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Tyndale University

Past, Future, and Present:
A Ministry Journey Unstuck in Time

A Research Portfolio
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry
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by

Ryan James Lawrence

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ABSTRACT

In this portfolio the writer explored his ministry journey and identity through the lens of time, looking at his past, future, and present, in order to plot a course forward. In considering his past he examined how his theology of preaching had arisen out of his experiences and the relationship between biography and theology. In considering his future, he explored how the imagination could be used to help lead people and institutions to new horizons. In considering his present he researched how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted preachers in his denomination, The Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec (CBOQ), and how group story sharing could be used to aid in their healing and recovery. The research portion of this portfolio used a narrative study, the heart of which was a focus group meeting of five pastors, followed up by interviews in which participants contributed to the evaluation of the project. The key finding was that participants endured many common struggles and hardships, including the experience of “preaching into a void,” which described the hardship of speaking without a connection to one’s audience. Sharing their stories helped participants to understand and normalize these experiences, aiding in their healing.

DEDICATION

To the great women God has used to bless my life:
my babcia, my mother, my wife, and my daughter.

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

— Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: PAST, FUTURE AND PRESENT

I am obsessed with finding organizing principles. This may be a result of all the years I spent preaching, looking for “big ideas” (Robinson 2001, 34-35) in text after text. Or perhaps it is a result of the years I spent studying English literature, writing paper after paper around tightly defined thesis statements. But my suspicion is that the two sets of experiences have merged and compounded, creating an absolute compulsion. As a result, I simply cannot write about things at random. There always must be some unifying thread which holds everything together. But my challenge in introducing this portfolio was that no such connection was initially apparent.

When I enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry (DMin) program at Tyndale I was torn between two potential majors: preaching and leadership. Preaching was my strength, my primary calling, gifting, and passion. The part of my job I loved most. Leadership on the other hand was something of a weakness. The part of my job I found more difficult and demanding. It was not that I had no gifting, passion or calling for it. It was that when I preached I felt like a dog joyfully running in a field, doing what it was created for, moving with long elegant strides. Whereas when I led I felt like a dog swimming in a pond, plodding along and making progress, but doing so inelegantly. A dog can swim. But it is meant to run.

In the end, I chose preaching, believing it made more sense to focus on becoming the best I could be at one thing. But I was not entirely sure of the decision. Perhaps it would have made more sense to focus on a weakness? However, as providence would have it, I was given the opportunity to do both. Enrollment in the preaching track at the time was too low to run a full cohort. So those of us who had enrolled in preaching were given the option of doing a DMin in leadership with a concentration in preaching. Effectively, this meant studying both subjects equally.

Doing a hybrid degree had the effect of giving me a well-rounded education. I was able to study both sides of my vocation, improving on a strength and working on a weakness simultaneously. However, it also meant that my portfolio was always going to be about two distinct aspects of ministry. The first section was predestined to be about preaching and the second was consecrated to leadership. Seeing this divide coming from the start, I had hoped to bridge it in the third section, through my research paper. I planned to somehow bring my philosophies of preaching and leadership together into one seamless whole through a single brilliant paper. However, as I began to work on my research project I found it did not want to go where I intended it to. Even when I gently tried to coax it, it would not comply. So I decided not to force the issue, choosing integrity as a researcher over the integration of my paper. Which left me with three chapters lacking a clear common thread.

Only there was a common thread, and that thread was me. I wrote all three of the chapters after all. So of course they all reflected my thoughts and values.

But this was not much of a common thread, as any anthology by a single author could claim that. However, as I reflected on the chapters I had written, I came to see that they were not just by me, but about me. I was the author and the subject of all three. Though this was more obvious in some of the chapters than in others.

It is in my first section, *A Preaching Journey*, that I am most obviously writing about myself. In it, I examined my identity and values as a preacher. The first half of the chapter is expressly autobiographical, as in it I told the tale of my journey as a preacher. And of course, as I did so, I wrote about myself directly. In the second half of the paper, there is a shift, as I explore my convictions as a preacher. Here you will find values shared by many preachers, such as the need for preaching to be biblical, clear, gracious, and contextual. But you will also find values more particular to me, such as being a playful exegete, or my choice to write of being substantial as opposed to applicable. Also, as I unfolded all of these values, I did so against the backdrop of my preaching journey, seeing them not as abstract principles, but as lessons learned through the course of my life. Indeed, as I began the chapter, I did so by commenting on the connection between biography and theology, recognizing that just as I can only understand myself in relation to God, so too I can only understand God from my own perspective. Then, as I concluded the paper I acknowledged that my theology of preaching is not fixed or finished because God has not brought my journey to an end yet. So from start to finish, even as it looks at subjects far greater than my personal journey, this chapter is thoroughly about me.

However, in my second section, *Imaginative Leadership*, I was far less autobiographical, and readers can be forgiven for not realizing I am the subject. Here as I developed my theology of leadership I began by briefly delving into my story again. But before long I turned to the world of ideas and thinkers, as I explored the nature of the imagination and its role in leadership. In doing so I started with Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye's definition of the imagination as "a vision of possibilities which expands the horizon of belief" (Frye 1963, 55). I then explored why imagination thus defined is needed in leadership, looking at Christian anthropology, as well as the ever-increasing pace of change in our modern world. I then turned to the biblical prophets and the pastor theologians of old, such as Calvin, using them as models for using the imagination in Christian leadership. I explored tools for imaginative leadership, including playful exegesis, practical theology, and spiritual disciplines. Then I consider ways in which imaginative leadership can be applied.

As this summary shows, this chapter is less directly about me. But it is still about me. I explicitly stated in the introduction that what I develop in this chapter is a philosophy of leadership that is specifically for me. I also concluded by recognizing that while I hope all readers can benefit from my work, imaginative leadership will not be for everyone. This is why my philosophy of leadership goes in such an admittedly irregular direction, veering so far outside conventional leadership philosophies. It was not meant to fit everyone but was custom-tailored to be worn by me. So even as I fade into the background of the chapter, I am still its subject.

In my third section, *Preaching into a Void*, it is easy to tell I am a subject, but also easy to miss the full extent to which this is the case. In it, I explored the ways in which preaching through the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted preachers in my denomination, as well as how group storytelling could be used to help them process their experiences and heal. I did so by gathering a small group of preachers, inviting them to share their pandemic preaching stories with each other, and then conducting follow-up interviews. My key finding was that participants had experienced many common struggles and hardships, including the experience of “preaching into a void,” which describes the experience of speaking without a connection to one’s audience. Sharing their stories helped participants to understand and normalize these experiences, aiding in their healing process. In all of this, I was literally a subject, as I participated in the study, sharing my story with the rest of the group. But the extent to which I am the chapter's subject goes beyond this. I experienced a high level of identification with my participants throughout the study. As they shared their stories, it felt as if they were telling my story. While I set out hoping to learn about and help others, I realized along the way that I was learning about and helping myself in the process. The project is not only about me. It is also about my participants and many other pastors who share our experiences. But it feels as though it is wholly about me, with every finding helping me to better understand myself.

It was in myself then, that I found an organizing principle for this portfolio. All three chapters are, in their own unique way, about me. However, this alone does not provide much in the way of organization. It leaves the various

chapters' connection to each other vague, and seemingly random. But as I reflected on the chapters and what they each revealed about me, an organizing principle for their relationship with each other emerged, and that was time. Each paper dealt primarily with a different and distinct time in my journey as a pastor. Those phases, in the order in which they appear in the portfolio, are the past, the future, and the present.

Again, it was in my first section, *A Preaching Journey*, that this pattern is most apparent. Here, as I told my story, I was squarely in the past. I went all the way back to my childhood, exploring how my early struggles with dyslexia, as well as my subsequent love of reading, impacted my development as a preacher. I also told the story of my conversion and my formative years as a Christian, seeing the ways in which both my insecurities and spiritual practices shaped me. I recounted my call to preach, my call to vocational ministry, and my early experiences as a pastor, noting the moments at which key lessons were learnt. I then turned to my values as a preacher and these, of course, are beliefs I have come to hold which will shape my future. But my focus was on seeing them as products of my past. This is an account of how I arrived where I am, so it is backwards looking.

My second section, *Imaginative Leadership*, briefly ventured into my past, as I sought to locate a core for my philosophy of leadership, and I considered current realities throughout. But the focus here was on the future. Imaginative leadership was not something I had already mastered. Instead, it was an attempt to dream up a leadership philosophy I could apply going forward. In this chapter, I

took my foundational beliefs and values, plus my sense of gifting and self, and combined them in search of a leadership philosophy I could fully embrace, and which would fully embrace me. This is why, for instance, preaching came up several times in the chapter, even though it was not specifically about preaching. I was seeking a form of leadership that could inform and shape the whole of my calling, including my primary gifting, which I had historically seen as separate from leadership. So while I covered much of what I already did and knew in the chapter, I did so, not to describe how I currently led, but to describe how I am meant to lead. The undertaking was aspirational in nature. Even though I wrote the chapter a year ago, it is still very much about my future, as I have a long way to go in learning to apply imaginative leadership. Indeed, I suspect this will be the case for some time, and that I may always be growing into my philosophy of leadership.

My third section, *Preaching into a Void*, was about the present. When I initially designed the project, my intention had been to explore the technical lessons the pandemic had to teach us about preaching. I even hoped participants would have had insights into the relationship between preaching and leadership. This was something I had been contemplating during the pandemic, and I hoped it would help me bring my portfolio together. However, as I refined the project, I felt called to minister to my participants by giving them space to tell their own stories on their own terms. This shifted the project, placing its focus more directly on its participants and their ongoing experiences. Since I participated in the study, this meant focusing intensely on my present reality. Doing so helped me better

understand my own experiences, and make headway in processing them. But at the time of writing this, the pandemic was still not fully over and I was still not fully recovered. So this paper dealt with my present reality, and my suspicion is that it will for some time.

The subject of this portfolio then was me. It was an attempt to understand my past, my future, and my present. This need for self-understanding helps explain the content of this portfolio. It also explains what is not present in it: which is a strong focus on my current ministry setting. My current ministry context was described from time to time. In particular, it appeared towards the end of the biography component of Chapter Two, in some of the illustrations and examples of Chapter Three, and is the setting for all experiences I shared in Chapter Four. But none of these chapters focused heavily on my current ministry. This was not by accident or neglect. It was because the main context of this portfolio was, again, myself. What I was seeking in every chapter was not to find answers and solutions for current fleeting challenges. Instead, I was after an understanding of myself that would help guide me for the rest of my journey in ministry, wherever it might take me. Indeed, part of what I was after was a sense of where God was taking me. I wanted to know what the next chapter held.

I have come to a stage in my life where I have gained enough experience and wisdom to reflect and gain a relatively clear sense of self. But I am also young enough that much of my journey, including my most productive years, is still ahead of me, Lord willing. So it makes sense that God would use my time in the Tyndale DMin program to help me take stock of my past, to better understand

who I am, and what I am called to do. It also makes sense that he would direct me to look to the future, crafting a leadership philosophy that will allow me to fully live out my identity and calling going forward. And it makes sense that he would help me process recent difficult experiences so that I can learn, heal and move forward.

I did not consciously set out to study myself. Frankly, I find the idea slightly narcissistic. I only include it here in the introduction because I truly believe self-understanding is the organizing principle of this portfolio. But I suspect this focus did not come about by accident. I see God's providential hand in this portfolio, guiding me to study what I must need to learn about most at this juncture in my life: myself.

CHAPTER 2

A PREACHING JOURNEY

Introduction

John Calvin began his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by observing: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts, the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and gives forth the other is not easy to discern” (Calvin 1960, 35). The more I have studied myself and God, the more I have realized Calvin's words apply not just to anthropology and theology in abstract, but also to our personal understanding of God and self. How can I understand who I am, apart from the God who created me? And how can I understand God, apart from myself when I am limited to my perspective? God is my starting place for understanding myself, and I am my starting place for understanding God.

While Calvin ultimately chose to move from theology to anthropology, I will go in the opposite direction, moving from biography to theology. I will do so not because I am more important than God, but because my theology of preaching developed through the journey God has taken me on. My experiences, from childhood to the present, have made me who I am as a preacher, and I believe God has providentially been behind this process. So I will begin with my story because in a sense this is where God began with me.

Biography

Early Struggles

Until recently I would have begun the story of my calling and formation as a preacher with my conversion as a young man. However, the more aware I become of myself as a preacher, the more I see the need to begin at the absolute beginning, going back to my childhood. Of course, I had no notion of becoming a preacher then, but God knew his plans for me, and I can now see how he began forming me for my calling long before I knew him. Indeed, my earliest experiences are perhaps the ones that most impact me to this day.

I was born into a loving home. Both my parents loved me. But it was my mother's love that set me on my vocational course. She is the one who read to me and told me stories. This is what gave me the love for words and literature which would not only lead me into preaching but shape the kind of preacher I would become. She would read me the typical Canadian childhood fare, especially Robert Munsch. She also told me fairy tales and the oral history of our family. As I grew older she introduced me to more complex stories. We read through *The Hobbit* and the *Chronicles of Narnia*. It is as we read these books that she taught me that stories are better without pictures because then we can use our imagination. A thousand words are actually worth more than a picture.

My mother's storytelling was a blessing to me. It taught me to love words and associate words with love. It also made me good with words. However, every blessing can be twisted into a curse. The false self is the mask we learn to put on because we believe it will make us acceptable to the world (Benner 2015, 78-79). I was a bright child, especially when it came to words, and for this, I was praised.

So I came to believe this was my way to security. Be smart and all would be well. Thus my false self began to emerge. But just as it emerged it was assaulted.

I was slow learning to read. I could comprehend what was read to me, but I could not translate letters into language. My teachers dismissed the issue. I was a bright child and it was only a matter of time before my reading caught up with my other abilities. Except that was not the case. After much insistence on my mother's part, I was tested for and diagnosed with dyslexia. The following is an excerpt taken from my journal entry from November 20, 2019, describing the impact this process had on me:

My false self feels the need to be smart. To know things, to be quick and clever, to be good with words. I figured out years ago that this was my route to praise and attention. To feeling accepted and secure. But then there was a problem. I was diagnosed with dyslexia. Now everything was in doubt. Was I smart? Or was I stupid? Going from a school for the gifted to special ed. brought on an identity crisis I am still living through.

Dyslexia was a challenge not just because I had to transfer schools and spend two years in a special education class, but because it brought my identity and worth into question. To not be able to read was to be broken in a place that mattered to me. For me, it was to be like a bird that cannot fly. What good is such a bird?

The best and worst parts of my childhood became tangled up with words. My fondest memory is of my mother reading to me, while my worst memory is being diagnosed with dyslexia. I came to value words for their beauty and the love they conveyed, and then questioned my own value when I struggled with them. As radically divergent as these pathways are, they were both a part of my journey, and both led me to preach. The good experiences gave me a genuine love for words that would draw me into the joy and wonder of preaching God's Word.

The bad experiences gave me a profound insecurity which caused me to work hard to prove myself, further developing my skill with words in the process.

I had to work around my dyslexia. When I did learn to read it was by using phonetics. But since the English language often defies its own rules, I still struggled with spelling. So I focused on everything else. If I was bound to lose marks for spelling I would major in comprehension and creativity. I was so determined to compensate for my deficiencies that English became my best subject. I received straight A's and would have gotten A+'s but for my spelling. It is telling that the half a grade I lost in English bothered me far more than my mediocre marks in Math. Words mattered to me in a way numbers did not. So I excelled at them, not just in spite of my dyslexia, but because of it. It is my love of words that led me into preaching, but so much of what I do on a technical level, I learned as a result of insecurity.

While all of these experiences took place long before I knew God, I can now see that he was already steering me towards the ministry of the Word through them. Once I became a Christian it was only a matter of time before I fell into preaching. With my deep love of words, preaching was a path too appealing for me not to take it. And when I found this path I discovered I was well equipped for it, thanks to two decades of love and insecurity, all bound up in words.

The Influence of Writers

The home I grew up in was not religious. This meant I was not exposed to preaching in my formative years. However, they were still my formative years and I would be naive to think my preaching is only influenced by what I have

been exposed to as a Christian. I now know God was shaping me long before I had any awareness of him doing so.

Having a childhood devoid of sermons meant the earliest influences on me as a preacher were not preachers, but writers. They would shape me as a communicator and as a person. When I became a Christian, and then a preacher, their influence was redirected but not eradicated. It is hard for me to hear even my favourite preachers in my sermons. I do not sound much like them. But I can hear my favourite authors coming through. They are the ones who gave me my voice.

Once I began to read, my parents eagerly bought me whatever books I desired. But my mother also subtly steered me towards more challenging reads. In the seventh grade, she introduced me to the writer I now realize had the most formative influence on me and my preaching: George Orwell. I had to write a book report on a novel of my choosing and she suggested I read *Animal Farm*. It is a deceptively approachable book, with its pretext of being “A Fairy Story” (Orwell 1983, 11). I read it in just one sitting but it was no mere page-turner.

What struck me about *Animal Farm* was that it had something to say. This fairy story spoke to me on a level no one had before, exposing me to grown-up ideas. Yet it was written so clearly, so powerfully, so absolutely perfectly, that I understood. This extended allegory told me more about the Russian Revolution and the lessons it had to teach us than any direct account could convey.

But what gripped my life most was not the book's ideas, but the discovery that it is possible to communicate with such shocking clarity and depth. I realized that words are not just pretty things, but powerful things. They can be used to

make ideas come alive. So I became passionate about writing. I started writing short stories and would throw myself with abandon into English assignments, not just trying to get an A, but seeking to master the art of communication.

After reading *Animal Farm* I dove into Orwell's other masterpiece, *1984*. It furthered my appreciation for the power of words while adding a new lesson. It is a dystopian novel, in which all freedom has been lost. The novel's protagonist explains the collapse of society, writing: "Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted all else follows" (Orwell 1990, 84). Reading this, I came to see truth as the bedrock of all that is good. In the light of the truth, life can flourish, but in the darkness of deception, it withers. I came away convinced that nothing is more sacred than truth. I still hold this conviction, only with the caveat that God himself is the truth (John 14:6).

This lesson was profound, and it brought about tangible applications, shaping the way I communicate. Words can be used to reveal the truth, as Orwell showed me in *Animal Farm* and *1984*, but they can also be used to "make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and give an appearance of solidity to pure wind," as he warns in his essay *Politics & English Language* (Orwell 2000, 359). Words are not inherently good or bad, helpful or harmful, revelatory or deceptive. It is the way we use them that gives them their force. Therefore we must be intentional in how we write and speak.

Orwell even gave me guidelines for telling the truth which I took to heart. He warned me, for instance, of the danger of "pretentious diction" (Orwell 200, 351), and exhorted me to "never use a passive where you can use the active"

(Orwell 200, 359). I have spent decades doggedly trying to follow these rules. Doing so has embedded clarity in me not merely as a stylistic choice, but as a value. Clarity is about telling the truth, and truthfulness is achieved through deliberate actions.

This is why I later gravitated to Haddon Robinson's Big Idea approach to preaching, in which the preacher's point is explicitly stated in one clear, unambiguous sentence (Robinson 2001, 34-35). There is no hiding in this type of preaching. Everything is fully on display. While I learned Big Idea preaching from Robinson, for me it was an extension of what Orwell taught me, another principle for using "language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought" (Orwell 2000, 359).

As much as I have already made of Orwell's impact on my life and ministry, there is one more lesson I must give him credit for. There is no truth harder to face than the truth about ourselves and our sin, and I have met no one more willing to face their own heart of darkness than Orwell. In his essay *Shooting an Elephant*, he documents an incident that took place while he was a colonial police officer in Burma. An elephant had escaped and trampled a local. Orwell called for an elephant gun, but by the time it arrived the animal had calmed down and was no longer a threat. However, he felt impelled to shoot it anyway, because of the crowd's expectations of him. Orwell's honesty about himself startled me as a youth, as he confesses "afterwards I was very glad that the coolie had been killed; it put me legally in the right and it gave me a sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant. I often wondered whether any of the others

grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool” (Orwell 2000, 25). He admits to something shameful, doing so not for shock value or catharsis, but because that is what he had to do in order to tell the truth about the evils of colonialism.

What I learned from Orwell and now carry into my preaching was that I must always face the truth, no matter how uncomfortable or inconvenient it may be. I must deal with passages that disturb my way of thinking and being. I must admit to my struggles and failures. This does not mean I must share everything uncomfortable about myself with my congregation. Personal sharing must be used with discretion. But I must always face the truth about myself personally. For how can I share the truth if I refuse to know it?

What did I learn from Orwell? I learned the power of words. I learned to value truth. I learned that telling the truth required clarity. And I learned that telling the truth required me to be honest with and about myself. Orwell was not a preacher, but he laid an excellent foundation for me to become one.

After my Orwellian awakening, I went on a literary journey that took me through high school and into an undergraduate degree in English literature, covering everything from middle English to postmodernism. Along the way, there was no other single author who influenced me so profoundly as a preacher as Orwell. However, the study of literature in general shaped me as a preacher, as it gave me skills I now use every week in sermon preparation. I had no practical ambitions for my degree in English literature, no idea as to what good it might do me. I simply and naively decided to study what I loved. But once I came to faith

and then decided to attend seminary I discovered that God, in his providence, had used my studies to prepare me for my vocation.

