

# Preaching and pastoral care

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**A**mong the various roles pastors have, preaching and pastoral care are often considered the most important as well as the most demanding of our time and energy. Obviously, preaching is the most public aspect of pastoral work, never engaged in with just a person or two; in contrast, we often give pastoral care in one-on-one settings or in small groups. Seminary curricula acknowledge the importance of these two areas of ministry by offering separate courses in these disciplines, but rarely do we give adequate attention to the relationship between preaching and pastoral care. Homiletics courses may mention in passing that pastoral calling and care will provide the contacts necessary to help pastors prepare sermons relevant to the actual experiences of the people

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in the pews, but I am not aware of preaching courses or texts that investigate the contributions of preaching to pastoral care.

In exploring the relationship between preaching and pastoral care, I begin by clarifying my assumptions about the church as the larger context within which and from which both preaching and pastoral care derive their mandate. I assume that both preaching and pastoral care must serve the larger purpose of the church in the world, and whatever we attempt to do in these areas ought to be measured by its appropriateness

to and congruence with the larger calling of the body of Christ in the world.

I will elaborate on the unique roles of preaching and pastoral care with slight shifts in emphasis: from what the pastor does to what preaching does in the lives of people, and to what pastoral care does for those receiving it. I want to show how these out-

come-based expressions of ministry intertwine and interact. I will propose three major ways preaching can contribute to and express pastoral care for members of our congregations.

### **Some assumptions**

A study of John 20:21, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” has led me to understand the church as the community of the sent. This community of the sent leads a dual existence: it is a body of people sometimes gathered and often scattered. When gathered, the body expresses care for its members, devoting time to worship, prayer, study, and leaning on one another. When scattered, the members of the body serve as light, salt, and witnesses wherever they live, work, and socialize. All members of the body are called to serve when they are scattered, while some are called to specific expressions of ministry within the body gathered. Ministry within the body gathered must always take into account the experiences of believers in their scattered existence.

When Paul wrote about God’s people set apart with certain gifts—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (Eph. 4:11–16)—he stated that these leaders have a twofold function: to equip God’s people for service and to build up the body until all achieve maturity as measured by Christ. It is my understanding that both preaching and pastoral care contribute to building up the body and equipping believers for ministry in the context of being gathered or scattered. Let us now, for the sake of clarity, consider these two aspects of ministry separately.

The primary pastoral care concern is that everyone in the congregation experience life to the full. As Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). The context of these words is teaching about Jesus the shepherd. Shepherding language has Old Testament antecedents. According to one Old Testament source of such language, Ezekiel 34, being a faithful shepherd among God’s people entails caring, tending, looking after, and nurturing. These ancient descriptions of the work of faithful shepherds continue to be critical dimensions of pastoral care in our time.

Faithful pastoral caregiving engages the caregiver in people’s lives, with the hope that such involvement will contribute to the anticipated outcome: that each person experience life to the full.

This understanding of pastoral care encompasses all people in the church, no matter what their age and social, economic, or educational status. Pastoral care is often given unofficially and informally yet very effectively by one person to another, as well as by pastors and others chosen to serve as caregivers officially representing the congregation.

The notion of the congregation as a whole being the womb of care for everyone finds expression in the many “one another”

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verses in the New Testament. These verses are addressed to all the people, never only to those who are set apart as leaders. In the New Testament, at least seventeen attitudes and actions are linked with “one another-ing,” the most repeated one being “Love one another.” When we review these expectations for community life, it becomes clear that the body of believers is called to practice an incredible amount of practical care for one

other. John Patton affirms this conclusion: “Pastoral care is the person to person response that grows out of participation in a caring community and which seeks to enable persons to give and receive care and to experience community.”<sup>1</sup>

A limited amount of pastoral care is given by the pastor who has received training in the art of expressing care, while much pastoral-like care will be expressed and shared among the members of the church. All these efforts of tending and caring for one another, whether formal or informal, incidental or scheduled, contribute to the possibility that everyone will be able to experience life to the full. That is the hoped-for outcome of all efforts in the area of pastoral care. In addition to the actual caregiving pastors are able to offer individuals, we also have a unique role to play in the community of caregivers. I will return to that role when we look at the relationship between preaching and pastoral care.

It is my assumption that congregations are ready for preaching that is vital, connected to real life, and biblically based. They are ready for preaching that engages listeners and includes appropriate pastoral self-disclosure. Sermons will have these qualities when pastors commit time, energy, and creativity to the lifelong task of

leading people in an ongoing conversation with scripture about life and meaning.

Keeping in mind Paul's expression "equipping believers for ministry," I propose that the ministry of preaching ought to have the following five outcomes. Cumulatively, over time, faithful preaching will lead to growth in five areas: (1) Christian identity, (2) a sense of vocation or calling, (3) identifying issues that need the church's attention and discernment, (4) a capacity to cope with crises, and (5) understanding of the Bible. If we look for these outcomes in the lives of members of the congregation, we have a tool for assessing whether we are proclaiming the "whole counsel of God" in ways that are balanced and related to life. Obviously, these outcomes overlap with a number of the issues that come into focus under pastoral care, broadly understood.

These outcomes serve as an elaboration of the statement of purpose C. J. Dyck formulated about Anabaptist preaching: for sixteenth-century Anabaptists, the sermon was "a tool which the Spirit could use for salvation and the growth of the hearers."<sup>2</sup> With these five outcomes as criteria, we have some idea about what that growth might entail. By suggesting these desired outcomes of preaching, I am declaring my underlying assumption that preaching matters a great deal in the life of the congregation.

