A foundation for relationships: Ministry in the 21st century

Feature in the June 27, 2012 issue

Illustration by Timothy Cook. Below: photo of Joyce Shin courtesty of Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago.

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 seventh in a series. Joyce Shin attended the University of Chicago Divinity School. She is associate pastor for congregational life at Fourth Presbyterian Church, a large congregation in downtown Chicago. Along with promoting fellowship within the congregation, her duties include preaching, pastoral care, developing lay leadership and fostering interfaith understanding and relations.*

What excites you most about ministry these days?

The possibility that it can serve as a resource for the spiritual health of interfaith marriages and families. More than at any other time in history, people raised in different religious traditions are building intimate relationships with each other. The problem is that too often religion is thought of as an impediment to building these relationships. My hope is that churches, synagogues and mosques can be resources for people as they negotiate and integrate all their deepest commitments, including their most significant relationships.

These relationships require trust and loyalty. Religion has at its core a concern for trust and loyalty—a concern for faith. So rather than being an impediment to these new relationships, religion can, I think, offer the necessary resources for creating and sustaining them.

In your experience, what does supporting interfaith families look like in practice?

Over the past year, I've been collaborating with a rabbi from a neighboring congregation to host a series of monthly dialogues for interfaith families and couples. We discuss practical topics: talking to children about God, planning a wedding, circumcision and baptism. We have found that these dialogues attract interfaith couples who are about to be married, interfaith couples with young children, and grandparents whose grandchildren are being raised in interfaith homes.

The rabbi and I take different approaches to some of the issues, but we do not impose our own approaches on the participants. We try to set an example of respectful and appreciative dialogue, and we try to create a safe arena for honest inquiry and heartfelt exchange.

What has been the hardest part of parish ministry?

The same as perhaps it has always been: bringing good news, healing news, to those who are hurting—whether their pain is physical, psychological, spiritual, economic or social. This is the hardest part of our work, and yet it is what calls us each day to renew our efforts.

Why is this the hardest thing?

In any painful situation that's out of your control—physical pain, news of cancer, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job—a sense of helplessness exists. We cannot fix people's problems, and this is hard to accept. So the challenge is to accompany people with the care of listening, praying and modeling a confidence in God's love and presence in their lives. It can be emotionally exhausting. But it is through the depth of these experiences that we can begin to comprehend and be grateful for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Also, the experience of suffering always puts faith to the test. Can we speak, even preach, our convictions about God to someone who is suffering—without causing them more pain and suffering? It's only when we can do this that we can honestly say there is some good news in our theology.

What has been most surprising about ministry?

The energy with which laypeople offer their time, talent and treasure. Fourth Church's congregants are deeply engaged in the life of the city and beyond, and they bring so much to this church: their awareness of people's needs, their affiliations with other organizations, their ideas for new initiatives, lots of their time. This has been a daily source of inspiration to me, and it demands a great deal of responsiveness—and responsibility—from ministers.

That has been the most surprising and inspiring thing about parish ministry. None of my teachers in divinity school told me to expect it.

On the basis of your ministry experience so far, what would you want to change about your seminary education, or what would you want to add to it?

Once ministry begins, multitasking ramps up. That's when it becomes very clear what a privilege it was to study full-time. As a minister, one's routine opportunity to engage in study consists largely of the discipline of preparing a sermon.

My most common critique of the sermons I hear is that they don't deeply engage and grapple with the biblical text. I think ministry students need to be equipped with the knowledge of how to make the best use of scholarship for this task. So I think I would have benefited from taking more Bible courses as a student.

Would it have been possible for you to choose to do this, or would it have required a revision to the curriculum?

I could have taken more courses in biblical studies. But it's only in hindsight that I realize I should have done so.

What's your process of sermon preparation? What resources do you find helpful?

I read the lectionary texts and select one or more biblical passages to focus on. Then I read and take notes on what biblical commentaries teach me about the text—as many commentaries as I can get my hands on. After this, I ask myself what the meaning of the text is and how it sheds light on our life experiences and on current issues. These questions lead me to read other things—a variety of genres and historical, interdisciplinary, cultural and generational perspectives. The need to prepare a sermon gives me a great excuse to read widely.

What are your go-to commentaries?

I find myself turning to *Interpretation*, the New Testament Library, Hermeneia, Word Biblical Commentaries, Sacra Pagina and the *Anchor Bible*. I'm sure there are others that I would find helpful, too.