At my seminary orientation one of my professors to be, Dr. John Kessler, asked me what I had studied for my undergraduate degree. When I told him I had taken English literature he informed me I was better prepared for seminary than my peers. I was surprised, but his explanation made sense. I had just spent four years analyzing texts. After that, he told me, biblical interpretation would come naturally. I quickly discovered he was right. So much of what I did in seminary felt like an extension of what I had been doing for years. God's Word is uniquely inspired, but still follows the rules of grammar, genre, and so on.

The lessons I learned in literature carried over from my undergrad degree into seminary, and from seminary into ministry. Every sermon I preach begins with a thorough, careful literary study of the sermon text. A lifetime in books made this the most natural and enjoyable task imaginable for me. I went to university to study what I loved - books. Now I get to spend part of every week studying the book I love most.

God used books to prepare me for my calling. However, there was only so much that could be learned from words on a page. One cannot, for instance, truly learn love from a book. But the preacher's first calling is to love (Matthew 22:26-40). So even the best books were not enough to fully form me as a preacher. As a result, I emerged from my early influences more developed in my head than in my heart. God would begin to correct this. But whatever

understanding I did have of love and grace at this early stage, I had largely due to my family, and especially my mother.

The story of my journey with books is, in fact, the story of her love for me. She was the one who read to me until I could read for myself, no matter how long that process took. She was the one who pushed my school to have me tested for dyslexia and fought for the supports I needed. She was the one who bought me every book I showed any interest in, while gently guiding me towards better material. She told me I could study whatever I put my mind to. She proofread everything I wrote - she still does (including this paper). The fact that I, a dyslexic, managed to get a degree in English literature, and am now working in a profession that requires me to read and write every day is a testimony to how much my mother loved me, and how powerful that love still is. One cannot underestimate the formative value of such love. It was, I suspect, the most powerful way in which God used books to form me as a person and a preacher.

Finally a Christian

I came to faith in my second year of university, and even in this literature played a role. My degree required me to take a Humanities elective and I chose children's literature as it was closest to my major. One of the students in that class invited me to a Christmas party for a Christian club on campus. I had no desire to go, imagining nothing could be more boring. I only went because she was such an extremely nice person that I did not want to be rude to her.

The party was tamer than I was used to, but I found myself enjoying that. It gave me the opportunity to get to know the people there, and they all seemed as

nice as my classmate. It was the friendliest gathering I had been to in a while, and this put me to shame. At the time I had a very negative view of Christianity. I thought of it as a harsh, judgmental faith. I was interested in religion, studying Taoism and Buddhism in particular, but dismissed Christianity out of hand. Meeting so many wonderful Christians, made a strong impression. I realized I had judged their faith without studying it. So I resolved to learn about Christianity.

I had recently bought a paperback copy of the King James Bible in order to study it as a work of literature, so I began to read it daily. Instantly I noticed it did not read like any other book. It was compelling, powerful. Everything felt true. Not in terms of being factual, but in being true to life. Here, I felt, was an accurate account of human nature. I saw myself in Adam and Eve, as they ate the forbidden fruit, in Jacob and his scheming, in Moses and his self-doubt. This book knew me. So my skepticism about Christianity died in the pages of scripture. Before I finished the Pentateuch I was a Christian.

Growing up with a learning disability had made me a know-it-all. I sought to always have an answer as a way of proving to others and to myself that I was not stupid. Becoming a Christian disrupted my coping mechanism. I would go to Bible studies and attempt to answer every question brilliantly as I was used to doing, only to discover how very little I knew about my faith. It was profoundly humbling, being the least informed person in the room. Sadly, this did not have the proper effect on me. I did not learn that I do not have to be smart in order to be loved and secure. Instead, I resolved to become a know-it-all about Christianity.

This was not the healthiest of responses, but God still used it to form me as a person and a preacher.

My insecurity led me to begin the most formative practice in my discipleship: reading through the Bible every year. This is something I would do for more than a decade. My goal was to catch up to everyone who had the head start of growing up going to Sunday School, and I certainly did that. Knowing what is in the Bible is helpful as a preacher. But unexpectedly and more importantly, this practice allowed me to see the Bible's grand narrative. The more I read it cover to cover, the more the Bible felt like a unified book telling one story; the story of creation, fall, redemption and restoration; the story of Jesus. Discovering this has deeply impacted how I preach. My sermons emphasize the unity of the Bible, with Jesus at its centre. Everything either flows towards or from him. I preach this way not because I learned it in a homiletics class - though I did in time - but because that was how the Bible unfolded before me.

My insecurity also sent me on a hunt for theological certainty. If something in my faith was at all unclear, my assumption was that it was because I was ignorant, and I could not stand the idea of being ignorant. My search for answers soon drew me to Reformed Theology, with its thorough systematic explanations. It felt good believing I fully understood complex theological issues, such as election and predestination. So I fully immersed myself in the neo-Calvinist movement. To quote Colin Hansen, I became "Young, Restless, Reformed" (Hansen 2006). I devoured everything the movement had to teach me. The negative effect of this is that in time I had to unlearn some ideas, such as

Complementarianism. But there were many positives within the movement, including its emphasis on grace, which is what has stuck with me above all else.

Reformed Theology did a spectacular job of driving Ephesians 2:8-9 deep into my skull: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” And once that truth was in my head, over time it worked its way into my heart. So that I came to truly believe that God’s acceptance of me is perfect and complete in Christ, with there being nothing I can do to add or take from it. This has had a profound personal impact on me. I cannot say that this has freed me of my insecurities. But it is freeing me. And this freedom impacts how I preach.

I preach God's grace in every sermon. Why? I have read many books over the years exhorting me to do so, and no doubt they have had an impact on me. Certainly, they have taught me the mechanics of preaching grace. But the true reason I preach grace in every sermon is that grace is at the heart of my theology and identity. I recoil at the idea of simply telling people to try harder and do better because that is my old identity. It is not who I am now. And more importantly, it is not in line with who I understand God to be.

I was a very insecure convert. I was insecure before I was converted, and perhaps even more insecure afterwards. But God used these insecurities to shape me as a person and preacher. He used them to send me on a quest to master the Bible and theology, and in the process God mastered me, granting me a deeper understanding of him, his story, and his grace. All of which are now core to my

preaching. So yet again I can see God's providence shaping me as a preacher, even before I sensed a call to preach, which is what I will now turn to.

The Call to Preach

As a new Christian, I had no idea which church to attend, so I joined the Brethren church many of my new Christian friends belonged to. In the Brethren church preaching is done by laymen, so there is always a need for preachers, and they identified me early on as someone with a gift for it. In reality, I was not yet mature enough for the task. But a decent intellect and desire to prove oneself can look like gifting from the outside.

Despite my immaturity - or perhaps because of it - I accepted the call to preach. Much to the church's credit, they put a great deal of effort into supporting me, including assigning me a mentor. Bill Yule was one of the church's elders and an excellent preacher in his own right. He shared his own preaching ministry with me, explaining how he crafted a sermon. He also exposed me to good books on preaching, such as Haddon Robinson's *Biblical Preaching*, which I did not fully appreciate at the time but would later become a major influence.

The most impactful thing Bill said to me, indeed one of the most impactful things anyone has ever said to me as a preacher, is that I needed to "learn the difference between a Bible commentary and a sermon." That comment stuck with me, which is good because it took a long time for me to learn the lesson. But its initial effect was to show me that I had not figured everything out yet. It was important for me to see this, and to see that Bill still believed in me in spite of it. This process helped me realize it was ok to be a work in progress.

It was in the Brethren church that I first encountered and fell in love with expository preaching. As a new Christian struggling to understand my faith, and with a background in English literature, I appreciated the way the preachers in my church would unpack a text, thoroughly explaining it. This love for expository preaching would keep me there for some time. But as my theology developed I found myself less and less at home in the dispensationalism of my church. My preaching began to raise eyebrows. So I began attending a Reformed Baptist church near my home, and it was there that I was called into ministry.

Of course, I did not start out preaching at my new church. My time there began with an invitation to lead a junior high camp, which then turned into several internships, and eventually an associate pastor role. These roles required me to build relationships with the people I served. They would come to me with their questions, concerns and burdens, many of which I had faced and many more of which I had only ever encountered in a book. Ministering to them changed me. Everything I spoke about when I did get to preach and teach became more real as I spoke these truths into the lives of people I shepherded. Because I cared for them I began to care about what I said on a deeper, less theoretical level.

I vividly remember walking into my supervisor's office one day and telling him about the prior night's ministry. He responded to my enthusiasm for the people I served with a well-natured smile, comparing me to the Grinch, whose "small heart grew three sizes" (Seuss 1985, 48). That comment stuck with me because I knew he was right, and knew how significant such growth was for me. I needed it more than a lesson in technique.

Shortly after my church called me into ministry I began attending Tyndale Seminary. Doing so was my way of accepting God's calling by preparing myself for the road ahead. The lessons I learned there are too numerous to name and make up much of the second half of this paper. But there are two insights I will highlight because, going back to Bill Yule's comment to me, they helped me learn the difference between a Bible commentary and a sermon.

In my first preaching class, Dr. Fred Penney walked us through Haddon Robinson's book *Biblical Preaching*. I had read the work before, but its brilliance had escaped me. This time, thanks to Dr. Penney, Robinson got through. I can still locate the exact line in *Biblical Preaching* that brought about a paradigm shift for me: "Sermons seldom fail because they have too many ideas; more often they fail because they deal with too many unrelated ideas" (Robinson 2001, 35). Up until then my sermons had been, as Bill Yule pointed out, verse by verse commentaries. Everything I said was technically true, and some of it was insightful, but it was a jumbled and overwhelming mess. I was giving listeners lots of content, but with little meaning. What I discovered, reading Robinson, is that I needed to help my listeners by distilling everything in a passage down to its core so that it could be understood, remembered, and applied.

What is so fascinating now is that this did not occur to me on my own. I had spent all of high school and university writing essays that revolved around a tightly formed thesis statement. Why did I not think to preach in this way? For whatever reason, I needed my first preaching class to reach this breakthrough. But

once I reached it, preaching became far more natural for me. Preaching was now an extension and application of what I had been doing for the past decade.

My second lesson came not from a homiletics class, but one on theology. Dr. Victor Shepherd introduced me to Bullinger's creedal declaration: "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God" (Bullinger 1999, 93). This statement is now at the heart of my preaching. It is an idea so packed with meaning for me, it will be the organizing principle of the *Theology* section of this paper. But to distil its significance down, what I discovered in Dr. Shepherd's class is that a sermon is not a Bible commentary because Bible commentaries talk about God's Word, while sermons *are* God's Word.

There is one other thing Dr. Shepherd taught me that changed my preaching. He told me "people suffer." He said this many times, always while recounting the hardships he witnessed in his ministry. It is such a simple, obvious statement. But the way he said it - with conviction and empathy - shook me. I realized that every person I encounter has suffered. They do not all wear their suffering for the world to see, but it is there. When I see people differently I speak to them differently. Realizing that everyone in the pews is a sufferer changed me as a preacher. It made me kinder, more empathetic, and pastoral.

In so many ways this was a wonderful period in my life, as ministry and school awakened me to God's calling for my life. But not all the lessons I learned were so joyful. When I began working at my church we were without a senior pastor. After two years there our interim preaching pastor was hired for the role.

When this decision was first made I was excited as he was an excellent preacher. However, his preaching soon changed for the worse, as did my situation.

Whereas before he would open the Bible for us, helping us to understand and receive God's Word, now he would tell us what he wanted us to hear. Every message veered away from the text and towards one of his agendas. I remember hearing a church member joke, "I wonder what text he will use this week to tell us to join a small group." It was hard being unable to defend my boss. But what was even harder was the pressure I faced when it was my time to preach. He would call me into his office for a Bible study on the week's text, during which he would simply tell me what to say. If I pointed out an aspect of the text that did not square with his interpretation I was dismissed. If I explained I was having trouble seeing his point in the text I was told not to overthink things. It was there. Just preach it. The preaching of the Word of God became the preaching of his words.

These experiences were deeply troubling. I was shocked by his lack of integrity. What's more, my own integrity was tested. This was my boss. My job was on the line. I loved my job. I was a young man on the verge of getting married. I needed my job. So I would do my best to follow his instructions. I would steer my sermons as close to his agenda as I could. But I could not bring myself to say something I did not believe. I would not bend the truth.

This was a challenging period in my ministry. I was intimidated and belittled on a regular basis. I lived in a state of constant anxiety. When my church let me go, claiming my position was no longer needed, my emotions were mixed.

I was hurt. I was sad. I was anxious. But more than anything I was relieved. Not just because my trial was over, but because I had withstood it.

Sometimes it was hard to know what I actually believed. Did I really love God? Did I really value the truth? Or did I just like sounding smart and pious? Suffering in ministry allowed me to know myself better. I had been given a choice between God and self. I had chosen God. While there was still much insecurity in me, I could see it was no longer the main driving force in my life. Ironically, a journey that ended with me being let go showed me I belonged in ministry.

However, I was now a pastor without a pastorate, and it was tempting to give up. To find a profession that would not chew me up only to spit me out. At this vital junction, my supervising pastor and mentor Dennis Campbell played a pivotal role. He had helped me through the challenges of the last four years, fighting for me to keep my job. When they let me go he affirmed my calling and told me not to give up. He told me I was called to be a pastor. There is no pastor I respect more than Dennis. If he looked at me and saw a pastor then that is what I was. I was called.

Taking the Training Wheels Off

After some time and much prayer, God led me to a new pastorate. In so many ways, it was like learning to swim by jumping off a dock. Suddenly I was no longer an associate. I had to take the lead. It was an overwhelming challenge at first. But God had recently blessed me with a wonderfully supportive wife, and with her help I embraced ministry's demands, growing in the process.

Being the lead pastor meant preaching almost every week. Preaching weekly was of course more demanding than monthly, but the increased demand was a blessing. Previously I had time to agonize over my message, and ultimately over myself. But now I have no time for such things. I had to forge ahead, being decisive. I still had time to think about my text and my people. But not enough time to think about myself. I benefited immensely from this change.

Being a lead pastor also meant learning to preach with an agenda. While my experiences in my previous church made me suspicious of agendas in the pulpit, I came to see that churches do need some leadership in the pulpit. Whether a new initiative was being rolled out or the community had suffered a tragedy, congregants occasionally needed a word from God addressing their situation directly. So I had to learn to lead from the pulpit. Doing so was demanding. It required me to hold onto a healthy tension, in which God's Word ultimately trumped my agenda. But it made me a more pastoral preacher.

Being a lead pastor has also meant doing more counselling. This exposed me to the deep struggles and wounds of my congregants. I supported people through depression, counselled struggling couples, and had heartfelt conversations with individuals who were no longer sure if they believe in God. I witnessed Dr. Shepherd's lesson firsthand: people suffer. This served to deepen my compassion and enriched my preaching.

Entering into people's lives also made my preaching more applicable. I used to think of application primarily in terms of telling people what to do. But I realized anything that helps a person experience God's grace is an application.

Simply saying “God loves you” was applicable if that was what would help get someone through a difficult time. I used to dread working on applications, as they often felt like demanding and awkward intrusions at the end of an otherwise gracious message. But now I find applications more natural. I see them as my chance to help people see how God’s grace can touch their life.

Joining my current family of churches, the Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec (CBOQ), also helped me immensely, as I now belonged to a network of pastors who were supportive and modeled healthy ministry. My mentor, Craig Rumble, was a particular blessing. He walked me through many challenges, modelling emotional health, integrity, and kindness along the way.

My studies at Tyndale also helped me to grow. My professors forced me to learn not just about preaching, but about myself. So many of the confessions in this paper were new discoveries which I was only able to face as a result of the lessons I learned in my program. And this personal growth showed me how deeply my preaching is tied to my identity.

During my program my congregants noticed a change in my preaching. They thanked me for my sermons more, telling me my messages now connected with them on a deeper level. I realized the change was not something technical. I had changed and my preaching was so deeply tied to me that it changed with me. That is why I believe there is so much value in the first half of this paper. To be a good preacher I must not just study the Bible. Even knowing God is not enough. I must also study and know myself. For it is only from the vantage point of self-knowledge that I can authentically know and speak for him.

Theology

As the first half of this paper chronicles, a great deal has gone into developing my theology of preaching. My beliefs and convictions about preaching have been acquired over time. This process has not been tidy or linear. While some of the preaching convictions have stood the test of time and are still with me to this day, others have come and gone. As I have gone through this process of learning and unlearning about preaching, there is one central conviction which has come to organize and oversee the rest of my beliefs. This, reaching back into my *Biography*, is Bullinger's declaration that "the Preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God" (Bullinger 1999, 93). If I had to reduce my theology of preaching to one Big Idea this would be it. All of my other convictions about preaching are spokes connected by this hub.

As I have already documented, I was first exposed to this idea by Dr. Victor Shepherd. At first, Bullinger's declaration seemed too extreme - heretical even. The Bible alone is the Word of God. My words do not belong in the same category. Not only did such a notion feel theologically wrong, it also felt wrong experientially. At the time I was dominated by insecurity. I did not believe in my own preaching. How could my preaching be God's Word when I doubted it?

It was Jesus who changed my mind about preaching. Or, more precisely, it was Dr. Shepherd's quoting of Jesus which persuaded me. In Luke, when Jesus sends his disciples to preach he tells them, "the one who hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16). As Dr. Shepherd emphatically pointed out, Jesus does not say it is as if they hear him, but that he is heard. Jesus fully owns his disciples' words as

his own when he calls them to preach. For me, this means that when he sends me to preach he also does so saying “the one who hears you hears me.”

Still, my position may seem extreme, so it is important to note it is shared by many others, especially within the Reformed movement. Calvin himself taught that in preaching God speaks to us “no less than if he himself had come down from heaven” (Shepherd 2020, 2). More recently, Ian Pitt-Watson perfectly captures my view when he writes: “For in the preaching event it is not just we who are talking ‘about’ God, God being the subject of our talk (or for that matter the object of our inquiry). It is God who is the communicator. It is not just we who are communicating truths about him. He is communicating himself” (Watson 1986, 13). That others agree with me does not of course mean I am right. But it does mean my position has a home within my theological tradition.

Coming to see the preaching of the Word of God as the Word of God brought about a paradigm shift for me. Up until then, my sermons were little more than lessons. Like the presentations and essays I did for school, they gave information on a topic, the difference being God was now the topic. But preaching, I suddenly realized, is not teaching. Yes, good sermons can and should teach at times. But teaching is merely a tool to be used alongside many others, all in service of a greater aim. That greater aim is for people to hear God. Not for them to hear about God, but for them to actually hear him. A sermon is not a lesson, but an encounter with God. On Sunday I talk, but God speaks.

This discovery brought about two major shifts in how I saw preaching. First, it began to bring the rest of my thinking about preaching into focus. Some

ideas that I had previously believed took on new weight, as I saw how they aligned with my calling to preach so God is heard. Other beliefs, which had seemed important before, diminished in, or disappeared from, my thinking as I saw they had little to do with my true vocation. Understanding the heart of preaching gave me a way to evaluate ideas, assessing and understanding their importance. This will be evident in the rest of the paper, as I will relate all of my other preaching convictions back to this core belief.

But a second shift deserving of special comment here is the new spiritual dimension this added to my preaching. Up until this point, preaching seemed controllable and in my power. I merely had to study and follow the right procedures. It was no different than giving a presentation, and I had been giving competent presentations without God's help for years. There was no need to involve him in the process at this point. Of course, I would not have admitted to any of this at the time. I would have strongly denied it. Everything depended upon God - in theory. But in practice, I did not depend upon him as a preacher.

The realization that it is God who speaks through the sermon changed this and changed me. Teaching is a relatively easy, controllable task. People do it successfully in secular contexts without any dependence on God every day. But speaking for God is a task beyond our control. Even when God speaks directly, people seldom receive his words as what they are (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). So how much less likely are they to hear his words through me? It is only ever through the work of the Holy Spirit that God's words come alive from us. (1 Corinthians 2:10-13). It is his work which first makes God's own Word come

alive for us. So I am dependent upon him to make my preaching come alive as God's Word.

Seeing this changed the way I approach preaching, as it gave me a greater appreciation of our need to pray. God is not a genie we can summon and command. Whether he shows up in the sermon is entirely up to him. So all I can do is pray; asking him to direct me as I prepare my sermons, so that the words I write are the words he wishes to speak; asking him to anoint me as I preach, giving my words a power that is not in me; asking him to work within my audience, making his Word come alive for them. Prayer should be the first and last thing we do in preparation to preach, with many more prayers in between.

I am about to catalogue my core beliefs on preaching, giving many principles and practices along the way. But a core part of my theology of preaching is the belief that preaching cannot be reduced to principles and practices. Preaching is neither an art nor a science. It is a work of God. Because of this, it is possible to get everything technical right about preaching, to have all the correct ideas and procedures, yet not truly preach. God cannot be rendered present by human effort. He is not in our control. He is gracious, and he shows up in response to dependence and prayer. It is possible to speak for him. But we can never do so on our own.

