



So Where's the Good News in This?
A Round Table Conversation on Relational Ministry
August 12, 2026

Adam Borneman: Hi friends, this is Adam Borneman with the Ministry Collaborative, and I'm looking forward to a conversation today with my colleagues Adam Mixon, Mark Ramsey, and Beth Daniel. Our staff has been having an ongoing conversation – not just among ourselves, but with the many pastors and lay leaders we work with – about the tumultuous times we live in and how to navigate that. And one of the variables that comes up in that conversation that, probably, doesn't receive enough attention is just the relational part of that work. As pastors, as we're wading into complex cultural, economic, political, racial waters in our communities, how do we make sure we're staying close to folks? How do we make sure we're staying close enough to challenge folks who may blindly agree with everything we say because they agree with how we tend to lean, or staying close to folks who won't? And also, at the same time, trusting our folks enough to be followers of Jesus so that we're not patronizing, so that we're not just playing it safe from the pulpit, or otherwise, because we're afraid that they won't be able to get it. So I want to use that relational framework to talk about these complex issues, and wondering where you all might want to jump in.

Adam Mixon: I saw a through-line there, Adam, between relational and relationship requires proximity. Proximity absolutely demands contextualization. And I'm thinking of all the ways that we've studied Scripture, and how letters that Paul wrote are read in 50 different ways, but most of them not being read connected to the context into which he was speaking. So we end up, on the one hand, with something that we're fighting about, when I think the goal was, actually, to gather us around something, or a way of thinking, that was more unifying. It's funny how old problems are new problems.

Beth Daniel: We talk about preaching a lot, even though we say preaching is just one of the ways that we are fulfilling our call and leadership in ministry. But most people in our network are pastors first. And I'm really grateful for the ways that we have these conversations with each other, and with those in the TMC orbit, about how their preaching needs to come out of their pastoring; how important that is, that they're not giving a weekly speech, but they're giving something that's connected to those faces that they're looking into in a room. And I do think that it's become so hard to remember that. Since the Pandemic, so many of our services are online, and you lose a little bit of that, if you even pay attention to pleasing the masses who are not in the room.

I taught a class in my former church and they wanted to record it. And I said "no", because it changes the way people answer the questions that I pose if they think they're being recorded and someone else can hear it. And I recognize the difficulty of our pastors who face that every single week, that there are things you'd say in a room because you're relational and you're connected and it's contextualized, that you may be hesitant to say because you know others are listening – not because you have anything to hide, but because it's personal. So, I just recognize, I'm just naming that, as an extra challenge, I think, that pastors and preachers have today.

Mark Ramsey: Yeah. I think particularly, in regard to any place of strife or potential division in a faith community, the absolute best thing any of us can do as pastors or leaders is go talk to a half dozen people who we know are across some spectrum and probably don't agree; not to gain consensus, not to politic it, simply to listen to their hopes and fears. When it comes to the issue of change – "Oh, people

don't like change" – we've said this before: I don't think it's change. People fear loss. They fear they're going to lose something. I think, in most political debates, if you dig down – and I'm not a political scientist or a sociologist – but if you dig down, at least some of the hyper-ness to this is: people fear something's at stake they're going to lose. I'm not sure we can solve that, but listening carefully to it, and understanding it pastorally, is, at least, going to give us firmer ground on how to lead from there.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. I don't think we can underestimate the need to get close enough to people to hear them, and to honor their stories and their insights without judgment. I'm struck by our work, and the fact that we do emphasize relationship, and how we are affected by one another's stories; and how, in 99% of those instances, there's a positive outcome where I'm broadened, where I become more compassionate and more sensitive and more aware of my neighbor. We're skipping a step somewhere, and, I think, Beth, your finger is right on it: in the name of reaching more people or whatever, or having more engagement, we're compromising the value of these immediate relationships. And that tears communities apart at some point.

Adam Borneman: I want to pick up on something Mark said, because I think he actually understated it. I'd be willing to say that fear really is at the heart of so much of it: people fearing the loss of possibility, the loss of a status quo, the loss of "once upon a time when things were like this", a loss of economic security...but we can make a very long list. But what I want to add to that is it occurs to me, in that, that pastors also fear loss. "If I say this thing or that thing, there's a risk. There's a loss that's at stake in this. I'm going to lose a relationship. I'm going to lose so-and-so who's been a part of this congregation." And, I think, on the one hand, just psychologically, we tend to overestimate. And Adam, this is to your point: I think we probably overestimate on the risk calculation there. I think maybe we wouldn't have as many losses, but I do think it's there.

And for that reason, as you all are talking, I'm thinking a lot about...a lot of our listeners are probably somewhat familiar with Ed Friedman's work, and it reminds me a lot of that: just knowing that you are walking into an emotional system where you have to, somehow, stay emotionally connected, but differentiated; that you somehow have to be willing to go in and say the hard thing and facilitate the hard conversation, but not get so sucked into it that you contribute even more to the anxiety in the room. So there's some very practical ways of thinking about that. But to tie that all together is to say, but I think the starting point is acknowledging that there really is a fear of loss that's going on with a lot of folks in our congregations. I know that's not the only thing, but from where I sit and from the pastors I talk to, I'd be willing to wager that's a pretty significant one.

Beth: So where's the good news in this? I mean, this is an odd and wondrous calling. We've named the fears that we carry on behalf of our congregations, and the fears that we carry as ministry leaders, which, frankly, is a job a lot of the time. We just want to keep a job. But we do believe that this is a precious and privileged position. And so, what is some of the good news for what we do, and how we do it, and how to do it well?

