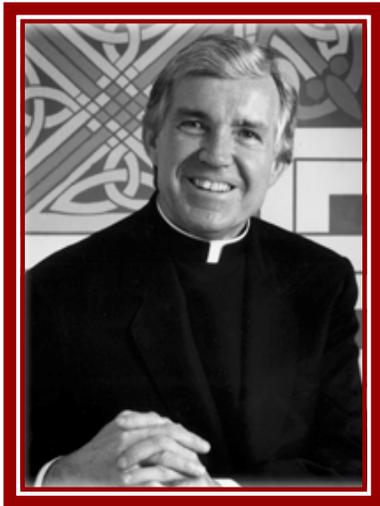


# Jack Wall

## on Being a Pastor with Imagination

(First in a three-part series of  
conversations with members of the  
Pastors' Working Group)

By Tracy Schier



For two years, a dozen pastors representing several Christian denominations met together every other month in what was known as the Pastors' Working Group. This initiative, sponsored by the Louisville Institute, was one of several Lilly Endowment programs intended to assist and study pastoring in the U.S. — What do pastors think about? How do they think? What are their concerns? What are their greatest challenges? In the words of Lilly Vice President for Religion Craig Dykstra, “In a nutshell, we (Lilly Endowment) wanted to create a cycle of learning from and for pastoral leadership for the sake of congregational life.”

Other related Endowment-sponsored programs include the Initiative to Strengthen Congregational Leadership that has two components: The Program to Enhance Theological Schools Capacities for Congregational Ministry, and the Theological Programs for High School Youth. The Endowment also initiated the Indiana Clergy Renewal and the National Clergy Renewal programs through which pastors could apply for grants that allow them to take time away from their congregation for a renewal program intended to benefit both the congregation and the pastor. Also, the Endowment funded a program at the Center for

Theological Inquiry at Princeton that brings pastors and theologians into conversation, and it sponsored two books by Paul Wilkes that identify and analyze outstanding Protestant and Catholic congregations.

Rev. Jack Wall, a member of the Pastors' Working Group, is a Roman Catholic priest in the archdiocese of Chicago and pastor of St. Patrick's Church in the heart of the city. His parish, most commonly known around the windy city as "old St. Pats," had but four parishioners in 1983 when Wall was appointed pastor. He explains that the primary reason the church remained opened after the majority of church members were long dispersed to the suburbs was that it was one of Chicago's oldest buildings, holding the distinction of surviving the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Wall explains that in 1953 the Kennedy Expressway cut across Chicago, disturbing the inner city and propelling families outward — away from the neighborhoods and parishes of their parents and grandparents.

What is a pastor to do when he inherits an aged, historical building that serves only four people? Someone with the vision and stamina of Wall imagines the development of an intentional church, one that defines its mission more by what it does than by where it is geographically located. Nineteen years after taking the leadership, Wall's "Old St. Pat's" serves some 4000 parishioners from all over the greater Chicago area — no zip code in the area has more than 5% of the membership.

In the following edited conversation, Jack Wall talks about his experience in the Pastors' Working Group as well as about his congregation and his pastoral vision. The conversation is edited.

**Q. Let's begin by talking about your experience in the Pastors' Working Group. What expectation did you have when you were invited to join?**

**A.** I think the biggest hook for me was having an opportunity to explore what Craig Dykstra and others are calling the "pastoral imagination". This was a real opportunity for me to engage in sustained conversations with others who have both similar and very different experiences in their pastoring. I realized that I had been very busy "being" a pastor and doing all the things that are expected in the job description. But I had very little opportunity to step back and think about how my work is shaped by a pastoral imagination.

And let me digress to say that a rough definition of the pastoral imagination goes something like this: it is how we imagine the world in a way that shapes everything that a pastor is and does. Craig Dykstra, in the Lilly newsletter [\*Initiatives in Religion\* \(Spring 2001, vol. 9, no1\)](#), states that he believes that pastoral imagination requires a peculiar intelligence that involves specific capacities of mind, spirit, and action that are specific to pastoral ministry itself. He describes a confluence of several things that contribute to the pastoral imagination — a constant attention to Scripture; sorting through the gospel's calls and demands; the experiences of leading worship, preaching, and teaching; responding to requests for help of all kinds from all kinds of people; living with people of all ages through whole life-cycles marked both by joy and mourning; and not unimportantly, the unending demands of running a non-profit organization that has buildings, budgets, personnel and community relations issues. So, you can see that there are many things that contribute to this pastoral imagination.

I found that my experience in the Pastors' Working Group helped me to understand those things in relation to my own pastoral ministry — and to do it in a vigorous ecumenical setting was part of the genius of the experience.

**Q. How did the ecumenical aspect of the conversations enrich the experience?**

**A.** When you think about the evolution of all of the Christian churches you see that they were created by different expressions of imagination. Each church looks at a particular situation with a set of different eyes. What was so delightful was that, despite the varying ecclesial imaginations and experiences of the pastors in the group, we all could come to understand that we have a common Christian faith and many theological and personal experiences in common as well.

