

Protagonist Corner

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What a fine time to lead a mainline congregation. Yes, I'm serious. Despite the doom and gloom of many denominational gatherings, aware of the Pew Research findings that 30 percent of adults under 30 are unaffiliated with any religion, and acknowledging the diminished power of Christian institutions, a simple truth remains: the time is ripe for smart, creative, faithful pastoral leadership. Today, more than ever, calls for wise pastoral theologians to lead God's people.

Lutheran pastor Keith Anderson recently hit a nerve in the blogosphere with a post on his popular website, PastorKeithAnderson.net. In the post, "Pastors, Stop Complaining About Sunday Morning Sports," Anderson argues that the popular lament of pastors—*Sundays are no longer sacred; back in my day...*—is largely unhelpful, a symptom, not a solution. The popularity of Sunday morning youth sports programs, Anderson writes, draws out from many pastors a sense of loss. He says, it is a loss of

a privileged place of not only religious institutions, but Christian institutions, and not just Christian institutions, but Christian people, and the leaders of those people, the professional clergy, us. We are mourning our own diminishing cultural position and privilege. That's what I hear just under the surface when clergy complain to each other about Sunday morning sports—it's the loss of *our* place, *our* privilege, *our* position.¹

But Pastor Anderson does not stop there, arguing that this perspective on the loss of institutional privilege comes out in our preaching, conversations with other clergy, and use of guilt in many areas of ministry.

In my experience, Anderson's diagnosis is spot-on. In a pastors' group, I once suggested that instead of complaining about the troublesome youth ice hockey away schedule that kept dozens of families from worshipping on Sunday mornings each winter, we instead craft a liturgy to be used on the road, suggesting a time of worship when athletes, parents, coaches, and grandparents might celebrate the gifts of friendship and sport that ultimately come from God. My idea went over like a figure skater in July.

Ultimately, Anderson's essay is a call to action, a call for pastoral leaders to help reframe the challenges of modern-day parenting as integral to their vocation, and for our churches to be supportive in ways beyond offering worship opportunities at 10:30 on Sunday morning.

In clergy circles one often hears complaints about technology and social media. Indeed, the rise of information technology and cyber culture affects everything from youth group meetings to marriage counseling sessions. And yet, the new information age is a grand time for preachers to claim newly constructed, and essential, theologies of stewardship and Sabbath-keeping.

Many Christians I know (though they may not voice it just so) are longing for

reflective guidance on how to be good stewards of their Facebook feed and smart-phones. How, they wonder, can we achieve balance, Christian community, and connection beyond our consumerist culture's message to buy and buy? What is Sabbath in a 24/7 world that never stops, in an Internet age with almost literally no end? This is a splendid moment for theologies of Sabbath that move beyond not shopping on Sundays to robust understandings of life deeply lived in the hustle and bustle of the Internet age.

I recently joined the faculty of a Midwestern liberal arts college that takes its Lutheran (ELCA) church-relatedness seriously. At Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, a chapel is held four days a week. On top of the bell tower that stands at the center of campus juts an enormous cross. So it came as some surprise to me to find the campus community I joined was in the midst of launching an extensive movement to embrace interfaith dialogue across faith traditions. I came to a college historically better known for its guarding of Christian tradition that, in a recent college magazine, featured a cover story on the founder of Interfaith Youth Core, Eboo Patel, a Muslim.

In the best tradition of interfaith dialogue, the college has embraced our growing pluralism—in the broader community, and in our student body—by seeking to deepen our understanding of many faith traditions. But, at every moment along the journey, our administrative leaders have been clear: Concordia is investing in the interfaith movement *because* it is a college of the church, *because* the Lutheran faith frees us to serve God and seek to understand our complex world, and *because* Jesus calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Amidst significant change in the makeup of the faith traditions of its applicants, the college sought both depth and breadth: depth in its understanding of Lutheranism and breadth in its embrace of all God's people.

For the past few years I have had the honor of serving on the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song, the new hymnal selection committee for my denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA). The process of deciding which hymns and songs will appear in a denomination's hymnal, and the launch of the list and publication of the collection is often fraught with arguments both theological and mundane—what color, how heavy, will it be? With this in mind, many committee members—myself included—anticipated more than a little dissension at our national General Assembly where the hymnal contents were released and commended to the church in a formal vote. We were happily surprised, then, that the collection sailed through its assigned committee, passing unanimously. It received a similar wholly positive response by the entire assembly. What should we make of this warm reception (at least, as of this writing)?

Perhaps the relative lack of debate surrounding the next Presbyterian hymnal has something to do with this changing reality of mainline Christianity. Against the backdrop of broader cultural changes and awareness, denominational infighting over musical style appears less consequential. It is in this time that pastoral leadership and prophetic preaching can *and must* rise to the occasion and follow God's call in this context bursting with potential.

Today is not a time for mourning, but for dancing. Christ is risen! We have songs to sing, new Facebook messages to post. It is a time for resilient, creative pastoral leaders to thrive.