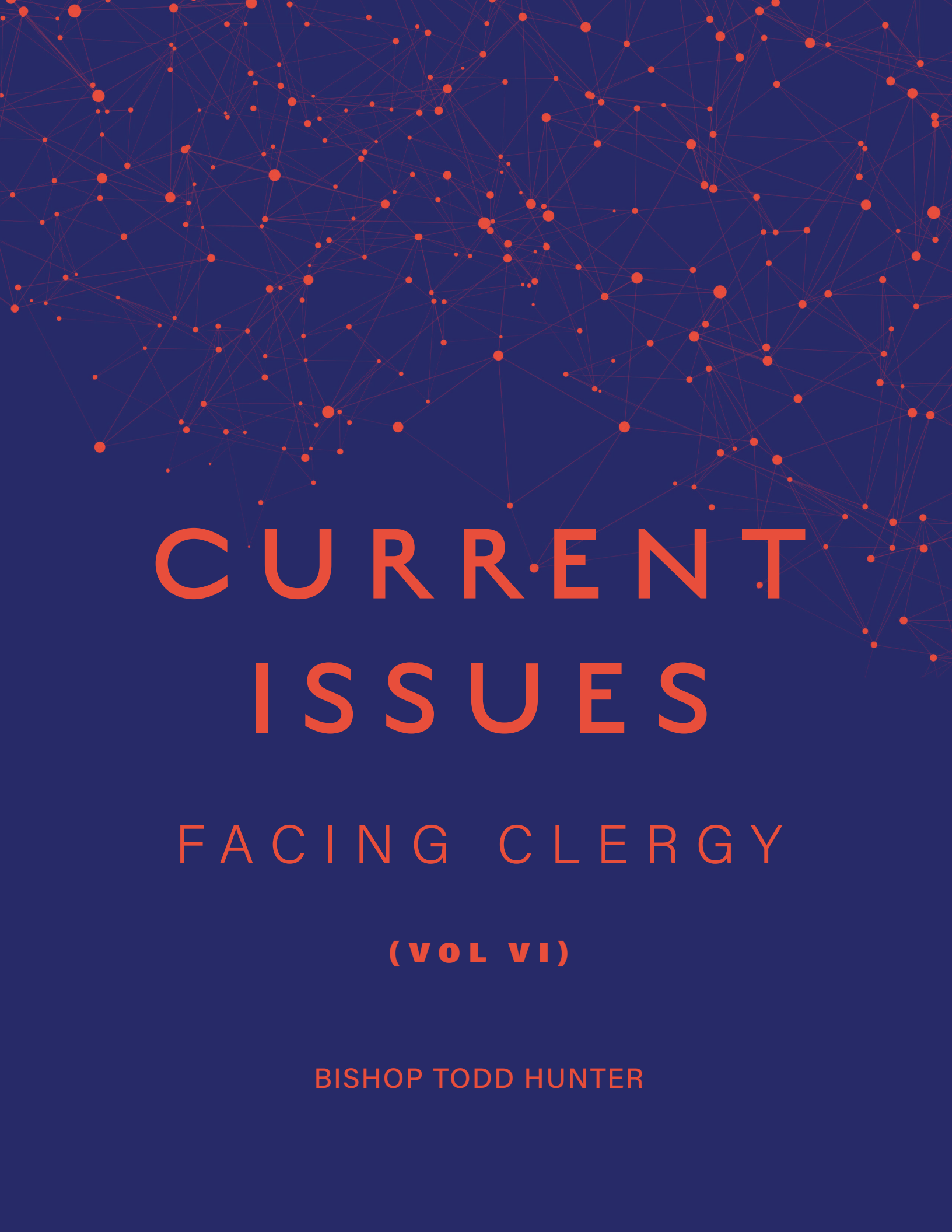


An abstract graphic of a network or web, composed of numerous small orange dots connected by thin, light orange lines, set against a dark blue background. The network is dense and sprawling, filling the upper half of the cover.

# CURRENT ISSUES

FACING CLERGY

**(VOL VI)**

BISHOP TODD HUNTER

# Leadership in Uncertain and Fatiguing Times

*Humanly speaking, it is impossible.  
But not with God. Everything is possible with God.*

Mark 10:27 (NLT)

*The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him;  
though he may stumble, he will not fall,  
for the LORD upholds him with his hand.*

Psalm 37:23-24

Lexi was involved in a serious car crash. She suffered multiple fractures in one leg and her opposite foot was crushed. Now she is in the hospital in traction, and even with strong medicine, she is in pain. She is stuck. Confined. Frustrated. Itching. Annoyed.

Lexi, of course, is waiting for the day she can get back to *normal*, back to investing her gifts in the world. But she wonders: Will there be a *new* normal? Will a limp now be her constant sidekick? Is arthritis in her future? Will she comfortably walk her kids around Disneyland?

Even with tremendous brokenness, Lexi remains fully human. Though her physical ability is a great gift, she cannot be reduced to skeleton, to muscle or to flesh covered by skin. Her agency, while temporarily diminished in one mode, is overall settled in a “Psalm 139” way:

*You created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother's  
womb.  
I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
I know that full well.  
I was made in the secret place,  
I was woven together in the depths of  
the earth.  
Your eyes saw my unformed body;  
all the days ordained for me were  
written in your book  
before one of them came to be.*

Lexi is not merely a mix of collagen and calcium phosphate. She is a never-ceasing spiritual being with a spectacular future as an agent of God in the renewed heaven and new earth.

