



When Your Calling Is Pastor

PTS Faculty and Alums Gather at Montreat, Reflect on the Pastorate

Photo: Krystin Granberg



Some of the PTS alums and faculty who attended the Montreat preaching conference in May pose for the camera. Where were the rest of you? Perhaps taking a coffee break, browsing in the bookstore, or hiking up Lookout Mountain?

by Barbara A. Chaapel

“There are moments when I stand in the pulpit in awe and all the church triumphant is singing around me,” says Ben Daniel about what it is like to be a pastor. “And there are other moments when I want to crawl into the fetal position.”

Daniel, a 1993 graduate of Princeton Seminary and pastor of Foothill Presbyterian Church in San Jose, California, was one of 400 pastors who attended a May conference at Montreat Conference Center in North Carolina titled “Reclaiming the Text: Recovering the Language of Lament” that focused on preaching from the lament literature of the Bible.

The restful, lush mountains of western North Carolina enfold the tiny town of Montreat and the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s retreat center there. This picturesque locale provided an oasis for nearly 70 PTS alums to hear top-notch biblical scholars and preachers (among them PTS professors Brian Blount, Pat Miller, and Dan Migliore) talk about biblical lament and how it relates to the life of the pastor and the church. Daniel, who says he first felt the call to pastoral ministry at age 9, preached his first sermon at

age 12, and “set my hand to the plow and did not look back until I became a pastor,” thinks the serious theological thinking the conference encouraged is just what the church needs.

“My congregation expects me to be theologically thoughtful,” he says. “Not theologically correct, but theologically thoughtful. They don’t want easy answers, or to have their intelligence insulted.”

Pat Miller agrees. “The work of a pastor is still to be the resident theologian in the congregation; to speak about and help people deal with matters of faith,” he says. He believes that preaching and teaching bring pastor and congregation together, and he urges pastors to do more teaching, and more theological preaching that helps people understand Christian doctrines. “Laypeople are more ready for critical, theological reflection on the Bible, even things like the source theory of the Pentateuch, than most pastors give them credit for.”

Lois Ann Wolff (Class of 1985), interim pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Hudson Falls, New York, until the end of June and now interim pastor of New Covenant Presbyterian Church in Albany, thinks that biblical studies is

essential for the preacher. She is grateful to PTS for giving her this grounding. “Grounding in the biblical tradition and in Reformed theology is extremely important in the local parish. Without it, I would become a Hallmark-card preacher.”

However, she believes that future pastors also need to understand how systems work and change. They should be versed in interpersonal relationships, finances and budget, and, most of all, leadership. “Our churches and our pastors are graying, and our faith is tied up with what we learned as children,” she says. “But I tell my people, ‘This is not the church you grew up in.’”

Wolff’s presbytery colleague and seminary friend Barbara Lucia, Class of 1984 and pastor of neighboring West Charlton Presbyterian Church, attended the conference with Wolff. Lucia puts understanding change at the top of her list of what pastors need to know. “The culture is changing, and we pastors need to help people make changes, not be afraid of change,” she says. “But too often the church is very busy doing just what it’s always done. At our church’s turkey suppers, every year the women stand in exactly the same place in the kitchen as they have always stood; if you’re new and don’t know where to stand, you can’t participate.

“Pastors need administrative skills and conflict management skills, and PTS didn’t do a very good job of teaching me these. I guess I’m talking about how to be a leader,” she says.

Both Pat Miller and Brian Blount teach their introductory Bible courses (OT01 and NT01) with a view toward the leadership roles their students will assume as pastors. “I always approach the class before me as future pastors,” says Miller, “and I believe my teaching should address them in preparation for that role. I try to help them see beyond the words of the text to *how* the words of the text construct faith.”

Conference participants had no doubt that Blount understood the role of the pastor as leader when he stood before them as the

preacher in worship. His tangy words laid bare both the text and the hearer's soul. Preaching from Mark 10, a story of Peter questioning Jesus about the sacrifices of discipleship, Blount distinguished between lament, which fills the pages of Scripture with real human anguish and anger in human conversation with God, and mere complaint or whining.

