Faithful reinvention: Ministry in the 21st century

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Illustration by Timothy Cook. Below: photo of Scott Kershner.

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 fifth in a series. Scott Kershner studied at Yale Divinity School and the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He recently left a pastorate in East Flatbush in Brooklyn to serve as pastor at Holden Village, a Lutheran retreat center in the North Cascades in Washington State.*

What excites you most about ministry these days?

The freedom to explore fundamental issues. The church and traditional religious commitments are no longer taken for granted as part of North American people's lives. So space opens up to ask very basic and interesting questions. Creedal formulas aside, what is church? What does it mean to worship God? How and why do faith commitments matter? We can no longer assume that everyone shares a common answer to these questions, so we can investigate them with fresh eyes. That's exciting.

How do you go about encouraging such conversations?

One way is through preaching. A seminary professor of mine suggested once that every denomination should identify seven or eight words or phrases that are lodestones to their theological identity—and then ban them for a year. Imagine Lutherans having to go a year without using words like *grace, law* and *gospel*, and *faith*. We'd have to do some difficult and creative work exploring what we mean by

these central concepts.

I try to preach in a way that explores theological ideas with a sense of curiosity and,  tes conversation and engagement where ust come off as jargonish.

In my current ministry we have daily worship, which gives lots of opportunity for creative exploration of what worship is all about. It's always my hope that worship services themselves, in the use of speech and silence, song and symbol, can invite such engagement.

What's an example of a conversation you've had around some basic question of faith, one that might have been less likely a couple generations earlier?

I recently hosted a theological discussion group at which we discussed atonement theology. In previous generations, a phrase like "Jesus died for your sins" functioned almost as a one-sentence summary of Christian faith, implying some sort of popular version of substitutionary atonement. Yet a phrase like that points to a whole range of questions. What does Jesus' death have to do with me? Did Jesus have to die for me to be forgiven by God, and what do I need to be forgiven of anyway? What kind of God requires human blood?

In the discussion group, people were eager to ask these sorts of questions, in some cases because they had found some of the very severe models of atonement deeply unsatisfying in their past experiences of Christianity. Others simply have no

familiarity with the whole metaphysical economy that this sort of atonement language assumes. Someone put it this way: "Jesus 'died for my sins'? What does that even mean?" A fine question, I think.

What's been the hardest part about being in ministry?
One of the hardest parts is the wide range of demands upon my time. Several generations ago, congregations were full of people volunteering their time to do the carpentry, plumbing, bookkeeping, snow shoveling, lawn mowing and a million other things to keep the church going. In a parish setting today, there seem to be fewer and fewer people who have time to volunteer. One result of this is that clergy get spread very thin. Another is that we pay people to do more of these things, placing a strain on already tight budgets.

What do you think are the reasons for people in churches giving less time as volunteers? More two-income homes? More overscheduling in general?
People being overscheduled has a lot to do with it, but it's deeper than that. It's about the deep and defining commitments in people's lives. Forty or 50 years ago, a religious institution would have been, for most people, the primary social affiliation outside of family. Today, religion is just one of many social affiliations that claim people's allegiance.

What's something important you've learned?
I always eschewed seminary classes focused on the practical aspects of running a church. Once I was in the parish, it didn't take long to realize how vital some of those skills are.

Would it have been possible for you to take more practical classes if you'd wanted to?
Yes. I just wasn't very interested. But as much as it pains me to say this, there were times in my first parish when I felt I needed an MBA, in addition to an M.Div., to do my work effectively.

Why does it pain you to say that?
Simply because the skill set required of pastors sometimes seems impossibly wide. In addition to preacher, worship leader, counselor, scholar, community activist and sometimes boiler repair technician, one needs to be an expert in business administration. Skills in business administration are undoubtedly very useful, but sometimes I fear that the office of pastor is being stretched a mile wide and an inch

deep. And as a practical matter it's very difficult for seminaries to begin to touch it all.

What else would you want to change about your seminary curriculum, on the basis of your ministry experience so far?
A couple of years ago I attended a symposium on theological education at Union Seminary in New York. The one thing I remember about it were some comments by Mark Jordan—now of Harvard—about two vital but neglected aspects of theological education. One had to do with appreciating and participating in the fine arts. What can the experience of aesthetic pleasure teach us about being human? How do the arts give voice to the breadth of human desire and hope? How might the arts lead us more deeply into the world that, as John's Gospel puts it, God so loves? I think seminary curricula would be enhanced by engaging these sorts of questions.

The other was about the need for hands-on experience with people and communities that are largely powerless within the larger society. The implication was that the experience of social and political powerlessness is hermeneutically important to understanding the gospel—and the cross.

What would it look like to address this in practice? Should there be more incentives in place for choosing underprivileged congregations as fieldwork sites?
There is some attempt within my own denomination—the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—to fund internships in churches that don't have the money to pay for an intern otherwise. So there is recognition of the issue. In any case, the experience of powerlessness needs to be taken seriously as a point of entry for understanding the gospel—and that's an understanding that may simply be un-available to those of us who come from a perspective of privilege.

