

Organizing for communion: Ministry in the 21st century

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Illustration by Timothy Cook. Below: photo by Casey Elia.

*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 sixth in [a series](#). A part-time pastor at Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship, Isaac S. Villegas also teaches classes in prisons with Project TURN and serves on the board of the North Carolina Council of Churches. He is the coauthor (with J. Alexander Sider) of Presence: Giving and Receiving God (Cascade, 2011).*

**What's been most surprising about being in ministry?**

The deep hurt that people walk around with. People who appear quite well adjusted have sat with me and courageously shared stories of pain—wounds that don't seem to go away, no matter how good and pious and prayerful the people are. Many in the church have been to hell and back, and they go on in silence, suffering alone.

Sharing in these experiences has been a terrifying privilege—to be invited into places of such pain, to hope that the Holy Spirit may come upon us as we talk and pray, to walk away with an overwhelming sense of helplessness. I can't make life come out right for people. Pastoral care is a spiritual exercise in being humbled, in often being unable to help—yet being a presence showing solidarity, even when it means sharing in someone's hopelessness. Humility isn't a virtue that I can choose to embrace or not; it's more like the feeling that comes right after having the wind



is a power of suffocation, an  
life of the Spirit.

Prayer has become a way to find a

space where I can begin to breathe again, even while caught up in the middle of struggles, my own and others. Prayer isn't a spiritual discipline or practice I can use as a tool for my development as a Christian. It's an act of desperation, of extreme neediness, in which I learn again that I am a child. I find myself returning again and again to Romans 8, where Paul tells us that there is a groaning within us: the presence of the Holy Spirit, who shows us how to wait for redemption.

Another thing that's surprised me is my role as a pastor in the wider community. I don't know if this happens to pastors throughout the U.S. or if it's because I'm based in the South, but I am frequently recognized as a pastor among people whom I do not know—and even among people who wouldn't call themselves Christians. I end up being invited into pastoral care situations with neighbors and strangers who would never step foot in the church.

Once someone I barely knew asked me to lay hands on her head and bless her. We were standing in a restaurant parking lot.

### **Did you do it?**

Of course. I put my hand on her head and prayed the benediction over her: "May the Lord bless you and keep you . . ." It felt strange, but I wasn't about to refuse to pray over someone's life. I spent some of my formative years in a small Pentecostal congregation where we were always laying hands on each other. I think they taught me that touch matters, that faith is fleshy. And Eugene Rogers, in *After the Spirit*, taught me that it isn't weird to see how the Spirit touches us through bodies, to say that the Spirit befriends matter.

### **Who has shaped your understanding of ministry?**

After I graduated from Westmont College, Ben Patterson let me follow him around and watch him be the campus pastor. I'm sure I was more trouble than I was worth. Yet Ben involved me in the student ministries and welcomed me at staff meetings. He also walked me through the craft of preaching each week. The pastoral life he displayed has shaped me in more ways than I can name, but here are a few things that come to mind: pastors are committed to a life of prayer, to memorization of large sections of scripture and to the unity of the wider church.

When I was first called to ministry in my congregation, our district bishop, Brenda North Martin, walked with me and helped me discern God's call on my life. We frequently met and talked about what it means to be ordained as a Mennonite minister. I can't tell my story of ministry without including Brenda's guidance or remembering the moment when she put her hands on my sweaty forehead and ordained me.

During my ordination process, Duane Beck was my mentor. He's been a pastor for longer than I've been alive. His probing questions have taught me to take stock of my inner life as a pastor. I have also learned much from him about what it means to cultivate a culture of gratitude within the church.

### **How have your peers in ministry been helpful to you?**

I get together regularly with three other Mennonite pastors. We started out with an agenda for our meetings—a short meditation on scripture, an item to discuss, a time of prayer followed by lunch. More recently, we seldom have agendas. Instead we share stories from our ministry. We discuss and listen, challenge and affirm each other. I have learned much from their practical knowledge, their wisdom. They know me, my weaknesses and gifts. They put up with me when I spout off about things I don't know much about. It is a wonderful gift for us to be ministers together, to be in

noncompetitive solidarity.

### **Where do you go for inspiration and renewal?**

I usually work in the garden. There's always so much to do—pulling weeds, digging holes, rethinking where I planted the butterfly bush last year, transplanting. It feels good to work in the soil and to see growth happen before my eyes. I've probably preached too much about what I've seen in my yard. I once did a sermon series on bluebirds.

I have such a hard time discerning what my church work actually accomplishes. How am I supposed to judge the results of my preaching, other than by the growing file of manuscripts? Gardening makes me slow down and pay attention to earth's silent mysteries: the seasons of growth and death, the abundance of seeds scattered generously and indiscriminately.

I was asked recently in a preaching class if I had anything to pass along to soon-to-be pastors. I told them about my spiritual practice of gardening and suggested it as a way to sustain themselves as ministers. I guess it didn't make much sense because one student came up to me afterward and said, "Are you kidding me? You want me to garden? That's all you got?"

I need to get better at describing mysteries, like what happens to me when I dig around in the ground and plant stuff.

### **What's your sermon preparation process?**

I've heard people talk about the preaching process as a kind of pregnancy and birth: the word gestates within us, sucking the life out of us, but we soon give birth to a sermon, which can leave us in a state of postpartum depression on Monday. If that metaphor works, my problem is that I usually have a tough time figuring out when I got pregnant.