But all of that being said, dependence and prayer are also not enough. To only pray, giving no further thought to the how and why of preaching, is not spiritual but lazy. An abdication of responsibility. A technically sound theology of

preaching is not sufficient, no matter how good it is. But a well-thought-out theology of preaching is still necessary. So here I will attempt to unpack mine.

Biblical / Expository

The fact that I have given this section a hyphenated title is in itself revealing. The main emphasis should be on preaching being biblical. After all, it is not just any preaching that is the Word of God, but the preaching of the Word of God. God is present not when I give my opinion, but when I expound upon his Word. It is vital then that preaching be biblical.

However, while my core belief here is simply that preaching be biblical, I know that this value is vague. Which preacher will not tell you they are biblical, even if they are in fact giving their own thoughts? Something more is needed to ensure that we are preaching the Word of God. For me that something more is that preaching be expository.

Mary Hulst gives an excellent definition of biblical preaching that captures the essence of expository preaching. “A Sermon is an oral event in which the speaker humbles him - or herself - before the grand narrative of Scripture and, after seeking to understand what God is up to in a particular passage, invites hearers to know God more” (Hulst 2016, 27). The best way to make sure preaching is biblical, according to Hulst, is to derive our message from a particular text. The grand narrative of scripture is also important as she notes. But preachers must preach from a single text.

Why do I feel it is necessary to focus on a particular text? Doing so is limiting after all. Instead of being able to draw upon all of what the Bible says on

a given topic, I bind myself to one passage. Expository preaching is like preaching with blinders on. We do that to horses. Why inflict it upon ourselves?

There are two reasons. First, on a pragmatic level, I have already stated that I believe “sermons seldom fail because they have too many ideas; more often they fail because they deal with too many unrelated ideas” (Robinson 2001, 35). When we limit what we say to one text it allows us to say one thing well and allows our listeners to absorb and remember what was said. Forgiveness is a huge topic. Who can take it all in at once?

Second, on a more theological level, I do not trust myself to handle all of the Bible at once. Doing so makes it too easy for me to distort scripture. I can make the Bible say nearly anything. “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me” (Matthew 4:9) sounds like a divine promise of prosperity when used as a passing reference. But an expository examination quickly reveals it is Satan speaking here. It is so easy to use bits and pieces of the Bible to say things that are not biblical. Expository preaching safeguards biblical preaching by forcing us to stay with a text, paying close attention to exactly what is being said in context. Expository preaching safeguards the value of being biblical.

I also believe it is advisable to show our congregation something of the expository process. Just as in a math class you must show the teacher your work so they know how you got your answer, preachers should show their congregation our work so they know how we drew our conclusion. Otherwise, we may give them the impression that what we say is the Word of God not because we are rightly handling the Bible, but simply because we say so.

Preaching expository messages is one of the best ways of ensuring our preaching is biblical. However, this is not safeguard enough. Going back to Mary Hulst's definition of preaching quoted above, the faithful preacher "humbles him - or herself - before the grand narrative of Scripture" (Hulst 2016, 27). As we zoom in on a particular passage we must not lose sight of the big picture, for doing so we may fail to be biblical even as we preach biblical texts.

Todd Billings's book *The Word of God for the People* is extremely helpful here. In it, he critiques what he calls the "smorgasbord" approach to scripture. In this hermeneutic we go to the Bible taking whatever we like, feeding our appetites (Billings 2010, 6). Focusing on a particular text is not enough to guard against this abuse. I can preach a sermon focused on John 15:7, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you," and falsely teach that Jesus will give us whatever we pray for.

The way to prevent such erroneous interpretations, according to Billings, is by using the rest of the Bible as a map when interpreting a passage. A map, he explains, "gives us the broad outline for our journey" (Billings 2010., 8). It shows us where we are starting, where we are headed, and which routes will get us there. When interpreting a specific passage we must use the rest of the Bible as our guide, letting it set the boundaries of our journey. Some interpretations are off-limits because they fall outside the map of scripture.

In my first preaching course Dr. Fred Penney drew upon the Old Testament prophets and their oft-used expression, "thus says the Lord." These are the words I long to say after each sermon. The surest way to know this is true, Dr.

Penny taught me, is to preach the Bible. Of course, not everything in a sermon carries equal weight. The jokes may be genuinely bad, and they are wholly mine. But if the core of my message is “derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context” (Robinson, 21) then I can truly declare “thus says the Lord” when I am done.

Playful

If I had been tasked with articulating my theology of preaching before I began my Doctor of Ministry program the word playfulness would not have appeared in this chapter. Not only would I have not used the term playfulness, but the concept itself would have been absent. Yet that does not mean it was not part of my preaching. I was just not aware of it. Indeed playfulness is one of my oldest values, going back to my study of literature. But sometimes our deepest values are the hardest to notice.

I get the term playfulness from J. Todd Billings' book, *The Word of God for the People of God*, which helped me to recognize and articulate this value. While the idea of a playful reading of scripture sounds trivializing - treating the Bible as a toy - Billings' point is the exact opposite. He says of faithful scripture reading: “It is a subject-to-subject relationship as in a serious game, you cannot force the game into your mold. You cannot wish your hits to be inbounds, and then they will be. You have to face what the game gives you, face what is ‘other’ about it, and respond” (Billings 2010, 42). God’s Word is not a passive object which we handle, but an active partner who speaks to us. It speaks, it confronts, it

demands, it denies. So we must allow ourselves to be engaged by it, crafting our sermons in response.

Billings used this idea of playfulness to counter a common way of mishandling scripture which he calls the “blueprint” method of interpretation. In this hermeneutic we come to scripture thinking we already know what it has to say. We know our systematic theology, and interpretation is merely a matter of identifying which of our doctrines a passage articulates (Billings 2010, 5). The blueprint method will generate truthful preaching, so long as our theology is correct. But the preaching it produces fails to truly engage and honour God’s Word.

The antidote to the blueprint approach to scripture is not to forget our theology as we read the Bible. Doing so would take us back to the smorgasbord approach discussed above. Again, the healthy approach is to treat our theology as a map (Billings 2010, 8). A map shows us the broad outline of our journey, which in the Bible runs from creation all the way to resurrection. However, a map is not so detailed as to tell you everything you will encounter along the way. A map leaves room for discovery and adventure - for play. In such an approach my theology helps me by telling me which interpretations are on the path. Knowing this actually opens me up to appreciate new discoveries. I can notice the particularities of my text and take my sermon in an unexpected direction because my theology lets me know if this interpretation is faithful to the larger narrative of scripture.

Mary Hulst, who does not use the term playfulness, thoroughly understands this value and captures what it looks like in action:

For Christians, and for Christian preachers in particular, loving the Word means allowing ourselves to be pulled into the revelation, to have our flaws revealed and assumptions challenged, to have our ideas about God shattered when confronted by the truth that is God. We let ourselves be vulnerable before the Word, allowing the Spirit to weave it deep into us, convicting us of sin and calling us to holy living.” (Hulst 2016, 18).

Being a playful interpreter is personally challenging. The preacher must discover new things, and those new discoveries push not just against their thinking but against their very self.

However, there are two very good reasons to embrace playfulness. First, in my experience, it makes for fresh, engaging preaching. Our sermons become as unique as the myriad passages of scripture as we let each text's details shape them. Indeed, I find that the more I lean into that which is most perplexing, challenging, even disturbing in the text, not shying away from anything, the more substantial my preaching becomes. The more I allow the Word and the Spirit to direct me, the more my congregation resonates with my preaching. Playfulness simply makes for better preaching.

Second, on an even deeper level, playfulness makes for more faithful preaching. I must always remember that it is the preaching of the Word of God that is the Word of God. Before I can claim to speak for God I must hear him. Playfulness at its essence is seeking to hear God. It involves putting aside our assumptions, even our fears and desires, in order to open ourselves to the text and the Spirit. As such, it is a prerequisite for faithful preaching. For I cannot speak for God until I have truly listened to him.

Clear

For me, clarity is a deep and long-held value. It was instilled in me by George Orwell, long before I was a preacher or even a Christian. But clarity has now taken on theological significance. At the centre of my theology of preaching is the belief that the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. So far I have explored this idea by focusing on the importance of the preacher's subject matter. We must preach the Word of God. But equally important is what we do with God's Word. We must actually preach it. And that is where clarity comes in.

What is the point of preaching? Why not just read the scriptures on Sunday? I cannot make God's Word any more true. I seriously doubt I can make it more beautiful. So what is my contribution? Like the faithful Levites in Nehemiah 8:8 who, after the scriptures were read, "gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading," my job is to help God's people understand his Word. The best thing I can bring to the Word is clarity. For it is only when we understand the Bible that we can meet God in and through it.

Clarity, then, is a theological priority. When we emphasize clarity we declare that hearing God's Word matters. That it is vitally important that we understand him. When we eschew clarity we state the opposite. We declare that God's Word matters little. It can be fudged, glossed over, or ignored. It does not matter whether we truly understand him. There is nothing subjective about clarity being a value, as our attitude towards it makes a statement about our attitude towards God and his Word. One need only look at how much time Jesus spent clarifying the Law and the Prophets to realize clarity matters.

However, as absolute as the need for clarity is, the way we pursue it is subjective. What helps one congregation to understand the Word may not help another. What follows then is my way of pursuing a theological commitment, but not all of my applications are themselves theologically necessary.

Nothing has helped me achieve clarity more than Robinson's Big Idea philosophy of preaching. In this approach, there is to be a "central, unifying idea" at the heart of every sermon (Robinson 2001, 37). The theory behind this practice is that it is better to say one thing well than to offer a handful of half-developed ideas. Robinson provides a proverb that superbly captures the essence of this approach: "A sermon should be a bullet, not buckshot." (Robinson 2001., 35). It should make one impactful point, as opposed to many weak ones.

This approach to preaching is profoundly challenging. It demands precise thinking. It is much easier to explore a topic or give a running Bible commentary than to say something precise and well-defined. It also forces us to be upfront with ourselves and our listeners about what we are saying. There is no hiding your point when it is stated so succinctly. No preacher should want to hide what they are saying. And if my thoughts are not clear in my own head what hope is there that my words will be any clearer? Big Idea preaching is not easy. But the effort is worth it, as it produces sermons of substance and truth.

While well-defined ideas are the starting place for my sermons, there is far more to clarity than having a Big Idea. The way we use language is just as important. This is why I find Orwell's rules for writing, such as "never use a long word where a short one will do" (Orwell 2000, 359), so extremely helpful for

preaching. If we desire to be understood then we will be intentional with our words. We will, for instance, avoid theological jargon when it is not absolutely necessary for making our point.

Clarity also involves the careful use of stories, illustrations, and other literary devices. Orwell showed me through his novels *Animal Farm* and *1984* that a good story can often capture the truth far more powerfully than a straight didactic explanation. What's more, Jesus, with his frequent use of parables, makes this same point. There is a reason why virtually everyone remembers and is impacted by the story of The Prodigal Son. Stories can crystallize the truth.

However, as helpful as stories and other literary devices can be, they can also be misused. Used well, stories powerfully illustrate and illuminate the point of the sermon. Used poorly, stories distract from the point. This is why I find it essential to heed Mary Hulst's calling to "kill your darlings" (Hulst 2016, 81). We must be willing to cut out everything that takes our attention away from what God is saying through our preaching text. I find this especially important when it comes to personal illustrations. An experience that was moving for me may not be as impactful for others as an illustration. I must be willing to sacrifice even that which is most personally meaningful for the sake of clarity. Doing so is hard, painful even. But it serves as a test. It reveals whether my focus is on preaching the Word of God so he is heard, or on preaching my own words so I am heard.

Gracious

As mentioned in the section on being biblical, if our preaching is to rise to the level of being the Word of God we must make sure our message is aligned

with the “grand narrative of Scripture” (Hulst 2016, 27). If my sermon is technically in step with my passage, but out of step with the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, then have I really preached the Word of God? Or have I simply used God’s Word as a pretext for my own words? True preaching which allows the listener to hear God must be faithful to his grand message.

This is why Wilson argues that all “preaching needs to get to good news” (Wilson 2018, xiii). If that is where the Bible is headed, then that is where all preaching must go. This does not mean we should censor the Bible, filtering out all that is troubling. In fact, trouble is essential for getting to the good news of scripture. For, as Wilson points out, the gospel is “the union of trouble and grace” (Wilson 2018, 24). It is only when we hear the bad news of sin that the good news of redemption makes sense. Christ’s promise of life is only powerful when we first know that we are dead.

It is essential that we preach both trouble and grace. But just as vital is the order in which we preach them. As in the Bible, the final word in the sermon must always be grace. Otherwise, as Wilson puts it, we inadvertently “turn wine back into water” (Wilson 2018, 195). If our word is to be God’s Word then our preaching must move towards and not away from grace.

The challenge of always moving in the same direction is that all our sermons can sound alike. Having spent several years in a church where every text was treated as an opportunity to explain justification by faith, I know this problem firsthand. However, if we have a robust understanding of God’s grace this need not be the case. Wilson provides a full definition of the grace to help preachers:

Grace recognizes the action of God, who has accepted that burden of human responsibility in Jesus Christ. Grace is an empowering action of God. The law is good and involves grace, but grace enables humans to meet the demands of the law. It includes things like forgiveness, salvation, providence, liberation, justice, overcoming of the ‘principalities [and] powers’ and the new creation. Grace is most fully expressed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Spirit. (Wilson 2018, 24)

Armed with such a definition, we can preach grace in a thousand different ways.

Preaching must always move in the same direction, but the endpoints of our sermons can and should be as diverse as the texts we preach.

Ending with grace can still be challenging, especially as preachers typically conclude their sermons with application. There is a good reason for doing so. We want our congregants to be doers and not mere hearers of the Word. But the danger is that applications can easily become more law than gospel. Sermons frequently end in a flurry of should’s, ought’s and must’s. That is why it is important to remember that preaching is supremely “about God and what he has done, not just about us and about what we ought to do” and that “only through what God is and has done can I be what I ought to be and do what I ought to do” (Pitt-Watson 1986, 21). Application is important, but grace is essential, for all our work rests upon the work of Christ.

Being applicable without being legalistic is difficult, but Mary Hulst helps by giving us a question to reframe how to approach application. She invites us to ask of our preaching text: “What does God do in our lives if this story is true?” (Hulst 2016, 118). This question keeps preaching from being abstract, for we are anticipating change. But it also keeps preaching gracious, for it is God who brings about the change. This shift transforms our preaching, so that “every application of every text is a celebration of the grace of God that enables us to live

differently” (Hulst 2016, 123). Now application does not take us away from God’s grace but helps us to understand it.

Substantial

As I have just acknowledged, preaching must be applicable, as God’s Word always demands a response. However, I prefer to speak of preaching in terms of being substantial rather than applicable. This is because the term application can give the impression that we are always looking to give people something to do. When I think of applications I think of things like “sell your possessions,” “participate in the church bake sale,” and “tell three neighbours about Jesus.” Such applications can be well, good, and necessary. But not every text, and by extension, not every sermon, calls for such a tangible, active response.

For instance, in Romans 8:28 Paul tells us “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” He is not calling us to do anything here. Rather, he is making us aware of what God does. Romans 8:28 is applicable, but the application is not something we are to accomplish, but something we are to believe. So tagging on a laundry list of demands onto such a passage may actually dilute its message.

Since, in my experience, the term application is associated with human activity, I prefer the term significance. Significance carries less baggage. A passage can be significant because it calls for action, but it can also be significant because it changes how we think or even feel. The key thing is to show one’s

congregation what difference it makes if God's Word is true (Hulst 2016, 118). Speaking of preaching as significance captures this need without forcing texts to apply in a singular way.

I also gravitate towards the term significance because it implies that preaching should be substantial. A sermon can have a concrete application but be so paper-thin that obedience is neither compelling nor meaningful. But, to quote Pitt-Watson, preaching is “about action enabled by insight, imperatives empowered by indicatives, ethics rooted in theology, ‘what we ought to do’ made possible by what God has done” (Pitt-Watson 1986. 22). If I tell you what to do, but leave you without understanding, motivation, and grace, I have not helped you at all. In fact, I have probably set you up to fail. Applicable preaching may only deal with actions, but substantial preaching includes grace and truth.

The Word of God is substantial. It always calls for a response, and the responses it calls for are always rooted in deep truth and deep grace. Therefore, as we seek to be the voice of God we must preach with substance.

Contextual

An argument could be made for treating contextualization as part of clarity. Why must preachers deal with context? Because we are called to help people encounter God, and so much of what stands in the way of hearing God through his Word is context. The Bible was birthed into a land and time radically different from ours. This is why, in his book *Between Two Worlds*, John Stott argues that preachers must build a bridge between the world of the Bible and our world in order to “enable God's revealed truth to flow out of the Scriptures into

the lives of the men and women of today” (Stott 1982, 138). If we fail to do so, much in scripture will be indecipherable. Contextualization is crucial to understanding the Bible. This makes it essential for clarity.

However, as essential as context is for clarity, I believe it deserves its own section because it is such an immense subject. I used to think of contextualization entirely in terms of understanding the past. If we understand the world of the Bible, I assumed, explaining it will be easy. However, our calling goes beyond helping people understand what the Bible says. Preachers are called to help people hear what God is saying to them. This requires us to not only understand the world of the Bible, but also the worlds of our people. It is not enough to know what Paul’s words mean. We must know what Paul’s words mean for our people. So we need to give attention to both contexts; the past and the present.

It is tempting to assume we understand our world. After all, it is our own context. However, there is a sense in which the present is more aloof than the past. There are commentaries on Matthew and Isaiah, which explain their worlds. But there are no commentaries on Alvin, Kelly, and the many other people whose worlds we speak into. Sometimes I even feel I need a commentary on myself, I am so inexplicable. Contextualization is a massive task because it is not enough to make the Bible clear. We must make it clear to particular people. And understanding people is not easy.

Contextualization demands that preachers study the present. It is not enough to know and make references to pop culture. In order to preach contextually, I must understand the worldview my congregants inhabit. I must be

aware of the beliefs and assumptions that undergird our age. Only then can I bring God's Word to bear on the present. For instance, to borrow the title of Charles Taylor's seminal work, we live in *A Secular Age*. I used to think of secularism entirely in terms of removing religion from the public domain, but scholars such as Taylor, Andrew Root, and James K.A. Smith have helped me see that secularism also involves a shift in our own worldview. We now live in a world in which theism is "one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" (Taylor 2018, 3). While I may choose to believe, belief is never easy because now there is always the possibility that I may be wrong (Smith 2014, 10-11). I used to take such doubts for granted, seeing them as universal. Now I realize they are particular to my context. The Bible was not written into a secular age of doubt. This means I must give serious thought to recontextualizing its message for the world I live in.

The task of contextualization is not limited to wrestling with big ideas. It also involves embracing people. There is a sense in which everyone is a context unto themselves. They have their own beliefs, fears, desires, and assumptions. So pastors must study the context of their individual churches. Dr. Kevin Livingston taught me this. He also encouraged me to write every sermon with specific members of my church in mind. I try to imagine what will confuse, trouble and comfort them. I ask myself what the passage's significance is for them. I do not write a generic sermon, but a sermon for them. This is why I feel strongly that preachers should also be pastors. We are bridging worlds, and how can one build

a bridge to a world they have never visited? Contextualization demands that we know our people and preach to them.

The goal of preaching is that people hear God. In order for that to happen our words must be contextualized. We understand the Bible in its context, and then translate its message into the context of our listeners. Exegeting our context is just as important as exegeting our text. Otherwise, we are merely providing a Bible commentary and not preaching.

Embodied

Embodiment takes place on two levels. On the literal surface level, embodiment involves delivery. While substance is more important than style, when we truly care about what we say, we will strive to say it effectively. We will seek to be audible, to use appropriate tone, intonation, and gestures, and to effectively pace our preaching. While our delivery must be authentic to who we are, we will seek to be the version of ourselves that most effectively speaks to our hearers.

On a deeper level, embodiment means preaching with integrity and authenticity (Stott 1982, 262). The pastor's first calling is not to preach God's Word, but to believe and live it. Of course, we will not do so perfectly. But we can approach the Word with sincerity, genuinely seeking to love the God we speak for and the people we speak to. Conviction must be the driving force of preaching.

This deeper level of embodiment is vital for preaching and even more so for preachers. If I do not believe what I am saying then my preaching will most likely suffer, as it will lack conviction. But even if my preaching does not suffer

my soul certainly will, as it is a serious thing to speak insincerely not just about God but for him. Nothing is more important for the preacher themselves than deep embodiment. Yet nothing is harder to control as, unlike with many other preaching values, sincerity and integrity cannot be produced through a series of principles and procedures, for these are matters of the heart. This is why it is vitally important for the preachers to have a private devotional life. We cannot control the state of our own heart. We can no more turn stone to flesh within ourselves than within our hearers. But we can trust that as we meet with God he will make his Word come alive for us, just as he makes his Word come alive for others through us.

Conclusion

I began this paper by discussing the deep connection between biography and theology. It is impossible to fully appreciate our theology apart from our life because it is during the course of life that God forms and shapes us. Yet at the same time, it is impossible to understand our biography apart from our theology, as our theology shapes how we view our journey. Writing this paper has given me a better understanding of my life, by helping me see how my experiences have shaped me as a preacher. It has also given me a better understanding of my theology by helping me to see where my preaching beliefs and values come from. Seeing the two together adds to my understanding of both.

