

View from the Pew: What a Parishioner Wants the Preacher to Know

by Max Sherman
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As I write this, I recall the day my friend's husband died. I went over to the house where she met me in the driveway on that sunlit day. As I remember, this was my first adult encounter with death. I told her, "I don't know what to say." She said, "You don't need to say anything. Just the fact that you are here is enough."

I was not a pastor, but I am convinced that through the hardest times most parishioners would say, "Pastor, you don't need to say anything. Just the fact that you are here is enough."

In 1963, my law partner Jim House, a Unitarian, recruited me, a Southern Baptist/new Presbyterian, to take a slot on the newly formed Board of Directors of Children's Cottage, a home for dependent and neglected African American children in Amarillo, Texas.

Pearl Longbine, a Presbyterian and a school nurse, had stumbled onto a serious issue of "doorstep" children in Amarillo. Her survey discovered at least seventy-six Black children who literally did not have a home and spent many nights on someone's doorstep in the African American neighborhood of then-segregated Amarillo.

There were many dependent and neglected Anglo children, but the community had established The Presbyterian Children's Home (PCH) for them in 1925. The PCH campus was located on several acres in the central part of town with several independent living cottages, each with its own set of house parents. PCH was—and is—the pride of Amarillo.

But there was no facility for dependent and neglected Black children until 1963.

Children's Cottage had only one three-bedroom house—recently remodeled by airmen from the local base—on a small lot donated by a Baptist church. The house parents were members of another church.

Serving on the Children's Cottage Board introduced me to five women who had a passion for responding to human need. Four were Anglo, one was African American.

Estelle Marsh, a Presbyterian, was the daughter-in-law of one of the three founders of one of the major gas fields in the world. Betty Childers, an Episcopalian, was from a pioneering ranching family in the Panhandle. Pauline Robertson, a United Church of Christ member, was from a hard-scrabble pioneer family who had to overcome many hardships. When the youngest of her ten children went off to school, Pauline started Camp Friendship, a summer program for underprivileged children of all ethnicities. Helen Vahue, a Presbyterian, was the daughter of a General Motors executive who moved to Amarillo when her husband purchased the outdoor signage

company for the Texas Panhandle. Bertha Huff, a Missionary Baptist, was African American. In her own church, she was the go-to person to organize hospitality and resources on a daily basis for the sake of people who needed anything.

Those five women, twenty to thirty years older than I, became close friends of mine and that experience shaped the rest of my life.

What do these two events from the life of one parishioner that occurred over sixty years ago have to do with the preaching, leadership, and pastoral care of pastors in 2023? Everything, I hope. It is a snapshot of a view from the pew of many churches over many years.

Pauline was our chair. Her agenda for the first few meetings was to share why we agreed to serve on a board that seemed to have an impossible task. Without exception each one of us agreed that it was because of our Christian faith, formed from diverse backgrounds: one grew up in a small town in Oklahoma, another on a ranch in Texas, another in small rural Texas town, one in Detroit, Michigan, one from an all-Black church, another from a town with only a Baptist and a Methodist church. The same was true of the volunteer airmen and the house parents.

We were all motivated by the gospel preached in many different ways, in many different settings, over many years.

One of the most succinct statements about building “Children’s Cottages” of the future is from an article in Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary’s publication, *Windows* (Winter 2001) on the theme of religion and politics. It was written by the Reverend David D. Miles, who happened to have had the governor of New Jersey as a member of his flock.

“I believe that the gospel itself is politically charged. My philosophy about preaching on political issues is that one must begin, not with the political issue, but with the gospel. I know that if I am faithful to the gospel, it will inevitably lead to particular political issues relevant to the day ... [P]reach the gospel to that particular congregation ... and trust the Spirit of God to speak to [each one sitting in the pew].”

Barbara Jordan was my close friend from our days in the Texas Senate and later at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. I was fortunate to be invited to sit with her family at her memorial service at The Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Houston, Texas. Air Force One had flown in from the nation’s capitol with President Clinton and most of his cabinet. Governor Ann Richards and many other dignitaries were in the congregation that day.

Pastor Cofield was the last to speak. He began, “If Sister Jordan were sitting in her wheelchair at her normal place when she was in the congregation, I would ask her what should I do on such an occasion. I can hear her voice telling me, ‘Preach, Pastor, Preach.’” He concluded with a prayer and a quotation from Howard Thurman:

I like to think that if Dr. King was the conductor of the orchestra,

Barbara would be in the first chair.
If Dr. King opened the doors of segregation,
She taught us how to walk in and hold our heads up high.
If he allowed us to sit at any table and eat what we wanted,
She taught us how to act at the table.
So we leave here today focused in our minds
That we can be the best we can be

“Because she was the best she was. Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

So what does this parishioner sitting in the pew in 2023 say to the pastor:
Give comfort by your presence,
Inspire to service with the gospel,
and
Preach, Pastor, Preach!