

Chris McLain: ‘... breaking bread together in faith’

March 8, 2017

Chris McLain has been pastor of First Baptist Church in Crowell two years and three months. From deep in the heart of one Texan, he shares his background and thoughts on church and ministry. To suggest a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated minister to be featured in this column, or to apply to be featured yourself, [click here](#).

Background

- Where else have you served in ministry, and what were your positions there?

Youth ministry intern, Calvary Baptist Church of Vernon, 2007

Youth director, South Park Baptist Church of Lubbock, 2008-10

Youth pastor, associate pastor of youth and interim pastor, Hilltop Christian Fellowship of Crawford, 2010-14

- Where did you grow up?

Vernon, Texas

- How did you come to faith in Christ?

After an ordinary Sunday morning service at Calvary Baptist Church of Vernon. I was 8 years old, and I remember my mother encouraging my little brother and me to pay special attention to the service. That morning, Bro. Ron Fox preached about Noah, but that's all I remember.

After the service, I told my mother I was ready to make the decision people

make when they go to the front during the invitation. She spoke to Bro. Ron and set up a meeting for us during the discipleship hour that evening. I remember sitting in a big studded-leather chair in his office and feeling a little intimidated as he talked to me about the decision I was making. I don't remember any of what he or I said in that conversation, but that evening, I walked the aisle during the invitation to make my decision public.

When Bro. Ron asked me why I came forward, I took the microphone and shared the gospel truth I now knew and believed. I only remember taking the mic, but my father said that was the proudest moment of his life, and I was baptized the next Sunday.

- Where were you educated, and what degrees did you receive?

Vernon College, associate of science degree, December 2007

Texas Tech University, bachelor of science degree in human development and family studies, December 2009

Baylor University's Truett Seminary, master of divinity degree in theology, May 2014

Ministry/church

- Why do you feel called into ministry?

My call came during the summer between my eighth grade and freshman year of high school. I'd taken a spring break mission trip to Carlsbad, N.M., with my youth group and then attended Super Summer that summer. I had a spiritual awakening on the mission trip, and Super Summer was a formative experience.

My faith had become very real and very immediate to my everyday experience on that trip, and as I unpacked the rapid spiritual growth I was

experiencing with my parents, I came to the conclusion that I was called to church ministry. I didn't know exactly what that meant, but I pursued my own spiritual formation and service with vigor through my home church and began serving in youth ministry while I was in college.

It wasn't until the last year and a half of my time at Truett Seminary that I gained clarity about pursuing the pastorate as the primary call of my career. It happened on a "BGCT Day," when Baptist General Convention of Texas staff visit Truett and host chapel service. After the service and into the afternoon, I networked with the BGCT representatives, and everyone I spoke to asked some variation of "So you're a pastor, right?" When Dr. Andy Arterbury stopped me in the stairwell to ask the same question while I was on my way out of the building that day, I suddenly had the sense of being beaten down by the call.

So, I walked home and immediately sat down and prayed a prayer of surrender—it was one of those special moments of spiritual clarity that don't come around often.

- What is your favorite aspect of ministry? Why?

My favorite aspect of ministry is the opportunity I have as a pastor to give informal spiritual direction to people.

I'm the "preacher" at "the Baptist church" to most people in town, but I strive to be a pastor to the whole community. I try to maintain a relatively high profile and participate in a wide range of community events in order to know my town and build relationships with members and non-members of my church.

In the process of doing that week-in and week-out, I occasionally have opportunities to talk to people about their spiritual growth and how their faith interacts with daily life. Some days, that involves wrestling with the conflicts that inevitably arise between Christian identity and national

identity or politics. Some days, it involves puzzling through the experience of suffering and loss. These conversations occur outside the bank on the courthouse square, via text message and even occasionally in my office at church.

I love seeing folks work out their salvation, even with fear and trembling. I ask questions and offer insights, and sometimes I see lightbulbs flicker on above heads. I learn and grow as much from these conversations as my friends do.

I'm not the expert. At my best, I'm "a beggar telling other beggars where to find bread," and there's nothing better than breaking bread together in faith.

- What one aspect of congregational life would you like to change?

There is a long tradition of care and concern for young people in my church and in our community as a whole, and there's a strong sense in Crowell that the life of our town and church is bound up in the well-being of our young people. That means in a town where the potholes are so bad we'd be better off with dirt roads, the school is a gleaming jewel, and in a church where the average age is nearly eligible for Social Security benefits, there's a booming Wednesday night youth ministry. Those are good things, but they also push us toward age-divided, programmatic approaches to ministry.

