

Bearing testimony: Ministry in the 21st century

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Illustration by Timothy Cook. Below: photo of Katherine Willis Pershey.

*What is pastoral ministry like these days, and how is it being shaped in new ways? The Century talked to pastors about the challenges and surprises of their early years in ministry. This interview is the second in [a series](#). **Katherine Willis Pershey** is a graduate of Claremont School of Theology in California. After serving as the pastor of a Disciples of Christ congregation in California, she took a call to be associate minister at First Congregational Church (UCC) in Western Springs, Illinois. Her book *Any Day a Beautiful Change* is forthcoming from Chalice Press.*

What excites you most about ministry these days?

I've always felt lucky to do what I do for a living. Ministry is just so interesting. That seems like such a weak word, but I'm genuinely interested in nearly every aspect of my work--I'm never bored. I engage in wonderfully diverse projects alongside wonderfully diverse people, and it all happens in a context of intentional openness to the Holy Spirit's guidance.

What does this openness look like in practice?

I think it's primarily a matter of seeing ordinary activities through the lens of faith. The renewed emphasis on Christian practice has been such a gift to the church. Telling your story is so much more meaningful when you understand that you are bearing testimony; calling on a sick parishioner takes a different shape when you recognize that both patient and pastor reflect the face of Christ. As Craig Dykstra says, practices are "patterns of communal action that create openings in our lives



may be made known to us."

In our weekly staff meetings, my

colleagues and I spend as much time in reflection about the previous week as we do in preparation for the weeks to come. Our Sunday school classes and small group studies always begin or end with time to share prayer requests. That's certainly not a revolutionary practice, but it cultivates from an early age the ability to articulate one's own joys and sorrows, the capacity to bear the joys and sorrows of one's neighbor and, as we pray for one another, a fundamental trust in the compassion of God.

Often I fail to truly open myself to the Holy Spirit, but when I do take the time to pay attention--even in retrospect--it's astounding to note how fully God is present in my life and the life of the church.

What's been the hardest part of parish ministry?

Leaving my first call was heartbreaking. Congregations--especially small, struggling congregations--need loving pastors. I loved that church, and I am still processing how to keep loving that church though I'm no longer its minister. It was a very odd experience: you don't stop being someone's sister or daughter, yet one day I was their pastor and the next I was not. It was a grief-laden process.

What was the grieving process like?

I was thrilled about my new call, but I cradled a lot of guilt and sadness about leaving. On my last weekend as pastor, the congregation celebrated its 100th

anniversary. It was a lovely commemoration of their longevity and faithfulness--and a great reminder that a church is so much more than any one minister. Still, leaving right after such a momentous event made the departure seem sudden, even though we had been preparing practically and spiritually for months. The moving truck came to the parsonage the next day, while the archival displays in the fellowship hall were still being dismantled.

For several months I could hardly think about the members of that church without feeling deep sadness. But they are thriving, and I'm thrilled about where I am now. My husband and I wanted to return to the Midwest, and I felt called to associate ministry.

Say more about that specific sense of calling.

I struggled to carry the pastoral burden alone, so the opportunity to work with colleagues was very appealing to me. I appreciate the depth that associate ministry affords. I'm able to dedicate more time and energy to particular areas of responsibility instead of feeling continually overstretched.

I was fairly anxious about the transition from working autonomously to having a supervisor. But I'm blessed to work with a wonderful senior pastor; in a relatively short time, we've established a great sense of collegiality and mutual respect.

What does your denominational affiliation mean to you?

I'm ordained to the Disciples of Christ, a denomination I joined as an adult. I deeply appreciate the ethos and community of my denomination; we are small enough that we generally know one another fairly well. I've been active in both the regional and general manifestations of the church, and I genuinely love to attend its general assemblies.

What led you to join the Disciples? What tradition were you coming out of?

I grew up United Methodist, and during college I worshiped at an Episcopal church and with a Friends meeting. I wanted to be a pastor, but neither itinerancy nor the priesthood appealed to me, and though Quaker theology resonated with me, I couldn't reconcile the absence of ritual sacraments and ordained ministry. The chaplain of United Christian Ministries at Kent State University was a Disciple, and while I think she refrained from inviting me to her church out of respect for my denominational roots, I visited anyway. It felt like home, and I joined almost immediately.

