

Entrepreneurial idealism: Ministry in the 21st century

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Illustration by Timothy Cook. Below: photo of Carol Howard Merritt.

*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 fourth in [a series](#). **Carol Howard Merritt**, a graduate of Austin Theological Seminary, serves as associate pastor at Western Presbyterian Church in downtown Washington, D.C. The author of *Tribal Church* and *Reframing Hope*, Merritt cohosts [God Complex Radio](#) and moderates a national PCUSA committee on the nature of the church in the 21st century. She blogs at [Tribal Church](#), which is hosted by the Century.*

What's been the most surprising thing about being in ministry?

The whole art of preaching still surprises me. It amazes me that people sit and listen to what I have to say on a regular and persistent basis. I do a lot of public speaking, and I'm never nervous about it. But when I preach in my own congregation, I still feel a bit tense—even after 13 years of delivering sermons. I'm aware of the weight of preaching, of proclamation.

I have so many hopes for those moments. I long for beauty and artistry in my writing. I want the words to be meaningful, inspiring and relevant. And more than anything else, I long for that palpable sense of God's presence. I expected that the gravitas of preaching would have worn off by now, but it hasn't.

Do you find that listeners receive you differently as a preacher than in your other speaking engagements? Or is the difference in your own sense of the context?

Both. And the difference isn't that there is more reverence or respect in a preaching context; it's that I have a deeper relationship with the listeners. When I speak about church growth or ministering with a new generation, the response is about what sort of work people are doing. When I preach, it evokes stories about people's lives. I hear about the pain, heartache, struggles and elation through which they are preaching, whether or not you're wrapped



What reading has shaped your

understanding of ministry?

I read Serene Jones's *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* a while back, and it has stayed with me. It's haunting me; it's like a puzzle that I can't quite figure out. How can religion be such a source of both pain and healing? I try to keep up with public conversations about this—I often hear pain in the voices of the New Atheist movement. And in my office I frequently meet with people who have been wounded by religion. I'm fascinated by the question—it's the focus of my third book.

How have pastors and others with more experience been helpful? Or unhelpful?

A number of pastors have taken me under their wing and given me advice. They have dropped everything so that they could stop and grab a cup of coffee with me and help me sort through the difficult dynamics that come with leading a

congregation.

I grieve over the fact that none of those pastors have been women. I don't know why it is, but the women I respect always seem too busy to engage in mentoring. Perhaps it is because most women stay in entry-level positions, and so few of them make it to the next step on a career trajectory. On numerous occasions I have intentionally reached out to women in the hope that they would mentor me, and I could not get them to respond. It's not that they were rude; they were just too busy.

I worry that women have not viewed networking and helping each other out as a priority in our professional lives. Now that I have some years under my belt, I'm finding that women are less likely than men to reach out to me to be mentored as well. Learning how to ask for, offer and receive help is a vital skill that we will need to nurture in order for women to flourish in this profession. In my experience, women establish wonderful networks to be friendly together, but we are not as good at teaching each other how to excel.

Are there other reasons for this that you've identified besides the fact that more women stay in entry-level positions?

When I first started in ministry, I read a business book called *Hardball for Women*, by Pat Heim. Heim contends that at least until Title IX took effect, girls were socialized to play games as equals, not competitors. We played house or dolls; boys played baseball and soccer. As a result, women feel most comfortable as equals, while men like to play hardball.

There's lots to critique in Heim's argument, but it is a helpful way of understanding certain dynamics among women. It answers many of the questions that puzzle women ministers: Why was the only person who voted against hiring me a woman? Why is a woman fighting my pay raise? Why is there such a robust "old boy" network, while women have a difficult time mentoring, being mentored and promoting one another? Women like to see themselves as equals, and this helps us in many ways—but sometimes it means that when a woman begins to rise in her career, we like to take her down a notch.

It also could be that women don't know how to network or ask for help; we have not been taught those particular skills. I am learning a great deal from the men I work with, and I often wonder, "Why didn't I do that?" Often I don't ask for help because I'm afraid of rejection. I'm worried that someone will laugh at me for even thinking

that I could be on a certain career path—not only because of low self-esteem on my part, but because people have actually responded this way. After receiving this reaction a few times, I learned to do things quietly and not ask for help too much.

What does being a leader mean? Has your understanding evolved?

I grew up as a conservative Southern Baptist who was taught that women should not speak in church. So my personal understanding of leadership has evolved rapidly and greatly.

Has your understanding changed in other ways along with the question of who gets to be a leader?

I used to respond a great deal to my congregation, readers, supporters and critics. But I did so in an unhealthy way. I needed the praise too much; I would let complaints paralyze me. I would shy away from a topic if anyone disagreed with me about it. Or I would allow the one blaring voice of protest to drown out the 99 nods of agreement.

Now I realize that my job as a leader is not to make everyone happy, and I should not be relying on my job to garner love. I have become more attuned to listening to God, listening to the body, realizing my own vision and moving forward. Of course, when someone has a complaint or fights movement in church, I spend time with them and hear them out. But negative reactions play a much healthier role in my work than they used to.

What does your denominational affiliation mean to you and your parishioners?

Presbyterianism is where I understood grace for the first time. My denomination has formed me, educated me and encouraged me. I owe everything to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Still, I am happy that denominational affiliation is not as important in our society as it once was. It was difficult for me to leave my conservative Southern Baptist roots, but the fact that our society supports religious fluidity made it slightly easier.

