

Keeping preaching fresh over the long haul

Don Rempel Boschman

It is the Monday after the second Sunday of Advent. In the next seventeen days I will preach sermons on three familiar texts: the testimony of John the Baptist in John 1, the Magnificat in Luke 1, and the familiar Christmas story in Luke 2.

If I were fresh out of seminary, opening Raymond Brown's *Birth of the Messiah* for the first time, I would be excited at the prospect of studying these important texts and preaching on them in some of the best-attended Sunday services of the year. But it has been

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more than twenty years since I graduated from seminary, and it is my twelfth Advent series in front of this congregation. What can I say this year that I haven't said before?

Many of my colleagues are in similar situations. I am a pastor at Douglas Mennonite Church, a medium-sized congregation in Winnipeg. The three other Mennonite Church Canada congregations in the north-eastern quadrant of the city have also experienced long-term pastorates. A recent study indicated that 42 percent of Mennonite Church Canada pastors have been in their present positions for six years or longer, with

approximately 15 percent having been in their present positions for at least ten years.¹

Long-term pastorates pose challenges for preachers. Listeners may become bored when they have heard the preacher's most exciting personal stories and have become overly familiar with his voice, intonation, and preferred sermon structure. The congregation's understanding of the gospel may also have narrowed as the pastor has focused most of her preaching on favorite texts and themes. The pastor might be reduced to preaching about lifestyle

issues only in generalities, because he doesn't want people in the congregation to think the sermon is aimed at them.

But not all preachers run out of energy. Last month, veteran preacher and teacher John Neufeld came by our church to use a particular commentary. John worked away in the library and came out an hour later, clearly energized. He was studying a text—on Peter at Cornelius's home—that he had certainly studied before, but he was still fascinated with the text and excited about preaching the sermon at First Mennonite, a congregation in which he has been preaching for thirty-five years.

Habits for the veteran preacher

How can a preaching ministry stay fresh and vital over the long term? What follows is not meant to be prescriptive but simply descriptive of habits I have tried to develop over the past decade.

Know how many sermons you have in you. Pastors have different capacities for preaching. If I preach more than twenty-five or thirty-five times a year, I run out of things to say. That

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number includes sermons at Sunday services, weddings, and funerals. I need time to absorb an idea before I can preach well. As a result, I usually decline opportunities to speak outside our congregation. One challenge for pastors is what to do with the many short meditations we are asked to give at meetings, church programs, or services in personal care homes. If we expect our meditations to be meaningful to our listeners, they should first be meaningful to us, and I for one cannot come up

with fresh insight and energy every week. Each minister will have a different limit, and we each ought to know our maximum and stay within it.

Share the load. Because of our limitations, we need to share the load. In 1997, my wife Kathleen and I became co-pastors at Douglas Mennonite Church. We quickly realized we were fortunate to be called to a congregation that has a strong tradition of reliance on lay preachers. Our predecessor was the sole salaried pastor in a congregation of 340 members, with services in German and English. With two different sermons scheduled each week, the

congregation had wisely called seven gifted lay preachers to share the preaching load. Most of the congregation enjoyed the diversity of voices and expected this pattern to continue.

Today our congregation relies less on lay preachers, but with a staff of five part-time ministers, we still hear a variety of voices

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from the pulpit. We have two English services with identical sermons. As the senior pastor, I preach in half of the services, approximately twenty-five Sundays per year. On the majority of the other Sundays, one of our other staff ministers preaches. Our youngest staff minister is in his early twenties, and the oldest is almost sixty. We have three men and two women as staff ministers. Lay ministers still preach occasionally, as do the young adults in the congregation whom we are training to

preach. As a result, our congregation hears sermons given from a variety of backgrounds and somewhat varied theological perspectives.

While some older members have encouraged me to preach more often, I have resisted that call. Just as a recipe served too often makes diners lose interest, so too a voice and a perspective heard too frequently loses its power. Some people in the congregation may desire that I as senior pastor preach four out of five Sundays, but in the long run I believe even they would grow tired of that diet.

Plan in advance. One joy of being a long-term pastor is that you can make long-term plans. At Douglas we have experimented with a variety of planning cycles, sometimes planning as little as a month ahead and sometimes planning up to nine months ahead. As a result, I seldom feel any stress about what I am going to preach on this week. We pastors work hard to collaborate in developing sermon series. We usually decide series themes several months in advance, and all of us have been challenged to preach on texts and topics that were not our first choices.² Series that are suggested but not ultimately chosen we add to a list of possible future series. Instead of wondering what in the world I haven't talked about before, I almost always feel that we have more material to cover than we have time for.

