
*The Pastor-Congregation Duet* is a “testimony” (259) to a love of the church and the calling of pastoral ministry by Gary Harder, a valued leader and pastor of the Mennonite Church in Canada. He invites pastors and congregations into a healthy, albeit complex, relationship likening it to a musical duet. At the heart of this relationship, as he reflects on more than 50 years of pastoral ministry, is a “growing covenant of mutuality . . . deep respect, love, and accountability” (xv). His story spans a volume of time, with significant shifts in theological and biblical thinking and worldviews, and changing expectations of the church. He examines how a pastor navigates the challenges and joys of ministry, and how a congregation supports and enriches pastoral leaders.

Harder’s love of music, a source of comfort and encouragement in his ministry and for his life story, is central to this composition. He reflects on developing his solo voice along with various duets. He is forthright with his own story of pastoral ministry, the congregations he has been in relationship with, and a complementing marriage duet. He offers candid accounts of harmony in relationship as pastor and congregation, as well as of times of dissonance when relationships are challenging and do not end well. He surveys his experience with honesty, sharing his struggles with openness and vulnerability. He offers pastoral wisdom, lessons gleaned through developing his own voice. In this way, readers can learn of the missteps and fragility of human relationships, as well of the messy and fallible church. Yet, gratitude and grace are woven into the stories Harder shares and the wisdom he has gained: “We all need continuous conversion to God’s way and God’s love” (248). From his extensive experience and reflection in pastoral ministry, he maintains that “God is in the blessing business” (179), working through and in spite of God’s people.

This volume is in four parts. Part 1 focuses on the congregation as a duet partner. Each of the four chapters in this part is dedicated to the author’s journey in ministry: his education and calling, and the congregations where he has worked. Part 2 offers his insights on developing his own voice. Each of the three chapters offers a unique reflection. He shares stories about the importance of nurturing physical and emotional well-being, and his pleasure
in music and the vitality and solace it provides for his soul is expanded in this section. One chapter is devoted to the many rhythms of the marriage duet. Harder shares his journey with a duet of mutual and equal voices, its “huge role in sustaining my energy and love of pastoral ministry” and “in nurturing my inner voice and my sense of self” (121).

Part 3 explores when music is festive, the special occasions in congregational life and pastoral ministry. Through stories of baptism, parent-child dedication, weddings, and funerals, Harder demonstrates his learnings, vulnerabilities, humility, and good humor. In these accounts, readers can enter into his wrestling with theological and biblical matters, reflecting on deep questions of faith and life and how they are shaped and shape the church. Part 4 considers when music is discordant. Harder normalizes conflict as a given, “perhaps even healthy . . . as a catalyst for growth and deeper engagement” (215). He looks at dissonant notes in a variety of ministry settings through the lens of an Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective of the priesthood of all believers, where every voice is valued and welcomed yet can present unique challenges for pastoral leadership. This section concludes with a poignant personal example, “sharing some of my struggles in my journey toward inclusion of LGBTQ people” (228).

In the postlude, Harder asks whether retirement ends one’s calling, and goes on to describe how he is personally answering that question (257-60). At the end, he succinctly and significantly summarizes the pastoral-congregation duet with words of hope and encouragement for all.

Throughout the book, the author includes sermons, stories, articles, and prayers from his ministry. These interludes illustrate the context of the pastoral relationship, the wrestling to understand pastoral leadership and a healthy relationship between pastor and congregation, and the refrains of blessing. This is a book for pastors and congregations, particularly for those who attend to the relationship between the two. Pastors will be encouraged with heartfelt reflections, while congregants will benefit from a pastor’s perspective on life and pastoral ministry—the challenges, joys, and hopes. *The Pastor-Congregation Duet* conveys and promotes the importance of developing a healthy relationship between the partners.

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