I sensed that the program honored the ministry of pastoring no matter what the person's denomination. There was a tremendous amount of sympathetic conversation as we shared our stories and our differing situations. There were a number of points of synergy — for me one of the most meaningful had to do with the experiences of those of us who are pastors in central city churches.

Years ago I heard the great theologian Edward Schillebeeckx talk about how he saw himself as a research theologian and that he viewed pastors as the

experimental theologians. That has stayed with me throughout this whole experience, and Schillebeeckx's honoring of the role of pastor seemed to come alive in the same way. One important part of the Pastors' Working Group was the reflective paper that each of us wrote after each session. Writing and sharing these papers helped us all to understand how we see, name, and respond to God in our particular corner of the world and how we understand our pastoral vocation.

**Q. Are you doing anything differently now in your parish after having had the two-year experience in the Pastors' Working Group?**

**A.** I know I am doing things more reflectively now. I think all of us, back in our congregations, maintain a "consciousness of the group" and of all that we learned from one another and shared and are still applying. We had wonderful readings and they have stuck with me. I pass these on to my staff and to interested members of the congregation. I had opportunities to share some of what I was absorbing as a member of the group with our board as well.

**Q. Did you learn things specific to other denominations that you are able to translate to the Catholic experience?**

**A.** I guess I have to say that I have continuing dialogue in my heart and mind with the members of the group. To share just one particular instance — I was particularly struck by the social justice mission of one of the participants, Lillian Daniels, who is pastor of the Church of the Redeemer in New Haven, Connecticut. I would have to say that I am not as much of an activist as she is, but listening to her story of how her congregation has been engaging in the promotion of social change and transformation was a big help to me in clarifying where we are going. I could listen to her experiences, and to her definition of the mission of her church, and apply these things to my own Catholic tradition and situation. I am greatly helped by her experiences. May I add, also, that the Pastor's Working Group offered a great opportunity to get to know women pastors and to understand the gifts that they bring to their ministry.

**Q. Can you talk a bit about your own pastoral experience? What was it like coming into a parish that had only four members and a very old — albeit historical — building?**

**A.** When I came, St. Pats was really just a building and not truly a church any more. I think that when I started in 1983 I was using my pastoral imagination (although I would not have defined it as such back then) to see that new life could come out of something that had died here in the inner city. It certainly could not be “same old, same old” in any way. Actually, many of my friends and family thought I was crazy to take up this parish. But I knew early on that the traditional, geographically or ethnically defined parish was not what could happen here. I looked around. And I knew, instinctively maybe, that mission centeredness had to be the answer for this parish. And you find the mission by looking at the needs around you in the larger culture.

I saw immediately that there was a need to serve young adults — men and women ranging in age from 21 to 35. If you think of the typical Catholic parish after World War II — these were places that catered to people who were married, had mortgages, and had children. It was a period also when people often worked for the same company their entire working life. Then along came the 70s and you find a whole generation of Christians who are out of college and simply don't fit into that existing type of parish structure. By the 1980s many of the old social contracts broke down — work became problematic no matter what a person's level of education; families and family structures had changed; and many religious convictions and values were changing as well. I could see that there were young adults all over the Chicago area who needed the kind of parish that I hoped we could develop.

Gradually, by offering good liturgies and presentations that spoke to young adults, and even by doing some advertising in the local press and by engaging high profile speakers, we attracted members from all over greater Chicago. We have truly become an intentional church.

I think I knew instinctively, and this was reinforced in the Working Group, that a good pastor has to listen to the imagination of others. Just consider this — of our current 4,000 members, this parish now has 150 couples who are Catholic and Jewish. Think of the challenge of helping each of these couples to honor each other's tradition, and of helping them to know how they should teach their children. Think of our post-September 11 challenges of bringing Christians, Jews and Muslims together to pray, to share, to begin to have common understandings, and certainly, to mourn together. Without listening to the imaginings and the faith experiences of others we would be impoverished.

**Q. If a new pastor were to come to you for advice, what would be some of the things you might say to him or her?**

**A.** I would first address a big fear — a fear that many have who are taking on the responsibility of congregational leadership — that you have to “do it all,” and even more daunting, you have to be good at doing it all. No pastor can, or should, do it all.

Then I would say to new pastors that they have to believe that they are on holy ground. They are responding to people who are coming from all over the place — the pastor has to meet them at the place of their experience and know the potential for that experience to influence the congregation and its mission.

New pastors must be fascinated with where they find themselves and remember that their congregation is not a cookie cutter franchise — like a hamburger stand. Rather, it is a special place where special things happen. The pastor has to be the person who believes most deeply that things can happen in the congregation and to recognize that how it happens is not wholly dependent on the pastor. After all, what happens is of God — the pastor must never forget that.

As a pastor I learned a long time ago that my best work was not my work as the administrator of the parish. And now I am fortunate to have a lay executive director whose vocation is to be a manager. Pastors must understand the difference between being a pastor and being an administrator – and maybe even more importantly, we must trust the laity. This is so important. The vocation of our lay members and their gifts provide the richness that defines the mission of the congregation. My first mentor, Dan Cantwell, years ago brought home to me the idea that the church is God’s lay movement in the world and that the priest is the chaplain to that lay movement. I believe that.