Pastor Garrett Mostowski and Pastor Sarah Logemann walk in the main aisle of the old sanctuary at Fort Street Presbyterian Church in Detroit on July 13. PHOTOS BY FINN GOMEZ/DETROIT FREE PRESS

Presbyterian church in Detroit found new pastors, new life

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I was raised Presbyterian, and still think of myself that way, although I stopped going to church in high school. I feel a connection to the Presbyterian church, because it's how I grew up; the denomination's focus on scholarly analysis of Scripture appeals to me, and I find its tenets of inclusion, redemption and justice admirable. When people say America is a Christian nation, I think, "Cool. Can it be Presbyterian?"

But the church I attended as a child in my hometown of Mobile, Alabama, with its stodgy pastor and 1970s wall-to-wall burnt orange carpet and pews, didn't speak to me. Except maybe, sometimes on Christmas Eve, when the darkness outside turned the sanctuary's arched windows into glittering mirrors, and the soaring refrain gloria, in excelsis Deo welled up inside of me, a feeling it didn't seem possible could be made or contained by

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Fort Street Presbyterian Church in Detroit is seen July 13.

Mostowski and Logemann laugh in the old sanctuary of Fort Street Presbyterian Church in Detroit on July 13.

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a human body.

When I became a parent myself, I started to wonder if I'd abandoned church too hastily. If, maybe, humans have sought religion for as long as there have been humans because it fulfills a need as basic as food or water, and whether we ought to be worried that as Americans have rejected religion at a record clip, we haven't replaced it with anything else.

So every Christmas and Easter, I take my son to worship at Fort Street Presbyterian Church, a magnificent Gothic Revival pile at Fort and Third in downtown Detroit.

The labyrinthine building, with its spires and arches, is everything my aesthetically deprived heart could've imagined, back in the burnt orange womb of my childhood church. On Christmas Eve at Fort Street, the pipe organ thunders, voices soar and the soft glow of candlelight illuminates the sanctuary's warm, intricately carved wood as Pastors Sarah Logemann and Garrett Mostowski seek transcendence with a small but growing knot of worshippers.

I'd been a twice-yearly attendee at Fort Street for nearly a decade when I emailed Garrett and Sarah, the married pastors who've led the church for the last five years, to ask if they'd meet me for an interview.

I wanted to know, I told them, what it's like to operate a mainline Protestant church in the year 2025, in a shrinking denomination – how they keep, literally, the lights on. I told them that I wanted to know what it's like to pastor a church as a married couple in a world where religion is still led most often by individual men. That I wanted to talk about why fewer Americans are religious, and that I struggle with what it means to have faith, or what it could mean to have a calling.

Sure, the pastors said. Let's go.

The historic Fort Street Presbyterian Church was constructed in 1855. PHOTOS BY FINN GOMEZ/DETROIT FREE PRESS

Pastor Garrett Mostowski leads Sunday service at Fort Street Presbyterian Church in Detroit on July 13.

'We need to change'

Garrett and Sarah have thought a lot about this, of course, as people who took very different paths to the pulpit, now pastoring a 176-year-old church that, five years ago, was on the brink of closure.

Sarah, 44, was raised in Denver, the child of atheist lawyers who debated politics and religion at the dinner table, inculcating intellectual curiosity in their young daughter. Her first real exposure to religion came from a middle school math teacher; Sarah had not realized, previously, that rational and rigorous intelligence was compatible with faith. Her teenage rebellion, she jokes, was sneaking off to church. Her conviction that faith was where she was meant to be and the work she was meant to do deepened as the years went on.

That was her calling: To inspire in others the same curiosity about the divine that had awakened in her.

Garrett, 38, was raised in central Indiana, surrounded by corn, attending an evangelical church where his parents served as elders, and the pastor thought nothing of instructing the flock to pray for George W. Bush to win the 2000 election, warning that an Al Gore presidency would bring about the end of days – and from which Garrett's family was ejected after his sister made the grave error of attending youth group at a different evangelical church. The pastor, Garrett says, denounced his sister's supposed transgression, and led the church in a vote to expel his family, a vivid example of mob mentality that still rankles.