If I had a magic wand, I'd wipe out the barriers that keep us separated and make us an intergenerational congregation where Sunday morning wasn't predominantly geared toward adults and Wednesday night wasn't predominantly geared toward the students. I'd make it so that our fantastic, part-time youth pastor could attend our church on Sundays and build relationships with senior adults as well as senior high school students, and I'd open the eyes of the students to see how much they could

learn from and enjoy the company of their grandparents' generation.

Celebrating our students' athletic and academic achievements is wonderful, but we are missing out on so much by not getting to know our kids better. And in the same way, it's wonderful that our church can serve as a community center for our students, but when they only have superficial relationships with the pillars of faith in our church, they are missing out on the vital resources they'll need to tackle challenges of faith and life when they strike out on their own.

- How has your ministry or your perspective on ministry changed?

When I first became serious about my faith in high school, my focus was on the capital "T" truth. I loved apologetics and participated in evangelism with a crusader's zeal. My passion for truth and concern for a lost and dying world haven't changed, but the way I approach ministry and mission has.

I've come to realize that for myself and everyone I know, it wasn't a persuasive argument for the truth of the gospel that convinced us to place our faith in Christ and become invested in kingdom life through the church. It was a personal relationship with one or more people over an extended period of time that softened our sinners' hearts. As we witnessed the lives of people of faith over the long term, and as they shared truth with us, the Holy Spirit began a saving work that neither we nor our evangelizing friends could have imagined at the outset.

So, it became clear to me neither evangelism nor salvation are events that happen all at once, and neither operates solely on the spiritual and intellectual level. I became convinced God works through human relationships and tangible acts of love and justice to inject truth into the human heart.

As I read Scripture, that's how I see God's truth mediated to humanity at

every turn. Moses really got to know God on Mount Sinai when he received the Law, and that Law was designed to organize the whole life of God's people, not just save their souls. When Paul wrote his epistles, for the most part, he was writing to people he knew about the particular concerns of their individual communities, and his apostolic effectiveness was tied directly to his personal investment with the people.

Of course, Jesus is the primary example of this. His disciples followed him across the countryside spending time with him in daily life, not simply attending lectures about the kingdom of God. Jesus' miracles addressed the specific needs of particular people, often involving a direct touch and expression of care.

But somewhere along the way, maybe during the Enlightenment period in Europe, we dissociated the soul from the body, denying God made us with both and addressing the needs of the one often impacts the status of the other. If Jesus, in the time of his temptation, subsisted not on earthly bread, but "on every word that comes from the mouth of God," then why can't a soccer ball and a new pair of shoes begin the work of leading an orphan's heart to God?

- Name the three most significant challenges and/or influences facing your congregation.

First, we are a rural congregation in an urbanizing world. In our culture of extraction—a concept I'm borrowing from the [Walter Brueggemann's George Knight Lectures at Logsdon Seminary](#) in November 2016, combined with some of Wendell Berry's thinking—most of the resources are flowing out of our community toward the cities. We produce beef and wheat that is consumed predominantly in urban contexts. We raise and educate children who obtain employment in cities and have little desire and even fewer job options to return and give back to the community and church that brought them up.

In a recent conversation with my Methodist counterpart, we discussed how when Texas booms, Crowell doesn't, and when Texas busts, we hurt more. This affects everything about our congregation. We bury more members than we marry, and we cut the budget every year in anticipation of stagnant wheat prices. The peak in county population came in the 1930s and has dropped steadily since then. Like so many small communities, there is a general sense of being unappreciated for the contributions we make to the world and an undercurrent of fear for the future.

Second, and directly associated with the first, our church is aging steadily. Although we host robust programs for young people, few families are meaningfully connected with our congregation. Much of this has to do with a generational disconnect.

For most of our congregation's history, the bedrock of our congregation was built on a core set of families who raised their children in the church, and those children in turn raised their children here. As new families moved to town, some joined and added their strength to our strength.

But today, that old way of sustaining the membership of the congregation has faltered. The children grow up and move away, and the new families who move to town are very unlike the core congregation. They are mostly poorer and ethnically unlike the majority, and those boundaries are difficult to cross, even when there is a desire to bridge the differences. This means we are not replacing the members who die or move away at a sustainable rate. And even when the will is mustered to take on bold projects to serve and evangelize, there are few able-bodied members to do the heavy lifting. This results in an inward-focus, so that we are tempted to pine after days gone by and focus our energies on maintaining the status quo.

Third, poverty is an ongoing challenge to the congregation, both for those members of limited means or who are on fixed incomes, and also in our outreach. The median household income in our community is less than half

the state average, and that financial stress raises a lot of barriers to our ministry.

Even so, I regularly witness extraordinary acts of generosity as our folks pull together to care for one another.

