

Training in Jesus' way: Ministry in the 21st century

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Illustration by Timothy Cook. Below: photo of Todd Friesen by Terry MacGregor.

*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 eighth in [a series](#). Todd Friesen graduated from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. He is lead pastor of Lombard Mennonite Church in west suburban Chicago.*

**What excites you most about ministry these days?**

Discipleship and spiritual formation. Jesus calls us to make disciples, not just converts. Discipleship means learning how to follow Jesus and obey his teachings, and Jesus taught us to do some really difficult things: forgive 77 times, feed the hungry, renounce violence, love our enemies, suffer for what is right. So we need regular and transforming experiences of God's grace.

I believe that discipleship begins in communal worship. That's where we encounter God and experience God's lavish grace, where we are empowered for faithful living. Our spiritual formation deepens as we connect with one another in loving fellowship and supportive relationships. Our lives are reoriented as we train in Jesus' ways, and we are then sent out to share the love of Christ.



**What's been the hardest part of**

### **parish ministry?**

There was a time when missing Sunday worship was not an option. Today, church has a lot of competition: ever-increasing work demands, out-of-town family events, athletics. Preaching, teaching and catechism become very challenging in this context. As a preacher, I may feel called by the Holy Spirit to preach a prophetic sermon but have to face the reality that a third of the congregation won't hear it. Or, in a preparation class for baptism, some may miss a crucial session because of a sports event.

Are preaching and teaching series that build momentum from Sunday to Sunday a thing of the past? I hope not. But increasingly, each Sunday needs to stand on its own—so that those who attend less regularly are not left behind.

### **So how do you square this with doing a preaching series?**

Last fall, my colleague and I preached a series on the Sermon on the Mount called "Experiments in Kingdom Living." Each Sunday, we built on what we had learned so far. But we also gave a recap for those who had missed earlier Sundays. This repetition actually ended up being beneficial for everyone.

### **What's your sermon preparation process?**

Ten days before Sunday, I read the biblical texts and send out a preview to our worship leader, song leader, children's storyteller and musicians. I spend the next three mornings prayerfully reading the texts and reflecting on how they speak to the

life of our community. I start writing my sermon on Tuesday; I try to write a page each day so that it is largely finished by Friday. At our Wednesday evening prayer service, the Sunday scriptures are read and participants share their impromptu reflections—which sometimes end up in my sermon four days later.

Our congregation has a very collaborative approach to preparing for a worship service. For the Sermon on the Mount series, an “ideas team” of six people created a weekly set of experiments for our congregation to live out. We rely on the Holy Spirit and collaborative planning to bring a seamless unity to the scriptures, sermon, music and prayers that are offered each Sunday.

### **What’s something important you’ve learned about ministry?**

Early in my ministry, I remember feeling close to despair as I encountered circumstances in people’s lives that were far beyond my power to heal, fix or change. But I gradually learned that I could lift these people to God each day—and that they found much comfort in the fact that I really was praying for them.

Since then, I have also begun to pray each week for the people listed in our church directory. By God’s grace, intercessory prayer has saved my ministry.

### **How?**

I have come to believe that one of my most crucial roles as a pastor is to devote myself to prayer, as the apostles do in Acts 6. Upon rising, I pray for those in our congregation who are in discernment, seeking reconciliation or yearning for healing. I cannot fix their lives, but I can lift their needs to God. Along the way, I have discovered how God often draws our hearts closer to those for whom we are praying. There is an intimacy in praying for others, particularly over an extended period of time.

More recently, I’ve also come to value a daily practice of contemplative prayer. For years, I had paid lip service to the importance of being still and silent before God. But I was never successful in doing so myself—my “monkey mind” would soon start swinging through the trees—so I would often just give up and return to praying out loud. But I grew increasingly weary of my jabbering, and I sensed that God felt the same way.

Then, four years ago, I experienced a breakthrough in my prayer life when my father-in-law taught me centering prayer. This simple method of silent prayer takes seriously Jesus’ instruction to enter our inner room, close the door and receive the

pure reward of God's presence. This method also teaches us how to gently release thoughts and distractions to God rather than trying to battle them ourselves.