At a recent new member class, around the table were people from a variety of backgrounds—Presbyterian, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Shinto, agnostic or metaphysical. Most of Western's parishioners did not come to the church because it is Presbyterian. They came for the sermons, the social justice work or the music. To them, being Presbyterian is not as important as the local church.

What would you be if you weren't a minister?

I would be an artist, a writer and an entrepreneur. But I like to think that I have incorporated those interests into my ministry.

Where do you go for collegiality, inspiration and renewal?

I have particular spiritual practices for renewal, especially walking meditation. Most of my inspiration and collegiality come from online sources. I'm inspired by reading. I look through magazines and journals online; I download books from the Internet, often on the basis of recommendations from blogs and Twitter. I study articles when other people tweet about them. Even when I do subscribe to the print edition of a magazine, I find that I want to peruse it on the bus, at the coffeehouse or at home—and when I reach for the magazine, I realize that I left it at the office. So I tend to scan through magazines on my computer or iPad. I listen to podcasts. I find that they make housework a lot more interesting.

Say more about what you find appealing about Twitter.

I use Twitter in a couple of ways. It's a news stream for me. Lately I've been intrigued by Andy Carvin's Twitter feed (@acarvin). He's an analyst at NPR, and he seems to be shaping journalism in a new way. He has carefully streamed the voices of people in the Arab world to give an on-the-ground account of the recent uprisings. He is a sort of filter, using Twitter to report and verify, and it's fascinating to watch the stories emerge instantly. I grew up with Andy, so I suppose that makes what he's doing even more interesting, but it reminds me how this medium that so many people mock ("Why do I care what you had for breakfast? What can you say in 140 characters?") is making a great impact on how we understand the world.

As a pastor, I use Twitter to resource my ministry. Blogs and Twitter are the main ways that I learn about new curriculum, religious news, new research and a variety of publications. When I have a question, I ask people on Twitter—and I get immediate responses from highly regarded sources. It has become invaluable.

I also go online for collegiality. I began to understand the power of community that forms on Twitter when my father was facing a life-threatening surgery. I tweeted about it and received a flood of messages from people all over the world, saying they were praying for me and my dad. I can't quite communicate how comforting that was.

This can be a very lonely profession. We might move every two to three years. We can often feel separate from the social groups that surround us. So it's nice to have a community that is not bound by location. It's not all positive, of course. People pick fights, overshare and become petty. But for the most part, I'm thankful for a medium that has deepened my face-to-face interactions and allowed me to stay in contact with people on a daily basis.

On the basis of your ministry experience so far, how would you want to change—or what would you want to add to—your seminary curriculum?

Not enough seminary professors have ever been pastors, so a lot of what they tell their students they ought to be doing in the parish is completely unrealistic. I don't know one pastor who in sermon preparation translates the biblical passage from the original language and goes through all the steps of the hermeneutical process. We'd love to, but our congregations would be frustrated if we spent that much of our workweek studying. Any preacher who has spent more than a year in a parish knows that there just aren't enough hours in the day to do this, but somehow our seminaries haven't figured it out.

I wish I had had an evangelism course that taught us how to access and read demographic data and imagine ministries that could reach out to our surrounding areas. I wish someone would have taught us what should be on a good church website, the basics of design, how to use social media and how to post our sermons as podcasts. I should have learned the basics of branding. (I know that sounds crass, but it would have been extremely helpful.)

I never learned how to ask for money. Many seminaries are very good at building up a donor base, but they never teach their students how to do it. I have learned a ton from my friends who work in nonprofit management. They were taught how to fund-raise. Why weren't we? Do seminaries not realize that it's a huge part of our job? I know that we are supposed to build a sense of stewardship into our preaching and teaching. I realize that we understand good stewardship as a natural fruit that grows up from the Christian life. But sometimes the boiler busts, and we need to make the ask. Fast. How do we do it?

In the years to come, church planting is likely be the most important subject that seminaries could teach. Much of my education was geared toward how to keep the 70-year-olds in the pews happy. And I have cherished ministering in that context. But the church is changing rapidly, and our education will need to change as well.

Why do you think church planting will be the most important subject?

More than 70 percent of PCUSA congregations have fewer than 100 members, and the average age of the members is over 60. These churches can keep going for a long time, but most of them will not be able to afford a full-time pastor. They are sharing pastors, hiring lay preachers or going with pulpit supply. And because of the age of the congregants, this probably will not continue to be a sustainable model.

I don't see this state of affairs as the death of the mainline. Far from it: I am thrilled about the possibilities that this presents. Of course, for a church to come to the end of its life cycle is painful, and I don't want to downplay the difficulty of closing a church. But congregations often leave a legacy: property or money that can be used for planting new churches.

A person preparing for the ministry today is likely walking into a denomination in which most ministers will be creating their own jobs. It's an extremely exciting time. When I encourage people to enter seminary, I point out that whatever church they will be serving may well be one that they will also be planting.

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

I'm fascinated by cultural and generational shifts. I love the idealism and prophetic focus that baby boomers bring to ministry. I get excited when I think about how our churches and denominations could take that boomer idealism, let go of a bit of power and begin to support Generation X. What would happen if we coupled that idealism with the pragmatism and entrepreneurial spirit of my generation? What if the church unleashed us to plant churches and to use our technological savvy to reach out?

Along with being very large, the millennial generation is generally community-minded and social-justice-oriented. Many millennials are not interested in church, but we could focus on reaching out and working with them. We could embrace their passion for justice and learn from them how to build networks of community.

All of this excites me as I think of the larger church and as I work with these shifts on a local level.