Planning in advance also gives individual sermons time to develop. My sermons typically go through as few as four and as many as eight quick outlines before they are preached, and this process takes time. Dedicating two hours a day over four to six days to sermon preparation bears more fruit than does devoting ten hours on Friday.

Do serious Bible study before reaching for the commentaries.

My father was a minister, my wife is a minister, and our congregation has a generous book and study allowance, so I have accumulated many biblical commentaries and other reference materials. Yet reference materials become a handicap when a preacher turns to them too early in the sermon-writing process. Spending a few days studying the text on your own is critical to understanding it.

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When John Neufeld came to borrow a commentary, I shouldn't have been surprised to hear that he had already been studying the text for two weeks. Secondhand knowledge is seldom as exciting as discovering things for oneself, and this difference will be evident in the pulpit.

Keep it real. Peter Taylor Forsyth (1848–1921) wrote that the “cure for dullness in the pulpit is not brilliance but reality.”³ Sermons need to be about something, and that something needs to be clearly stated and de-

scribed. Years ago, someone in our congregation challenged me to preach about domestic violence. I agreed that I should, but the resulting sermon was so vague and unfocused that perhaps only the two of us knew what I was trying to preach about.

The congregation should be in no doubt about what we are talking about. If we are preaching on materialism, we should give vivid examples: big screen TVs, cruises, and over-extended credit cards. We should give illustrations with humility and tentativeness, but we must describe the issue in ways that a child can understand. If we speak plainly and vividly, we will not struggle to hold the congregation's attention.

Keep learning. I am an avid reader, but I often forget the content of books I have read. In 2006, I enrolled in a doctor of ministry program at Fuller Theological Seminary, and I have

found that the discipline of writing papers has helped me digest new material. Each year I return from my studies in Pasadena with ideas I am excited about sharing with our congregation.

This need to keep learning applies specifically to preaching. I was twenty-four years old when I took my first preaching course at seminary. At that time, my real-life preaching experience was

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limited to one brief meditation at a church camp. Needless to say, although the preaching instructor was knowledgeable, I soon forgot most of the material presented in class. But I was fortunate to learn preaching skills on the job as a missionary in Botswana. By my late twenties, I was preaching weekly and learning what did and did not work. I wasn't sure why certain things were effective, but I developed a style that suited me.

More than twenty years after my first preaching course, I took a second preaching course, this time with June Alliman Yoder and John Neufeld. Perhaps they said many of

the things I had heard in the first course, but now I heard them with fresh understanding. Equally helpful were John and June's comments on my videotaped sermons. Where church members are likely to just say "wonderful sermon" on their way out of the church, John and June offered pointed and informed advice for improvement. I hope to take another preaching class in the next four or five years. New books on preaching are always being published; they also suggest solutions to homiletical problems with which preachers struggle.

Conclusion

Kathleen and I became pastors at Douglas Mennonite Church in the summer of 1997. Before we arrived, the Douglas ministerial had decided to preach on the first three kings of Israel: Saul, David, and Solomon. As a result, the fourth sermon of my pastorate here at Douglas was on adultery, on the story of David and Bathsheba. I remember thinking to myself, I'm glad I'm preaching on this topic now, before I know who in the congregation is committing adultery. After more than eleven years at Douglas, a

sermon on adultery is now much more difficult, because I know of marriages in the congregation that have been tested by adultery. I am now preaching to friends for whom it is a deeply painful topic, and I feel like I am pulling scabs off partly healed wounds.

Adultery is not the only topic on which I now find it more difficult to preach. Pornography, substance abuse, marriage, homosexuality, money, children, and death are not simply subjects to be explained; they are issues with which my friends in the congregation are struggling. This awareness can either silence me or help me become more realistic, nuanced, and focused in my preaching. A long-term pastorate can be a treadmill-like experience for a preacher and a congregation, but it can also be the foundation for a focused and compassionate preaching ministry.

Notes

¹ Dieter J. Schönwetter, *2008 Mennonite Church Canada Pastoral Report* (Winnipeg: Mennonite Church Canada, 2008), 30.

² Our team usually develops sermon series in one of three ways: on a topic such as money, sex, or spiritual disciplines; on lectionary readings (often done during Advent or Lent); or on a section of the Bible.

³ Quoted in Gordon MacDonald, "The Day I Brought a Skunk to Church," in *Preaching to Convince*, ed. James D. Berkley (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), 113.

About the author

Don Rempel Boschman has been a minister at Douglas Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba, since 1997. From 1985 to 1996, Don worked as a missionary in Botswana in the area of theological education with African Independent Churches. He and his wife, Kathleen, have two children, Michael and Lisa.