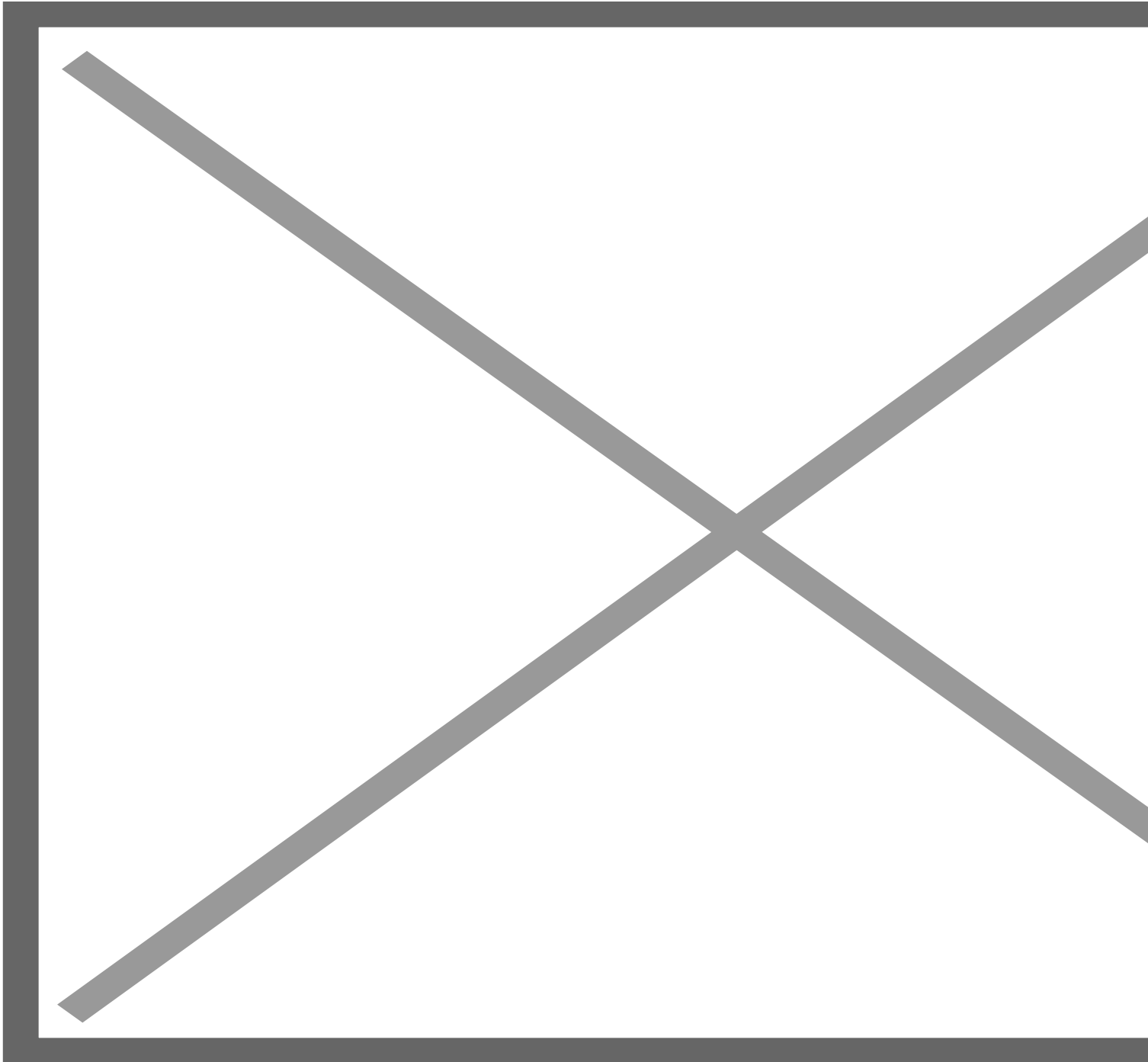


Pastoring in a city under siege

As a Black man from the South Side of Chicago, I am used to showing up during a crisis.

by [Julian DeShazier](#) in the [March 2026](#) issue

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Century illustration (Source image: Getty)

I really hadn't thought about it until she asked me. She's a close friend and the sort of person who is both repulsed by cable news and can't look away, the type this 24-hour cycle was created for. I was surprised to see her name pop up on my screen, but Chicago had been in the news a lot since the immigration agents came to town, so she was checking in. After the perfunctory and increasingly useless pleasantries were exchanged, she relayed the real reason for her call: "I'm curious: What's it like pastoring in a city under siege?"

