

Why I worry about the pastors of politically divided churches

In our current political climate, the preacher struggles to say something both unifying and prophetic.

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue



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It's been a rough couple of months for many pastors as they've led their congregations through post-election anxieties. Those who endorsed the president-elect have to face the anxiety that comes from getting what you want. Many called

their churches to support him because of his stand on a particular issue such as abortion. Now they're destined to four years of advocating for a president whose life and public policies reject most of the morality they preach from their pulpits. I'm not too worried about these pastors because they seem to have the capacity to stay on top of the political sentiments of their congregations.

By contrast, those pastors who publicly denounced Donald Trump have spent the last two months binding up the wounds of their congregation and assuring them all is not lost. There have been special worship services, listening sessions, and newly formed community alliances focused on demonstrating a commitment to Muslim-Americans, harassed women, LGBTQ people, or undocumented workers. These pastors have redeclared their churches to be sanctuaries for all of God's children. I worry about the stamina of these pastors, but not their vision. They're tired but have healthy souls.

The pastors I fret over the most are those whose congregations are divided in their political allegiances. These churches pride themselves on being a place where all types of diversity are held together by a common center in Christ. "The center will always hold," pastors have said for years. "We don't have to worry about what divides us." But this last election revealed that we have never been a centered country; congregations had better be worried about what divides them.

Now any veneer of unity or rhetoric about "Stronger Together" has been torn away. This is also true in congregations that are dealing with the reality that they are very much divided by conflicting visions of our life together as a nation. If a politically diverse congregation is paying attention, it realizes that the inauguration of our new president tears at its understanding of the church's mission. Some members will continue to advocate for the church to care for the poor, the marginalized, and the uninsured and will provide hospitality to the stranger in its midst. Others will say the time has come for the church to do its part in making America great again, whatever that means.

In this stark conflict the pastor stands in the pulpit struggling to say something that's both unifying and prophetic. It's easy to gloss over the divisive issues of a congregation with a declaration about spiritual unity, and it's easy to make a congregation afraid of the "them" who are to blame for our problems. But it's very difficult to preach to a divided "us."

This goes to the heart of the pastor's calling. We are not cheerleaders who lead the congregation in fight songs for our side of a political game. Nor do we wander around asking, "Can't we all just get along?" Our calling has always been to proclaim the gospel for our life together. So what does it mean to be the pastor-preacher who has taken a vow to love everyone in the congregation in such a divisive time?

What does it mean for a pastor to have convictions that conflict with those in the pews who are listening to a sermon?

My seminarians tell me that the pastor should simply preach the truth and let the chips fall where they may. But our seminary's alums address the question with a more nuanced response that places their commitment to love all of the congregation in tension with the freedom to proclaim the truth as they see it. "The truth," they say, "is that I have a holy commitment to those who I think made a grave mistake when they went into the voting booth. I have to be their pastor as well."

I spent ten years as the pastor of a large congregation in Washington, D.C., and learned how to speak on issues that divide the nation. "The goal," I now tell my students at the seminary, "is to preach into the cultural divisions in a way that transcends the competing political platforms." I still believe that.

How does one be a pastor-preacher in a time of cultural division?

But there are times when a preacher has to echo Luther in saying, "Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me." This is one of those times. No pastor should remain silent at the election of a president who has deceived the working class with empty promises, and who is clearly misogynist, Islamophobic, an advocate of racist stop-and-frisk policing. He wants to build walls around the country rather than offer hospitality to the stranger. All of that is anathema to the gospel of Jesus Christ's love for a world he was literally dying to love.

So I stay awake at night praying for the pastor who has to figure out how to say this to a congregation that believes Jesus is the lord of life, but that says, please, don't talk about politics.

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