Centering prayer has helped me to experience in new ways that God really is love—a love that is not only embracing and comforting but also purifying, healing and liberating. As I have tasted the sweetness of God's love, I have experienced an increasing desire to empty myself of everything that is separating me from a fuller union with God. And these encounters with God's love have sustained me through some very challenging times in ministry.

I now participate in a centering prayer group that meets every Sunday evening for contemplation, study and conversation.

### **Where else do you go for collegiality and inspiration?**

When I graduated from AMBS, I assumed that my relationship with the seminary had largely ended. But since then, I have returned for 11 straight years to attend pastors week, at which I've been challenged by the likes of Marva Dawn, Walter Wink, Rodney Clapp, Walter Brueggemann and Diana Butler Bass. Last year, I commuted there every other month to complete a certificate in spiritual direction. And when faced with challenging pastoral situations, I have often consulted with professors.

My alma mater has been a crucial base camp that I have returned to again and again for nurture, friendship, resources and training.

### **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?**

We live in times fraught with partisan divisiveness. As the living body of Christ in the world, the church is called to model a more excellent way. Nowhere is this more crucial than in how congregations make decisions together about difficult matters. In fact, how we make decisions together may be just as important as what we decide.

When I get together with my seminary classmates, we sometimes lament our lack of training in leading good processes for discernment and decision making. It's possible that we just were not listening. But I do believe that future pastors will need to be better trained to help their congregations make decisions together that are faithful to the Spirit's leading, transparent, fair and safe for all those participating.

### **What might such training look like?**

Seminarians would learn how to clarify what a church disagreement is really about,

to identify a shared goal, to develop a transparent process for listening to God and each other and to determine who decides and how. As a final project, students might be asked to design a discernment process on a particularly divisive issue for a faith community with which they are familiar.

Facilitating such conversations is a crucial part of ministry. When I first became a pastor, I believed that my role was to articulate a clear and compelling vision for the congregation and wait for everyone to naturally follow. Looking back, I see situations where I failed to listen well or to value the discernment of others. My desire for quick results sometimes hurt relationships, requiring long seasons of healing.

I have probably learned more from my failures than from my successes. I am now deeply convinced that a pastor's role is to help a congregation continue to "be church to each other" as the members listen carefully to God and one another. Helping a congregation talk about difficult issues is prophetic leadership, especially when this involves the polarizing issues of our day.

I have been especially influenced in this regard by Stanley Hauerwas. "Change takes time," he writes in *Hannah's Child*, because "any change that is accomplished nonviolently comes about through honest persuasion." Hauerwas says that sometimes we are tempted "to try to force God's kingdom into existence through violence," whether physical or verbal. "But that," he argues, "is to betray the time we have been given."

### **What other reading has shaped your understanding of ministry?**

I read constantly. And I try to read widely, but I find myself returning regularly to certain authors, the pages of their books underlined and margins filled with notes. For prayer, I return often to the works of Cynthia Bourgeault, Thomas Keating, Thomas Merton and Richard Rohr. For ministry, to Gordon Cosby and Eugene Peterson. For theology, to Miroslav Volf, Rowan Williams and John Howard Yoder. For discipleship, to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lee C. Camp, Marlene Kropf and Dallas Willard. And to keep pace with political and cultural trends, I read the *New York Times*.

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

If I ever take a break from pastoring, my wife and I would love to return to work in China. One of the most exciting times in my life was going back to China in the 1990s after completing two years of Chinese language study. In contrast with my two earlier stays, I was finally able to communicate freely with people from all walks

of life. I was also able to hear the amazing testimonies of brothers and sisters in the Chinese church.

My own call to ministry came through my friendship with an 89-year-old Chinese Christian named Stephen Wang. (At the time, my wife and I were serving in Beijing with a Mennonite educational organization.) This retired college professor had every reason to be bitter. During the Cultural Revolution, two of his children were seriously injured by Red Guards, and he was sent to work in the countryside for many years. But though he had suffered greatly, Wang's face was radiant with joy and peace. He told me he had long ago forgiven his persecutors, some of whom were still his neighbors.