About Baptists

- What are the key issues facing Baptists—denominationally and/or congregationally?

The defining issues of the present time in Baptist life, and American Christianity in general, are questions revolving around the LGBT community.

On various occasions, friends have suggested these will be the biggest questions we wrestle over in our ministry careers. I've witnessed and participated in countless conversations, and I've spoken frankly with my friends and congregation. I've seen the pain and care on both sides. I've struggled, and I've watched others struggle, with discerning how to balance truth, love and Christian kindness. I've witnessed both sides lash out, voice contempt and condemn. There has been more disunity than unity, and the power games of a bygone age of Baptist wars that were before my time are once again rearing their ugly heads.

All of this pains me deeply. I have friends on all sides, and I sympathize with the spectrum of viewpoints expressed. I've publicly stated where I stand on some of these issues, but I abhor that human beings created in the image of God, many of whom are faithful Christian brothers and sisters, and some of whom are friends and fellow ministers, have been reduced to theological and hypothetical "issues" for us to discuss and fight over. There is wickedness in that sort of dehumanized rhetoric.

But even more than all that, the church has utterly failed in its

responsibility to offer a compelling Christian vision of human life in this broader cultural debate. When it comes to LGBT issues, we've allowed the culture to set the terms of the conversation. Sex and gender identity have been artificially elevated as matters of first importance in our lives and world. All "sides" of this conversation have treated sex and gender issues as if they are nearly as central to Christian faith as the divinity of Christ.

Traditionalists rage against these sins with a spiritual fervor that far outstrips their biblical significance, while the revisionists have treated their free expression as a litmus test of Christian love. Both have allowed culture to set the terms of the conversation when, regardless of where we may stand on these matters, the church should be undermining the idolatry of sex and gender identity in our culture.

If we were to set those concerns back in their proper place, then much of the strife and division we are seeing among Baptists and in the church as a whole would be, perhaps not resolved, but certainly diminished.

About Chris

- What did you learn on the job you wish you learned in seminary?

While I was a student at Texas Tech and serving both as a part-time youth director and volunteering extensively with the Tech Baptist Student Ministry, I had an ongoing inside joke with Jeff Kennon, the Tech BSM director, about "the things they don't teach you in seminary"—like driving around campus looking for dumpsters to offload 2,000 meals worth of garbage after 99 Cent Steak Night, or navigating South Padre Island in a church van at Beach Reach during spring break when the clock strikes midnight on St. Patrick's Day.

I've continued to add lessons to that list, including proper technique for shoveling snow around handicap spaces in the church parking lot on the morning of a big funeral while wearing a suit and tie, and tidbits like how

to respond properly to the witty banter and jokes made in poor taste around the table at the local cowboy café at breakfast time.

Seminary was one of the most formative and meaningful seasons in my life. I look back on those years with great fondness. But as helpful as it was, I'm thankful both before and during my seminary studies I already was engaged in congregational ministry. Even when you're making it up as you go along, the experience of leading and serving a congregation and getting your hands dirty, physically as well as spiritually, provides insight and ministerial framework that simply can't be taught.

As the aforementioned lessons indicate, ministry teaches you not to take yourself so seriously, and it teaches you to love real people where they are.

- Name some of your favorite books (other than the Bible) or authors, and explain why.

Wendell Berry has had an enormous impact on me personally, and my approach to ministry. I've only begun to scratch the surface of his literary corpus, but titles including *Farming: A Hand Book*, *Jayber Crow* and *What Are People For?* have been particularly insightful. As a son of a rural community, I appreciate Berry's attention to the plight of the small, some would say "backwater," communities in the country. He sees the richness of the land others dub "flyover country." His attention to "place," home and observation of ordinary lives has been remarkably helpful to me in ministry and personally. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Robert Creech at Truett Seminary for introducing me to Wendell Berry in his "Life and Work of the Pastor" class, and it is my understanding that Dr. Creech first came across Berry's writing because it is referenced by Eugene Peterson, who reads Berry by substituting his mentions of "place" and "land" with "congregation" and "parish."

Coincidentally, Eugene Peterson himself has become another favorite

author, particularly his book, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*. It is because of Peterson's book that I've largely eliminated the word "busy" from my vocabulary. Peterson says pastors become busy for two reasons—first, because we are vain and want to appear important; and second, because we are lazy and let others dictate the way we use our time. With this in mind, Peterson reframes the work of a pastor as praying, preaching and listening. These insights, and many others, from Peterson's work also have been particularly formative for my ministry. I struggle and strive to be "unbusy" and to always have time for people.

As a young pastor, I seek to humble myself and listen more than I speak. In doing so, I come to know my congregation, my "field" in the language of Berry, so that I can serve them faithfully.