As helpful as this exercise has been, however, it has also made me aware that my theology of preaching is not final, complete or fixed. How could it be when God keeps giving me new experiences? I fully expect my beliefs about

preaching to continue developing because I fully expect that God has more to show me and new places to take me. Indeed I do not see myself as fully formed yet, and how can my theology be more formed than I am? But I feel I have arrived at a solid understanding of my journey thus far, with a new level of self-awareness. Also, I feel confident that the core of my theology will endure. So what I anticipate going forward is that God will add to and refine my theology. There may be some parts of my past and my present that need reassessment. There may be aspects of my theology that needed reworking. But on the whole, I feel God has led me to a solid foundation in my understanding of my biography and theology, which can be built upon. And when we consider Calvin's edict that "nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts, the knowledge of God and of ourselves" this is no small thing (Calvin 1960, 35).

CHAPTER 3

IMAGINATIVE LEADERSHIP

Preface

The subject of this chapter is *my philosophy of Christian leadership*. There are four keywords in this subject. Most obviously are the words *leadership* and *Christian*. These words call for attention, and throughout this chapter I will explore leadership, doing so from a Christian perspective. But the words *my* and *philosophy* are also important and merit some consideration at the outset of this chapter.

First, in saying this is *my* philosophy of leadership, I want to make it clear that this philosophy is for me. Hopefully, there will be principles and insights that can apply to all leaders, and perhaps some kindred spirits will resonate with most or all of my ideas. But I am not seeking to write a one size fits all approach to leadership. What follows is tailored to fit me, with my calling, giftings, inclinations, and limitations.

Second, it is important to note that this is a *philosophy* of leadership. It is not meant to be an encyclopedia, covering everything I know and believe about leadership. It is also not a leadership strategy, dealing with a specific leadership situation. So, there are important values and considerations which I will leave out, such as the need for Christian character, and the particulars of my context. I leave these out not because they are unimportant, but because they are outside of my

scope. This is a philosophy, which means it is an attempt to get to the heart, the fundamental nature, of the type of leadership I am called to.

I am a preacher and one of my fundamental beliefs about preaching is that “sermons seldom fail because they have too many ideas; more often they fail because they deal with too many unrelated ideas” (Robinson 2001, 35). I will be applying this principle to the writing of this chapter by focusing not on Christian leadership in general, but on *my philosophy* of Christian leadership.

Introduction: The Imagination

Graham Greene writes in the opening of his novel *The Power and the Glory*: “There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in” (Greene 2001, 12). As I have sought to understand my own philosophy of Christian leadership, my first and foremost task has been to arrive at my starting point - the belief, idea, or presence from which all my other beliefs and ideas about leadership radiate. At first, I thought to begin with the Old Testament prophets, as no biblical figures shape my ministry more. But while the prophets play a pivotal role in my leadership and this chapter, there is an influence even more fundamental. As I have traced my thinking back I have arrived not just at a foundational idea, but at a foundational experience. The kind of experience Greene describes in the quote above.

My clearest early memory is of my mother reading to me. This was our nightly ritual, and since I am dyslexic and took a long time learning to read, it is a ritual we enacted for many years. We began with classic children’s books, such as the works of Dr. Seuss and Robert Munsch, but as I grew older we ventured into

more mature books, such as *The Hobbit* by Tolkien and *The Chronicles of Narnia* series by C.S. Lewis.

I distinctly remember us reading *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. While it was far more text-heavy than a typical children's book, it still had pictures. I would ask my mother to see the pictures right away, as soon as we turned the page. But she explained that this would stop me from using my imagination. It is far better to use your own imagination than to rely on someone else's. At the time (and at the present) there was no earthly authority wiser or more trustworthy than my mother, so I believed her wholeheartedly. Thus began my belief in the importance of the imagination, a belief that has fundamentally shaped me as a person and a pastor, and which forms the foundation of my philosophy of Christian leadership.

While I learned to treasure the imagination at an early age, it would be some time before I came to value it on anything more than a personal level. For years, the imagination was merely something to enjoy. It was fun reading and making up stories. It even seemed virtuous in a way I could not defend but felt intensely, but it was not something necessary or useful. This was enough for me. I loved the imagination for its own sake. But short of becoming a novelist - which I did aspire to for many years - I saw little practical use for the imagination in life.

But then, in my second year of university, while unsurprisingly studying English literature, I was assigned to read the great Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye's Massey Lectures entitled, *The Educated Imagination*. In the lectures, Frye makes a case for the value of studying and teaching English

literature (Frye 1963, 1). His main argument was, as one can tell from his title, that literature educates the imagination; however, in order to make this argument, Frye first built a case for the importance of the imagination (Frye 1963, 57).

The starting place for understanding Frye's defence of the imagination is how he defines the term. The imagination, according to Frye, is that part of us that is able to form "a vision of possibilities which expands the horizon of belief" (Frye 1963, 55). We tend to give credit for all our mental activities to reason. But, Frye argues, much of our thought life actually depends upon the imagination. Anytime we go beyond the crunching of raw data, trying to look past what is to what can be, we are beyond reason and in the realm of the imagination. This means, as Frye points out, that "in practically everything we do it's the combination of emotion and intellect we call imagination that goes to work" (Frye 1963, 57). We need to use our imaginations far more than we realize.

Frye gives an illustration of how frequently we use our imagination:

I recently went past two teenage-girls looking at the display in front of a movie which told them that inside was the thrill of a lifetime, on no account to be missed, and I heard one of them say: 'Do you suppose it's any good?' That was the voice of sanity trying to get its bearings in a world of illusion. We may think of it as the voice of reason, but it's really the voice of the imagination doing its proper job. (Frye 1963, 59)

These girls were attempting to look beyond what was in front of them. They were trying to see what the future might bring. As such, they were operating beyond reason and using their imagination. I find this illustration compelling because it is taken from everyday life. If we cannot decide whether to see a movie without using our imagination, then is there any area of life to which it is not essential?

Frye argues for the utility of the imagination by highlighting its use in what we might consider the most rational of fields. He argues that: “Imagination is certainly essential to science, applied and pure. Without a constructive power in the mind to make models of experience, get hunches and follow them out, play freely around with hypotheses, and so forth, no science could get anywhere” (Frye 1963, 39). This is an argument confirmed by Einstein, who writes: “Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution. It is, strictly speaking, a real factor in scientific research” (Einstein 2009, 97).

If the imagination is essential even for the sciences, then is there any sphere in which it is not needed? I wholeheartedly agree with Frye’s assertion that, “when you stop to think about it, you soon realize that our imagination is what our whole social life is based on” (Frye 1963, 57). The imagination is not just a fanciful indulgence, the source of stories and daydreams. It is essential to everything we do, including leadership.

Frye defines the imagination as that which allows us to form “a vision of possibilities which expands the horizon of belief” (Frye 1963, 55). What is leadership if not guiding people and institutions to new horizons? Indeed, that is how I define leadership: as guiding people and institutions to new horizons. To lead implies movement. No one needs to lead unless we are going somewhere. Nothing could be more essential for such a task than the imagination. Without

imagination, we cannot reach beyond where we already are, and if all we are doing is staying in place, in what sense are we leading anyone or anything?

The imagination may not be at the heart of every minister's philosophy of leadership - again what I am developing is *my* philosophy of Christian leadership. But the imagination is so important, any leader who neglects it risks being incapable of guiding anyone anywhere. Every leader must, to some extent, be an imaginative leader (Nelson 2015, 52).

What Imagination Is Not

Before exploring its role in Christian leadership, it may be helpful to further define the imagination by looking at what it is not. In my experience, the idea of imaginative leadership can be met with a great deal of skepticism and even fear. This is because for many, imaginative leadership equals fanciful, deluded leadership.

Philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch's distinction between imagination and fantasy is helpful here. She argues that "imagination is oriented towards receiving and responding, while fantasy tends to project and paper over" (Shakespeare 2019, 298). When we imagine, we are dealing with reality, grappling with the possible, with what can and ought to be. It is when we fantasize that we seek to escape or avoid reality.

Also, according to Murdoch, "imagination involves a disposition towards what is other than us, and a certain honesty before it" while "fantasy is to be turned inward" (Shakespeare 2019, 298). This distinction is especially important in a Christian framework where God is the ultimate "other." When we imagine,

we are oriented towards God, using our minds as he intends, seeking to envision his will for our world. It is when we fantasize that we seek to create a world all of our own without reference to him and his will.

To give an example of this distinction, when we dream of a church free of all conflict we are fantasizing, as we will not experience such a reality on this side of eternity. This is harmful as it is an act of escapism that threatens to paralyze us. But when we picture a church in which conflict is dealt with healthily, through confession and forgiveness, we are imagining. While such a church may be hard to attain, it is possible through the reality of Christ. Furthermore, such a vision is helpful, as it can mobilize us.

Going back to Frye's definition, the imagination forms "a vision of *possibilities* which expands the horizon of belief" (Frye 1963, 55). When we imagine we are dealing with what is possible. While it is true, from a Christian perspective, that all things are possible with God (Matthew 19:26), at the same time a Christian imagination must deal with the revealed will of God. We want to see what is on his horizon. When used this way, the imagination actually brings us into closer contact not just with the reality of our world, but the reality of God.

Why Imagination is Central to My Leadership

While it is clear that the imagination is essential for leadership in general, it is still necessary to examine the need for imagination in my leadership in particular. While the uses of the imagination are too great to fully enumerate, I will examine three key reasons why imagination is vital for my leadership.

1. Our Complex World

Writing from within the Canadian Christian context which I inhabit, Garry Nelson and Peter Dickens describe the times we live in as disorienting (Nelson 2015, 8). This is not only because the world has changed so much, but because it continues to change at an ever-increasing rate (Nelson 2015, 9). As Nelson explains, we now live in a world where often “the pace of change is faster than the pace of learning” (Nelson 2018, loc 327). We see this new reality unfold as ministry strategies once heralded as the next great thing suddenly fall flat, and once-thriving churches now sit empty (Nelson 2015, 8). Change is the order of our day, so much so that standing still leads to falling behind as the world moves on without us.

These disorienting times create particular challenges for leaders. As Nelson and Dickens explain: “Nothing less than a reinvention of how we view and understand our world is required. We must innovate and constantly anticipate the changes around us. Whether it is a public trading company, a thriving business, or a church seeking to engage the surrounding community in new ways, bringing about a reinvention is all about resilience and a willingness to adapt” (Nelson 2015, 9). It is worth pausing to consider the leadership demands they highlight: reinvention, innovation, anticipation, adaptation. Going back to Frye’s definition of the imagination as “a vision of possibilities which expands the horizon of belief” (Frye 1963., 55), we can see these are all imaginative tasks, as every single one of them requires the leader to look beyond what is, to see what can and should be. What is this if not imagining?

Indeed, Nelson and Dickens point out that it is not enough for leaders to be imaginative. They must also “challenge the people they serve to radically reimagine the assumptions, reinterpret the beliefs, and reframe the values that are presently at work by developing a process that establishes a new set of constructs from which a new existence can emerge” (Nelson 2015, 111- 112). Leaders must be catalysts, helping others to exercise their imaginations. They must appeal to and stimulate the imagination, seeking to truly “engage the hearts and minds of people” (Nelson 2015. 97). It is not enough to simply have a vision of where we must go, as significant as that is. We must help others to envision the future for themselves. All of which require us to lead imaginatively.

Looking at our disoriented times, Nelson and Dickens comment that lack of imagination is crippling to leadership (Nelson 2015, 52). This no doubt is always the case. But when the need for change is greater than ever so is the need for imaginative leadership.

2. Our Nature

I defined leadership in this chapter’s introduction as guiding people and institutions to new horizons, and when we consider that institutions, and especially churches, are largely made up of people, we can see how essential working with people is in leadership. Whether we are trying to lead a Bible study or a board meeting, we are always dealing with people. So nothing could be more essential for leadership than a working anthropology. One cannot lead people if they do not understand what they are and how they function. Also, since this is a Christian philosophy of leadership, it is essential that we have a Christian

anthropology, otherwise our leadership will be out of touch both with the people we lead and with the God who leads us.

James K. A. Smith has made a major contribution to Christian anthropology in recent years by challenging how we see ourselves. Smith argues that in our modern, rational worldview we see ourselves as “thinking things” (Smith 2016b, 5). We believe that we will go wherever reason dictates. So all that is needed to lead people is to appeal to them rationally. If they know where they are to go, surely they will follow. However, tapping into Augustinian theology, Smith pushes against this view, arguing that we are primarily creatures of the heart (Smith 2009, 50). That what drives us is not what we think, but what we love (Smith 2016b, 13). As Augustine famously writes of God in his *Confessions*, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you” (Smith 2016b, 8) We are not rational beings living by what we know, but desiring beings, searching for and compelled by our heart’s desires.

Smith also brings in the work of philosopher Charles Taylor, particularly his idea of the social imaginary (Smith 2016b, 45). Taylor argues that we do not live according to intellectual schemes or theories, but by our imagination (Taylor 2001, 171). The social imaginary is composed not of ideas, but “images, stories, legends, etc.” (Taylor 2001, 172), which together give us a sense of how things usually go, how they ought to go, and what it means for things to go wrong. Taylor emphasizes that this content cannot be expressed in the form of doctrines or theories, insisting that they form an “imaginary” (Taylor 2001, 173), pointing out that, “humans operated with a social imaginary, well before they ever got into

the business of theorizing about themselves” (Taylor 2001, 173). The imagination is more fundamental to who we are and how we function than even reason.

The genius of Smith is in taking Augustine's theology of humans as lovers and fusing it with Taylor's concept of the social imaginary. Smith argues that what truly animates us is a vision of “the good life” (Smith 2016b, 11), a picture of what happiness and flourishing look like. It is a vision, something we can picture and not an abstract idea (Smith 2016b, 12). If we have a Christian imagination, it will be a vision of God. If we have a secular imagination, the image will exclude him. Either way, it is this picture of the life we desire that truly defines us and shapes our lives. As Smith, so profoundly explains, “You are what you love because you live towards what you *want*” (Smith 2016b, 13).

The anthropology which Smith builds for us has tremendous implications for leadership, as it shows us how people are actually led. As he explains:

It's not so much that we're intellectually convinced and then muster the willpower to pursue what we ought; rather, at a precognitive level, we are attracted to a vision of the good life that has been painted for us in stories and myths, images and icons. It is not primarily our minds that are captivated, but rather our *imagination*s that are captured, and when our imagination is hooked, *we're* hooked. (Smith 2009, 54)

We must lead imaginatively because that is how we are compelled. What moves us is not reason but a vision. So it is not enough for leaders to provide explanations and arguments. They must craft compelling pictures of what lies on the horizon.

As radical as this might sound, it is worth pointing out that it is something many secular leaders seem to understand. For instance, in his book, *The Advantage* Patrick Lencioni warns of how “leaders confuse the mere transfer of

information to an audience with the audience's ability to understand, internalize, and embrace the message that is being communicated" (Lencioni 2012, 142). More than mere data transfer is needed because "messaging is not so much an intellectual process as an emotional one" (Lencioni 2012, 143). What Lencioni seems to understand is we are not thinking things driven by ideas, but lovers driven by desire. Something more than information is needed in order to lead people. That something is imagination.

3. My Calling

I entered into ministry because I felt called to preach. Leadership, on the other hand, was something I had to do. A responsibility that went along with preaching. So in my thinking preaching and leadership were separate activities. When I was chairing a meeting, planning a new initiative, or organizing volunteers, I was leading. But when I was preparing for or delivering a sermon I was not. This meant that much of the time I was pastoring I was not leading. It also meant that when I was leading, I was operating outside of my primary gifting, passion, and responsibility. What's more, I felt this division was essential, that preaching and leadership had to be kept apart because preaching needed to be protected from leadership. As odd as this may sound, and as unhealthy as it is, I arrived at this conviction through experience.

When I arrived at the church where I would receive my call to ministry, we already had a strong preacher. However, he was only a preacher and not a leader. The church's senior pastor had resigned before I arrived, so a professor of homiletics from a nearby seminary drove in every Sunday to preach. His sermons

were excellent and the main reason I began attending the church. Eventually, after I had joined the church's staff, he was appointed as the church's senior pastor. I was thrilled, mainly because this meant I could continue to sit under his preaching. However, his preaching changed after becoming the lead pastor. Before, it felt like he was letting the Bible speak, with the text setting the agenda. Now, it felt like he was doing the talking, with each text supporting one of his ministry agendas. At first, the change was subtle and seemed harmless. There were passages that supported many of his initiatives. There are, for instance, passages on community, and encouraging members to join small groups is a valid application of such texts. But soon every sermon was about small groups, church planting, or some other project. Which meant we no longer heard about topics outside his purview, such as holiness, justice, or theology proper.

Observing this shift had a strong impact on me. It is when my pastor became a leader that his preaching changed. So, I surmised, leadership was dangerous in the pulpit. It threatened to compromise God's Word by bringing in agendas. Which meant if I wanted to preach with integrity I had to keep leadership and preaching separated. This is the paradigm I brought to my next pastorate where I was now the primary preacher and leader. However, it was not long before new ministry experiences began to challenge this paradigm. It was as I implemented my first new ministry initiative that I realized some level of leadership from the pulpit is necessary. Prior to my arrival, my church lacked any small groups. I soon realized rectifying this would require more than some planning and an announcement after the service. Our members lacked a robust

theology of community and this had to be addressed if our new groups were to take hold. So I planned and implemented a sermon series on community, doing so with fear and trepidation.

The series was a success. Small group participation skyrocketed. More importantly, I felt confident I had not compromised the Bible in the process and I saw that it was possible to lead from the pulpit. This brought about a paradigm shift. Preaching and leadership could come together but I still felt doing so was dangerous, something to only be done on occasion. This was a large shift for me, but it was not large enough.

I have now been at my church for six years, and the more I lead, the more I realize how large a task leadership is. It goes far beyond running programs and launching initiatives. Leadership requires establishing values, building a culture, instilling vision, and keeping everyone on mission. These are monumental tasks, requiring constant communication (Lencioni 2012, 141-142). An occasional leadership sermon will not do. My growing sense is that I must lead from the pulpit with every sermon. This conviction is supported by William Willimon in his book *Leading with the Sermon*, where he argues that preaching is in fact, “the most important leadership activity of pastors” (Willimon 2020, 1). This is a strong claim, but one he grounds in the very nature of God.

Pastors must lead with the sermon not simply because the challenges of ministry demand it, but “because of who God is and what God is up to” (Willimon 2020, 2). Our God, Willimon reminds us, is a speaking God. Indeed, “it is in the nature of the Trinity to be communicative, revelatory - the Father

speaking to the Son, the Son mutually interacting with the Father, all in the power of the Holy Spirit, God speaking to God's world" (Willimon 2020, 2). Speech is not just something God does for our benefit. It is a part of who he is. We see God's speaking nature reflected in how he works. As Willimon writes: "In the Bible, word proceeds world. There is nothing until there is creative speech." (Willimon 2020, 6). From the beginning, even before there was anyone else to listen, God has worked through words.

This commitment to working through words extends past the beginning, and into how God works through leaders. In the Exodus, God leads his people to freedom "on the basis of nothing but a speech from a none-too-talented, untrained preacher" named Moses (Willimon 2020, 4). God then led Israel through the prophets, whose ministry consisted of "just words" (Willimon 2020, 5). Finally and most significantly, when Christ comes, he does so preaching (Mark 4:17) (Willimon 2020, 7), and after his resurrection, he leaves the church with a "homiletical commission: 'Go, tell...'" (Willimon 2020, 7). From Testament to Testament, God's leaders work through word.

Christian leadership must be exercised through word, and as Bullinger declares in the Second Helvetic Confession: "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God" (Bullinger 1999, 93). Preaching has immense leadership potential because in the sermon God speaks. When preaching is done faithfully, God is not merely the subject, but the communicator (Pitt-Watson 1986, 13). He addresses the community, speaking to its needs and challenges. This may seem

radical, heretical even. But it is nothing more than taking Jesus' promise that “the one who hears you hears me” (Luke 10:16) seriously.

Because God leads and calls us to lead through words, and because in preaching we hear the Word of God, “preaching and leadership are inseparable” (Willimon 2020, 10). If we do not receive his leadership in the sermon then in what sense can we claim to be led by him at all?

It is clear to me then, that I must lead from the pulpit. I have a growing desire and sense of call to lead with my primary gifting and passion. But the question is how? How can I lead with every sermon, while not compromising the sermon with leadership agendas in the process? This for me is where the imagination comes in.

When we appreciate the role of imagination in leadership every sermon becomes an opportunity to lead. This is true first of all because every sermon can be viewed as an opportunity to reimagine life and ministry. In his book *Between Two Worlds*, John Stott calls preachers to build a bridge between the world of the Bible and our world in order to “enable God’s revealed truth to flow out of the Scriptures into the lives of the men and women of today” (Stott 1982, 138). It is not enough to tell people what God's Word says. We must help them envision what it means to follow God here and now. In preaching we can perform this task, using every text as an opportunity to see what lies on our horizon.

