

How to be a purple church in a red state

When you embrace criticism instead of avoiding it, you get lots of chances to love your enemy.

by [Brian D. McLaren](#) in the [June 21, 2017](#) issue



Vanessa Ryerse of Vintage Fellowship in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Photo by Michael Drager.

Northwest Arkansas is probably not a place you imagine as a hotbed of church innovation and progressive Christian theology and practice. And you've probably never heard of Vintage Fellowship in Fayetteville. The same goes for Morgantown, Kentucky, and Morgantown Community Church. But at both Vintage and MCC something quietly remarkable and promising is going on.

“Demographically and statistically, we should not exist,” said MCC pastor Josh Scott. “We’re a deep purple dot in a deeply red state.”

Morgantown Community Church started as a seeker-sensitive congregation, drawing on the church growth movement of the 1990s. Since Scott became pastor there 12 years ago, his own faith has gone through what he calls an “intensive deconstruction process.” It’s led him to different conclusions about what the Bible is, what it means to be part of a Christian community, and how Christians should engage the world. His church has joined him on that journey.

When a graduate student visited MCC recently as part of a study of people who are moving from a conservative to a progressive faith, “he expected to find an enclave of hipsters,” said Scott—“that somehow we had tapped into a trendy undercurrent in Morgantown. “But that clearly wasn’t the case. The student met exactly the kinds of people you’d expect to meet in small communities in America’s heartland: hog farmers and schoolteachers, mechanics and grocery store managers. Not hipsters.

“The people who’ve found their home with us aren’t the typical image that pops into the mind when you imagine a progressive person,” said Scott.

A church that goes against the grain in a politically and socially conservative area has three main options. It can be a community for liberal refugees, a place for the political or social minority to gather with kindred spirits. Or it can be a bridge-building community, seeking to bring together people who see things differently, helping them understand and perhaps influence each other. Or it can be an activist community, seeking to change the social and political climate of the region in a progressive direction. I asked the pastors of MCC and Vintage which of these three paths best describes their congregation.

“MCC is definitely a refuge for the progressive Christians (and some non-Christians who want to be connected in a community) in an extremely conservative region,” said Scott. “There’s a growing segment of our community who need no convincing about how urgent it is that we reimagine—migrate, if you will, to a more just and generous faith.” He recalls a fortysomething progressive Christian who remarked, “I can’t believe this church exists in my town.”

At Vintage, Vanessa Ryerse, who copastors the congregation with her husband, Rob, said, “I would guess Vintage is more of a refuge for progressive Christians in a conservative region, which is probably an important role to play in the Bible Belt.”

But both pastors are dedicated to pursuing the other two objectives as well—building bridges between differences and contagiously embodying faith in action. Taking on all three challenges is, in my experience, a rare thing. As I explored this work with them, I was impressed with how similar their approach—and their struggles—are.

For starters, they have learned that nobody can keep everybody happy. “Whether it was affirming women in leadership, inviting my friend, who happens to be a lesbian, to share the stage on a Sunday morning, or critique of the direction our country is taking, sometimes people can’t keep making the journey with us,” Scott explained. “The tension stretches some relationships beyond the breaking point.”

Ryerse said that though people find it “exhilarating” to work at loving and listening to one another, “sometimes people get worn out and give up.” When that happens, both pastors work hard to maintain a positive relationship with those who leave. They believe their efforts to stay in a positive relationship are an outflow of the gospel they preach.

Along with learning to let people leave graciously, both congregations have learned to separate central concerns from peripheral ones. They repeatedly emphasize the primary values that are essential to their congregations while stressing that differences on secondary matters are not only permitted but valued. Living out this message takes real work, work that never ends.

“We use the image of a bull’s-eye at Vintage,” said Ryerse. At the center is an understanding of Jesus as loving to all people, no exceptions, and an appreciation of the Trinity as a relational unity in diversity. Because of this central focus, belonging is a given, a starting point, and isn’t based on additional doctrinal or political agreement. Scott put it like this: “MCC has a clear direction and journey, but not everyone who participates in our community has to share all of our opinions or conclusions.”

Creating a space for differences goes against our normal tendency—reinforced by social media—to create and live in echo chambers of agreement. Churches too can be such echo chambers, noted Scott, “which is why I value MCC being a community of respectful dialogue. We are seeking to hold those of differing perspectives together, sharing bread and wine, joy and pain, hope and loss together. Part of our work is to teach people how to disagree generously, how to be open to thoughtful

critique and discussion. Our values aren't up for negotiation, but we can engage in conversation that helps us all understand one another a bit better."

Holding their central mission and vision tightly enables them to hold secondary matters lightly. But repeatedly they need to tell people, in person and from the pulpit, that they are loved and that they belong whatever their differences.