Adam Borneman: Well, Beth, I'll just briefly jump right back on it because it was already in mind. I think the good news is the reminder, as cliché as it may sound, reminding people things like: there's nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And then, you just make a long list of what the things that we think can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And all of a sudden, that doesn't become so cliché anymore, if we're willing to dig deep around those sort of truths. All the promises and commandments in Scripture of "do not fear". And then, why is that? It's because the Lord is with you. You don't actually have to fear. And we're not trying to minimize the human element and all

that. Obviously we all have fears and griefs and a sense of loss. But I think that is the good news, Beth, is it's a Gospel promise, it's an eschatological promise, that we don't have to fear, because nothing can separate us from God's love.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. I'm thinking, Adam, and again, not trying to sound flippant or dismissive at all, but I'm retreating to the Gospel where Jesus says, "The one who seeks to save his life will lose it. But the one who loses it for my sake actually saves it." All of the stuff that we are counting as loss is an elaborate illusion. Anything lost in the cause of Christ is actually toward an eternal gain. And if I don't believe that, I'm not preaching.

Mark: Yeah, I would add to that, and Beth, it's an excellent question. The good news is the Spirit is working to put a wind at our backs toward all these issues, and not in our face. Culture puts wind in our face. The Holy Spirit puts wind at our back. The high calling and joy of getting to know people in their most tender and vulnerable moments as a pastor or a deacon or an elder or somebody in church life; the joy of being a faith community that is inter-generational, so you actually get to know people who have lived through different parts of life and learn from them and share with them and then talk about God in that context, there are so few places in our culture where that can take place; the joy of the sound of Christian adults sitting in a circle talking about Scripture: first awkwardly, and then with gaining confidence and insight, and then delighting in the sharing of others, and the laughter that comes with that, and sometimes the tears and the insight, that's good news. And I know that happens every single week in faith community after faith community. And it's not getting headlines.

Beth: Gosh, I love this part of our conversation, because sometimes pastors and preachers need to be pastored and preached to. And I hope that even the encouragement to remember what you believe, to remember where your hope lies, to remember that God's faithfulness does not depend on ours, that is such good news as we try and fail and try again to do this work. You know, I'm wondering: we've all served in pastoral ministry, and we all are in contact with people who continue to do good work for the Kingdom. And I'm wondering if maybe we can share some stories about people or situations that do this well, that proclaim good news, that experience good news?

Adam Borneman: I've been thinking the last few minutes about a colleague who I've gotten to know well the last few years up in North Georgia. And he is in a more decidedly progressive church in the middle of an area that's just not in a lot of different ways. And it's a healthy congregation. They do really well. And he was just joyfully telling me last week about how much he's enjoyed just, really, preaching a very simple, clear Gospel in this congregation the past few months. And this is a congregation that they're, in all the ways you might expect, is engaged in the community for the work of justice and relieving poverty in so many different ways. He has enough relational trust there that people are not going to doubt where the work is going to be and where the heart is. And yet, he was also finding so much joy, and just proclaiming and nurturing a very simple, deep Gospel proclamation with these folks. And I loved hearing about that.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. I think, Adam, probably a little more just close to my heart is watching how folks embrace the Gospel, are transformed by it, and then become a part of the story. And they start curating their experience and sharing it with one another. Watching that happen in these small groups is the best part of this job. It's not so much in my declaration or teaching, but watching them embrace this story and be changed, and then realize that their experience is a part of that story. And they start sharing with one another – kind of to Mark's earlier point. And they're encouraging one another and walking with each other through healing across generations. It's underestimated. It is just grossly underestimated.

Mark: Well, it doesn't get headlines and it doesn't spur a thousand emails.

I'm thinking of a hospice chaplain I had lunch with not long ago. That's hard work, because it's a short-term relationship. And she was talking about the joy she takes in being able to walk with people. And she admitted: half the people she's "walking with" can't walk and really can't communicate well, but getting to know the web of family and friends and honoring that last chapter of life. I'm thinking about two preachers in particular that probably, outside their context, no one's heard of. They're in pretty small churches, both of them. When I listen to their sermons, every single Sunday, I can tell they're preaching to people they know well and love. They're not the most brilliant sermons in the world. They'll never be published, but they are communicating to me what is the best part of proclaiming the Gospel in the context of that.

And I'm thinking also of leaders of pretty complex systems who walk into it every day, and lead through the complexity, and try to fashion a way forward in service of Jesus Christ, even when it's really hard. Because, you know, you're never going to get everyone to agree, but they keep doing it – not for themselves, enough for popularity, but for the sake of a pretty large goal. Their churches have been given incredible resources, and they know those have to be deployed for the Gospel, come hell or high water.

Beth: You know, I have a pretty important story from this weekend. We are currently in Dallas, and over the July 4th weekend, it was the one-year anniversary of the devastating floods in the Hill Country. And our church lost some children at Camp Mystic. We have families and communities that were deeply affected, and continue to be deeply affected. And I walked into church on Sunday, and I saw two families, who lost children, serving communion. And I just thought, "What an incredible witness to something that is so much bigger than I can offer, or my husband, the preacher of that day, could offer." And it just reminds me: we have a big God who is doing the heavy lifting, and we just get to participate in that, if we keep our eyes on that God.