

October 11, 2026

Philippians 4:1-9 “What, Me Worry?”

In 1933, the Pension Fund of the Christian Church declared the second week in October as “Week of the Ministry.” Our denomination still recognizes it as a time to appreciate people in all forms of ministry. They encourage congregations to celebrate people who have answered the call to vocational ministry and to foster relationships with those who may be *considering* a call to vocational ministry. It’s a big deal for most Disciples congregations. Typically preachers use the time to talk about how awesome it is to serve in the ministry. Some will lift up outdoor ministry and say something about how many clergy received their calls at church camp. Other pastors tell stories about clergy mentors who helped and encouraged them over the years. Still others lift up our denomination’s colleges and seminaries or remind folks of church members who went on to serve in the ministry. That’s not where I’m going this morning. Not yet at least. I’m afraid I need to paint a picture for you that may seem a little ... bleak at first. Hang in there. I promise it will get better.

Since the very beginning of the Christian Faith, there have been different expressions of the church. The two most common are Catholics and Protestants. Our church is Protestant. We can trace our roots back to Central Europe in 1517. Here in the United States, Protestants have always been the dominant expression of the church. But there are a *lot* of different denominations like Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, various charismatic churches, and sooooo many Baptists. The two most prominent Protestant churches are usually described as mainline and evangelical. Those labels aren't perfect, and there is plenty of overlap between them. Historically, mainline denominations have tended to emphasize established institutions, theological breadth, ecumenical cooperation and the church's responsibility to engage the larger society. Evangelical churches have tended to place greater emphasis on biblical authority, personal conversion and an individual's relationship with Jesus Christ. We are part of the mainline tradition.

Once upon a time, *mainline* Protestantism was the dominant expression of Christianity in America. That started to change in the 1960s when mainline Protestant churches started a long decline, and evangelical Protestant churches started growing and quickly surpassed the mainline. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, evangelical churches leveled out and remained strong while mainline churches continued shrinking. Something changed in 2000 though. The issue was no longer that Americans were changing *which* church they attended. They just started abandoning churches altogether. For the next 10 years, mainline churches continued to decline, but evangelical churches were declining too. I tell you who was growing though – the SBNRs. That’s “Spiritual But Not Religious.”

This completely changed the religious landscape. The 1960s did not produce an immediate collapse in religious participation. Even as late as 1999, 70% of Americans still claimed to be part of a congregation. In 2025? Only 45%. Okay, then *why* did this happen? Hard to tell because there are competing explanations — lower birth rates, generational shifts, political polarization, scandals, institutional distrust, the rise of “SBNRs,” weakening social pressure to claim a religious identity, secularization, *and* people leaving because they just found church irrelevant.

So what does this mean for people who answered a call to vocational ministry in the early 1990s? Well, many of them are praying, “Oh please God, help keep things together until I can retire!” Not me though. And it’s not just because I’m fortunate enough to be leading an exceptionally high-functioning Mainline Protestant Church, but that *is* part of it. And it’s not because Paul said, “Do not worry about anything” in our scripture lesson for the morning. See, I’m a gold-medal award winning worry-wart and have been since childhood. *My* hope is in verse 8 – “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, *think about these*

things.” That and, “Plan ahead, be flexible,” a lesson I learned from Jerry Mattingly, a wise professor who helped us navigate a Middle East travel seminar when I was in seminary. And, of course, and my mentor Jack Musik said, “Boy, you gotta stop worrying about things. Get out of the way and let God do the work.” Then, of course, there’s my current spiritual director, Amber St Clare who says, “What we chase runs from us, but when we are still we attract.”

The most important question I think we have as we enter this Week of the Ministry is: “*What does faithful ministry look like when the institution we’ve inherited is changing in front of us?*” We adapt. Rather than forcing ministry to continue looking the way it looked in 1991 when I received the call to vocational ministry, we pay attention to what God is doing *now*. For decades, a lot of church-growth experts asked, “How can we get more people to fill our pews?” Oh, well ... you’ve got to change the music. You’ve got to advertise better. Start a contemporary service. Start a children’s program. Build a website. Broadcast online. Make worship more visitor-friendly. And there’s nothing inherently wrong with any of that. Shoot, we’ve got a website. We’re online. But the assumption of a lot of churches is that what we do here in our building on Sunday morning is the most important part of our ministry, and our sole purpose is to persuade people to come participate in what we’re already doing.