### **The contributions of preaching to pastoral care**

One hoped-for outcome for preaching noted above is that it will help people grow in their capacity to cope with crises that arise in life. Life's crises are basically of two types, developmental and circumstantial. People experience developmental crises as a matter of course as they go through the life cycle. These include the changes of puberty, the issues of middle age, and the peculiar challenges of retirement and aging. Circumstantial or situational crises are those that come upon us, often without warning: accident, natural disaster, illness, and the like. Erik Erikson has described a crisis as "a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential."<sup>3</sup>

Preaching has a vital role to play in preparing and equipping people as they go through the inevitable rough patches of life. In at least three ways, it contributes to pastoral care, in strengthening their capacity to cope.

*Preaching contributes to pastoral care by creating a foundational framework.* Pastors must be aware of what members are wrestling with in their lives, and we must also address the question, what resources do our people have that enable them to deal with difficult issues? What we are concerned about here is the development of a worldview, an overarching faith that provides perspective and equips individuals and families in the church to cope with difficulties they encounter. Theologian Harry Huebner and others speak about the need to foster a Christian imagination and acquire appropriate vocabulary that will enable us to reflect on and deal with life's situations as followers of Jesus. Developing a foundational Christian perspective cannot be accomplished in a short time, nor is it something we learn in the midst of a crisis. To

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accomplish this goal, preachers must take the long view and deliberately work at this project over a period of years.

Over time, faithful preaching will clarify several basic elements of Christian imagination. It will invite the congregation to engage the whole biblical narrative, in which Christian understandings of God and the meaning of human life are rooted. Such preaching provides transcendent perspectives of hope and trust in God that enable us to face the complexities of life. Such preaching tackles the big questions of suffering and evil in relation to our understandings of God—not only in the abstract, but linked to specific difficult experiences with which people in the congregation struggle. Such preaching conveys the truth that not all difficult questions or experiences have quick and tidy answers.

Faithful preaching also provides discernment about unrealistic notions about life. While some may be taken in by a health and prosperity gospel, faithful preaching supplies the basis for discernment that relies on all the voices in the scriptural canon. Sound biblical-theological reflection will name and explore unrealistic attitudes and popular notions about life that abound in our culture.

When preachers have these outcomes in mind, we will be energized to work diligently, courageously, and creatively in

developing a foundational Christian perspective that dares to deal with the difficulties and ambiguities of human existence.

*Preaching contributes to pastoral care by modeling.* Over time, preachers touch on many aspects and experiences of life. The way we do so, not just the content of our messages, has an impact on our listeners. Through our approach to difficult subjects, we convey much more than we explicitly say. We model something vital and profound simply by addressing from the

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pulpit issues that some people may perceive as too sensitive or too private for public speech. By naming and dealing with sexuality, money, depression, loss and grief, anxiety, abuse, dying, and other issues, we challenge and overcome taboos and assumptions about what experiences our faith can deal with.

When pastors preach on these important issues, we also have the opportunity to use appropriate self-disclosure to share our own vulnerability. In open and honest struggling with life's issues in terms of faith, pastors demonstrate that we too continue to live with unanswered questions, even doubts and unresolved issues. When I was receiving

chemotherapy for my cancer some years ago, I preached a sermon in which I shared my struggle with the bold affirmation of Psalm 121, "My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth." During that crisis time in my life, the once-comforting words did not suffice. I was pressing for an answer to the question, *how* does help come from the Lord when I am dealing with cancer? I agree with theologian Douglas John Hall, who has written that "being without answers is not an embarrassment."<sup>4</sup>

Such clarifying and self-disclosing preaching may make another important contribution to pastoral care. Hearing preaching that wrestles honestly with issues of life and faith may help listeners feel free to approach the pastor about their own situations and questions. Preaching that models a helpful approach is at the same time powerfully invitational.

*Preaching contributes to pastoral care by dealing with specific issues from time to time.* In the process of developing a

worldview and modeling an approach that intertwines faith and life with insight and clarity, the pastor will of necessity also deal with specific clusters of issues. Sometimes we will do so as an outgrowth of preaching on the suggested lectionary texts; at other times, we may use the vehicle of topical preaching.

As a way of dealing with specific issues, I have found John Patton's analysis of "four human problems" helpful. He argues that these four problem areas cover most of the specific issues pastoral care addresses. He devotes a whole chapter to each of these issues: loss and limitation, patienthood, abuse (self and other), and relationships. While he affirms the role of the pastor's teaching and preaching in "creating conditions where care can take place," particularly in reference to relationships, I would broaden his affirmation of the preaching role to include all these critical areas of life. He writes that "the way the pastor understands and interprets . . . in [the] pulpit makes possible significant pastoral relationships in troubled times."<sup>5</sup> When we rely on biblical texts, familiar and unfamiliar, to deal with experiences of loss and grief, illness and disease, as well as with abuse and relationships, our preaching provides listeners with insight, perspective, and hope, and contributes greatly to living life to the full.

In *Freedom for Ministry*, Richard Neuhaus writes of "the church in all its thus and so-ness, in all its contradictions and compromises, in its circus of superficiality and its moments of splendor."<sup>6</sup> I hope that by giving attention to the potential contributions of preaching to pastoral care, the church may experience many moments of splendor.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Patton, *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 27.

<sup>2</sup> C. J. Dyck, "Preaching and the Anabaptist Tradition," *Mennonite Life* 17 (January 1962): 23.

<sup>3</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 68.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Reality of the Gospel and the Unreality of the Churches* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 163.

<sup>5</sup> Patton, *Pastoral Care in Context*, 200.

<sup>6</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 8.

## About the author

Before retiring from fulltime work, John H. Neufeld served as president of Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg, Manitoba (1984–97), and as pastor of First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg (1969–84). While at CMBC, he taught homiletics.