

***Mike McCurry answers follow-up questions from Missouri clergy:***

**How do you work in a situation where some people will not engage dialogue but will simply leave and never come back?**

To be in a place where you are speaking authentically about issues that are on the public's minds means you will not keep everyone happy. That's why pastors often do not do it. I think you need to accept the risk that some will decide to get up and leave. However, pastors and churches that step into the role of public witness often find that it attracts new – especially younger – new members. The decline in church affiliation among young people is located (research tells us) in a belief that the “church does not practice what it preaches.” So, look for graceful ways to manage departures and wonderful ways to welcome new participants with open arms.

**In the United Methodist Church, we claim to be a “big tent.” It goes without saying that there exists a broad spectrum of belief within clergy and laity on every topic under the sun. Additionally, our church has a General Conference that speaks on its behalf on abortion to gun control to human sexuality (and much, much more) in ways in which not all of its members support. It goes without saying that for any non-United Methodists on the line, the same could likely be said for their own church or denomination. What advice do you give to your students and colleagues in balancing the institutional church's statements and personal belief and call?**

Heaven knows the UMC pronounces itself on every issue. The Books of Resolutions on my shelf grow wider and wider. Many of us made an effort back at the beginning of the 21st century to prioritize our commitments. That led to “four areas of focus” and a declaration that the UMC denomination would concentrate on fewer things rather than splaying itself across a spectrum that was too wide for us to be effective. I think that is the model: what matters to your congregation? Where will you focus your energy?

In my local church we were led by a senior pastor who felt a call from God to focus on feeding hungry people. We have a congregation very engaged in many issues, especially because many of us also work in the Washington D.C. world of advocacy, lobbying and government. But we adopted hunger as a “focus area,” and we now feed families, send kids home on weekends with backpacks that make it through until Monday, and are engaged in an effort to declare our local zip code a “hunger-free zone.”

**As a committed and faithful lay person, what are your personal expectations for the pastors in your own life?**

I have a wonderful senior pastor and associate who are very different in personality and background. He is a second-career elder and a bit more introverted, but he has a civil engineer background, which has been incredibly helpful in the midst of a church capital campaign and planning for a major church reconstruction project. She is a double “pk” and both her parents, elders in the UMC, clearly passed on gifts of preaching and pastoral care. Our congregation loves both of them very much. That relationship has allowed both of them to challenge us from time to time and to consider different ways of thinking.

I cite this because the balance of perspectives is important, but I suspect some of our webinar participants are sole pastors or maybe even have a multiple point charge. The importance of building relationships beyond Sunday has been vital to me. When I served as lay leader of my church, the senior pastor took me and the chair of our church council out for coffee at least once a month. We left time for prayer, private conversations about our families, favorite jokes, before we got down to the church agenda. That relationship-building is the thing I most expect from my pastor(s).