Additionally, every sermon is an opportunity to lead by appealing to the imagination. We must remember that what animates us is not reason but desire. We all live towards a vision of the good life. So it is not enough to tell people

where we must go. We must help them see where we are going. Every sermon can be viewed and treated as an opportunity to mobilize God's people by helping them form a God-shaped imaginary.

Leadership, as I have defined it, is guiding people and institutions to new horizons. Every sermon can lead by tapping into the imagination, allowing the church to see what God has placed on its horizon. Such an approach to leadership protects the integrity of preaching because the leadership agenda is always God's. Every week the preacher receives God's leadership through an act of imagination and then passes that leadership on again through imagination.

Wherever I look, whether at something as contemporary as our modern world, something as timeless as human nature, or something as personal as my own calling and journey in ministry, I see imagination as playing a central role in my leadership. It is what the church needs from me, and what I as a preacher can offer. So I feel justified in making it the foundation of my philosophy of leadership.

Models for Imaginative Leadership

As important as it is to see why imaginative leadership is needed in theory, it is also essential to see what imagination looks like in action. Indeed, proof is needed to show that imaginative leadership is actionable. So I will examine two models of imaginative leadership, one from the Bible and one from church history. In these models, we see that imaginative leadership is not a novel concept, but a leadership strategy that has served the people of God for millennia.

Furthermore, in these models, we find valuable insights into how imaginative leadership can be practised today.

1. The Prophets

The Prophets may not be the first figures we think of when we consider leadership in the Bible, as unlike many of their contemporary leaders, such as kings and priests, they did not occupy a formal position within a hierarchy. Instead, their authority was delivered entirely from their proclamation of the Word of the Lord (Peterson 2014, 126). But while this may make them unconventional leaders, both within their time and ours, I believe it makes them an excellent model for preachers as they seek to lead from the pulpit.

The prophets' influence on me began with my first preaching professor, Dr. Fred Penney, who taught us that the preacher's goal is to be able to claim, like the prophets, "thus says the Lord" at the end of each message. This is why expository preaching is essential, for it is only when our message is "derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context" (Robinson 2001, 21) that we can confidently claim divine authority.

But while I have long strived to echo the prophets' "thus says the Lord" I have struggled to see them as a model for ministry. This is because the ministry of the prophet seemed so different from my own. For while as a preacher I am relegated to unpacking ancient texts, the prophets were empowered to deliver new revelation. There was a freshness and a vibrancy to the prophets' message. They were able to speak directly to the issues of their day declaring the will of God. I

longed to speak in such a way, to truly lead with words, but assumed I could not emulate them because our worlds and callings were too far apart.

However, more recently I have come to see that while there are major differences between the prophets and myself, we have far more in common than I previously realized. In particular, our ministry contexts and demands are surprisingly similar in significant ways. This has allowed me to see that while the prophets may not be models for expository preaching, they are in fact excellent models of leading with words.

Before I had thought of the prophets' message entirely in terms of receiving new revelation from God, but now I recognize that much of their work involved recontextualizing what God had said in the past. As Jared Alcántara explains, “much of the Old Testament addresses a significant contextual question: *What does it look like to be the people of God in a strange land, whether in slavery, sojourn, or exile*” (Alcántara 2019, 75). When the Law was given, Israel was still coming into the promised land, but many of the prophets ministered during times of exile and occupation. They had to help God’s people wrestle with unprecedented challenges, such as keeping the Law under foreign rule or outside of the land altogether. What does worship look like without a temple? Is it possible to follow a pagan king? These are the kinds of questions the prophets had to help the people of God wrestle with.

There is a sense in which our age is unique. The pace of change we are seeing is unprecedented. But there is nothing new about change itself, and one can easily argue the changes the prophets led Israel through are greater than the ones

we face. I for one would rather face secularism in Canada than deportation to Babylon. The role of the prophet was to lead God's people through change (Strachan 2015, 45-46). The question for us then is how they did so, working only with words? The answer is through the imagination.

No one has done more to open up the prophets and their ministry for me than Walter Brueggemann in his landmark book *The Prophetic Imagination*. In it, Brueggemann argues that "the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternate to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us" (Brueggemann 20018, 3). The keyword here is *alternate*. The prophets' message was that things can and should be different (Brueggemann 20018, xxxv). They pointed to new horizons, expanding Israel's perspective on what was possible. All of which is to say, they engaged the imagination.

The first example of such leadership is Moses, who spoke into the reality of Israel's slavery, painting a picture of freedom. He called God's people to imagine not just a better life, but a sovereign God willing and able to help them (Brueggemann 20018, 6). Out of this message an unprecedented change takes place. A new society emerges *ex nihilo* (Brueggemann, 6 20018.). Moses' ministry is a testimony to the power of imagination but it is an example that may be hard for us to apply. Moses ministered to an oppressed and enslaved people, while I minister to affluent professionals. However, the new reality Moses ushered in only lasted approximately 250 years (Brueggemann 20018, 7), at which point it was crushed not by another nation, but by Israel's own monarchy

(Brueggemann 20018, 23). Under Solomon, Israel began to undergo what George Mendenhall calls “The Paganization of the State” (Mendenhall 1975, 160). This transformation of the state entailed many changes, the most disturbing of which being the use of conscripted labour. Now the slaves had become the enslavers (Brueggemann 2018, 24).

This change brought Israel unprecedented prosperity and wealth, which in turn deadened their imagination. As Brueggemann explains: “Solomon was able to create a situation in which everything was already given, in which no more futures could be envisioned because everything was already present a hundredfold” (Brueggemann 2018, 25). Their reality was a nightmare, yet they could not dream of anything better because it seemed as though they had everything. This is a situation that we in the modern West, satiated by material possessions and entertainment, can relate to. We have so much, we can not see what we lack. Our ability to imagine is under threat.

The role of the prophets was to decry this state of affairs. To call out what was and announce what could and should be. They did this by engaging and appealing to the imagination, doing so in two distinct, yet connected ways. It is as we look at these two ways of deploying the imagination that the prophets become a model for us.

We may think of the imagination as something purely positive. We like to imagine things being better. But of course, we also know it is possible to imagine the worst, and this in a sense is the first way in which the prophets engaged the imagination, through what Brueggemann calls “Prophetic Criticizing and Pathos”

(Brueggemann 2018, 39). As the cliché goes, the first step to dealing with a problem is admitting you have one, and one of the challenges the prophets faced was the belief that nothing was wrong. During the monarchy, there was an “official religion of optimism” (Brueggemann 2018, 37). In this religion, there is no room for the idea of failure. The good times are here and will not end: “All these denials about endings are necessary in the royal community because it is too costly to face and embrace them. It would suggest that we are not in charge, that things will not forever stay the manageable way they are, and that things will not finally all work out” (Brueggemann 2018, 42). The first task of the prophet then was to help the people of God imagine there was a problem, that God might be displeased, and that judgement was a possibility.

This need for pathos applies to the modern church no less than ancient Israel. As Robyn King notes, one of the challenges we face in ministry is “overly optimistic evaluations of the state of the church” (Shakespeare 2019, 301). We can engage in what Kotter calls “happy talk,” downplaying and avoiding the challenges we face as well as the need for change (Kotter 2012, 44). So as we seek to lead our people to new horizons we must begin by seeing why such a journey is necessary.

The prophets also teach us a lesson about tone. As Brueggemann explains: “The prophet does not scold or reprimand. The prophet brings to public expression the dread of endings, the collapse of our self-madness, the barriers and pecking orders that secure us at each other’s expenses, and the fearful practice of eating off the table of a hungry brother or sister” (Brueggemann 2018, 46). It is

not enough to simply call people and institutions out, reprimanding and chastising. There is nothing imaginative in that. The imaginative leader must help their people see and come face to face with that which is wrong in them and their world.

While pathos and criticism are essential to imaginative leadership, they are not sufficient, so we must turn to the second way in which the prophets engaged the imagination. This takes us into what Brueggemann calls “Prophetic Energizing and the Emergence of Amazement” (Brueggemann 2018, 59). Once we see that things must change, the next step is to believe that change can happen. So the prophets also spoke a message of hope and new beginnings (Brueggemann 2018, 60-61), painting a picture in words of an alternate future (Brueggemann 2018, 64). Such hope for the future must not be grounded in us and our world, but going back to Moses, in the radical freedom of God (Brueggemann 2018, 6).

As Brueggemann explains in his essay *Prophetic Leadership*, the prophets called Israel to “reimagine the world as though the character of YHWH were a real and living and engaged agent in the reality of the world” (Brueggemann 2011, 3). As God’s people, we believe all things are possible with God, in theory. But imaginative leaders seek to put flesh and bones on this belief, calling us to envision what God’s action can do in us and our world. Through this message of hope the prophets accomplished one of the leader’s greatest and hardest tasks: they motivated people. For as we reimagine our world with hope, despair turns into energy. (Brueggemann 2018, 77).

Brueggemann argues that the essence of the prophet's ministry is to be found in the bringing together of criticizing and energizing (Brueggemann 2018, 59), and I believe this balance is the main leadership lesson we can learn from them. The imagination is not to be used as a tool for fantasizing, but for confronting our present reality and stepping into God's new reality.

Example A: Jeremiah

In order to see what Prophetic Imagination looks like in practice and to help see its implications for imaginative leadership, let us look at the prophet Jeremiah as an example. Jeremiah serves as an excellent example for us to relate to because like us, he lived in a period of great change, witnessing transformative events such as the fall of Assyria, the emergence of the Babylonian empire, and most significantly the fall of Jerusalem with Judah's subsequent exile (Feinberg 1986, 364). How did Jeremiah use the imagination to lead God's people through such disorienting times?

First, we see Jeremiah using pathos and criticism to confront the state of denial that existed within Judah. He goes after the false prophets for teaching that Judah would not fall (Brueggemann 2011, 8), doing so with imaginative force, declaring, "They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14). Jeremiah calls the people to imagine a narrative contrary to the message of prosperity they have been fed. He tells them they have a deep and serious wound that their leaders have been treating superficially.

Unlike the false prophets, Jeremiah tells Judah the truth. He tells them, for instance: “You have played the whore with many lovers; and would you return to me? declares the Lord. Lift up your eyes to the bare heights, and see! Where have you not been ravished? By the waysides you have sat awaiting lovers like an Arab in the wilderness. You have polluted the land with your vile whoredom” (Jeremiah 3:1-2). The language of whoredom provides a powerful image that invites Israel to see “the rock bottom reality of having departed a compelling relationship with YHWH” (Brueggemann 2011, 11).

Of course, Jeremiah does not engage in confrontation for confrontation’s sake. He is seeking to wake Israel up to the reality of God’s judgement. Once that judgement hits them, we see a shift as he begins to use the imagination to cultivate hope and energize. (Brueggemann 2011,16). He tells the exiles who are now in Babylon:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer. 29:5-7)

We may at first miss the imaginative force of this passage. Are these not simply instructions? But in calling Israel to build homes, plant gardens, get married and have a family, Jeremiah invites the exiles to imagine a new life in Babylon.

Jeremiah leads Israel to a new horizon. He does this first by confronting them with their present reality, exposing their sin and its consequences. Then by introducing the possibility of a new way of being the people of God. With both pathos and hope, he injects new possibilities into Judah, doing so with

imaginative, evocative language that paints a picture. As such Jeremiah serves as an excellent example for us as we seek to lead imaginatively.

Example B: Jesus

As Brueggemann points out, “clearly Jesus cannot be understood simply as a prophet, for that designation, like every other, is inadequate for the historical reality of Jesus” (Brueggemann 2018, 81). However, going back to Eusebius (Eusebius 2007, 86) and through Calvin (Calvin 2008, 317), the church has recognized that Jesus occupies the three offices of prophet, priest, and king. So while Jesus is more than a prophet, we can still look to him also as an example of prophetic imagination at work (Brueggemann 2018, 81).

Jesus serves as an excellent example of imaginative leadership for us as his mission also involved guiding God’s people through a period of intense change. He was tasked with inaugurating the Kingdom of God, bringing the future into the present (Ladd 1974, 307). There has never been a more extreme example of guiding people to new horizons.

One of Jesus' tools for leading his followers into the Kingdom of God was his use of parables; short stories, taken from the fabric of day-to-day life and often used to convey larger ideas (Achtmeier 2001, 80). As Lane explains, “parables make a direct appeal to the imagination and involve hearers in the situation” (Lane 1974, 151). While parables are used to teach, they also aim to effect a response (Achtmeier 2001, 81). So they serve a leadership function in that they are trying to move people towards an action or decision, doing so through the imagination.

There are many parables we could look at, but *The Parable of the Sower* found in Mark 4:1-20 serves to illustrate how Jesus used the imagination to both criticize and energize. Jesus begins the parable by describing three soils, saying:

Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. (Mark 4:3-7)

As Jesus himself will later explain, all three of these soils represent people who receive his word, but for various reasons fail to truly respond to it (Mark 4:15-19).

What Jesus is doing here is introducing his followers to a disturbing thought, letting them know that just because people are listening to him does not mean they are truly hearing him. He conveys this through the image of a farmer who, unlike his rural listeners, sows his seeds indiscriminately (Edwards 2002, 128). The mere fact that Jesus is teaching them does not mean they are receiving his message. Many if not most in his audience will not bear fruit. In saying this, he performs the prophetic task of injecting pathos into his listener's imagination. They and their neighbours could be one of the first three soils.

But Jesus does not stop with pathos, as he adds a fourth soil to the parable which “produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold” (Mark 4:8), explaining it represents “the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold” (Mark 4:20). Again Jesus taps into the imagination. The average crop yield in ancient Israel was seven and a half to tenfold (Keener 2014, 137), so the numbers Jesus promises take his listeners beyond the realm of experience into

a level of abundance they can only imagine. The Kingdom of God may be up against dire odds, but when it takes root the results are overwhelming (Edwards 2002, 129).

What we find in this parable then is an example of both pathos and amazement, introducing the possibility of both a dead response to his Kingdom, as well as a living, abundant one. Both responses are pictured with images taken from but going beyond day-to-day life. A farmer who sows, but not like them, and seeds that yield a harvest beyond anything they have ever experienced. In all of this Jesus gives us a superb example of leading people with the imagination.

2. The Pastor Theologian

There is a great deal we can learn from the prophets. We find in them powerful proof that imaginative leadership is actionable, as well as many practical insights that we can apply as we seek to lead imaginatively. However, there is a sense in which their world is extremely removed from ours, and in which their job description is extremely different from that of pastors such as myself. So there is much to be gained by also tapping into a more contemporary and pastoral ministry model as we seek to understand and practise imaginative leadership. So we turn now to the pastor theologian.

As we begin to explore this new model we must begin by clarifying our terms. The two main resources I will lean upon here are the anthologies *Becoming A Pastor Theologian* edited by Todd Wilson and Gerald Hiestand, and *The Pastor as Public Theologian* edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan. While

these two volumes use different terms to describe the pastor's role, I believe they are developing the same paradigm and will treat them as such.

I base this in part on the significant cross-over between the two works, with Wilson and Heiesand making contributions to *The Pastor as Public Theologian* and Vanhoozer writing a chapter on *The Pastor as Public Theologian* in *Becoming A Pastor Theologian*. With the writers of these two anthologies contributing to each other's works, I think it is fair to claim they belong to the same camp.

The one thing which seems to separate these two paradigms is Vanhoozer and Strachan's inclusion of the word public. Besides this, their terminology is the same. The insertion of the word public can give the impression that what Vanhoozer and Strachan have in mind is a higher-profile role. However, when we examine how they use the term, we see this is not necessarily the case. Vanhoozer explains that the pastor is a public theologian "because they work in and for the public/people of God, for the sake of the public/people of God everywhere" (Vanhoozer 2015, 17). While the public Vanhoozer and Strachan envision the pastor ministering to stretches beyond the local church, it still includes the church, and it is largely through the church that the pastor reaches the greater public. This is a paradigm we see well represented in *Becoming A Pastor Theologian*, with contributor James K. A. Smith for instance arguing that it is the job of the pastor to equip the church to engage the greater public (Smith 2016a, 26). So while the terminology used by these two works may differ slightly, this difference disappears once we go in-depth.

The most obvious and significant feature of the pastor theologian paradigm is the belief that pastors should be theologians. This is an idea that can easily be misunderstood. We can take it to mean every pastor must have a Ph.D. and a position at a seminary, writing books and giving lectures when they are not pastoring. This, after all, is what we imagine theologians to be: ivory tower intellectuals. However, this image misses the point of the movement, which is to challenge the belief that theology is solely the work of academics (Vanhoozer 2016, 39).

The idea of theology as a discipline separate from pastoral ministry is a relatively recent invention, with Vanhoozer arguing the split occurred in the early nineteenth century when seminaries began dividing theological education into the four streams of biblical studies, church history, systematic theology, and practical theology (Vanhoozer 2015, 5). Prior to this, for hundreds of years, the church's best theologians had been pastors (Strachan 2015b, 70). Examples of this include theological giants such as Augustine (Strachan 2015b, 74-75) and Calvin (Strachan 2015b, 78-80), both arguably the greatest theologians of their age, and at the same time pastors.

Indeed, the pastor theologian movement warns us of the dangers of turning pastors into academics, as Vanhoozer cautions: "Most scholars are specialists who know a lot about a little, but get tongue tied when it comes to the big questions. Pastors address the big questions - of life and death, meaning and meaninglessness, the physical and the spiritual - on a regular basis, and have to do so in terms that communicate to non-academics" (Vanhoozer 2016, 41-42).

Because they do theology in the context of the local church, most pastors should be cautious of becoming scholars, as this may distract them from pastoral ministry (Chapell 2020, 18). Instead, the pastor must be a generalist “who can grasp the issues necessary for the pastoral endeavour” (Chapell 2020, 18) and “relate big truths to real people” (Vanhoozer 2015, 23). This of course requires some level of academic rigour but does not mean the pastor must or should be an academic.

In addition to challenging what it means to be a theologian, the pastor theologian movement also pushes us to rethink theology itself. We often view theology as an abstract academic discipline, but Vanhoozer defines theology as “the project of seeking, speaking and showing understanding of what the triune God is doing in and through Jesus Christ for the sake of the whole world” (Vanhoozer 2016, 41). Defined this way, theology is a vibrant, ongoing, and relevant task. So long as God continues to work in our world there will be theological work to be done, and so long as our theology is rooted in divine action, it will always speak to the issues the church faces. Also, defined this way there is an advantage to doing theology from a pastoral vantage point, for who is better positioned to see what God is doing than those on the front lines?

Having at least somewhat clarified what a pastor theologian is, the question I now must answer is how is this model relevant for imaginative leadership? One of the things which makes the pastor theologian paradigm so helpful for understanding and practising imaginative leadership is the way in which it frames pastoral leadership. According to Vanhoozer, pastor theologians lead by being “out ahead of their congregations” (Vanhoozer 2016, 42).

Specifically, it is the role of the pastor to seek to discern “what the Triune God is doing in Christ” so they can lead the church into joining God’s mission (Vanhoozer 2016, 39). As John Lush explains, it is as we “see what God is doing” in our world that we are able to move beyond maintaining the status quo of ministry and “participate in the activity of God” (Lush 1996, 94-95). Going back to Vanhoozer’s definition of theology, pastors must engage in “the project of seeking, speaking and showing understanding of what the triune God is doing in and through Jesus Christ” (Vanhoozer 2016, 41) because it is only from such a vantage point that we can sense God’s leading. As Lush sums the matter up, “pastors must be in front and know the way” in order to lead (Lush 1996, 93).

This approach to leadership helps us further appreciate why leadership requires imagination. For as soon as we seek to look beyond our immediate horizon to see where God is taking us, we are imagining. It is only by engaging their imagination and the imagination of others that pastors are able to present their congregations with “a distinct, alternative identity and vision from that commonly offered by the world” (Lush 1996, 95). Pastors engage in the task of theology so as to “grasp the picture of what the church has become and the vision of what it can be when obedient to Christ” (Lush 1996, 97). When they set such a vision before the church, they are leading imaginatively.

Additionally, pastor theologians lead not just by using their imagination to discern God’s leading, but to communicate what they receive from him. Vanhoozer recognizes this by calling pastors to communicate imaginatively, commending preaching that “appeals to our imagination so that we can see,

practically *taste*, reality as it truly is: not a mechanical universe in perpetual motion but a divine creation in the midst of labour pains, where the new in Christ is coming forth from the old in Adam" (Vanhooser 2016, 48). Imaginative communication is needed because the pastor theologian's goal is not producing abstract ideas but "changing the identities and visions of earth-bound people who live as survivalists to that of Kingdom-bound people living with great expectations" (Lush 1996, 95).

It may not seem like the pastor is leading when they are absorbed in study and contemplation. However, as Thomas Burgess explains, ministers can only lead in the ways we have explored above when: "they are alive theologically and remain challenged in their thinking. They must always be making connections anew between belief and practice in their own lives and must be engaged continually in prayer, theological reflection and practices of piety" (Burgess 2003, 290). Taking time to engage with God on a deep and imaginative level is essential to pastoral leadership. So if in the rush of ministry, as we dash between committee meetings, we fail to engage in such work, we are not neglecting a luxury, but are failing to lead.

