

James P. Wind's formative moments

by [James P. Wind](#)

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One Sunday morning in the late 1950s, as I inched along in the line waiting to shake hands with my pastor after worship, I was singled out. The Rev. Dr. George W. Wittmer asked me, a ten-year-old, to meet him at the door to the sacristy after he had greeted everyone. Tall and gray-haired, Pastor Wittmer was easily the most important person our family knew. He wore impressive vestments, gave polished sermons, had more books in his study than I had ever seen in one place and had an office bigger than our family's living room. A vice president of our denomination, he presided over Messiah Lutheran Church at the corner of Grand Avenue and Pestalozzi Street in South St. Louis with refined authority.

Messiah Church was a thriving tall-steeple church in those religious boom years, and its pastor was a leader in a denomination that placed clergy on a pedestal. When I met him at the sacristy door, he invited me in to a place I had never been before. As Pastor Wittmer put away his vestments, he told me that the congregation was going to introduce the use of individual cups into its communion practice.

Like many Protestant congregations, Messiah Church was a very prim and proper place in the days before liturgical reform and social upheaval swept across much of American Christianity. Holy Communion, as it was called then, was celebrated on a monthly rhythm, and children my age were not permitted to partake.

Pastor Wittmer invited me to become the first acolyte chosen to follow him as he distributed the private cups filled with wine to the well-dressed adults kneeling at the communion rail. My job would be to collect the used

glass cups on a silver tray.

Although always taking me to the brink of disaster (a dropped tray or cup), the job had perks: a special robe and the privilege of sitting with Pastor Wittmer in the sacristy during the service. In those days our congregation's clergy sat privately in the sacristy and appeared in the sanctuary only when they had something to say or do. I could assist him by timing his sermon (the goal was finishing within a rarely reached 23 minutes), lighting the candles and filling his water glass.

What I did not know then was that I had crossed a threshold. I had been invited inside the working world of the pastor. As I timed the sermons, collected the lipstick-smearred communion cups, arranged books, lit candles and watched my pastor do his job, I began to try on the role of pastor. A decade later Pastor Wittmer and I began to disagree about the course of Messiah Church and our denomination. But that day—with the full collusion of my parents and a large congregation of people who thought it would be great if I would be a pastor someday—he gave me the chance to try on pastoring. More than that, he led my family and congregation in creating a plausibility structure (something that is much harder to construct in our more complex times) in which I could begin to see myself as a minister.

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