I print out the lectionary texts and carry them around in my pocket, so I can read them wherever I go and scribble notes. I meditate on them, pray through them and include them in my everyday life. But often my sermon seems to come from elsewhere: from a song or commercial on the radio, a book or a conversation—or a bluebird that watches me in the garden. Preaching, it seems, involves a spirituality of life, a way of being present to the God of life.

Sometimes a sermon comes to me quietly, without drawing any attention to itself; it just happens, as if it were the most natural process in the world. Sometimes a sermon comes after a struggle: the process exhausts me, and I'm worn out before I step behind the pulpit. And occasionally a sermon grabs hold of my life and overwhelms me. Preaching becomes an act of submission: here I am, a servant of the Lord.

### **What would you change about your seminary curriculum?**

My professors invited me into theological and biblical vistas I hadn't noticed before. We discussed voices from the church throughout the ages, and we paid attention to how these theologies have shaped us and our world, for good or for ill. I think Willie Jennings has best captured my seminary experience with his jazz metaphor: the task was to learn how to play some of the basic theological melodies of the church and to let those melodies invite me into creative arrangements that display the gospel here and now. I can't say that I know how to play the melodies of theology very well, but at least my professors played them for me and told me to go and do likewise.

I do worry about the way my classmates and I were taught to think about church tradition. It's a vision of church doctrine as an ideal spirit of truth, which has marched through history unaffected by political and economic forces—though empowered to defeat all the heretics along the way--so that the deposit of faith could be handed to us, pure and spotless. But as Mennonites we think of politics, economics and theology together. Some of our Anabaptist ancestors were persecuted for the way they held property in common, which was a vision for society that flowed from their convictions about God's work in the world.

As a member of a wing of the church that was deemed heretical some centuries ago, I worry about the place of the losers in church history. There's a shadow side to orthodoxy, one that probably bothers members of peace churches more than most people at a mainline seminary. We can't help paying attention to the history of violence that taints the legacy of church "capital-T" tradition.

### **What does your denominational affiliation mean to your parishioners?**

It means a lot. Many of us have joined the Mennonite Church because we wanted to be part of a community of faith that rejects violence outright, a congregation that supports us as we try to disentangle our lives from the powers and principles of the war machine. To be part of a historic peace church has renewed—even saved—the faith of many of the people who have joined our church. Becoming Mennonite has

been a way for many of us to continue to be Christians in the context of U.S. world power.

### **Are there not many "cradle" Mennonites in the congregation?**

I'd guess that only about a third of our congregation grew up in Mennonite families. But I'd add that those of us who *are* cradle or ethnic Mennonites are also "convinced" Mennonites, as the Quakers would put it. Our denominational identity as a peace church is just as important to the ethnic Mennonites among us as it is to others in the congregation.

### **What does being a leader mean to you?**

An anticlerical stream runs through the center of the Anabaptist tradition. Pastors aren't singled out as default leaders. Leadership roles for us are always temporary and specific, depending on whom the congregation appoints for a particular task. These kinds of decisions are made by consensus within our congregational life meetings, which occur every other month.

This leadership model has its frustrations. We have lots of meetings and lots of committee work. I find myself picking up the phone often to confer with different committee chairs or having to wait for the next congregational life meeting before I can get involved in some important matter.

My role as pastor means that I am a servant, doing the work that the congregation outlines for me. Power is always flowing through the gathered people, always being given and received. Perhaps this is an important reason why our church meetings are so well attended; even visitors at our worship services often stick around for congregational life meetings.

I also like to think of myself as a sort of grassroots organizer: our little church assembles as a polis, and I work behind the scenes to make sure everything is ready for the meeting. Each Sunday different people plan and lead the service, preach and provide child care. I spend a lot of time assembling these rotations of people and facilitating their leadership. I also show up early and transform our rented space into our sanctuary; I rearrange the pews, pull crates of hymnals from a storage closet and move the pulpit into position.

The organizing doesn't end with Sunday worship. This week, our congregation is in charge of the meal for Open Table Ministries, a coalition of churches that sets up tables and chairs alongside the highway so we can eat lunch with people who live in

the woods behind Wal-Mart and elsewhere. For me, pastoral ministry means getting enough people from church together to make sloppy joes and casseroles for the dozens of people who are hungry for food and fellowship.

Ministry is organizing space for people to enjoy communion with God and one another. So I rearrange pews, and I find people to help me make sloppy joes.

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

The sanctuary is dark, and the pews are empty. Katie and I get to work preparing our worship space. She sets out the hymnals; I position the pulpit up front and set up a folding table with a white tablecloth. I put the cup and the plate on the table.

Tom arrives with a jug and fills the cup. A few people trickle through the sanctuary doors and find a pew. Dirk enters, walks to the table, unwraps his freshly baked loaf of bread and places it on the plate.

The worship service begins. I offer an opening prayer. Kendra leads our singing, and Ryan preaches. Laura and Matt get up from their pews and walk to the table. Matt reads the words of institution from 1 Corinthians; Laura takes the loaf and breaks it in half. Matt invites the congregation to come forward, and I take my place in the circle.

"Brother," Matt says to me, "receive the body of Christ, broken for you." The bread is still warm from Dirk's oven. Laura says, "the blood of Christ, shed for you." I dip the bread in the cup and eat.