Unfortunately, it is easy to neglect such work and allow the imagination to stagnate. One of the chief criticisms of the pastoral theological paradigm is the demands it places on pastors (Slimak 2019, 81). Pastors already have too much to do, and in our world "action takes priority over thinking." (Lush 1996, 96).

However, this challenge actually points us towards one of the great strengths of

the pastor theologian movement and one of the chief ways in which it can help us as we seek to be imaginative leaders.

According to Craig Barnes, the greatest challenge pastors face today is “confusion about what it means to be a pastor” (Barnes 2009, 4). Does any other profession feel such a need to compare itself to and define itself by other professions (Vanhoozer 2015, 8)? Within such uncertainty and insecurity, the pastor's role can easily become “whatever the market requires of you” (Burgess 2003, 287). Pastors are expected to be all things to all people. The unfortunate result of this is that pastors can become what Stanley Hauerwas calls “a quivering mass of availability” (Willimon 2002, 60).

The pastor theologian paradigm may at first seem out of touch with the pastor's reality because no one is demanding that we do theology. If we fail to engage our imagination, who will notice and complain? But if we set aside the considerable time such work takes we will have to say no to other demands and there will be complaints. But perhaps this is a challenge we need to face head-on. The pastor theologian paradigm forces us to think seriously about what pastors are called to do. It gives us an opportunity to carefully define our calling, setting boundaries and expectations.

If our understanding of the pastor's role leaves no time for imaginative work, for hearing from God and discerning his leading, then perhaps we need a new understanding of pastoral ministry? The pastor theologian paradigm provides us with such an understanding. As Wilson and Hiestand point out: “For centuries, the church held out a clear and compelling vision for what a pastor is and what a

pastor does. In short, a pastor is a theologian” (Wilson 2016, 2). In returning to this vision, the pastor can find a stable identity and understanding of their calling.

What is so significant about this clear definition of the pastor's role is it provides pastors with the time and space they need to do imaginative work. When the pastor's role is defined in terms of frantic activity, the imagination will inevitably be ignored. But when the pastor's role, first and foremost, is to be a theologian, then they are afforded the time needed to engage their own imagination and that of others. So above all else, the pastor theologian paradigm helps us by providing a framework in which we can practise imaginative leadership.

Example: John Calvin

John Calvin was not the first pastor theologian; James K.A. Smith makes a compelling case for Augustine as a pastor theologian (Smith 2016a, 32-36), and Owen Strachan points to Irenaeus as the first pastor theologian in church history (Strachan 2015b, 71-72). But I have chosen Calvin as our example because his pastoral and theological accomplishments are so immense, that he can spark our own imaginations, expanding our horizon of leadership.

Calvin's accomplishments as a theologian are well known, with Dr. Victor Shepherd asserting, “all Protestantism outside Lutheran lands stands on Calvin's shoulders” (Shepherd 2009, 15). But what is far less appreciated is how pastoral Calvin was. As Dr. Shepherd observes: “Calvin, sadly and mistakenly, is thought to suffer from a shrivelled heart and an acidulated spirit” (Shepherd 2009, 10). He

is seen as the epitome of the ivory tower theologian, ignorant of and indifferent to the situation of God's people. However, nothing could be further from the truth.

The first thing that is essential to note is that Calvin was in fact a pastor. While it had been his intention to move to Strasbourg and be a pure theologian, when William Farel heard Calvin was passing through Geneva he prevailed upon him to be the city's pastor, threatening: "May God condemn your response, and the calm you seek for study, if before such a great need you withdraw and refuse your succour and help" (González 1985, 65). Calvin heeded this call, which means his theological work was done in the midst of a pastoral ministry.

This pastoral *Sitz im Leben* is reflected in Calvin's theology. For instance, while Calvin's doctrine of predestination may be viewed as his most abstract and cold contribution, when looked at in context we see the exact opposite is true. Dr. Shepherd tells the story of five men in Lyon awaiting execution for their Protestant faith. These men pleaded with the city officials in Geneva not to dilute Calvin's doctrine of predestination. They knew that before their execution they would be tortured and might recant their faith under such duress. Facing this prospect, they needed to know that "God's purposes for them were eternal and that nothing could loosen their Lord's grip on them" (Shepherd 2009, 17). In a time of persecution, the doctrine of predestination served a pastoral function we may not appreciate.

As significant as it is to see the pastoral nature of Calvin's theology, it is also necessary to see that his pastoral work extended beyond the writing of books. When he first arrived in Geneva the city was in turmoil. There was a leadership

vacuum as well as a lack of structures and institutions to take the place the Roman Catholic Church had occupied in religious and civic life. (Manetsch 2016, 81).

Calvin helped fill these voids by devising new leadership structures for the church (Manetsch 2016, 82) and becoming involved in civic life, such as in his founding of the Geneva Academy (Shepherd 2009, 12).

There is perhaps no better example of how Calvin embodied the ideal of the pastor theologian than his work for the poor. Calvin denounced the medieval belief that the poor are spiritually privileged, as well as the idea that the wealthy can earn merit by giving to them. He rightly saw that such beliefs kept the poor in economic misery. He then helped the city of Geneva to erect the civic apparatuses needed to properly care for the poor, as well as the sick, refugees, and the persecuted (Shepherd 2009, 13).

While at this point it should be clear Calvin was a pastor theologian *par excellence*, it is fair to ask what this has to do with our main theme - the imagination. Calvin was able to take the newly emerging theology of the reformation and bind it together into a cohesive whole (González 1985, 61). He was also able to devise entirely new religious and civic structures. If such endeavours do not count as feats of the imagination, I do not know what does. In Calvin we are given a breathtaking portrait of what pastors can accomplish when they lead imaginatively, looking beyond what is and guiding their people into what can be. He also reminds us that imagination is about more than expressive creativity. It is also about finding new pastoral solutions to address the challenges of the day.

Tools for Imaginative Leadership

At this point in our exploration of imaginative leadership, we have laid a theoretical foundation, looking at what the imagination is and why it is needed in leadership. We have also looked at two models, both of which have given us a glimpse of what it looks like to put imagination into action, teaching us valuable lessons in the process. The next logical step is to put imagination to work in our leadership. In order to do so, it may be helpful to look at some tools to help us engage our own imagination, as well as the imagination of those we lead.

1. Theological Interpretation: Playful Exegesis

As we seek to lead, and especially as we seek to lead from the pulpit, we will have to engage with the Bible. Doing so imaginatively is necessary if we desire to journey towards new horizons. But the idea of applying our imagination to scripture sounds dangerously fanciful. There is a genuine risk of distorting the truth. This is why I find the theological interpretation of scripture to be such a helpful resource.

In his book, *The Word of God for the People of God* J. Todd Billings explains the theological interpretation of scripture, as well as its two alternatives, using three metaphors. The first way in which we can interpret scripture is using what Billings calls a “blueprint” hermeneutic. In this approach we have a rigid systematic theology through which we read the Bible, “and the task of interpretation is to discover where in our theological system this particular passage goes” (Billings 2010, 5). This leads to unimaginative exegesis and sermons that fail to lead, as we use texts to tell ourselves what we already know.

The second way of reading the Bible is using what Billings calls a “smorgasbord” hermeneutic, in which we read texts in isolation, taking whatever we wish from them (Billings 2010, 6). This does not lead to imaginative exegesis, but to fanciful interpretations of scripture. It also leads to sermons that fail to provide Christian leadership, as no sincere effort is made to hear God’s will for his people.

The third option is the theological interpretation of scripture, which Billings describes using the metaphor of a map. A map gives us a broad outline for our journey. It shows us where we are, where we are going, and what route we must take to get there. But maps are not comprehensive. They do not tell us everything we will encounter along the way. They leave room for surprise and discovery (Billings 2010, 8). In this hermeneutic, we use our theology to guide our exegesis. It shows us what interpretations are and are not permissible. But our theology does not stifle exegesis. We still have room for discovering new insights and applications along the way. It is in such a framework that we are free to use our imagination, producing sermons that can lead faithfully.

Billings elaborates upon this approach to interpretation using the language of play, describing exegesis as a “serious game” in which “you have to face what the game gives you, face what is ‘other’ about it, and respond” (Billings 2010, 42). We must deal with what God gives us, paying genuine attention to the text in its theological context. But we also respond, asking the questions and posing the problems that need to be addressed in our context.

To give an example, I recently preached a Palm Sunday sermon in a largely Chinese Canadian church following the tragic killing of eight people, including six Asian American women, in Atlanta. I needed to preach on the triumphal entry in Mark 11, as that was my assigned text, but at the same time, I sensed the need to address this tragedy and the broader issue of racism. As I worked (or played) with Mark 11, I noticed that right after his entrance, Jesus goes to the temple. What he sees there disturbs him so much that he returns the next day, overturning the tables. What upsets Jesus is how, by building a market in the Court of the Gentiles, they have excluded all outsiders from worship (Cole 2008, 257-258). He calls their displacement out, declaring, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’?” (Mark 11:17).

From these observations, I arrived at the sermon idea: The King arrives to call out our racism. This idea flows from and responds to my text and its details. It is consistent with my theology; in particular, the belief that all humans are made in the image of God. It is imaginative, putting before us new possibilities as we contemplate the difference it would make if the church followed Jesus' example of actively speaking out against discrimination. Most significantly, such a sermon leads, as we are challenged to step into this newly envisioned reality.

The theological interpretation of scripture is a key tool for imaginative leadership because it gives us a framework in which we can engage our imagination, playfully developing sermons that address our ever-changing world, speaking in terms that drive transformation. Such exegesis helps move us beyond teaching into leading from the Word.

2. Practical Theology: Cristopraxis

There is a sense in which, with the introduction of the pastor theologian model, we have already entered into the domain of practical theology. For what is the point of developing theology in the context of ministry if not to be practical? But there is merit in giving the formal discipline of practical theology consideration, giving thought to how we develop our theology. Our goal after all is not simply to produce theology but to lead imaginatively. So the question is how can we approach the task of theology so as to engage our imagination as well as the imagination of others? Is there a method that positions us to discern God's leading so we can guide others?

In his essay, *Evangelical, Practical Theology* Andrew Root gives an overview of Evangelical approaches to practical theology, noting that most methodologies use the Bible as their starting place (Root 2014). Root sees this as a potential hindrance, as it “makes a practice-to-theory perspective more complicated, as the normativity of the Bible rests over it.” I share Roots' concern, as in my experience, not all theological reflection begins with the Bible. For instance, I arrived at the position of egalitarianism not by starting with the Bible, but with my experiences of women in ministry.

Additionally, I am concerned that a method that starts with the Bible may create an imbalance in those who lead from the pulpit. Expository preachers already begin their work with the Bible, using it as the starting place for their sermons. Mirroring this approach in their theological method may limit their thinking, cutting them off from insights that do not originate in the text. When our

goal is to engage our imagination, we need a methodology that opens new horizons for us.

Thankfully, as Root points out there is one exception to the general rule of Evangelical practical theology, namely Ray S. Anderson. In Anderson's methodology, the central authority for practical theology is not the Bible, but what he calls Christopraxis (Root 2014). As defined by Anderson, "Christopraxis is the continuing ministry of Christ through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit" (Anderson 2001, 29). When we begin with Christopraxis, we begin with Jesus' ongoing work in our world. As Root explains, in this approach, "Jesus is encountered not primarily through reading the Bible, but through the experience of Christian community itself" (Root 2014). It is the ministry of Jesus in our midst then, which invites us into theological reflection.

It is worth noting that Anderson's emphasis on Christopraxis resonates with Vanhoozer's definition of theology as "the project of seeking, speaking and showing understanding of what the triune God is doing in and through Jesus Christ for the sake of the whole world" (Vanhoozer 2016, 41). One could argue the reason pastor theologians are needed is because of the ongoing task of practical theology. Whether or not the world needs another systematic theology is debatable, but practical theology will be needed so long as God is still ministering.

While Anderson's emphasis on Christopraxis is the strength of his methodology, it can also be cause for concern. Emphasis on Christian experience can potentially lead to subjectivism (Anderson 1997, 10). But Anderson avoids

this pitfall by asserting that “for every instance of theological innovation there must be a theological antecedent” (Anderson 1997, 21). An antecedent is a previous act of God that prepares us for his current ministry (Anderson 1997, 22). For instance, while we do not see full egalitarianism in the Bible, there are many passages that prepare the way for such a shift, such as Paul’s identification of women as coworkers (Anderson 2001, 91). As we witness God working through women in our communities, such texts help us see that egalitarianism is in line with and anticipated by God’s Word.

I believe this particular approach to practical theology is a tremendous resource for imaginative leaders because it can help us discover new, prophetic insights which we might otherwise miss if we only start with scripture. For instance, I would not have been able to preach the Palm Sunday Sermon I outlined earlier apart from this discipline. I did not arrive at the conviction that we as Christians must call out racism by starting with biblical texts. Instead, I began with experience, in particular the experiences of my black friends and fellow ministers. It is as I listened to them, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement, that I began to appreciate the reality of systemic racism. It is as I listened to their experiences of prejudice and bigotry that I became aware of the current need for the church to vocally challenge the current status quo.

Scripture still played a role in this process. The text I preached from on Palm Sunday is a powerful antecedent, as in Jesus’ advocacy for the excluded Gentiles we see a precedent for our call to be anti-racists. But I would not have

arrived at such a conviction if I had started with scripture. This means I would have missed an opportunity to lead by awakening God's people to a new alternate reality in which the church becomes the voice of God against hatred.

A practical theology rooted in Christopraxis is an invaluable tool for the imaginative leader because it is one of the means through which we can have our own horizon expanded, discerning where God is calling the church. As with the prophets before us, it is this awareness of an alternate reality that is the starting place for our leadership.

3. Spiritual Disciplines: Working the Angles

As we seek to lead imaginatively, it is important to remember that, as Iris Murdoch explains, “imagination involves a disposition towards what is other than us” (Shakespeare 2019, 298). As imaginative leaders, we are not seeking to construct our own vision for the church, but to receive one from God. So above all else, it is important to be connected to him. As helpful as practices such as the theological interpretation of scripture and practical theology may be, we can treat them as means in our control, and even as means by which we control God, prying vision from him on demand. When this happens, as technical as our tools may be, we are engaging in fantasy. Spiritual disciplines are invaluable tools for leaders because they can remind us of our dependence upon God. With their emphasis on openness and receptivity, spiritual disciplines can help ensure that we rely on God as we seek to lead imaginatively.

In his book, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* Eugene Peterson decries the current state of church leadership, arguing that what most

pastors “do with their time under the guise of pastoral ministry hasn’t the remotest connection with what the church’s pastors have done for most of twenty centuries” (Peterson 1987, 1). We have turned church into a business, with pastors operating like shopkeepers when, as Peterson explains, “the pastor’s responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God” (Peterson 1987, 2). The question is how can pastors keep the church attentive to God? How can we be sure we are leading the church in hearing and following him? Peterson argues the key is the pastor’s own engagement with God through spiritual disciplines.

Peterson has three particular disciples in mind: prayer, scripture, and spiritual direction. He singles out these disciplines because they are “acts of attention” (Peterson 1987, 3), ways of listening to God. That reading scripture is an act of attention will be no surprise, as when we read the Bible we are receiving his Word. We may think of prayer as us talking to God, however, as Peterson points out, “prayer is answering speech; it is not primarily ‘address’ but ‘response’” (Peterson 1987, 45). In prayer, we show God we are listening by replying to him. Finally, spiritual direction involves a relationship in which “two people agree to give their full attention to what God is doing in one (or both) of their lives” (Peterson 1987, 150).

My point in bringing Peterson in is not to argue that his list of disciplines is definitive and that these and only these are the practices pastors must engage in. Rather, what I want to focus on is his emphasis on attentiveness. What is key is the idea that pastors need to engage in practices that focus their attention on God. In the theological interpretation of scripture and practical theology, we are seeking

to produce something. But the disciplines which Peterson describes are acts of pure reception.

Peterson calls the three disciplines he highlights angles, explaining: “I see these three essential acts of ministry as the angles of a triangle. Most of what we see in a triangle is lines. The lines come in various proportions to each other but what determines the proportions and the shape of the whole are the angles ” (Peterson 1987, 5). As leaders, we can be too focused on the end product; on arriving at a vision for our ministry. Our attention is on the triangle. But when we work the angles, simply paying attention to God, we allow him to determine the shape of the triangle. Through the use of spiritual disciplines, we let God shape us and our ministry.

The pastor's role, ultimately “is to keep the community attentive to God” (Peterson 1987, 2). This is perhaps even more true in imaginative leadership, where there is the risk we will confuse imagination with fantasy. So the pastor’s starting place must be their own attentiveness to God. With their emphasis on listening and receiving, spiritual disciplines can help safeguard our leadership by ensuring that we hear God before presuming to speak for him.

Applications for Imaginative Leadership

As we approach the end of this chapter and get ready to step back out into the world of leadership, it may be helpful to list several of the applications of imaginative leadership we have touched upon throughout this chapter. This list is by no means comprehensive, but it gives us a starting place for envisioning how we can apply imaginative leadership.

1. Preaching

That preaching is the first and foremost application of imaginative leadership will be no shock. Part of my starting place for developing imaginative leadership was my desire to lead through my primary gifting, calling and vocation, which is preaching. Also, the two models we considered are both predominantly models for preaching. The prophets were leaders whose authority rested entirely upon their proclamation of the Word of the Lord (Peterson 2014, 126). Additionally, the pastor theologian movement acknowledges that preaching is the pastor's primary means for reaching the public (Vanhoozer 2016, 35). But beyond my ministry needs and the models I have chosen, there is a reason why preaching suits the task of imaginative leadership.

In his book, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* Walter Brueggemann describes preaching as an act of reimagining. He asserts, in terms very similar to what we saw in Smith earlier, that:

“We know (or think we know) that human transformation (the way people change) does not happen through didacticism or through excessive certitude, but through the playful entertaining of another scripting of reality that may subvert the old given text and its interpretation and lead to the embrace of an alternative text and its redescription of reality.
(Brueggemann 1997, 29)

People change and grow not simply by being told to do so, but by being invited into a liminal space where they can consider or imagine an alternate reality.

Preaching then is vital because preaching “is not only the announcement of the alternative, but it is the practice of the very liminality that does not yet know too much” (Brueggemann 1997, 30). Preaching is a vital application for imaginative

leadership because it creates the type of space in which people can truly exercise their own imagination.

Every Sunday, when the preacher steps up to the pulpit, they have an opportunity to lead the whole congregation. They do so by going beyond teaching, into the realm of the imagination. They lead by helping the congregation to imagine an alternate reality in which we follow God's leadership. In doing so, they create the kind of space in which the transformation of the individual and the body which they make up together can take place. This is how we journey to new horizons.

Additionally, it is worth noting that in his recent book, *The Practice of Christian Preaching*, Alcántara dedicates an entire chapter to preaching creatively, warning preachers that without imagination “we lose the vitality and vibrancy of our Christian witness” (Alcántara 2019, 164). His work testifies to the growing understanding and awareness of the need for imagination in preaching (Alcántara 20019, 163). Additionally, he provides preachers with a cornucopia of resources for preaching creative sermons that speak to the imagination.

2. Vision

Leaders are expected to provide vision. To bring a sense of direction and purpose to the table. As Leith Anderson explains, “leaders are called upon not only to predict the future but also to determine the future” (Anderson 1999, 191). The challenge of course is we cannot see, let alone control the future on our own, which is one of the reasons imaginative leadership is so helpful in developing vision. The models and practices described above give us the resources we need

in order to engage our imagination and receive an alternate vision from God. It is as we follow in the footsteps of the prophet and do the work of a pastor theologian that we can hope to receive a vision from God. The proper use of the imagination is crucial in Christian leadership because only God knows and controls the future and we must depend on him to guide us.

Additionally, imaginative leadership is crucial because, as Anderson notes, “vision is imagining the future” (Anderson 1999, 197). A vision should not be a long, convoluted list of prepositions. Instead, it should be a clear picture which orients and motivates. It is not enough for the leader to exercise their own imagination in formulating a vision. They must also strive to engage the imagination of others. Again, the models and practices described above give us the resources we need in order to deliver such a vision to those we lead. It is as we engage in playful exegesis and meditate upon Christopraxis that we can bring our people a compelling vision worth following.

3. Equipping

The pastor's calling is not simply to minister but “to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:12). This work of equipment is primarily seen in terms of training. For instance, Collin Marshall and Tony Payne’s book, *The Trellis and Vine*, calls pastors to equip their congregations, doing so entirely in terms of training (Marshall 2009, 85). While training is very much needed, I believe more is called for. In addition to giving our people the skills and competencies needed for ministry, we also must help them to engage their

imagination. At minimum, we must give them a vision to work towards. But what is even better is when we equip people to use their own imagination.

I was recently in a meeting where one of my deacons asked everyone to use their imagination. He asked us what the future of our church looked like for each of us if resources were not an issue. Many members of the meeting spoke in terms of church growth. They wanted to see more people in attendance and a bigger facility. But as I pondered his question I pictured a future in which our church was so engaged in community service that if we were to leave our neighbourhood it would be noticed and we would be missed. With this image in place, suddenly I had a much greater sense of purpose. My mission was not growth for growth's sake, but growth in service and love. Through this exercise, my deacon led me by engaging my imagination. This is part of what it means to equip the church, and it is a form of equipment that imaginative leaders are well-positioned for.