I'm at a church now that's affiliated with the United Church of Christ, and while I love where I am, I miss the Disciples practices of weekly communion and baptism by immersion. I didn't expect to grow attached to the latter; it was one of the things I accepted with a raised eyebrow in the first place. The whole thing just seemed a little old-timey to me; I associated it with fanatics and fundamentalists, not progressive Christians. Fortunately, I had been baptized as an infant, which worked as a get-out-of-jail-free card: since Disciples are almost universally opposed to rebaptism, I could join without getting my hair wet.

And then, not far into my first call, one of the church's teenagers decided she was ready to make the good confession of faith and be baptized. I was thrilled--and petrified. I guess I had known I wasn't going to get away with staying dry forever, but the whole idea was so intimidating. There are logistics involved with immersion baptisms, such as plumbing to contend with.

The woman who chaired the property committee saw the fear in my eyes and offered to do a trial run. We'd meet in our swimsuits a week before B-day and fill up the tank, and then I'd dip her as many times as it took to figure out how best to throw my strength to ensure that the sacrament didn't last uncomfortably long. In the baptistry, we giggled the whole time, joking about how holy she would be by the time I was through with her. I ended up immersing her a good seven or eight times. So much for not believing in rebaptism.

As I waded into the baptistry on the first Sunday of Advent--the thunderous words of John the Baptist ringing in my ears--I was ready. The teenager and I both surrendered that day as the water flowed between our fingers and toes. We agreed that it felt sort of like a bear hug from God, a goofy metaphor for a wonderfully goofy practice.

So, I miss immersion. But I happily participate in baptizing the infants of my new congregation, where, in the words of novelist Marilynne Robinson's John Ames, "the water just heightens the touch of the pastor's hand on the sweet bones of the head, sort of like making an electrical connection."

Is your preference for immersion also a preference for believer's baptism?

It's really about the physicality, symbolism and beauty of immersion itself. To be honest, these aspects move me much more than any theological or biblical argument about believer's baptism.

How have pastors and others with more experience been helpful to you? Unhelpful?

I was one of the founding board members of the Young Clergy Women Project, and I have availed myself fully of its opportunities for peer support and continuing education. I'm easily irritated by more experienced clergy who presume that we cannot relate to one another as colleagues but only as mentor/mentee. I love mentors--I *collect* mentors--but I'm most drawn to pastors who don't condescend to their newest colleagues.

One of the most formative experiences I've had with other pastors was serving on the committee on ministry for the Pacific Southwest Region of the Disciples of Christ. I learned so much about ministry--both from my colleagues on the committee and from the candidates who were still working out what it meant for them to be called to serve God and the church.

Where else do you go for collegiality, inspiration and renewal?

On a daily basis, I turn to the staff at church. Having experienced the loneliness of serving as a solo pastor, I really cherish the gift of having in-house colleagues. Once a month, I meet with three other young clergywomen who also understand writing to be an integral part of their vocations--we are all alumni of the Collegeville Institute summer writing programs. Our stated purpose is to read and respond to one another's work, but the group also functions as a collegial support network and, quite frankly, the primary source of my social life. We've been gathering for several months, and no one has ever missed a meeting.

Do you see writing as an integral part of your vocation to ministry or something separate? Either way, how do you find the time?

I suppose it is part of my vocation to ministry. I don't think I would thrive as a pastor without writing, and I know I wouldn't want to pursue a writing career distinct from ministry. In addition to the writing that is inherent in pastoral ministry--sermons, letters, curricula and so on--writing for publication beyond the congregation is one of the ways I live out my faith and calling.

Shortly after my first interview for my current position, Chalice Press offered me a book contract. I shared the news with the search committee and senior pastor, and as we moved through the discernment process, they made it clear that they didn't see the writing project as a hindrance to my ability to be a fully engaged minister. They embraced it as a ministry that could benefit both the congregation and a larger

audience. My senior pastor encouraged me to consider writing part of my job description--and has followed through by offering me ample time to write.

