

Editing the *Christian Century* through decades of cultural change

## **“It's the nature of the gospel to upend settled views.”**

an interview with [David Heim](#) in the [November 20, 2019](#) issue



Read about [Heim's retirement and other transitions at the Christian Century](#).

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**You've had a major hand in shaping the *Century* for three decades. What stands out for you as major changes in that time?**

Of course the digital revolution and the rise of social media have had a huge effect on the mechanics of creating and delivering the magazine. Because the digital world changes so fast, magazines need to be nimble in their technical capacity to respond to people's reading habits.

I'm more aware of cultural changes. One that stands out is a wave of interest in memoir and first-person writing. When the *Century* started the rotating Faith Matters

column in 1997, I saw it as an attempt to encourage pastors and theologians to speak in a personal voice and talk about their own faith commitments—which at the time seemed like something mainline Protestants were not so good at doing.

As it turned out, that move was unknowingly part of a trend. My sense is that the *Century* publishes many more first-person essays than we used to, articles that are more about bearing witness to an experience than arguing a point. The success of the Buechner Narrative Writing Project, in which we give readers a one-word prompt for a short personal essay, is another reflection of that interest.

### **Any other cultural changes you'd point out?**

The extreme political polarization of the country over the past decade does complicate the work of producing a Christian magazine that is engaged with public life. I can't help comparing it to the atmosphere when I began working at the *Century*.

In the 1980s there was a sense among many liberals that New Deal liberalism had exhausted its intellectual energy and that interesting ideas were coming from the right about political devolution and pragmatic experiments in local control. Bureaucratic liberalism seemed to have sputtered, and it was plausible that there might be “conservative” means to the “liberal” ends of expanding equality and opportunity. For a brief time it seemed that political labels were not as important as insights on how public policy actually worked in practice. All that was interesting to me, and it was fun to try to inject some of that thinking into the magazine. It still seems to me healthy for Christians to engage public issues without entirely identifying with one kind of political thinking.

But the moment didn't last long, and perhaps it existed mostly in the minds of some journalists and scholars. The notion of fundamentally shared political goals has disappeared. The all-or-nothing stakes of politics today and the stark political options on hand make it much harder for Christians to think of themselves as strategically nonaligned.

### **Do you see the same polarization in theology?**

Opposite poles exist, but the starkness of some old divisions has faded. A lot of the social commitments and theological styles of moderate evangelicals are rather close to those of mainline Protestants. That's not to say there are not still issues where

sharp differences remain. But there are authors like N. T. Wright who can easily appear in both worlds. And the *Century* has excerpted books published by InterVarsity Press, which wouldn't have happened some decades ago. Narrative theology and premodern approaches to scripture offer areas of shared interest. It's also true that good theology tends to be disruptive of closed thinking. It's the nature of the gospel and the Bible to upend settled views.

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In this connection, I recall an article we ran in 2011 that argued for same-sex marriage on the basis that marriage is viewed in scripture as a school for sanctification, and gay people need sanctification just like everyone else. It was a nice reorientation of the issue, undertaken with a strong theological and scriptural focus. That's the kind of thing the *Century* has been able to do by being attentive to the theological tradition as well as the cultural debate.

### **Has anything changed in the subjects the *Century* covers?**

The magazine used to devote a lot more space to covering denominational conventions and meetings of the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches. Caring deeply about the councils was just part of the *Century's* ecumenical identity. At one time those institutions represented a widespread, powerful dream of unity. People's dreams of unity and cooperation now take many different forms.

### **You've been following church and culture for a long time. Is there a way to describe the church at this moment?**

Mainline denominations have been losing members during my entire adult life, and now it seems another demographic cliff is at hand. A familiar model of church—with a building, a full-time pastor, a staff, a set of programs—is fading. That model won't disappear entirely, but it's clear there will be far fewer churches, especially small ones, that follow it. At the *Century* we've responded mainly by trying to tell the stories of people who are trying out different models. It seems unlikely any one model will emerge as the paradigm.

### **What does that mean for the *Century*?**

Amid this upheaval, a magazine like the *Century* should be more valuable than ever. How in this new context does one critically transmit Christian tradition, engage public issues, develop ministries, and be a faithful leader of a Christian community? These questions have been central in the pages of the *Century*, and I can't imagine they will go away. Any future church will have people who share those concerns and who want—and need—to think, write, and read about them.

**What's been most rewarding for you in working in this form of religious journalism?**

It's been rewarding in a host of ways. It's been a chance to shape conversation in the church. It's given me the opportunity to be in touch with a wide range of writers and scholars, and to invite them to contribute to that conversation. It's wonderfully various work, since at the *Century* there is virtually no topic outside the scope of the magazine—no topic that can't help illumine, or be illumined by, Christian faith. It is fun to be part of moving an article from conception to publication, and to work on all the stages in between. It's energizing to keep finding readers and writers who care deeply about the *Century* and want it to flourish. I've gotten paid to work with words and ideas, all of them related to how to live a faithful Christian life in these times—the most interesting question there is.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Three decades of editing: A conversation with David Heim."*