- What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?

My favorite Bible passage is [Romans 12:1-2](#).

I first encountered it meaningfully while I was a high school student attending a worship conference for youth group praise bands. Paul's image of a "living sacrifice" struck a chord of truth in my heart, and I've found it a helpful touchstone in my spiritual life. It was in Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* that I first came across the corollary saying, "The problem with a *living* sacrifice is that it can crawl off the altar." So it is a daily task, or as Warren says, sometimes a "50 times a day" task to offer myself as a living sacrifice.

And along with this image of the "living sacrifice," Paul continues in verse two with the instruction, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." I've always had an intellectual bent, so the idea of a transformed and renewed

mind appealed to me.

Christians practice a different sort of thinking that leads them to a different sort of interaction with the world, an interaction that is directed by the will of God. This idea of discerning God's will through a renewed mind has been helpful for me at various stages in my personal and spiritual development. I think it generally is true of young people who are serious about their faith, and it certainly has been true of me at times, that we are occupied with a desire to discern the will of God for our lives. There are many ways we try to divine God's will; through some spiritual "sign" or opening our Bibles to a verse at random, for example. And although I can't rule those insights out completely, I've found that using a mind transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit to consider the various options that fall within the will of God is a far more reliable method of discernment. I've found that God honors the choices we make with the minds he's given when we approach them from the position of a living sacrifice.

- Who is your favorite Bible character (other than Jesus)? Why?

This is a far more difficult question than it seems. I have lots of favorites, but the one who strikes my fancy at the moment is Ehud, the second judge recorded in Judges. His story is recorded in [Judges 3](#), and it's a marvelously composed piece of satire and wordplay.

Ehud himself is a left-handed Benjamite, literally a "left-handed son of the right hand," and Israel's adversary in the story is the Moabite king, Eglon, a very fat man whose name sounds like the word for "fatted calf." It's a raucous story full of innuendo and prominently features potty humor as the enemies of God's people are shamed and Ehud escapes having assassinated King Fat Calf, got his hands "dirty," and returned home to lead his people to an astonishing victory in which Moab switches from oppressor demanding tribute to subject offering the same.

All we know about Ehud comes from those 19 verses, and he's perhaps my favorite reminder of God's highly developed, elementary-school level sense of humor.

- If you could get one “do over” in ministry, what would it be, and why?

When I was a student at Texas Tech and just starting to work in congregational ministry, I got deeply involved in the Tech BSM international student ministry. My “do over” would be taking another crack at the work I did with those students.

With basically no cross-cultural training, missional naiveté and the best of intentions, I started knocking on the doors of students from at least 10 different nations living in my apartment complex and inviting them to a Bible study. If I could go back, I would be a lot less focused on the programmatic model of attracting students to a Bible study in my apartment and more interested in getting to know them on their terms.

I now realize that as desperately as many of them needed to hear the gospel, there was so much learning that I missed out on because I didn't take the time to listen more. Deeper friendships and dialogue with those men and women from India, Iran, China, Ethiopia, Nigeria and elsewhere could have benefited my faith and worldview as much as I could benefit theirs.

- What are some of the benefits of doing ministry in your context?

Crowell is 30 miles from where I grew up, and it's my father's hometown. My moving here makes me fourth-generation Foard County, and much of my sense of call is bound up with Crowell being a sort of “home.” I am both an insider and an outsider—an insider in that my family is known, and an outsider in that I was not personally known until I came. I take that to be the best of both worlds.

I remember a comment in one of Wendell Berry's books that many young seminary preachers were called to *come* pastor his small, rural church near Louisville, Ky., but none had ever been called to *stay*. With Berry, I believe small, rural, out-of-the-way churches deserve good pastors, too.

So, I'm here in Crowell, and I have no plans to leave anytime soon because ministry in Crowell is like serving a church in Mayberry. It's hard to overstate the pleasantness of the slow pace of life, and the benefits of living along with the seasons. Since moving here, I've taken up gardening and beekeeping, and I've rekindled my old loves of hiking, fishing and camping. When I walk back across the alley from having supper with my neighbors in the evening, I can look up and see so many stars that it's given me a whole new appreciation for God's promise that Abraham's descendants will be as numerous as they are.

Rubbing shoulders with my congregation at the grocery store, pharmacy, bank and restaurant fosters a biblical sense of community life that I've never experienced elsewhere. In our digital, connected, fast-paced world, I think most people are starved for true community. That's something the church offers, but it's hard to do when the only time you see your Christian brothers and sisters is at worship.

I love Crowell because so many of those barriers are stripped away and the church can really be a community center. There's certainly a sacrifice we make in return for that simplicity, but it's so worth it.

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