"If you're singing the blues because the capital campaign didn't make its goal last year, when a huge proportion of the people on earth can't scrape together enough pennies to feed their children, then you're whining," he said. "If you stand up on your soapbox in the midst of global poverty, famine, and starvation and rail against heaven about how high your property taxes are in your paved-road, somebody-picks-up-your-trash-every-Tuesday, police-protected, electricity-supplied, cable- and satellite-networked, Internet-connected, municipally bonded existence, I don't care what tax bracket Uncle Sam has got you in, you, baby, are whining."

Blount is not just a scholar preaching to pastors. He's been where pastors are. Just after graduation from Princeton Seminary as a 25-year-old, though not Presbyterian himself, he was working part time with the youth at a Presbyterian church in Virginia. A member became ill and was hospitalized. It was summer, and no one could visit. So Blount went by to sit at the hospital bed, to talk, and to pray. "Out of that interaction by the hospital bed, they invited me to be their pastor, and I decided to become a Presbyterian," he says. He went on to pastor the church for six years before pursuing Ph.D. study.

"You can be prophetic if you pay attention to pastoral care," he says. "When you're coming out of love, people can hear your prophecy."

Loving a congregation has been the first priority for George Rolling (Class of 1973) throughout his 29 years of ministry in three churches. "I love people—serving them, challenging them," he says. "The Golden Rule is a pretty good formula for success in pastoral ministry. People are hungry for being loved, and in the stressful nature of our culture, the Golden Rule goes

a long way in the church's life toward making peace and having a responsive congregation. It takes about 3-to-5 years—and a lot of patience—to establish trust; but if they can trust that you love them, all else in your ministry flows from that."

Rolling, a marathon runner who ran his first Boston Marathon while in seminary, believes in long pastorates. (He pastored



Pat Miller shares an informal moment with a conference participant. He and his wife, Mary Ann, graciously hosted PTS alums one evening in their Montreat home.

Photo: Krystin Granberg

a yoked church in Ohio for 11-1/2 years, was an associate pastor in North Carolina for 15-1/2 years, and has been pastor of Watauga Avenue Presbyterian Church in Johnson City, Tennessee, for two years and hopes to stay there until he retires.) Years together between pastor and congregation, he believes, create a community in which people can hear what is preached, can lament together, and can celebrate together. Like Blount, he believes people can struggle with the text honestly when there is an "unadorned, authentic rendering of Scripture in preaching and study," which Rolling found modeled at the conference in Phyllis Trible's [Trible is an Old Testament



George Rolling believes churches and pastors must both lament and celebrate together.

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scholar on the faculty of Wake Forest University Divinity School] honest exegesis of Hagar's story in Genesis and in Ellen Davis's [Davis is an Old Testament professor at Duke University Divinity School] reading of the psalms as Hebrew poetry.

Rolling chose to attend the Montreat conference in part because of its theme. "I've had plenty of hard times, time for lament, and I know that every member of my congregation has, too. This conference has helped me understand that grief, struggle, and pain are as real for a pastor as for anyone else." He has also found unexpected support from the retired pastors of his presbytery. "They have gifts to give, encouragement to offer. They understand pastoral ministry because they have been there."

Ben Daniel, too, is honest about the struggles of being a pastor. "It takes energy and work to care for yourself at the end of the day," he says. "I don't have thick enough skin sometimes. It's hard being criticized by some congregants, and then loving 'the criticizers.' I've learned to visualize their faces when I pray the Lord's Prayer when I get to the line 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.'"

He recalls having read that 70 percent of Presbyterian ministers don't have close friends, and works hard to be in the other 30 percent. He is part of a "strong and faithful pastoral support group led by an elder," and grateful for a strong marriage ("We work at it") to his wife, Ann, who "supports what she knows makes life good for me, things like urging me to write, which I love to do, and protecting my day off." He gets another kind of support from his mother, an active church member in another congregation. "I sometimes call my mother, who can complain to me about her pastor, and I can complain to her about my 'church ladies.'"

And while many pastors use the language of "complaint," Dan Migliore, who led a workshop titled "The Prayer of Lament in Christian Theology" at the conference, believes it is often "lament" that they mean. "There is a great surge of spiritualities in our culture," he says, "and pastors want to speak to that hunger. Yet at the same

time they know that many of our 'spiritualities' are superficial: spiritualities of success-oriented, get-ahead, feel-good religion." Migliore believes this divide causes anger and anguish for pastors as they seek to be honest with their congregants. The theme of lament touches this. The absence and silence of God at the core of lament has real pastoral significance.

