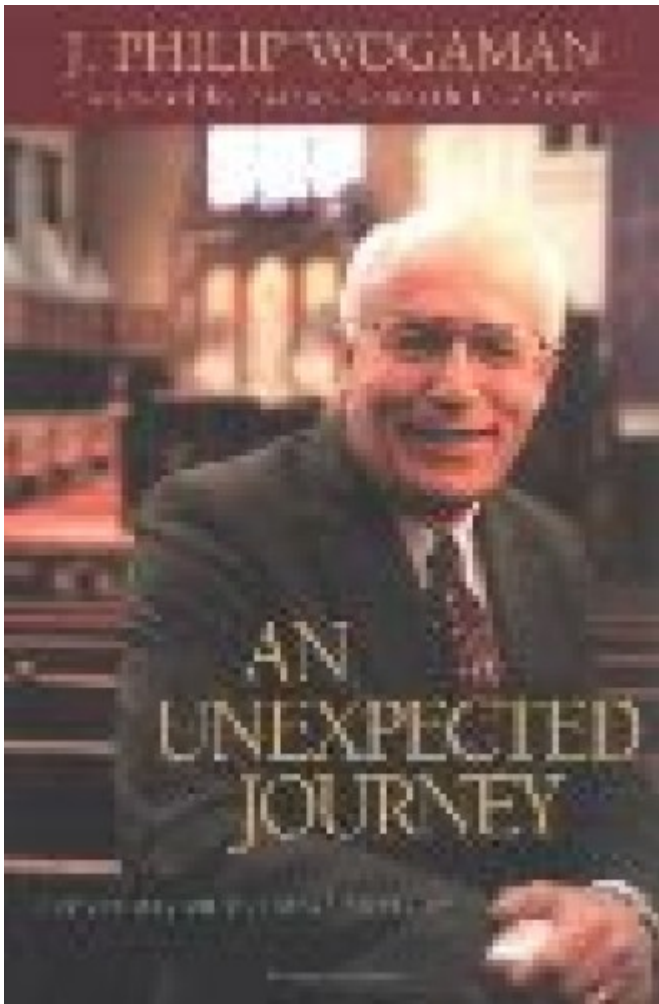


In the thick of it

By [Eugene H. Winkler](#) in the [May 4, 2004](#) issue

In Review



An Unexpected Journey: Reflections on Pastoral Ministry

J. Philip Wogaman

Westminster John Knox

Many seminaries and pulpits are filled these days with “second-career” clergy. Often they are people who have been active lay leaders in their local congregations, and

sometimes they have made a difficult decision to answer the call to ordained ministry by leaving a very successful vocation in business, education or medicine.

Philip Wogaman became a “second-career” pastor by a different route. After 26 years as a professor of Christian ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., 11 of them as dean of the seminary, he was asked by his bishop to accept an appointment as senior pastor of Foundry United Methodist Church in D.C. Wogaman had enjoyed a wonderful life in academia, and his wife, Carolyn, had enjoyed a 16-year career as a preschool teacher.

At the age of 60 Wogaman was then called to the discipline of preaching weekly instead of occasionally and the demands of counseling troubled parishioners, ministering to people in hospitals and nursing homes and dealing with unusual situations in a diverse, urban church. Moreover, he had been nominated as a candidate for bishop and if elected (he wasn't) would have served at Foundry for only three weeks!

Soon after he became the pastor of one of Methodism's most important and historic churches, it was soon revealed that his predecessor, a very popular pastor, had been involved in sexual affairs with several women in the congregation. Also, Wogaman was appointed to the pulpit in July 1992, which meant that in his ten years at Foundry he faced the Oklahoma City disaster, the events of September 11, national elections and the presidential crisis of 1998-99.

Because of Foundry's location one mile from the White House and its educated and influential constituency, such events and problems were not faced in a vacuum. Senator Bob Dole, about to become Senate majority leader, and his wife, Libby, were members of the church. Former Senator George McGovern attended regularly, and on March 14, 1993, during the worst snowstorm in the District's history, who should come trudging through the elements to Foundry but the newly elected President Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary. On a morning when most D.C. churches had cancelled their services, the newly elected chief executive and his wife showed up to a church without musicians and a very small number of worshipers.

When the Clintons next returned to the church, the passing of the peace became a fiasco. Hundreds of congregants lined up to shake the president's hand. Thereafter, the call to pass the peace was modified to exchange signs of peace “with those nearest you.”

During December 1994, Wogaman preached on peace using Advent texts. He got specific about the world situation, namely the U.S. intervention in Haiti. President Clinton was at the first service and later in the day thanked Wogaman for “that public support of the way he had addressed a difficult dilemma.”

As he looked out on the congregation at the second service, whom should he see but Senator Dole? The senator had vigorously and publicly opposed the Haiti intervention. “It was as though Satan himself had perched on my shoulder and said, ‘Are you sure you want to go through with the Haiti part of your sermon?’” While he does not believe in the existence of Satan as a literal being, Wogaman does believe in his functional equivalents: all those little situations when we are tempted to turn away from what we believe to be right and good.

That was the last time Senator Dole and his wife worshiped at Foundry, and after a period of “church shopping,” they formed a relationship with a church of another denomination. “The Christian Coalition,” Wogaman writes, “was enormously influential in the Republican Party at this time. Senator Dole, while not their first choice (and probably not sharing many of their views), doubtless had to be acceptable to them.”

When Dole ran against Clinton in the 1996 election, Wogaman lamented the fact the Doles had left Foundry. What a wonderful symbol to the rest of the nation, he thought, if both candidates for the presidency had been from the same congregation.

Every pastor strives to preach to both heart and mind, and no pastor can pretend to have all the answers. As an ethicist Wogaman had developed “a method of moral judgment based on clarification of our initial presumptions. If we can gain clarity about the starting point, we at least know where to place the burden of proof.”

But as he felt his way into the task of preaching regularly to the same congregation, he found that he was doing less topical preaching than he had expected. “On the whole, I found it much more useful to touch on social issues as a part of the development of a sermon based on a biblical-theological theme.” For example, his post-Easter 1993 sermon at the time of the Oklahoma City bombing, from Psalm 30:11, dealt with Easter as the event born out of tragedy so that the congregation could grasp both the enormity and the possibility.

Foundry Church was drawn into the culture wars almost from the time of Wogaman's arrival, partly because the congregation voted to welcome gay and lesbian people. As senior pastor, Wogaman carefully defined the differences between a morality that is defined *prescriptively* (conformity to rules and principles) and *relationally* (expressing respect and love in relationship). For his stance and the action of the congregation, the Institute on Religion and Democracy and other representatives of the Religious Right vilified Wogaman and even picketed the church.

After the impeachment of President Clinton, Wogaman served as one of the spiritual counselors to the president. He, Tony Campolo and Gordon MacDonald met almost weekly with the president, who was open with them, honest and guilt-ridden. In true professional fashion, Wogaman does not reveal the content of any of their conversations.

Wogaman is a remarkable man who has served the church of Jesus Christ through some of our nation's most turbulent times. His honesty and lack of vanity are embracing. He recognizes in himself the temptation that all pastors face constantly: to become self-important, to strive for those places Jesus called "the chief seats," and to succumb to self-aggrandizement. His focus on the pastoral role enabled him to remain compassionate yet truthful, prophetic yet reconciling.