Now there's a question with teeth. I sat back, giving her query the silence it deserved, inviting her to sit in it with me while I found some words.

I thought about earlier that day, and a story about a family we're helping that, well, isn't really a story because I'm not sure if I can tell it. I'm never quite sure what I can say, because it isn't my experience to share and they aren't ready to share it, so I say nothing.

I thought about answering the phone at all hours of the night, not because I want to leap to action but for a far more human reason: I'm worried that the people I hope to protect will now be in detention, which means I will have failed them—or God. But they are almost always calling with a far different concern. Not about anything in particular, just an increasing dullness to their life that feels noticeable enough to share, a thing we might eventually name "depression" but perhaps don't want to go there yet. A thing with which I am quite familiar: trying to move through the pacing of life as if the routine will save us, as if the cadence is not totally different now. As if "normal" were ever a thing.

It is driving through parts of the city that used to be filled with people to the point where driving felt more dangerous than it ought to be—children everywhere, pig ears on carts, music loud enough to be a welcome party—and seeing those streets mostly empty. The smells are gone, the tastes still delicious but sadder, as I imagine a Palestinian hummus or a Haitian griot.

It is not altogether quiet, however. In front of the Broadview Processing Center each day you will see at least 20 faithful, raising the clarion sound of contention. Every Friday another group arrives, hundreds deep, because it is their turn to be there and this is all faithful witness. Sometimes at Broadview, sometimes downtown.

This is all proof that the church is still "the church," that people still matter, and—as an intern recently reminded me—that peacemaking requires sacrifice. Those sounds are loud but far too faint for most of the city's residents, like a distant thunder. For most of us, siege is silent. It is surviving as the world gets heavier and we decide that all we have time for today is survival. It is not quiet reservation; it is conservation. It is not walking around feeling constantly affirmed—as you imagine an Óscar Romero or Frederick Douglass to be and then will the same for yourself—but exhausted, just like the good bishop and the abolitionist, as any critical eye can spot between the lines.

As a pastor, it is going alongside those for whom life feels too heavy, for whom any action feels immediate and urgent and often more about themselves than the thing they hope to change; it is going alongside people who are hoping to save others, yes, but really hoping to save themselves; it is accompanying people who are hoping to survive these times while also trying to survive them yourself. It is taking a break, and sometimes not answering the phone, when the break feels indulgent and the phone feels like a portal. It is to betray one's sense of purpose with rest. Even typing the sentence feels disgusting, but pastoring is a series of betrayals—to self, family, virtues—that the aged pastor learns to stomach but the wise pastor learns to abolish. It is to find joy, yes, in a crumbling world, and to claim it for oneself and pass this to others. Or if not joy then peace or hope or

love—whatever the people may need—and to name these predilections as the stuff of God, stuff worth focusing on, not as numbing medication, as Marx would have it, but as commitments that empower us to endure and eventually end the siege, with our hearts intact. It is to say “Love your enemy” without irony and to watch how that phrase moves throughout the room, to see how cute you’ve become to them as you ask them to do the impossible.

At this point my friend had been waiting on the phone for about as long as it took you to read this far. I decided to break our long silence and answer her genuine question with a genuine response: “You know, actually, it doesn’t feel different from any other day.” She immediately accused me of nonchalance, which I’m capable of, but this time I was being honest. I’m a Black man from the South Side of Chicago; I have lived every day of my life under siege. And as a pastor, I had to quickly learn that there are no such things as small crises. Everyone’s hurt hurts. When we feel stuck in time, our neighbors can be experiencing it too, or we alone can be feeling the life leaving our body. Either way we need a pastor, and it’s my job—and my honor, yes, but also my job—to show up for whoever in whatever city at whatever time. And to try to take care of myself too, whatever that means.

Because there’s never been a time when I offered care for someone who wasn’t under siege. “If it feels different today,” I said to my friend on the phone, “then what was I doing yesterday?”