Who has shaped your understanding of ministry?

The theologian who has most shaped my approach is H. Richard Niebuhr. One of my responsibilities is to cultivate fellowship in the congregation. At a large church, this can be challenging. I take seriously Niebuhr's insight that faith is inherently social: it consists of our commitments of loyalty and trust. We often inherit our faith from the people we trust most in life, and our faith can be enlarged when we take on the causes to which our closest and most trusted friends are loyal.

Niebuhr's theory gets concrete quite easily. Whenever someone dear to me cares deeply about a cause, I open my mind and heart to it out of a sense of loyalty to that person. It is through interpersonal relationships that our imaginations and compassion expand.

My approach to ministry has also been shaped by the philosopher John Dewey, who underscores the necessity of engaging one's environment in order to have an experience that is truly transformative. Ministry can be transformative only if we are constantly engaging the world around us. In interfaith work, mission, evangelism—in every aspect of ministry—we will never lose our vitality and dynamism as long as we continue to engage, both locally and globally.

I think about Dewey's insights as I become more acquainted with Islamic and Jewish congregations in our neighborhood and continue to collaborate with them.

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

There are so many books written on leadership and the skills it requires. Certainly, being a leader entails having a big-picture vision for an institution, as well as the talent to articulate that vision and engage others in the work of living into it. Leadership also means knowing the details and dynamics at work in the life of the institution that one is leading.

Sometimes leadership is conceived of primarily as something that is goal-oriented and that requires execution of certain skills. Goals and skills are no doubt necessary.

But it seems to me that in ministry, leadership is at its heart profoundly relational. Being a leader is a relationship of receiving the trust of others and being responsible to them.

The trust that a congregation gives you when it calls you to be its pastor—even if you are straight out of seminary—feels weighty and is precious. Pastors bear a lot of responsibility, and this sense of responsibility is what I am most keenly aware of in my daily interactions with congregants, in my preparation of sermons, in my administration of programs, in my pastoral care calls.

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

Perhaps I would teach theological ethics at a college or religion at a private high school; I think it is important to keep religion and ethics active in the minds of young people. I might be an educator committed to citywide school reform. I might be an actress who steps deeply into diverse characters—I have always been fascinated by the power and art of empathy.

What does your denominational affiliation mean to you?

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is meaningful to me mostly for historical reasons. I am profoundly grateful for the rigorous theological and ethical writings of John Calvin and for the Reformed worldview that Presbyterians have inherited.

What does it mean to your parishioners?

Congregants in our church aren't necessarily knowledgeable about PCUSA polity or about current denominational dynamics and issues. But I do think many of them are in touch with the values of the Reformed tradition.

How have pastors and others with more experience been helpful to you?

I consider myself extremely fortunate to serve on a staff with a number of pastors, because I learn different things from each of them. From those who are more experienced in ministry, I have learned from observation as well as from their mentoring. By observing them I have learned when to speak and when not to speak and how to pace myself, as well as the value of taking the long view.

My more experienced colleagues have also provided me with good counsel when I have sought it. Fortunately, no one has offered unsolicited advice, which speaks to

their collegial spirit and their abiding trust that we all learn important things in time. While some people think that we learn by trial and error, I like to avoid as much error as possible by observing those whom I respect and asking them for counsel.

Have you also learned from mistakes you've made?

Oh yes. I have learned from opportunities missed, from speaking too soon, from speaking instead of listening, from speaking in one way instead of another way. One advantage of working with other pastors on staff is that we don't let each other make really grave mistakes. The mistakes we make usually have to do with the art of ministry. As in many of the arts, you become more skilled with practice and experience.

I also simply enjoy my colleagues' company. We laugh a lot when we are together.

Do you also maintain regular contact with people in solo pastorates?

I do. Their experience of ministry is quite different from mine. I have deep respect for them, especially for the sense of responsibility they carry. It's up to them to shepherd their congregations.

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

I would like to see the congregation I serve become increasingly multiracial. This is my dream for the wider church as well.

As for racial diversity in the wider church, are you thinking of individual congregations, the overall membership or both?

I am thinking about individual congregations; I am interested in the actual interactions between people of different races. The give and take, the humor, the variety of perspectives, the empathy—all of these experiences would enrich our communal life, and it would move us toward true integrity as the church. I think it would be pleasing to God.