Love for enemies is riveting, whether two millennia ago on Golgotha or today. During a time alone in Wang's home one afternoon, I suddenly found myself weeping. I was cut to the heart by the beauty of his life, shared with and shaped by Jesus Christ over many decades. I was struggling deeply at the time, and I realized how much I longed to be transformed in the same way.

Amid my tears, I mysteriously heard God's call to become a pastor. Within a year, I was back in the States taking my first class in seminary.

**Tell us more about the connection between longing to be transformed and your specific call to professional ministry.**

I was struggling then with forgiveness in some of my closest relationships. Wang helped me to see firsthand the beauty of forgiveness, how it leaves a person free and unencumbered at the end of life. In his company, I sensed that I was witnessing firsthand the good news of the gospel. I felt called not only to receive this same transformation in my own life but also to invite others to receive it as well.

**What does your denominational affiliation mean to you?**

I believe that *Mennonite* is a wonderful adjective and an impoverished noun. I like to tell people that I'm a "Mennonite Christian." This clarification, I believe, helps me to find common ground with other Christians and to be open to the possibility that they may be just as committed as I am—or more so—to Christ-centered discipleship, peacemaking, deepening community, living simply and serving others.

We Mennonites are well known for our *More with Less Cookbook* and the values that accompany it. But I dream of a Mennonite church that is less comfortable, one that more fully shares God's special concern for the poor and vulnerable. A newcomer,

after surveying the cars in our church parking lot, once asked me, “Is simple living no longer a Mennonite core value?”

In recent years, we have grown mostly silent about the increasing inequality in our nation. The Occupy movement is crying out against the economic injustice that we have chosen mostly to ignore. “When the churches are silent on these matters,” a friend wrote recently, “perhaps God raises other voices.”

### **What do you think being Mennonite means to your congregation?**

Our congregation was established to minister to the increasing number of Mennonites moving to Chicago after World War II. But almost immediately, we began to attract people from diverse backgrounds who were interested in our Anabaptist understanding of the gospel. Today, our members drive up to an hour to be part of a community whose core values include following Jesus in daily life, peacemaking, global concern, serving the poor and building community.

However, since some of our members live as far as 50 miles apart, nurturing strong communal bonds is also one of our greatest challenges. What’s more, the congregation experiences steady change as people move to and from the area; I sometimes say that I have been the pastor of several different congregations, all at the same church. Newcomers often share their thoughts about their deep sense of loneliness in our anonymous suburbs and their longing to be part of a faith community where they are known and loved. I find it helpful to remember that our church has been called to share God’s love in a mission context of significant material prosperity and relational poverty.

Our congregation strongly values our ties with the Mennonite Church USA. Our denomination’s *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* deeply shapes and guides how we talk about who we are and what we believe. We also rely on our denomination for Sunday school resources that reflect our Anabaptist emphases on peacemaking, kingdom citizenship, simple living and service to others.

We are also grateful for all the ways that our denomination helps connect us with the world beyond our nation’s borders. Through our mission and service agencies, we are able to link up with Christians around the world and to share spiritual and financial resources.

We constantly need to remember that our congregation does not exist just for itself. Many are searching for a faith community that is trying to live out Jesus’ teachings

on peacemaking, reconciliation and forgiveness. Our calling is to be a church that is always welcoming others to come follow Jesus with us and to learn how to live as he intends. As we participate in all parts of congregational life, Jesus' character is being progressively shaped in each of us.

**Describe an experience that made you think, "This is what church is all about."**

Our congregation participates in a local ministry that hosts and feeds the growing number of homeless people in our area. Instead of just throwing together peanut butter sandwiches, we try to anticipate that Christ will be present. Our adults and children prepare a delicious meal for about 60, complete with tablecloths and music.

One of the highlights of the meal occurs right before our guests arrive, when we gather in the kitchen to pray. "Help us to see Christ in every person we meet," we pray. "And may our guests see Christ in us as well, in the love and kindness that we show them." After all our guests are served, we sit down to share the meal with them.

Since this ministry takes place on Sunday evenings, I often show up feeling weary and tired. But afterward, I invariably feel grateful for encountering Christ in some new way and for catching a fresh vision of what it means to be his living body in the world.