

Where issues have faces

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [June 24, 2015](#) issue



A ministry to homeless people in Puyallup, Washington, serves a meal at a church.

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It was the kind of conversation that makes pastors enjoy professional conferences—the kind that has nothing to do with the conference. We were drinking coffee at a table in the hotel lobby. I was amazed at how quickly the conversation became a common lament.

“I want to get back to being a pastor,” said the man across the table. “I’m so tired of trying to navigate our church through the debates about divestment and gay marriage. These issues are sucking up all the air in the congregation.”

Another pastor said, “We have gays in our congregation. We know them, love them, and have worked beside them on mission trips, committees, and Sunday school. If two of them wanted to get married, the congregation wouldn’t blink an eye. But if the elders are forced to vote on a policy about gay marriage, it will tear the church in half.”

“For us the problem is the divestment issue,” said another pastor. “We’ve worked hard to develop a good relationship with the synagogue down the street from us. When they heard that our denomination voted to divest its stocks in companies doing business with Israel, they went berserk. I’ve done weddings with the local rabbi, and a joint Thanksgiving Day service. But now I’m spending my time trying to explain that our denomination is not anti-Semitic.”

None of these pastors would say that issues such as justice for LGBT people or Palestinians are unimportant. They feel called to speak about these issues as much as they do about racial justice, the environment, or economic concerns. The problem is that the pastors cannot engage the conversation on the congregation's own terms. Their denominations have determined the nature of the debates that take up an extraordinary amount of their energy.

For a very long time mainline Protestantism has congratulated itself on being prophetic because it is so good at voting for progressive agendas. But what our society really needs from the church are agents of change. And that has never come from a denominational vote. Change comes from congregations that decide to live by the ethics of Jesus Christ.

I trust local pastors. They are the ones who receive the phone calls in the middle of the night. They sit through boring committee meetings, butterfly around the fellowship hall after worship, knock themselves out to write another "profound" sermon, and wade daily into the messiness of human lives. They are the ones with the most authority to speak to the congregation about the call to social justice.

No one in the pews is holding their breath to read the next position paper from the denomination. But if their pastor climbs into the pulpit, wearing a gown tattered by the nibbling of sheep, and says, "Hear the word of the Lord," they will follow that shepherd anywhere.

So it's time for the denominations to get off the backs of their own pastors. It is so easy for them to send their delegates to some distant city and delude themselves into thinking that voting, voting, voting, without congregational accountability, will bring about the kingdom of God. It doesn't.

The kingdom comes as local communities of faith engage in prayer, worship, mission, and conversations about sex, Palestinians, or whatever else Jesus Christ puts on their plates along with issues that denominations don't seem too concerned about—families, widows, teenagers, crime, health insurance, who will be the church treasurer after old Mr. Smith dies, and how they are going to fix the leaky roof.

I know the leaders of my denomination. They are good and caring people who work very hard with an ever-shrinking budget. They are not the problem.

The problem is the inability of a modernist superstructure like a denomination to handle postmodern affections. In the 1950s the church could speak with one voice because people trusted big institutions. Then it made sense to speak about the Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, or Methodist position on the issues. Now we have to humbly remind ourselves that there is a myriad of positions on every issue within the church.

If people trust any religious body these days, it's the local congregation. They prefer their issues to have names, faces, and stories. They handle nuance well and don't worry so much about logical contradictions. So they're happy to have the gay couple they know get married by the pastor but would rather not have to vote on a policy that would permit it. They care about the plight of Palestinians but don't want to upset their Jewish daughter-in-law. It is important to them to be a part of a historic tradition, but they hate being told what to believe.

Somehow, contemporary pastors have figured out how to navigate this changing spiritual landscape while remaining absolutely committed to the gospel and its prophetic proclamations. And they took a vow to love their congregations. They refuse to be dead right on the issues at the cost of tearing up their churches. That's why I trust them.