Conclusion

As I noted at the outset, my goal has not been to develop a one size fits all philosophy of leadership. Rather, what I have been after is a philosophy of leadership for me. One that fits my gifts, my inclinations, and my calling. In imaginative leadership, I believe I have found such a philosophy. Imaginative leadership allows me to tap into my lifelong love of the imagination. It provides me with a framework for leading from the pulpit week after week. In the prophets, I have found models to show me how to use the imagination in a way that is truly Christian. In the pastor theologian, I have found a framework within which I can

do imaginative work. The disciplines of practical theology and the theological interpretation of scripture give me the tools needed to do imaginative work. Additionally, the spiritual disciplines help ensure I truly depend upon God and do not fall into fantasizing. Finally, the applications we have considered show me how great the need for imagination is in leadership, and how many opportunities there are for its application.

I know imaginative leadership will not be for everyone. It will not suit everyone's gifting, inclinations, and calling. That is okay. But we all need to use our imagination to some degree, and leaders in particular need to engage their imagination as well as the imaginations of others. My sincere hope is that the work I have done will help others in this task. You do not have to be an imaginative leader as I have defined the term. You do not have to apply this label to yourself. Instead, you are invited to take what I have started and apply your own imagination to it, to find your own horizon.

CHAPTER 4
PREACHING INTO A VOID:
A NARRATIVE STUDY OF CBOQ PREACHERS
SHARING THEIR COVID-19 PANDEMIC EXPERIENCES

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis. It cost people their lives, health, jobs, and well-being, creating needs that called for immediate intervention. However, there was also a sense in which the pandemic afforded us a unique opportunity. By creating conditions we would never choose to replicate, COVID-19 provided never to be repeated research possibilities. There were projects that could be run then that could not be done at any other time. The goal of this project was to minister to the immediate needs of preachers in my denomination The Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec (CBOQ), while contributing in some small way towards learning all we can from our COVID-19 experiences in the process, so lessons can be applied to future ministry.

Opportunity or Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted much of life and ministry in Ontario, impacting everything from how we shop for groceries to how we go to church. Preachers in my denomination, CBOQ, had to rapidly adjust to preaching online, speaking to empty rooms and learning technical skills on the go (Cressman 2021, 46-49), all while addressing a prolonged worldwide crisis (Beamish 2021).

Furthermore, they had to do all of this while providing urgent leadership and care in other areas of church life, and while undergoing their own experience of the pandemic. Doing so was challenging, overwhelming, even traumatic. I know, because this was my own experience, and that of the other pastors from across Ontario who I met with online week after week to support each other in prayer. One thing needed in this context was a way to help preachers process their experiences so that they could make sense and meaning of all that has happened, aiding in their healing process.

Response

Five CBOQ preachers, including me, met to tell our stories of preaching through the COVID-19 pandemic in a focus group setting. Follow-up interviews were then conducted, I provided my personal response and analysis, and a Church Life and Leadership Associate from CBOQ reviewed the data. The outcome was that participants were helped to process their experiences and heal, by gaining an awareness that their suffering and struggles were shared by their peers.

Supervision, Permission, and Access

The guidelines and restrictions of the Research and Ethics Board of Tyndale University as well as that of the faculty of Tyndale University were followed throughout the project. A Church Life and Leadership Associate from CBOQ head office was regularly consulted in order to obtain their permission to carry out the study, keep them informed of all actions, and seek their input along the way. However, participants' identities were kept private even from CBOQ, so that there would be no fear of reprisal or stigma for what they shared. I knew it

would be impossible for me to be completely unbiased in this work, as I too am a preacher in CBOQ, so I chose to participate alongside the rest of the group and invited my participants to help me evaluate our time together.

Context

There were two main components to the context of this project. The first was preachers, specifically preachers in my denomination, CBOQ. The second was the COVID-19 pandemic. Preaching is a challenging, demanding task, even when times are normal (Hulst 2016, 11-12). There is studying to be done. There are decisions to be made. It takes time to write and revise a sermon. Speaking in front of an audience can be an intimidating prospect. There is always room for second-guessing after the sermon is done. Additionally, preachers face other competing demands in ministry and life, all of which vie for their time and energy. But things were far from normal during the COVID-19 pandemic. Preachers in CBOQ spent two years addressing people in crisis (Beamish 2021), who were sometimes frightened, tired, angry, depressed, or traumatized. They had to adjust to preaching online, with all of the technical demands this created. Also, with technology came a shift from preaching to embodied human beings to preaching at screens and camera lenses (Cressman 2021, 46-49). They had to face all of these adjustments and challenges while being burdened with a myriad of other new ministry demands, as well as their own personal challenges of living through a pandemic. The context of this project then was men and women doing a hard job during hard times. The need in this context was a means for CBOQ preachers to process these unique and challenging experiences, crystallizing all

they have learned and endured, so they could heal from the past two years (Hill 2009, 192-193).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic was a constantly changing event, it is important to note that the focus group meeting at the centre of this project took place on November 19th, 2021. At this point, public health restrictions were gradually being lifted in Ontario (Wikipedia 2022, par. 37) and we had not seen any cases of the Omicron variant yet (Wikipedia 2022, par. 39). This is to say the project took place at a time when it appeared the pandemic was ending.

My participants' context was my context, as I had preached throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This was, in many ways, the hardest, most demanding, and traumatizing period of my career. At the same time, it was also a time of learning, growth, self-discovery, and triumphs. This means I went into the project with as much to process as my participants. So while I was the researcher, I was also a peer to my subjects and as such, participated alongside them.

Also, while there were commonalities between all participants, such as our calling to preach and the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were also differences. CBOQ is a diverse denomination, and this is reflected in its pastors. CBOQ ordains both men and women. It is a racially diverse community. There are churches of different sizes and with different budgets. I am a white male in his late thirties who pastors a medium-sized middle-class church. Other CBOQ pastors come from entirely different backgrounds and contexts. This diversity was also a part of the context of this paper.

Models and Other Resources

Going into this project I anticipated my participants' experiences and the lessons they had learned would fall into three broad categories. The first category was technical lessons about preaching. The second was more personal, relating to the preacher's identity and spiritual life. The third concerned the idea of leading through preaching (Willimon 2020). With these expectations in mind, I felt well-positioned to analyze and interpret the stories my participants would tell. I had just spent the better part of three years rigorously studying these topics on a doctoral level. Surely, with such expertise, I would be able to understand my participants' stories.

However, after running the focus group, conducting follow-up interviews, and analyzing the data, I was struck by how ill-prepared I was for anticipating and understanding my participants' experiences. Indeed, I discovered how unequipped I had been for understanding and expressing my own experiences. This observation is not a slight on the quality of the education I had received at Tyndale, but a reflection of how unprecedented an experience preaching through the COVID-19 pandemic was. In the focus group, we briefly touched upon the technical side of preaching, as well as our identity as preachers. No one but me had anything to say about preaching as leadership. Instead, what was central was the experience of "preaching into a void." This phrase refers to the mentally and emotionally draining experience of preaching without a sense of connection to one's audience because they are not physically present.

In order to explore whether my feeling of being unprepared to understand this experience was valid, I undertook a review of every preaching textbook I had

even been assigned, both for my Doctor of Ministry and Master of Divinity degrees. While works written before the pandemic could not deal with it directly, I wanted to see if my studies in some way foreshadowed the challenge of preaching into the void. I did find several ways in which this was the case.

One idea that helps make sense of my participants' experiences is embodiment. Both Willimon, in *Proclamation and Theology* (Willimon 2005, 50-65), and Hulst in *A Little Handbook for Preachers* (Hulst 2016, 135-153), dedicate entire chapters to exploring the embodied nature of preaching. It makes sense that an embodied practice would suffer from being disembodied through technology. However, both writers focus on the preacher's body, and not on the need for an embodied audience.

There is an interesting section in *Preaching with Bold Assurance* where York and Decker comment on the conversational nature of preaching, writing "if you were in our audience - even if you were just one face in a sea of faces - we could involve you in a conversation" (York 2003, 253). They discuss how preachers can listen to their congregants by paying attention to their eyes (York 2003, 255). However, they only treat this as a means for gauging audience response, and not as a point of personal, emotional contact vital for the preacher.

Most helpful, in *Ways of the Word*, Powery dedicates an entire chapter to embodiment in preaching (Brown 2016, 183-207), and unlike other writers, he explores the embodiment of the congregation. He discusses the "call and response" dynamic of African American churches, as well as how this dynamic plays out in other settings, writing:

When people laugh or sigh in response to something said, call and response is happening. When a congregation shifts in its seats and leans forward to hear what you have to say, that is a response. Even if the response is not heard, that does not mean it is not there. The response of a congregation is part of the sermon form the public body expresses. We do not normally think of the congregation when discussing embodiment in preaching, but we should. (Brown 2016, 197)

More than anything else I have encountered in my studies, Powery's insights here anticipate the hardships of preaching into the void. He shows us that preaching is truly a dialogue. This means that during the pandemic preachers in my denomination lost a conversation partner they may not have realized they had.

The insights above are the best glimpses into the reality of preaching during a pandemic that I could find in my previous studies. While they are helpful, they do not constitute a full model for understanding the experience of preaching into the void. So my conclusion is that my project took me in a direction I was not prepared for. But this is not surprising, as the pandemic itself took all of us in a direction we could not anticipate or prepare for.

What helped most in understanding my participants' experiences then was my own experience of preaching during the pandemic. Had I not been engaged in the same work with the same challenges as them, I may have struggled to understand their experiences, as I would have had nothing to prepare me for what I heard. But because I had endured the same challenges and hardships, I was able to instantly relate to them. Going into the focus group I lacked the vocabulary of the void, but I was able to quickly adapt to and adopt it because it described and consolidated so much of what I had been through myself. So in the case of this project, my greatest resource was my own story.

Additionally, my work was shaped by my prior experiences in ministerial gatherings. Since I began serving in CBOQ seven years ago I have consistently attended the “cluster group” for my region, in which pastors gather to discuss ministry. I have also regularly participated in the weekly online prayer meetings CBOQ has organized for pastors during the pandemic. These experiences, while not constituting formal case studies, still helped in designing my project. For instance, I decided to keep the group small because I had observed that in larger gatherings participants often struggled to be heard. Additionally, I was able to assess how well the meeting worked because my prior experience with similar gatherings gave me a baseline for comparison.

Project, Methodology, and Methods

While the methodology and methods of a project always matter, in the case of this project these considerations were particularly important as it was my exploration of narrative research that gave rise to this project. It was McCormack’s insight that “as we tell our stories we relive, reconstruct, and reinterpret our experiences” (McCormack 2000, 286) which gave me the hypothesis that storytelling could be used to help preachers process their pandemic experiences. So for me, my methodology does not just describe how I conducted my project, but also how I arrived at it in the first place.

Field

The first phase of the project, in which pastors shared their stories of preaching through the COVID-19 pandemic, took place online over the video conference platform Zoom, on Friday, November 19th, 2021, from 2 to 4 pm EST.

The second phase of the project, in which participants were interviewed individually, took place between Tuesday, November 30th, 2021, and Tuesday, December 7th, 2021. All interviews were conducted online over Zoom and lasted less than one hour. Interviews were scheduled at the convenience of participants.

I recruited four preachers from within my denomination, CBOQ. Three of my participants were from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) where I also minister. I had prior relationships with them and they already knew each other. Knowing my participants in advance allowed me to strategically recruit preachers from diverse personal and ministerial backgrounds. Also, having participants who knew each other ensured there would be some level of familiarity within the group, which I hoped would promote open sharing. The goal of this project was to test a method that could be reproduced in existing ministerial settings, so these prior relationships made the group more akin to such a setting. I did have to recruit one participant from outside of my region. I was not aware of any female preachers within my area, and when I asked CBOQ for a list of female preachers all of those listed were outside the GTA. I was able to recruit one female preacher from a nearby region. This allowed me to gain a female perspective, as well as the perspective of someone who was a relative outsider to the group.

All participants were recruited by an initial phone call from me, during which I followed a script. Participants were then sent an information letter and consent form. While I offered participants a week to consider joining the project, they all agreed to join the project of their own accord during my initial phone call.

Given the sensitive personal information my participants shared, plus my commitment to keep their identity confidential, in giving their background information I must avoid providing a composite sketch of each participant by which they could be identified. So while I will provide an overview of the group's composition in Table 1, I cannot go beyond this.

Table 1: Participants Ethnicity, Gender, Age, and Congregation Size

Ethnicity	African Canadian	2
	Chinese Canadian	1
	Euro Canadian	2
Gender	Female	1
	Male	4
Age	30-40	2
	40-50	2
	50+	1
Church Attendance	<100	1
	100-200	2
	200-300	1
	300	1

Additionally, I should note that I participated in the study and have included my information in Table 1. My own background is Euro Canadian, male, aged 30-40, pastoring a congregation of 100-200.

Scope

The scope of this project is decidedly limited. The goal was to explore whether group storytelling could be used to help preachers within CBOQ process

their experiences of preaching during the pandemic. This goal involved at least three delimitations within it. First, only pastors within CBOQ were studied. So while it is possible that the findings of this study would apply in other denominational settings, determining this would require further study. Second, while the group discussion did touch upon many aspects of ministry, all participants were preachers and this was the main focus of the discussion. So while it is possible that such storytelling would work equally well among other groups of pastors with shared experiences, such as youth pastors, or among pastors with mixed duties, this also requires further study. Third, this project was focused specifically on processing experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic. So while it is possible such storytelling could be used to process other events or even regular ministry challenges, again this would require further study.

Additionally, it should be noted that only one storytelling format was explored. So while I was able to determine that the method used was effective in this context, I cannot conclude that it is the optimal method. It is possible that other approaches exist that would be equally or more effective. One would need to run a comprehensive study of all possible methodologies in order to make such a determination.

Finally, it must be admitted that the size of the group studied, at five participants, was small. So while every participant did find the process embarked upon helpful, it would be premature to conclude that what worked for them will work for every individual. However, it was the small size of the group which

afforded participants space to share their stories and allowed this project to meet its objective of studying a method that can be used in ministerial settings.

In summary, all that was studied was how one particular method was able to help one specific group process one particular set of shared experiences. So while it is hoped that the intervention used in this project can be used to help more than just CBOQ preachers, that is a subject that requires further exploration.

Methodology

The primary methodology for this project was narrative research. As Sensing explains, “the purpose of narrative research is to examine how participants impose order on their lived experiences thus making sense of the events, thoughts, and actions in their lives” (Sensing 2011, 157-158). Narratives play a vital role in processing experiences because in them we “relive, reconstruct, and reinterpret” the events of our lives (McCormack 2000, 286). So in inviting participants to share their stories, I was not just learning about their experiences but giving them an opportunity to learn from and about themselves in this process. Savage and Pressnell quote a sidebar from the February 2003 issue of *Prevention* magazine which captures the power of telling stories:

We don't describe the world as we see it; we see the world as we describe. Language has the power to alter perception. We think in words. These words have the power to limit us or to set us free; they can frighten us or evoke courage. Similarly, the stories we tell ourselves about our life eventually become our life. We can tell healthy stories or horror stories. The choice is ours. (Savage 2008, 35)

Narrative research was well suited for this project because of the way storytelling can impact us. The hope was that this storytelling process would positively impact how participants perceive not just their experiences, but their very selves.

This is why the focal point of my project was a storytelling focus group. Almost certainly, this was not the most efficient way to gather information on preachers' COVID-19 experiences. A survey, for instance, could be distributed to far more participants. But the point was not to accumulate information. Rather it was to observe the storytelling process and see whether it aided in constructing meaning after the disorienting experience of ministering during a pandemic (Sensing 2011, 120).

When it comes to evaluation, one crucial consideration to keep in mind is that in narrative research “actual events are not being sought” (Sensing 2011, 163). The point is not to determine how accurate participants' narratives are, or whether they are objectively better preachers as a result of telling their stories. Instead, “the representation, the construction of reality, is the focus” (Sensing 2011, 163). What matters is whether participants feel they have processed their experiences and benefited as a result. This is why follow-up interviews were conducted. In these interviews, I was able to invite my participants to help me in assessing the project, doing research not just on them, but with them (Melrose 2001, 162). They were able to give their own assessment of whether the work we had done together had been helpful and tell me how it had impacted them.

Additionally, in narrative research, it is important for the researcher to recognize how their own subjective perspective impacts the way they read others' stories (Sensing 2011, 160). I sought to accomplish this by adopting the proactive research method in which the researcher joins those they are studying, so that “the actions of all participants are evaluated, including those of the researcher”

(Savage 2008, 109). This means my methodology included an element of autoethnography, in which the researcher describes and analyses their own experiences (Ellis 2011). It also means my personal experience and impression were just as relevant in evaluating this project as that of my participants, precisely because I was a participant.

Finally, I did not initially intend to qualitatively code the data. However, after conducting the focus group I realized there was far too much content for me to analyze on an ad-hoc basis. I needed a way to ensure I captured the nuances of my participants' stories, looking for patterns and connections I might otherwise miss. Coding provided me with a resource that met this need (Saldaña 2021, 8).

Methods

This project involved two phases. The first phase consisted of a focus group that met for two hours, during which participants shared their experiences of preaching through the COVID-19 pandemic. One week prior to the meeting participants were given three discussion topics in order to spark reflection and allowed them to decide in advance what they would be comfortable divulging. The topics were as follows:

1. Tell us the story of your first COVID-19 sermon.
2. Tell us about your struggles and challenges preaching through the pandemic, and the lessons you learned through them.
3. Tell us about your triumphs and victories preaching through the pandemic, and the lessons you learned through them.

During the focus group, we went through each topic one by one, with each participant sharing their story. We did not follow a particular order of participation throughout the meeting. Instead, participants were invited to share when they felt ready. After a participant shared, others were able to comment or ask questions. During the focus group phase, I moderated the discussion, ensuring the group stayed on topic (Sensing 2011, 121). I also participated, sharing my own story.

The session was video-recorded over Zoom. I did not take notes during the discussion so I could focus on participating, but wrote down my impressions immediately after the meeting while they were still vivid.

There are several reasons for using a focus group format. First, as Sensing points out “the synergy of the group will often provide richer data than if each person in the group had been interviewed separately” (Sensing 2011, 120). By having participants interact with one another, it was hoped we would arrive at a richer, fuller understanding of preaching through COVID-19. Second, this format closely resembled meetings that already exist within CBOQ. It is not uncommon for pastors to discuss similar topics in ministerial and prayer meetings. This means using a focus group provided information on how existing structures might be leveraged to help preachers process their pandemic experiences. Third, by having participants listen to each other’s stories they could be more involved in evaluating the value of such storytelling.

In the second phase, I interviewed participants individually for one hour, debriefing them on the focus group. These interviews took place one to two weeks after the focus group, allowing some time for reflection. I had questions prepared

in advance in order to guide the discussion, but I also remained flexible allowing myself and the participants to explore whatever direction the conversation took us (Sensing 2011, 110). Indeed, one new research question emerged during my first interview which I then included in all subsequent interviews as a result. In these interviews, my main objective was to learn whether the focus group experience was helpful, harmful, or neither, as well as why.

I kept field notes throughout the project. As Savage and Presnell explain, in narrative research the researcher's own reflections can provide valuable data (Savage 2008, 109). So I used my field notes to record not just what happened during the project, but also my personal impressions.

I also created a transcript of the focus group meeting and performed qualitative data coding on it. I completed two cycles of coding. In the first cycle, I utilized In Vivo Coding, in which codes are taken "from the actual language found in the qualitative data record" (Saldaña 2021, 137). I chose this approach as a way of honouring and preserving my participants' voices by using their own words. In the second cycle, I performed Focused Coding, which "searches for the most frequent or significant codes to develop the most salient categories in the data corpus" (Saldaña 2021, 303). It is at this stage that I began to identify key themes and see patterns.

Finally, I shared my findings and interpretation with a Church Life and Leadership Associate from CBOQ, while keeping participants' identities anonymous. This is the ministry team tasked with equipping and supporting

pastors in my denomination. I asked them to reflect on the data I had gathered and make an assessment as to whether it was of any help to our denomination.

The cumulative effect of these methods is triangulation (Sensing 2011, 75), as in interviewing my participants I gained an insider perspective, in providing my own reflections and analysis I offered the researcher's perspective, and in consulting an expert from CBOQ I gained an outsider's perspective. Having all three perspectives gave me what Sensing calls a "thicker" interpretation of the data (Sensing 2011, 72).

Phases and Timetable

The phases and timeline of the project are recorded in Table 2.