College-bound by then, Garrett decided that if this was faith, it wasn't his. He didn't go to church for three years, during which he thought of himself as an atheist, but found his way back after finishing his finance degree when a friend talked him into a yearlong internship coaching kids at a Presbyterian camp in Colorado. He took a full-time job at the camp, renewing his contract for a year, then another year, learning a different, more inclusive way to approach faith, surrounded by people who called out his gifts: He could connect with the kids, he welcomed their questions. After four years, his mentors helped send him to seminary.

That was his calling: The conviction that his gifts had a purpose, and that he had an obligation to use them.

They met, Sarah says, in "the most dorky pastor couple sort of way – in preaching class."

Assigned to the same sermon-critique group at Princeton Theological Seminary, from which both earned degrees, neither thought the other was particularly good at preaching.

"I thought she was really boring," Garrett says.

"I thought he was so off topic!" says Sarah. "We call it God's divine sense of humor that we now have to listen to each other every single week."

But Sarah and Garrett were learning that they could trust each other to give honest feedback, and to help the other improve, the foundation of their marriage and their pastoral partnership. (They both, by the way, got better at sermons.)

After seminary, Garrett was hired to pastor a church in Montana, and Sarah served as an itinerant preacher for a group of small churches nearby that couldn't afford a full-time minister.

They started working together, and realized they made an effective team – membership in the churches they led had grown by 30%.

But while Garrett was unquestionably recognized as a church leader, Sarah encountered resistance.

"At my first funeral, I was accosted by a man who didn't believe that I should be in the pulpit as a woman. He was quoting Scripture at me, and told me that he almost stood up in the middle of my sermon to tell me that I should be removed," she said. "Then he said, 'Surprisingly, you had some really amazing things to say.' You know, it was a really good sermon, but you're going to hell for what you're doing. He was threatening enough that I was very nervous that he was going to physically attack me, and when I got to my car, I had to call Garrett crying. That was my first funeral experience. Welcome to ministry!"

Congregants sometimes seemed to think she was the pastor's wife, not a pastor herself: "Yes, I'm the pastor's wife, but I'm also the pastor, and he's the pastor's husband."

The piecemeal nature of the work wasn't economically sustainable, Garrett says, nor was he content to stay where Sarah wasn't afforded the same opportunities and respect. Fort Street was interested in a pastoral couple, and had a theological openness that appealed to both.

But something else intrigued them.

"All the churches, when they're hiring pastors, write up a profile about themselves for the hiring system," Sarah says. "A lot of churches will say 'We want to grow with young families,' even if they're struggling. Fort Street said something that I have yet to see another church post: 'We need to change, and we don't know how.'"

Five years away from closing

The pastors arrived at Fort Street in 2020, moving from Montana to Detroit in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, when Sarah was, they joke, 900 months pregnant with their only child. They'd visited before, and had delighted in the way the Detroit defies stereotypes; even during the pandemic, Sarah says, the couple fell in love with the city's vibrancy and creativity.

But Fort Street was in trouble.

The Presbytery – the church's regional administrative body – sat the new pastors down, telling them to consider this a short-term job.

"We had just moved cross country, and we were told in the first week, 'You're going to have to shut this church down in three to five years,'" Garrett said. They'd been told that 40 to 50 people were worshipping at Fort Street on Sundays, "But it was more like 12, and that was what was on the official rolls."

Fort Street is Detroit's second-oldest Presbyterian congregation, organized in 1849, and moving to the building at the corner of First and Third, then a posh residential area, 1855. The Gothic Revival building was designed by Albert H. Jordan, according to the website Historic Detroit, at a cost of $70,000, or $1.7 million in today's dollars; the church's 167 members were some of the most well-heeled Detroiters of the day, like Russell A. Alger, the governor of Michigan who also served as U.S. secretary of war and as a U.S. senator, Theodore S. Buhl, a banker and co-founder of the Detroit Institute of Arts, and railroad magnate James F. Joy.