Of course, one of my major areas of emphasis is ministry with young families, and my book is a memoir about motherhood, marriage and ministry. If I were writing mystery novels, the congregation might not be so enthusiastic.

What books have shaped your understanding of ministry?

Eugene Peterson's books are invaluable--challenging, if not downright convicting. He clearly expects a lot of ministers, as well one should. Before I met Peterson--at a workshop hosted by the Collegeville Institute--I assumed that he would be a stern and intimidating man. But he's delightful, a fount of gentle wisdom.

When I reread his books now, I still sometimes feel as though I've been called to the principal's office, but now I know the principal is soft-spoken and sparkly-eyed. He's also a model for me as I continue to try to weave writing into my life as a minister, as many of his books were written while he was in full-time pastoral ministry.

I wish I could have read *This Odd and Wondrous Calling* when I was in seminary. Lillian Daniel and Martin Copenhaver's book doesn't exactly shape my understanding of ministry; it perfectly reflects it.

How would you want to change your seminary curriculum?

I wish I had been better prepared to read the Bible within the context of a faith community. My biblical studies courses were exclusively academic in nature. Certainly the capacity to think critically about scripture is crucial. But exegesis doesn't feed spirits, and there are a lot of hungry spirits in the church.

Was there not much connection between your biblical studies and your preaching coursework?

Not especially. I did have an excellent preaching professor, with a background in New Testament studies--he did address the scholarly and pastoral dimensions of homiletics. But it was just one introductory preaching class; I remember wishing I could have taken my biblical studies courses with him as well.

Nevertheless, I cherish the years I spent at Claremont and am grateful for my seminary education.

What's your sermon-prep process? What resources do you find helpful?

During the summer, I plan out the scriptures I will preach on for the year. I usually preach the lectionary, especially since the publication of the Feasting on the Word series. That's my primary resource for study--the exegetical, pastoral, homiletical and theological perspectives are generally just the right amount and scope of material to spark a sermon idea. I preach from my written manuscripts word for word, but by Sunday I try to be familiar enough with my text that I only need to glance at it.

What developments would you like to see in your congregation's mission? In the wider church's?

I'm hopeful that the mainline church can reclaim meaningful, practical and theologically tenable practices of evangelism. Martha Grace Reese provides an excellent road map in her Unbinding the Gospel series. I led an all-congregation program based on her work during my first call, and I'm in the process of reading and discussing it with the staff at my present church. At both congregations, people are reluctant to speak boldly about their faith. But people need to hear the good news of God's grace and love more than ever, and if the church doesn't take on this mission, I'm afraid--well, that's where that sentence can end: if the church doesn't take on this mission, I'm afraid.

What do the two churches you've served have in common that makes people similarly hesitant to share their faith?

They're pretty different places. South Bay Christian was declining; First Congregational is thriving. But they inhabit the same larger culture, a culture in which much of the language of the Christian faith is laced with connotations of fundamentalism. I think people just learn to be quiet about their faith, because that's the safe and polite thing to do. We need to reclaim our language, model authentic faith-sharing and gently invite people to do the same.

Describe an experience that made you think, "This is what church is all about."

My congregation in California hosted a hot breakfast program on Sunday mornings before worship. Up to 75 homeless and low-income people came each week. When one of the regulars was ticketed for playing his trumpet on the Redondo Beach pier without a permit, our music director invited him to play in worship. The first time he played, there wasn't a dry eye in the place.

He began attending worship regularly, and eventually he joined the church. At his request, we located a social service organization that could provide housing and services for him. At one point, he lived with a roommate who had held onto the inventory from his family's musical instrument company, so one morning during church he presented me with a gift: a silver trombone. We played several duets together, including one at the congregation's 100th anniversary celebration.

The church's engagement with this gentleman has been challenging at times, as he continues to struggle with significant issues. Still, the congregation has exhibited great hospitality toward him. In the Disciples tradition, the communion service includes lay members praying for God's blessing on the bread and cup. South Bay Christian Church did not merely invite a homeless man to receive the gifts of grace; they ate bread that he had blessed.