

A liberal congregation burns hot under Trump

We were already active in our community. Now we're on overdrive.

by [Kyle Childress](#) in the [June 21, 2017](#) issue



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John Updike penned one of the most famous lines in baseball when he said that Ted Williams “radiated, from afar, the hard blue glow of high purpose.” I like that line and I love baseball, but I have my doubts about the “hard blue glow of high purpose” when it comes to being a pastor and caring for a congregation. It seems to me that it usually ends in burnout. Nevertheless, since Trump was elected I feel as if I’ve been burning with a butane-like intensity alongside a congregation full of high purpose.

Fewer than 100 people show up on an average Sunday morning in our church, but they are smart activists who drive Priuses, ride bicycles, run, recycle, repurpose, organize, serve on committees, write articles, teach, run for office or help others run, show up at city council, school board, and zoning commission meetings, and

volunteer with the food pantry, the Humane Society, after-school programs, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, the NAACP, and farmers' markets. They go on mission trips, build houses for Habitat, lead marches, and deliver meals. In short, if there is good going on in our town, it's likely that someone from our congregation is involved.

Since the election and inauguration of Donald Trump, it's as if we switched the old record player from 33 to 45 rpm. Our sense of high purpose has intensified. Genuine concern and compassion are mixed with fear and anger. Immigration issues and ministry have moved front and center. We're in high gear.

Our associate pastor and her husband are in the foster-to-adopt system. They already had a three-year-old foster child when they received a panicky phone call from Child Protective Service. The parents of two little girls had been deported that morning and a four-year-old and a still-nursing ten-month-old needed a Spanish-speaking home. Within two hours the two little sisters were delivered to our pastor and her husband. The congregation has rallied around the family, but every day we receive news of someone else being deported. Some church members are scrambling, meeting with friends and their immigration attorneys, drafting power of attorney and parental guardianship papers so if the friends are deported, their children will be protected.

Our context in religion and politics here in Nacogdoches, Texas, is ultra-right wing. At a local Support the Police rally last year, 300 mostly white people listened to a succession of white preachers tell them that "there's no such thing as racism; only a lack of respect for authority." One of the preachers showed his true-blue commitment by wearing his "properly authorized" handgun on his belt while he preached. I'm a fifth-generation citizen of a state known for exaggeration and hyperbole, but this was over-the-top even by our standards. Yet the crowd thought it was all patriotic and Christian. A young African-American mom whispered to me, "This scares me."

My response, like the congregation's, has been to bear down and work harder.

After the election we experienced a temporary bump in attendance, with new people showing up because of their distress over the racism, xenophobia, and meanness expressed in the campaign and election. But we also noticed that our financial giving was decreasing. Some of it had to do with the old truth—people who are afraid give less. Many people give more to other needy causes. Our in-boxes are inundated with

pleas from MoveOn, Planned Parenthood, Meals on Wheels, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, all with their own heightened concerns, and some church members respond with increased financial support for these organizations and decreased giving to the church.

We are a smaller, leaner church, focused on action and resistance.

One thing I did not anticipate was the loss of some church members who said, “I can’t do this God thing anymore. I can’t stomach a church that supports Trump and the God that that church worships. Though I know that Austin Heights is not like that, I just can’t do it anymore.”

I can understand that their faith was thin and their membership marginal, but their financial support was significant. They not only quit attending church but also quit giving. As a result, for the first time in my 27 years here, we’ve had to cut the church budget at midyear and may have to cut it again before the year ends. Six years ago we seriously considered building a new building—I’m glad that we didn’t, since we couldn’t afford the payments now. These days I’m trying to figure out how to teach financial stewardship and speak the gospel to people who are burned-out from the God talk that’s thrown at them by racist, gun-toting preachers.

I remember theologian Robert McAfee Brown talking about the church facing a “shake-down for action.” That was in the Reagan era, but these days fit his thinking just as well. We are a smaller, leaner church focused on action, service, ministry, and resistance—a hard blue glow of high purpose.

How do we keep that hard blue glow? Will Willimon tells about some students who sang for hours in a small, hot church while they waited for the signal to head out to the streets to demonstrate for civil rights. They were eager to march and mount the barricades, and one of them complained to an older pastor about having to sing all day long. The pastor responded, “Son, we’ve been at this a long time. When you get out there, you better have more to back you up than good intentions. Keep singing.”

Whether we have good intentions or high purpose or both, we need more than a hard blue glow. A blue glow tends to produce heat, but when I’m surrounded by darkness, I crave the more gentle light of hope, guidance, and reassurance—the soft yellow light of a candle in worship or perhaps a lamp unto my feet.

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