## Hopes Dashed

The Church is in a similar position regarding COVID Era 2 (or 3, or whatever!). We have all been trying to do ministry with one leg in a cast and one arm in a sling. Last Spring, we were all pointing to the Fall, hoping for a “go date” when the world would begin to get back to normal. Now here we are in February 2021, and the social, societal routines of the world are still up in the air. No group of experts has concluded: “On July 1, the world will start again!”

In fact, experts are worried that mutated versions of the coronavirus may [prolong the pandemic](#), maybe for years. They expect things to get worse before they get better. An end to the pandemic may be getting further away as the next iteration, fueled by variants of the virus, is already taking hold. These variants are significantly more contagious than the virus we've been dealing with so far, and some researchers believe it may also be about 30% [more deadly](#).

At the same time, hospitalizations are down from their peak, and vaccinations—even with widespread vaccine hesitancy across the country—are steadily increasing. We can have some optimism that the political polarization of the pandemic is waning.



Reviewing my frequent interactions with clergy, I note that most of us are tired of the drawn-out pandemic. We feel weakened by the lack of interaction with colleagues and friends. We are exhausted from leading through the crisis under high political and relational pressure. Now what? Another uncertain six months?

## How to Plan: Looking Through a Dirty Lens?

Most leaders I know are wondering: *Do we know enough about the future to plan, or is there still too much uncertainty?* I think we each need a short-term vision, a corresponding strategy and thoughtful plans to execute on the strategy. Even if details of execution may change, each church needs an overall strategic direction for the next six or so months. We can start by answering this question: *How can my church do good, reflecting love of God and neighbor, in this circumstance?*

Here are a couple thoughts that may inspire creative thinking:

- Focus on what you *can* do, not what you *can't*. Through the lens of the Kingdom and the gifts of the Spirit, name the opportunities, not just the threats. People and communities in pain, anxiety and frustration are opportunities for ministry.
- Focus on the certainty of basic human needs, not the overall uncertainty of the curve of the virus and the date “the world opens again.” Let immediate human needs inform your creativity.
- Develop new ministries designed for “the needs of now.” Design creative ways of delivering those new ministries. Sense the real pain around you not as an anxious fixer, but as a person who is working with the Lord of multiplied bread and fish. It is Christlike to come alongside people with resources in their hour of need. It also solidifies relationships—and relationships are the glue and the capital of long-term, effective ministry.

- Is there a quiet phase or let-up area in your church right now—maybe the music team or children’s ministry? Can you use this down time to work on improvements that were too difficult given the momentum of weekly, in-person services? The worship team might recruit and onboard new leaders or take the time to find new songs. The children’s ministry could use the downtime to customize a new curriculum.

- Using your experience of the last 11 months, try to name the two most likely scenarios for the next six months. Make plans for both, adjusting as events unfold.

The glue that will hold your church together is steadily ministering to the real physical and spiritual needs and pains of your congregation. Get relentless about empathic listening. Identify and name reality. Create simple, doable ways to respond to what you discovered and named. Help form new leaders and create new ministry. This is the time to take some relational risks—even as Jesus did with Judas, Peter and James and John. The risk of empowering others and trying new forms of ministry is far less harmful than fearful or control-based inaction.

## What to Do with the Strength That Remains?

Lying in the hospital, Lexi discovered and leveraged the strength that remained. She could use her iPad to communicate with people she had dearly missed in the midst of her hectic life. She had been wondering about a career change and took as a gift the quiet evenings alone to consider the state of her heart on the matter. She read a book that she’d been putting off for months.

My suggestion is this: Once you have inventoried your present gifts, strengths, abilities and capacities, ask yourself, “How do I aim these in the direction of healing and discipleship?” Thinking along the various lines of healing may be the best form of ministry in a season when many people are frenzied, divided, and inflicting harm upon one another.



# Confidence Restored

Public meetings of various sorts remain problematic. But the Church shares in Lexi's "Psalm 139" promise. Quickened by the Spirit, we still have many of forms of power, capacity and agency. Remembering this keeps us steady as leaders who walk with Christ in these tough times.

You have heard me say many times that "the kingdom of God is never at risk" and that "if you are in the kingdom you are thereby always safe." A "Eugene Peterson" way to gain relaxed, humble confidence is to be aware of what is *really* happening in the world.

*We live in a world which, because it is  
a world which God has both created  
and redeemed, is not a wasteland, but  
a garden, a rose garden, in fact...*

*No matter how frequently and  
learnedly the journalists and scholars  
report that the world in which we are  
living is a wasteland, it is not...*

*The most important thing going on  
right now is what God is doing.*

*We get in the way, we talk too much.*

*The most important thing being said  
right now is something God is saying...  
marvelous things are being done and  
said right now...*

*If we are not constantly brought to  
awareness of this huge God-dimension,  
trained in attentiveness to this  
immense God-presence, we will act and  
speak out of context,  
as if we are in a wasteland.*

*But there is no wasteland. We are in a  
garden, a rose garden.*

Eugene Peterson, *Subversive  
Spirituality*

Find healing for your soul through Christ. Become an agent of healing. Make sensible plans to share this healing with your congregations.

I am with you: I cheer you on and pray for you every day. I honor your work on the frontlines, the real places of ministry. And most importantly, God is with you: *Do not be afraid...for I am with you and will rescue you, declares the Lord* (Jer. 1:8).

Grace, peace and the companionship and power of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