But it isn’t. Yes, our building is our biggest asset. Church Extension told us that almost 20 years ago. But there are so many ministry needs *beyond* these walls. So instead of asking, “How do we get people to come *here* on Sunday mornings,” maybe we should ask, “What are the most heart-felt ministry needs in our community and how can the church be present there?”

The work we do with the Chico Area Interfaith Council isn’t about getting people to join First Christian church. Obviously. The radio show I do isn’t designed to funnel listeners into Sunday worship. When I conduct a funeral for a family with no church connection, or when we

open a boutique to serve foster families we're doing ministry among people who may never sit in our sanctuary on Sunday morning. And *that's okay!* If they do, that's just a byproduct of our faithfulness. But it's not the reason for our existence.

But when we scramble around trying to fill our pews hoping that the glory days will suddenly come back, that's worrying! Well yeah pastor, but it's worrying with a strategic plan in mind, right? No! Paul offered something *different* to the church in Philippi: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable ... think about *these* things." Or to put it another way: Pay attention.

Look around. Where do you see something true? Pay attention to it. Where do you see justice happening? Get involved. Where do you see something beautiful and life-giving? Encourage it. Where are people hurting? Go there. Where are people lonely? Sit with them. Where people are hungry for community but wouldn't dream of walking through the doors of a church on Sunday morning? Maybe that's where ministry needs to go next. That's what I've learned about ministry over the years. The *shape* of ministry changes. The *institution* changes. The *culture* changes. But God doesn't stop working just because the organizational chart we've inherited isn't working the way it used to. Maybe that's what Jack was trying to tell me all those years when he said, "Boy, you gotta stop worrying about things. Get out of the way and let God do the work." He wasn't telling me to do *nothing*. He was telling me to *stop confusing my anxiety with God's responsibility*. A pastor's job isn't to "save the church." And thank God for that! Our job is to pay attention to where God is already at work and then ask, "How can I be part of that?"

Okay, but the statistics! You can't ignore the statistics. Red alert! We've got to *do* something! Listen, when 70% becomes 45%, our response can't simply be to get the 45% back up to 70%. See what I'm saying? That's just chasing. Instead of asking, "*How do we get them here?*" ask,

“Where are they, what is happening in their lives, and how can the church be *present* there?” Like Amber said, “What we chase runs from us, but when we are still, we attract.”

So many churches spend an enormous amount of time and energy chasing attendance, membership, money, cultural influence, and the past. The lesson in our passage this morning gives us a better path – “Pay attention to what is good. Practice those things and the God of peace will be with you.” Which sounds a bit like what Professor Mattingly taught in the Middle East Travel Seminar: “Plan ahead. Be flexible.” Plan ahead? Absolutely. We *should* think about the future of the church. We should be responsible with our resources. We should ask hard questions about what works and what doesn’t. But be flexible. Because the church of 2036 probably isn't going to look like the church of 2026. And that's okay. Paul doesn't tell the Philippians to preserve what they've got. He tells them to pay attention to what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing and commendable — and then, in the very next verse, he tells them to *do* those things.

Pay attention to what God is doing. Pay attention to the *people* God puts in front of us. Pay attention to what is true and just and beautiful and life-giving. And then go do it some more. Because that's ministry. And maybe that's what we ought to celebrate during Week of the Ministry. Not just pastors. Not just people who went to seminary. Not just those of us who answered a vocational call a long time ago. Ministry is what happens whenever the people of God pay attention to where God is *already* at work and show up. So, what does faithful ministry look like when the institution we've inherited is changing in front of us? Be still. Pay attention. Be flexible. And stop worrying that it's *our* job to save the church. It isn't. Our job is to *be* the church. And Paul says when we do that, “the God of peace will be with you.”

What, me worry? Well ... probably. But I'm still working on that. Thank you for allowing me to serve as your pastor.