Who or what—mentors, experiences, reading—has shaped your understanding of ministry?
My mentors have mostly come through the printed page. People like Frederick Buechner and Eugene Peterson have been extremely helpful in the ways they bring the full power of their intellectual and creative capacities to bear in thinking about faith and ministry. More recently, James Alison, who is deeply informed by the work of René Girard, has been very inspiring. I appreciate the way he's able to articulate the gospel as a being-set-free that we are always in the midst of and discovering afresh. Reading him has made me a better preacher and reassured me that faithful

preaching matters greatly.

Reading contemporary fiction is very important to me. In particular, I've found the writing of David Foster Wallace to be enormously inspiring. When I feel my curiosity about life or my capacity for self-honesty or compassion for others going dull—which is most of the time—his writing is like cold water in the face. It's difficult to overstate the loss that is his death. There is important scholarship to be done on the theological significance of his work.

Why a specifically theological take on Wallace?
Luther has this great phrase in his explanation of the first commandment: your god is whatever you love and trust above all else. It's really a statement about human desire and attachment. Wallace relentlessly explores the psychological and spiritual terrain that Luther's insight points toward. I don't know whether Wallace read Luther, but I'd be surprised if he didn't—Wallace was such a polymath.

One of Wallace's themes is the solipsism of contemporary North American culture—the self-reference and self-concern in which we are so often trapped. I think this casts a lot of light on Luther's account of the human person being *incurvatus in se*. In fact, Wallace often refers to self-absorbed people as "inbent."

Wallace's work asks if it's possible to transcend what he calls "the kingdom of one's own skull" and genuinely love another. He once said in an interview that "the reason we are here" is to finally attain a capacity for self-giving love. So his work has a deeply soteriological, almost pious concern—something he was aware of and slightly bashful about. Sincerity is not exactly a postmodern virtue! His work is aesthetically demanding and very funny and sometimes terrifying in what it tells us about ourselves. The nakedness with which he portrays his own struggle to transcend narrow self-preoccupation and "become a fucking human being" is, to me, deeply moving. I think Wallace has a lot to teach those of us with a theological cast of mind—and especially those of us who preach.

What does being a leader mean? Has your understanding evolved?
For a minister, I think leadership means always keeping the central things at the center: baptism and Eucharist, the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen calling us into lives of self-giving service. Faithful leadership points to these central things so that the leading, finally, is the leading of Christ.

What does your denominational affiliation mean to you and your parishioners?
Holden Village is a Lutheran ministry, affiliated with the ELCA. So there is a deep institutional identification with that denomination and tradition. At the same time, we have many guests and staff who don't have that affiliation.

My own theological commitments are very ecumenical. The gospel is antecedent to any of our denominations. At the same time, I do find that the Lutheran tradition is a very rich place to stand. Luther's understanding of the theology of the cross is indispensable to me, theologically and pastorally.

What does Luther's understanding mean for your pastoral ministry?
Luther understood the God revealed through the weakness and dereliction of the cross to be a hidden God, *deus absconditus*. God is, paradoxically, to be found in the places where God seems the most absent. In precisely these places, God is at work in unexpected and surprising ways, bringing life and hope from death.

Pastorally, this leads me into solidarity with human pain and struggle. At the same time, a theology of the cross is not burdened to defend theism in light of the reality of human suffering. God is the suffering one as much as we are. A theology of the cross calls me to compassionate solidarity with others while pointing to the unexpected and surprising ways God may be at work, as evidenced in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Where do you go for collegiality, inspiration and renewal?
When I was in New York City, I was part of a colleague accountability group that met weekly. That became a vital source of support in my first call. I don't really have that in my current situation; my closest ministry colleagues are two or three hours away. But I do have the Glacier Peak Wilderness all around me, which is wonderfully renewing of the spirit.

What's your sermon preparation process? What resources do you find helpful?
Nearly every week I visit two websites: WorkingPreacher.org, which comes out of Luther Seminary, and Girardian Reflections on the Lectionary, which offers commentary informed by the mimetic theory of René Girard. As I go through the week, I try to keep three things in my mind: what I'm reading in the news, the particular issues and concerns of the community I serve and the cycles of the

seasons, both ecological and liturgical. All this shapes what I do when I finally get down to the business of writing my sermon, which I do on Saturday.

Do you find the Girard-based commentaries equally useful throughout the church year? Is the approach relevant to a wide variety of biblical subjects?

I do find it useful throughout the year. While Girard's thought is of course especially relevant to texts related to sacrifice or atonement, theologians influenced by his anthropological theory can offer fresh perspectives on lots of familiar texts. Girardian thought incisively shows how scapegoat mechanisms function in human culture, while maintaining that the whole life and work of Jesus opens our eyes to the scapegoating going on all around us—especially that in which we may be implicated.

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

I think the church is going to have to learn how to carry out its mission while being poor. As church attendance and giving drop, there's a lot of anxiety about how ministries will be funded—understandably so. No one likes the utilities turned off in the church building, and no pastor wants his or her pension to go unpaid. Still, we're going to have to face the reality of shrinking material resources in the church. Can the church learn to thrive while being poor?

Do you see positive sides to this new reality?

There are all kinds of creative ways the church as an institution is being rethought as the current models are collapsing. I don't think we have any idea what the church is going to look like in 50 or 100 or 500 years; it's really an open question. That said, if we trust the promise that the church is led by the Spirit, the uncertainty of the future doesn't have to be a source of anxiety. It can lead us to faithful reinvention.