the baptism of our daughter's child. The baptismal identity that our granddaughter will receive through the water and the Word will, we pray, be a powerful resource to her throughout her life. While the cell phone interruption upon her birth was disruptive to our family, and to The Family of Faith, the news of the arrest of the Director of Preschool Operations is now a memory. Through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, the resurrected Lord Jesus promises to provide our granddaughter

with forgiveness, life, and salvation. The church will be gathered around these promises. Both our granddaughter, and those gathered at her baptism, will celebrate the new identity rendered through the life, death, resurrection, and reign of Jesus.

The certain promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation continue to sustain the church. The church stands resiliently against those who would manipulate, deceive, and injure her. This resilience is a historic fact. People still believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. This is the case not because of one pastor's work, or one congregation's efforts. Rather, the church exists today only because of the grace of God found alone in Jesus Christ. While the arrest of the Director of Preschool Operations was disruptive, to say the least, the arrest, trial, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus retains its power to arrest sinful hearts unto salvation.

In chapters one to four, we observed two basic sources of challenges to the church: challenges that originate outside the church (e.g., Hurricane Harvey) and disruptions that find their source within the church (e.g., the arrest of the Director of Preschool Operations). In the next two chapters we will consider the stories presented so far as case studies in church leadership. Not models of church leadership, but case studies. In Chapter Five we will consider more broadly the exogenous realm (i.e., the realm outside the church) to which we will apply the counsel of Holy Scripture. In Chapter Six we will use the case studies provided, as well as other examples, to consider how church leaders are called to address issues from the endogenous realm (i.e., the realm of events originating inside the Body of Christ). Finally, in Chapter Seven, we will conclude our considerations by learning about leadership from the source to which Jesus himself points us: little ones.