That, by the way, is how Fort Street keeps the lights on – Joy left the church an endowment now valued at $30 million; half the investment income covers the church's roughly $800,000 annual operating budget, including salaries for five full-time, 12 part-time employees and the $1,000-a-month power bill, and the other half goes to the Presbytery.

And *that*, by the way, is why the John C. Lodge Freeway hooks left going into downtown Detroit – the Michigan Department of Transportation initially planned to route the freeway through the church, but Joy's endowment requires the Fort Street to operate at the corner of Fort and Third. Eminent domain laws at that time would've required MDOT to buy out the endowment, so – the Lodge curves.

That influence, the church's literal effect on Detroit's landscape, was one of the reasons Garrett and Sarah knew Fort Street couldn't close.

But the church had been plagued by conflict and infighting, with seven pastors in 10 years, and the congregation was shrinking. After Garrett and Sarah took a vacation, some members thanked them, half-jokingly, for coming back.

The story the Presbytery told could've convinced another young couple that the church was a lost cause, Garrett says: "I'm stubborn enough and enough of a contrarian that I was like, 'OK, well, if you tell me that, I'm going to do the opposite,' and Sarah's like that, too. But a lot of it was that we saw something in the people that a lot of the folks at the Presbytery did not."

Dwindling faith

The percentage of Americans who identify as Christian hit a low of 62% in

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the Pew Research Center's 2023-2024 Religious Landscape Survey, down from 78% in 2007.

Studies probing the reasons for these declines turn up similar causes: Dissatisfaction with church doctrine, perceived hypocrisy of church teachings, and, for nearly 1 in 3, a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute found, disagreement with some denominations' anti-LGBTQ+ teachings – the Catholic church, the survey found, is losing members at the fastest clip.

But mainline Protestant denominations – Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Congregationalists – that tend to hold more progressive views, like the belief that abortion is a personal ethical decision that shouldn't be restricted by law, or embrace of same-sex unions, LGBTQ+ clergy and transgender rights, are dwindling, too.

The national Presbyterian Church organization reports that the denomination loses about 50,000 members a year. The church projects that this year, membership will drop below one million; 140 Presbyterian churches closed in 2024.

Just about 11% of Americans are members of mainline Protestant churches, Pew found; in contrast, 23% of American adults identify as evangelical – often allowed to define Christianity in America – and 19% as Catholic.

Most Americans who've left the church, PRRI found, just stopped believing.

Pastor Sarah Logemann and Pastor Garrett Mostowski look to the ceiling during a worship song at Fort Street Presbyterian Church in Detroit. FINN GOMEZ/DFP

Finding transcendence

And that's the challenge, for anyone looking to rebuild a congregation: We may have faith in the goodness of our fellow humans, or appreciate the radical empathy of Jesus' charge to love our neighbors as ourselves. But for an increasing number of Americans, it's the supernatural components, for lack of a better word, that drive them away from religion.

"This is the conflict that we see in mainline churches, and in our church particularly, that there is not a shared belief in the same thing. You have people that don't agree with even just reading the Bible, or using it as an authoritative text. I don't mean you've got to follow every rule and letter, I mean we look at the words of Jesus and we say 'We have to take this seriously,'" Garrett says. "We have to find something that we all believe in. Maybe 'transcendence' is a better word. I think we need a return to believing in transcendence, because if you don't have that shared belief, you're just arguing ethics."

I note here that Americans no longer have a set of shared facts, a problem that pops up in journalism and politics all the time – that while our post-modern diminution of capital-T truth opened the door to elevating the perspectives and needs of women, LGBTQ+ Americans and people of color, it's also given rise to the spread between MSNBC and Fox News.

Ministry, Sarah says, has to make room for all truths: "I like transcendence as a word … even our book of order says it opens membership for all who confess Jesus as Lord. But, within that, there is freedom of conscience … everyone's interpretations of Scripture are going to be different, and you cannot bar anyone from membership because they have an opinion that's different than you, or a different capital-T truth."