"I have had personal conversations with people wherein I emphatically and wholeheartedly assure them that we value differing voices, specifically theirs," said Ryerse. "They need to know we aren't tired of them and we don't want them to leave. It's sometimes just that simple."

Creating a space for differences goes against the tendency to seek a like-minded group.

Letting people go graciously, holding to essentials tightly and nonessentials lightly, and telling people directly and repeatedly that they are loved—these practices constitute the starting point for these congregations. A fourth trait takes them beyond the starting line: they don't walk on eggshells when it comes to political and social disagreements. Instead, they identify the tensions and confront the disagreements. They name the elephant in the room.

"Over and over again," said Ryerse, "we have reminded our more progressive people that all the people who voted for Trump can't be racists, bigoted, uncaring people, because they have friends at Vintage who voted for Trump and they know them to be more complex, interesting, and profound than that. And we tell our more conservative people that everyone who is angry and afraid in the face of a Trump presidency can't be whiny losers, because they have served with their liberal friends and know them to be deeply compassionate people of character."

"We are happy to live in the tension with anyone who is willing to do so," said Scott. "I find it strengthens our community, because we regularly have people from various political or even religious backgrounds engaging on topics from theology to health care to immigration. All voices are given space, as long as they are respectful. One person asked, 'How long can we live in this tension?' My reply was simple: 'As long as you can and are willing, so are we.'"

A pastor told me a story recently that captured the challenge these churches face. He had just preached on loving your enemies, working from a text in the lectionary.

After the service, an elder cornered him in the hallway. He was furious and said, “I don’t think it’s appropriate to preach on that subject when our nation is at war with violent Islamic terrorism! You shouldn’t mix religion and politics!”

“I’m just preaching what Jesus said,” the pastor replied.

“Well,” the elder said, “I’ve always considered that a weak spot in Jesus’ teaching.”

Many people in congregations are formed spiritually by sources outside the church, by media outlets on the left or right. If a sermon agrees with what they already think, it’s not political. If it challenges their current views, suddenly it is political.

That’s why confronting hot political issues requires some careful advance work. Vintage did this early last year when it developed a sermon series called “Just Live” which attempted to break down the lines between “real life” and “religious life.” Ryerse said that the series helped people see that everyday life, including politics, already is a spiritual activity. Given that framework, she said, “it was no surprise to anyone that we would talk about how you vote, how you comport yourself in conversation, how you believe in your political party, how you trust for the future, how you love your neighbor, how you think of others, and all kinds of essentially political conversations.”

Scott recalled how during Advent the church examined the story about the massacre of the innocents and the flight to Egypt, and then talked about Jesus as a refugee. Later he invited a friend who works with the Muslim refugee community in Bowling Green, 20 minutes to the south, to talk about how the church community could serve and extend hospitality to refugees. Since these events took place while Donald Trump was talking about banning refugees, some people in the church thought Scott was making a political statement. “Which it was. I previously have done teachings about peacemaking, which focused on the negative and tragic impacts of U.S. drone strikes, as well as teachings on economic disparity and injustice.”

Ryerse told of organizing a sermon series on becoming a better listener. Muslim, Latino, transgender, and homeless neighbors were invited to share their experiences, giving the congregation occasions to practice listening and learning how to serve their neighbors better.

When I was a parish pastor, my congregation held a Faith and Politics Forum which I moderated. We invited some respected Republican-voting and Democratic-voting

church members to answer a series of questions about how and why they were voting as they were. Agreement was not the goal. Rather, we wanted people on each side to hear someone from the other side express a heartfelt, logical explanation of the connection between their faith and their vote. We then opened for questions from the audience. It was a challenge to maintain the standard of civility that our panel had modeled, but it was an important experience, one that participants won't forget.

Providing a refuge for progressives in conservative regions is important. So is living in the tension of disagreement and creating communities where civility and acceptance without agreement can be practiced. But congregations like Vintage Fellowship and Morgantown Community Church are quietly going beyond even that. They're embodying a different way to be Christian and inviting others to join them. For many people, it's a life-giving invitation. It makes others angry.

But even a negative response provides an opportunity, said Scott. "In our very traditional, largely fundamentalist community, we seek to be a witness for a just and generous Christianity. This leads to regular and various public attacks from people who feel threatened by our community, and those who cannot abide the tension and feel hurt by our journey into progressive Christianity. This has allowed us to talk about, and actually practice, loving those who consider us enemies. We've also allowed criticism to be an opportunity to clarify our message."

Avoiding criticism is tempting. But in the end, that effort makes the church boring, not to mention complicit when matters of injustice are at stake. These congregations are learning to see criticism as an unavoidable part of doing ministry. The challenge isn't to avoid it, but rather to employ it for good purpose.

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