Migliore believes that pastors must help church members to be honest in their prayer lives, both in private prayer and in corporate worship. Such honesty includes lament. "The events of 9/11 have made an impact on us all, made us more aware of the dark side," he says. "A pastor must be prepared to help people lament in this context. We need to recover lament in worship, because a recovery of lament is linked to a recovery of hope. People must be allowed to tell the truth about their experiences of abuse, neglect, loss, mistreatment. In the face of suffering, we can look to what God has done, to moments of grace in the preached word and the sacraments."

Paul Huh, PTS Class of 1991 and pastor of Bethany Presbyterian Church in Bloomfield, New Jersey, thinks the most important thing a pastor and a congregation can do is to attend to spiritual renewal in worship and prayer. Pursuing his Ph.D. in liturgical studies at Drew Theological School while pastoring at Bethany, Huh says that daily, communal, and family-oriented prayer, such as is practiced in his native Korea, is essential to such renewal. "It's important for the worshipping community to feel the rhythms of spiritual life under a pastor's own personal renewal and prayer," he says. "We must have healthy pastors to have healthy churches."

"Both at Drew and at Bethany, I teach the form and the freedom of worship," he says. "Teaching form is pretty easy; teaching freedom is harder. You have to develop imagination, and be willing to make mistakes together as a community."

Huh's community is a unique one. He is the only Korean American to serve an Anglo congregation in Newark Presbytery. That

church also is home to a "nesting" Korean congregation within its walls and to an independent Filipino congregation. The three worship together as often as possible, always on liturgical holidays, in both English and Korean. "We have learned that when two or three are gathered, or when two or three cultures come together to pray, a deep, covenantal bond is formed," he says. "When you worship crossculturally, you learn that there are many rooms to worship in. You learn to wait for one another, to respect one another's styles of worship, to experience silence together, to breathe and pray together."

Huh, who spontaneously played his cello at two of the Montreat worship services, is also a church musician. "I was not happy with just words," he says. "I wanted harmony and music."



Paul Huh is the only Korean American serving an Anglo congregation in Newark Presbytery.

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His musicianship has given a gift to other pastors. He just completed editing the "most multicultural hymnal produced in the world so far": the bilingual Korean American *Come Let Us Worship: Korean American Hymnal and Worship Resource* (Westminster John Knox Press). He hopes that its traditional Korean hymns, traditional Anglo hymns, praise songs, and services for the Lord's Day, baptism, and the Eucharist will provide pastors with new voices and texts to reflect emerging cultural diversities in the church.

Conference participants and leaders agreed that diversity is clearly one of the realities that makes the church today a community where both lament and hope are valid. Lament because diversity still divides; hope because Christ proclaims a world where

all are respected and all are one. Diversities of age, ethnic background, race, theology, size of congregation, language, and worship style are just a few of the challenges for pastors. But Brian Blount captivated participants when he brought a "light touch" to the diversity theme.

"Old Testament and New Testament people are like cat and dog people," he said one morning before he began to preach, aiming his gaze playfully at Miller. "They both love animals, but that's where it stops. Like cats, Old Testament scholars are kind of sneaky; they can pounce on you in an instant and claw you up! They act superior and rub all up against you to get what they want. On the other hand, New Testament scholars [that would include Bount!] are like dogs. They are up-front and loyal; faithfully

they fetch your slippers and ask for your love and attention. They live by grace! Even their languages are different: Greek is straightforward, like a dog. You just read it! But you have to 'experience' Hebrew, like you do a cat."

A bit more seriously, Blount took the metaphor further. "The disciples created the church. They carved out a piece of the future and gave it a name: church. Then, if you are a pastor, God dropped you into a pack of unpredictable Christians, a pack full of cat people."

Ben Daniel was happy to claim the role of dog for the pastor. He imagines

the pastor as the sheepdog, herding the sheep. "Pastors organize and care for people, and that can be a positive image when herding is done right," he says. "But shepherds will tell you that if the sheepdog nips at the sheep too much, he is a bad sheepdog. And the sheep are not the only ones who need attention. Dogs need lots of affirmation; so do pastors. Most important, the sheepdog always has an eye on the master, the Good Shepherd."

Not a bad description of a calling that can take you all the way from the fetal position to the church triumphant! ■



Ben Daniel takes renewal time to make clay pots on the wheel in Montreat's pottery shed.

Photo: Krystin Granberg