The congregation at Fort Street is diverse, Garrett says, not just in race or ethnicity but in belief: "We have atheists that will tell you that they're atheists who come every week. We have very conservative people that likely don't agree with us theologically, and still sit in the pew and want to hear us teach. Then we have a lot of liberal folks that are probably really in line with how we think about Scripture … We allow for a conservative reading – hey, you can you can read this literally, and this is what that means. But you can also read it metaphorically. We invite everyone's opinions. But it's more like inviting their souls into it, because when you believe something, you're attached to it. So we're not just playing in the land of, 'Oh, we just think different thoughts,' no, you have a conviction here, and you need space to exist in that."

But the argument shouldn't be the point, Sarah says: "For us it becomes, 'Well, what do you do with that conviction?" Not just, 'Let's argue about which take of this is correct.' But wherever your soul aligns, what are you doing with that?"

'We're not going to tell you what to believe'

For Sarah and Garrett, faith's capital-T truth is justice, support of, as Jesus commanded, the marginalized and oppressed. That's part of the Presbyterian ethos, and longstanding tradition at Fort Street. So, despite the congregation's desire to change, a plan to eliminate Fort Street's beloved Open Door program, offering meals to people experiencing homelessness, met with some resistance.

In some ways, Garrett says, the church's endowment blunts the need for urgency. When the bills are paid, what reason is there to stop this program, or raise money for that one?

But the very people the food program served gave the church honest feedback: They weren't coming for the food – it was terrible. They didn't need clothes – better garments were available elsewhere. They came, Garrett says, because people knew their names, and connected them to social workers who actually got them to resources. The money that had funded Open Door now pays for direct assistance to unhoused people, and the church contracts with service providers to offer shelter on site. In two years, they've housed more than 50 people.

Along the way, something changed: "We're growing," Garrett says.

Some of the church's new members are LGBTQ+ people looking for an accepting religious space and spiritual study. Most, Sarah says, are ex-evangelicals like Garrett, who've found a safe place to land at Fort Street.

"The church used to be a catch-all as a social institution. Now all of that is available elsewhere. So how do we specialize to connect people with meaning in their lives?" Garrett says.

For Presbyterians particularly, that can be a hard question to answer.

Conservative churches that are growing, he says, offer congregants, particularly young white men struggling to navigate masculinity, rules for how to live their lives: "They have structure."

Presbyterianism's pitch is more subtle, Garrett says, and more challenging. "We want to be a place where you come when you're searching, and you've thought a little bit more about your faith and maybe you've broken out of that structure early on."

Wrestling free of dogma, he says, means "we can step into an ever-expanding consciousness that is more generous and, I would say, more faithful to a reading of Scripture. And that's where we come in. I think you'll hear that in our preaching."

It's not a model for rapid growth, he says, "Because it's so ambiguous – we're not going to tell you what to believe."

But for some, it's the perfect fit: Fort Street now has 139 members, with roughly 60 attending service on Sundays.

Growth and service

Garrett and Sarah dream of a Fort Street that continues to grow, grounded in community, with old and new members who find connection outside of church and understand how those bonds can power service responsive to the changing needs of the city. Of a congregation that seeks faith because they have questions, not because they want answers – that divine curiosity Sarah longs to ignite, a God-gifted sense of play and wonder in a world with, as she says, few curiosities left.

In the sanctuary at Fort Street on Christmas Eve, when the organ rings out and the voices of the congregants swell, I'll feel what Sarah describes: The same feeling I had as a child, a collision of beauty and community and hope and, yes, wonder; and it will feel like God.

Fort Street Presbyterian Church, in Detroit at 631 W. Fort St., holds regular worship services on Sundays at 11 a.m. The church will hold a Longest Night service on Dec. 21 at 6 p.m. The candlelight Christmas Eve service will be held at 7 p.m. on Dec. 24. Find more information at www.fortstreet.org.

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