Table 2: Phases and Timetable

Preparatory and Planning Phase: October - November 2021

- Select preachers and invite them to participate: Oct. 20 - Nov. 3
- Send instructions on confidentially, information on the risks and benefits, as well as consent forms to participants: Oct. 20 - Nov. 3
- Collect consent forms: Oct. 20 - Nov. 3
- Conduct a poll to set the focus group meeting: Nov. 5 - 9
- Set up a Zoom meeting: Nov. 11

Implementation Phase: November - December 2021

- Send discussion topics to participants: Nov. 11
 - Participants attend a 2-hour focus group over Zoom: Nov. 19
 - Record reflections after the focus group meeting: Nov. 19
 - Conduct hour-long follow-up interviews with participants over Zoom: Nov. 30 - Dec. 8
 - Record field notes after each interview: Nov. 30 - Dec. 8
-

Analysis Phase: January 2022 - March 2022

- Produce a transcript of the focus group meeting: Jan. 10 - 28
- Perform qualitative coding on the transcript: Feb. 19 - 26
- Write my findings and interpretation: Feb. 26 - Mar. 5
- Send my findings and interpretation to a CBOQ Church Life and Leadership Associate: Mar. 5
- Send my findings and interpretations to participants to review for confidentiality and accuracy: Mar. 5
- Receive the Church Life and Leadership Associate's feedback: Mar. 9
- Receive participants' feedback: Mar. 5 - 20

Reporting Phase: March 2022

- Write the final report: Mar. 5 - 31
-

Ethics in Ministry Based Research

Because my research subjects are my peers there is little risk of a power imbalance. Each of my participants works in a different institution, doing roughly the same role as me. Because CBOQ is an association of churches and not a centrally run hierarchy, one church has little to no sway over another. So while I did have control over the focus group meeting, otherwise I had no authority over my participants, and it would be difficult for me to exert coercive control.

The main risk was that a participant might share sensitive information which another participant might leak. This was addressed in two ways. First, participants signed a confidentiality agreement. Second, participants were warned of this potential risk and advised to reflect in advance on what they were comfortable sharing. They were told that what they shared or held back was entirely up to them. It is worth noting that such risk is normal in CBOQ

ministerial settings in which pastors are routinely asked to share their experiences. The understanding is that what is said in such settings is confidential, and pastors must routinely decide what they are comfortable sharing.

Additionally, it was possible that sharing their story might resurface existing wounds participants had received during the pandemic. Participants were warned in advance of this possibility. I was prepared to work with a CBOQ Church Life and Leadership Associate to get participants appropriate support if, at any point, I became aware of such a response. However, there were no signs of adverse responses during the project or follow-up interviews.

Because my participants were also my colleagues, and because I had also preached through the COVID-19 pandemic, I could not be objective. But, as Savage and Presnell (Savage 2008, 37), as well as Sensing (Sensing 2011, 160) argue, objective, neutral, value-free research is not possible and involves self-deception. Instead, the researcher must recognize and make visible their subjectivity (Sensing 2011, 160.) So, I acknowledged my embeddedness to my participants, participating alongside them as an equal.

Participants were promised that their data would be reported anonymously. To achieve this I used pseudonyms for my participants. Additionally, the pseudonyms and pronouns used are gender-neutral, making it difficult to form a composite picture of and identify my participants. However, I did use my real name in reporting my own data in order to make my perspective more transparent.

This project was approved by the Tyndale Research Ethics board on October 8th, 2021.

Findings, Interpretation, and Outcomes

In presenting my findings, interpretations, and project outcomes, I am aware of how impossible it is for me to be unbiased. Indeed, as someone who preached through the COVID-19 pandemic, I am as biased as can be. This project has impacted me personally, eliciting a strong emotional response. As Sensing explains: “No research methodology or data collection method gets the researcher out of the way” (Sensing 2011, 41). I simply cannot take myself out of the equation. However, what I can do is present my perspective openly, using my responses as part of my data. For, as Sensing also explains: “Researchers who ignore their feelings may not explore all the possibilities available to them for their interpretation. Ignoring feelings may cause researchers to ignore significant data.” (Sensing 2011, 45). This means that embeddedness, handled correctly, can actually be used to enrich my data.

What I will attempt to do then, is include my perspective in a way that adds to, but does not dominate the project. Achieving this goal requires me to be intentional in how I present my content, especially in terms of how I order information. I will seek to arrange my content in a way that positions the reader to see my impressions upfront. I will also provide the reader with perspectives other than my own.

In presenting my findings, I will begin by giving my own impressions of the focus group, using my field notes as my source. Doing so will allow me to share my raw personal response to the meeting, uninfluenced by later work, laying bare the pre-understanding I brought into follow-up interviews and my

analysis. Then I will present the findings I arrived at through qualitative data coding, allowing them to temper my initial impressions.

In the interpretation phase, I will begin by sharing my participants' assessment of the group experience, allowing them to participate in the evaluation of the study. Then I will build upon their insights, presenting my own interpretation.

Finally, in presenting my outcomes I will begin by sharing my denomination CBOQ's response to my work. One of my goals was to help them better care for pastors in the denomination, so I will allow them to share the extent to which that outcome was achieved. I will then share my own understanding of what was accomplished by the project and where it may lead.

Findings

The first thing I wrote in my field notes after the group meeting was "everything went well!" Looking over the notes that follow, it is clear this assessment pertains to the project from a research point of view. I comment on how "the conversation was very fluid," as well as that "participants were able to comment substantially on the topics without prompts." My fear going into the project was that my participants might not talk and I would have little to work with, however this was not the case. So this is part of what I meant by "everything went well!" But there is another layer of meaning to "everything went well!" During the meeting, I was both a moderator and a participant, but I wrote that "I felt more like a participant than a moderator." I was personally drawn into the discussion and the group. Even more significantly, I note that "I genuinely

enjoyed the conversation.” I came away feeling positive. I felt heard and understood. So “everything went well!” is also a personal assessment.

Moving beyond my initial response, I commented broadly that “the big theme seemed to be commonality.” My assessment was that participants’ experiences of preaching through the pandemic were remarkably similar. Additionally, they connected over these commonalities. There was even a sense of comradery. I note that this was my own experience, writing, “I felt I could relate to almost everything shared.” I also offer the assessment that “others expressed the same feeling,” commenting, “it’s amazing how much nodding there was!”

Elaborating on the theme of commonality, I note: “I didn’t get the impression that factors such as gender, race, or age mattered much in people’s experiences. Everyone seemed to have the same experiences regardless of their background or the background of their church.” I had intentionally recruited as diverse a group as I could, seeking to match the richness found in CBOQ. My sense was that our common experiences cut across such distinctives. I do not think I meant that everyone’s experiences had been uniform in every way, but rather that there was a common experience that united us and allowed us to relate.

In terms of what this experience was, I comment: “Everyone struggled with the lack of connection to their audience. This seemed to be the biggest burden. Preaching during COVID had pulled so much out of us, and little had been given back to sustain us.” It was the experience of preaching to empty sanctuaries and cold camera lenses that had taken so much out of us and allowed us to relate to each other.

My initial finding then was that the group meeting had been extremely positive because we were able to connect and relate, especially over our common experience of preaching without a connection to our audience and the toll this had upon us. That was my own immediate personal response to the meeting. This means it is the perspective I brought into further analyzing the group meeting, which is what I will turn to next.

First, since my initial impression was that differences in race and gender had not played a major role in our conversation, I will acknowledge the times participants did discuss such distinctions. Table 3 lists all of the times participants referred to subjects of race and gender. Definitions of the codes used here and throughout this paper can be found in *Appendix F*. I will not use my participants' pseudonyms in this section, as doing so may make it possible to identify them.

Table 3: Race and Gender

Code	Number of Occurrences
Female Experience	1
Immigrant Experience	1
Chinese Experience	3

Diving into these occurrences, our lone female participant noted how being a mom and a pastor is different from being a dad and a pastor, as there is a greater need and a desire to keep home separated from work. Another participant expressed the challenges faced by first-generation Canadians, who are expected to “work twice as much for half as much.” There were also three references to the challenges of working in Chinese churches, made by two participants, all of

which concerned the challenge of indirect communication in Chinese culture.

While issues of race and gender did not dominate the group discussion, there were still reminders that everyone did not experience the pandemic in the same way. As always, issues of race and gender do impact people’s stories.

The reality that people’s experiences of the pandemic had been different is seen more acutely when looking at how participants described their personal experiences of the pandemic. While the pandemic was challenging for all, they expressed that challenge using different language, as seen in Table 4. As in subsequent tables, the numbers represent the times I observed each category of response.

Table 4: Personal Experience of the Pandemic

Code	Total	Pat	Jordin	Dallas	Robin	Ryan
Disorientation	5	2		3		
Impact	1	1				
Naivety	6	1	1		3	1
Unknown	9	3	3		3	
Excitement	1				1	
Change	8				7	1
Business as Usual	5				5	
Prior Hardships	1		1			
Caution	2		2			
Challenge	11			1	2	8
Determination	2		1			1
Alone	4				2	2
Satisfaction	2					2

In coding my participants' stories I included different types of responses, such as emotions, actions, and attitudes, as my goal including whatever terms my participants use to describe their experiences. I also tried not to make my categories overly broad, as this would flatten out all subtlety and distinction, making participants' experiences appear more uniform than they were. I could, for instance, have coded Naivety and the Unknown together under a single broad category. But I believe there is a difference between recognizing the unknown, such as in Pat's statement "we're all living in the unknown" versus the sense of one's own naivety as found in Robin's comment, "how many of us here are introverts that were tricked into thinking we're going to come out of this like so happy." What Pat is expressing is an awareness of how little they knew, while Robin is expressing a sense of having been fooled or deceived. The distinction between the categories I used may be subtle, but they reflect the subtleties of my participants' experiences.

Looking at my participants' stories through these categories, one sees that none of them experienced the pandemic in exactly the same way. I, for instance, spoke of facing challenges 8 times, while no one else used such language more than twice. Dallas spoke almost entirely in terms of disorientation. Robin spoke of change more than any other participant by far, but also repeatedly used the phrase "business as usual" to describe their initial response to the pandemic. Robin was also the only participant to note a sense of excitement. Pat was the only participant to describe the pandemic in terms of a sudden impact, stating, "and then boom the hammer falls." Jordin was the only participant to speak of how

prior hardships affected them as well as the only participant to describe themselves as cautious.

As I will discuss later in more detail, participants did frequently state that their experience had been the same as others. For instance, at one point Pat shared: “Yeah I could say ditto to everything that all of you have shared.” With so much agreement taking place, I do not mean to overly stress the distinctions between participants' experiences. Still, it is worth noting that when it came time to share their experiences in their own words, everyone did so differently.

More commonalities emerged when looking at the lessons participants took away from their pandemic experiences, though still with some variation, as seen in Table 5. In coding the ways in which participants grew I included a variety of developments, from technical lessons to inner growth. My goal was to record growth as my participants defined and identified it.

Table 5: Lessons Learned from the Pandemic

Code	Total	Pat	Jordin	Dallas	Robin	Ryan
Providence	8		4	1	1	2
Clarifying	1		1			
Growth	4		4			
Preaching	19	4	1	1	5	8
Accepting Uncertainty	1		1			
Confidence	3					3

All but one participant shared that they had learned about God’s providence. However, they all did so differently. Dallas for instance spoke of gaining a “very real sense of God at work” in the lives of congregants, while

Robin shared, “when push comes to shove God does give you the energy to do it.” Also, all participants stated that they had in some way grown as preachers as a result of their COVID-19 experiences. It should be noted the main focus of the meeting was preaching through the pandemic, so that may have influenced this outcome. Still, every participant did affirm that they had been learning about preaching from the pandemic. However, the specific lessons they had learned about preaching varied. Jordin shared that they were communicating the gospel differently, but in a way that is hard to quantify. I spoke of how the pandemic had taught me about contextualization in preaching, as well as how I had come to see preaching as a form of leadership. Dallas talked about seeing the impact their preaching has on people’s lives. Robin had discovered how receptive they are to feedback and even to criticism, as well as how they had become more vulnerable in preaching. Pat affirmed that they had learned the same lesson about vulnerability, adding the insight that when you preach with vulnerability it allows others to see they are not the only ones struggling

There were some takeaways that were unique to particular individuals. I, for instance, was the only one who spoke of growing in confidence, and Jordin’s takeaways were particularly unique, as they were the only one to speak of personal growth, coming to accept uncertainty, and having their values and priorities clarified. This does not mean that such lessons were not learned by other participants. Again, participants repeatedly and broadly stated that their experiences had been the same as others. For instance, after I shared what I had been learning about contextualization and leadership Jordin responded, “I would

echo all of that.” Still, the fact remains that when it came time to express what they had been learning and growing in, people did not speak uniformly. There was both overlap and variation.

One other commonality worth noting is that all participants discussed mental health in some form. Table 6 captures the codes I used to track mental health:

Table 6: Mental Health During the Pandemic

Code	Total	Pat	Jordin	Dallas	Robin	Ryan
Burnout	14	4	1	2	4	3
Counselling	2		1		1	
Self-Love	6		2	2		2

At 14 occurrences, burnout was the third most common code I identified overall.

There were times when the phrase burnout was used directly. For instance, Dallas spoke of realizing they were on the “slippery slide of burnout.” Also, when Pat shared about not having energy for pastoral care, Robin pointed out that this was a sign of burnout. Additionally, there were times when the language of burnout was not used, but I judged it was being described, such as when Robin spoke of needing to sleep more, and not being able to find the motivation to do anything.

Related to burnout, there were two occasions when participants referenced counselling. Robin shared that they and their spouse needed counselling at one point during the pandemic, and Jordin noted that they probably should have sought out counselling.

On a more positive note, three participants, myself included, shared how they had been learning to love and care for themselves. Dallas talked about how they: “Felt God saying ‘just be kind to yourself.’ You know just - if things don't get done they don't get done and if they take longer that's okay. And that was kind of like letting the pressure out and off of me.” I spoke of my realization that after the pandemic I would need time to heal and recover before plunging into anything new. Jordin shared about learning to accept themselves and their humanity.

Thus far I have been focusing on areas that go beyond or even contradict my first impressions of the meeting. However, I will now go into the two data points that most align with my initial interpretation, which focused on agreement, as well as the common experience of preaching without connection to one's community. The second most common code I identified takes its inspiration from one of my participants. Robin described their pandemic preaching experience, saying: “It feels like it's a vortex. You throw something out there, someone watches it and ... there is no response, no email no nothing. And then you do it again.” Robin powerfully captures something all participants referred to. The experience of preaching without connection. I modified Robin's use of the word “vortex” by substituting the word “void” in my coding, as while vortexes contain a void they can also be seen as pulling things together which is the opposite of Robin's meaning. Table 7 captures all references to this experience that I coded.

Table 7: Preaching into the Void

Code	Total	Pat	Jordin	Dallas	Robin	Ryan
Void	21	7	4	1	3	6

The experience of preaching into a void is so key for this study, and my participants did such an extraordinary job capturing it, that I will share some of their insights. In addition to the comment cited above, Robin shared that one of the biggest challenges of preaching during the pandemic was not having an audience. First of all because of the loneliness this produces, and second because when you have a live audience you receive feedback from watching people's faces. They also added: "And you know at first I thought if you have good feedback that's wonderful if you have bad it's difficult to accept. But now I'm just wanting any feedback."

Jordin picked up Robin's language of the vortex, sharing: "But that sense of putting it out into the vortex. I remember preaching and somebody leaving their sound on... and I said something that was supposed to be funny... and they laughed like 'hahaha.' And I was like ..." To which Pat replied, "somebody's out there," leading Jordin to exclaim: "Exactly. There's somebody out there, there's somebody that's listening to me and was reacting in the way that I thought that they would react, as my congregation, as the people that I care for." Dallas connected the void directly to technology, explaining: "So it's like you're just catapulted into this technological venue that you would never have chosen. But there you are, with that sense of feeling quite lonely and with the physical isolation but also just not being able to really truly connect with people." I shared about my experiences, saying: "You make this big output where you're throwing out this product of love that you pour yourself into and you're trying to hit people where they're at and trying to connect with them during a hard and vulnerable

time. And then you don't really get anything back.” I also explained: “You don't get those facial responses and you know it's very seldom that people take the time to reach out and tell you that something's working. I've had some times where I've talked to people and they said 'oh' like 'this has been really good' or whatever. And every once in a while you get it but it's never in the moment on the spot. So you don't get that emotional connection” I elaborated on the lack of connection, saying: "And it's really been hard not having that. I didn't understand how important that was. I mean I knew it was important but I didn't understand until this.”

Pat told the following story about their cameramen, which captures so much of the experience of preaching into a void:

I'd be preaching and he'd be taping it and listening and you could see him perk up every time he got something or it was relevant to him. And that was my virtual congregation for a time. And then it switched to someone else videotaping and that someone was doing a great job but doing it a different way. He'd start the camera and he'd sit down and he'd be looking at his iPhone texting people. And I'm thinking: 'Wake up! Wake up! Isn't this good stuff?' And like no feedback. In fact, I'd finish the sermon and think 'well if he wasn't excited about it I wonder you know is this a real bomb.' So again just that lack of feedback and the importance of kind of a virtual congregation. And just the momentum trying to keep up energy. As you all said, staring at a camera you have no idea if you're connecting. And so every time you throw something out whether it's a joke or you know a gem and you get zip back, just my energy drops a bit more each time. And so that's been hard.

They also shared: “So that search for and need for and longing for feedback was really big to me. And looking for the comments you know. Afterwards, people would tell you or told me you know they appreciated things but it was just nothing. Just nothing at all.”

This experience of preaching into a void, investing ourselves in our sermon and our congregation, only to get no response was by far the most commonly shared experience in the group meeting. It elicited more agreement and affirmation than any other topic. Which brings me to the final code I will share.

The most common code I used in analyzing my data again takes its name from my participants and the language they used. Four times participants used the term “echo.” First, after my account of preaching into the void, Jordin stated, “I would echo all of that.” Shortly after that, Robin shared “I think it's going to be just echoing a lot of things.” Finally, after Robin shared Pat responded, “Yeah I echo so much of what's already been said. Everything that's been said I have experienced.” I decided to use their language of echoing to track the times participants resonated with the experiences of others, and this turned out to be the code I flagged most, as seen in Table 8.

Table 8: Echoing

Code	Total	Pat	Jordin	Dallas	Robin	Ryan
Echo	26	7	4	3	5	7

The instances of echoing I flagged varied. Some echos were brief. For instance, after Pat shared their confusion over pandemic terminology, Robin responded with an empathetic “yes.” I coded this as echoing because I interpreted it as an affirmation of a shared experience. Most instances were more explicit, such as when Robin shared about burnout and Dallas responded: “What Robin said. I can, I can relate. So I started noticing those same things.” There was even

one nonverbal instance of echoing I coded, as I noticed everyone nodded in unison to an experience that had been shared.

So while it is true that there was a great deal of variation in how participants told their stories, using different language for their experiences, and sharing different takeaways, what they expressed time and time again is how similar and relatable their stories were. Going back to my initial findings, commonality was the biggest theme observed. Additionally, the biggest commonality was, as I noted in my initial findings, the experience of preaching into a void.

Participants' Interpretation

I will include participants' responses during follow-up interviews under interpretations because at the start of each interview I made it clear I was inviting them to participate in evaluating the project, as I was doing research with them, rather than on them (Coglan 2004, 99). So I will begin by sharing their insight into the project. Of course, it is impossible to wholly remove my influence in doing so, as I must decide which of their comments to include, as well as summarize at times. But I will strive to be faithful to their words and insights. Additionally, the specific questions I asked, plus some key excerpts from participants' responses can be found in *Appendix G* for those who wish to hear more from my participants in their own words, and see their words in the context in which they were given.

The first thing to note is all participants spoke of the experience in positive terms and no participants reported any negative aspects of their experience.

Jordin for instance noted that “even during the thing, people were commenting on how valuable an experience this was and is at the time that it was happening.”

According to participants, there were two positive aspects to the experience. The first was being able to share their own story with others. Pat described this as the “kind of the invitation that doesn’t come naturally to us in the world, because as preachers and pastors we’re the ones that are the listeners of other people.” In the group meeting they experienced “the invitation to say ok what you have to say is of value and we want to hear that.” Jordin expressed a similar sentiment, asking the rhetorical question: “When do we have an opportunity to talk about our stuff, be heard, but also affirmed and validated?”

Participants also explained why the group meeting was an effective space for telling their stories. Dallas explained it was in part because they were “sharing with colleagues ...with people in the same situation” who could relate and understand what they were going through. Jordin expressed the same idea, saying: “There’s something different about sharing in the context of other people that are in the context. People that have been in the trenches... You don’t know unless you know.” They also added that such contexts are lacking in the Baptist community. Robin added that pastors do not experience such spaces with their church, explaining, “you can share openly because none of these people go to your church, none of them are your board members or anything like that, so you feel very safe to share, and also you know that they understand because they are in the same shoes.” Finally, Dallas commented this is not something pastors can do on their own: “This is something that you really need others to help you analyze and

discuss. Because when you discuss things it's the spoken word, it's naming it, it's identifying it, and you can't do that alone." It was not just remembering their experience, but telling it to others that was helpful.

The other positive aspect of the experience was hearing the stories of others. While part of the benefit of this was hearing how others' experiences had been different, what participants focused on was commonalities. Pat explained this by saying: "Anytime I struggle and then I find there's company, I kind of feel I'm not the odd guy out. I'm not any worse off than somebody else that's experiencing life at this time." What helped them was the echoing phenomena I noted in my findings. Jordin stated this explicitly, sharing: "To hear in other people's stories, echoes of your own story and situation, that was great."

Participants offered tremendous insights into why hearing others echo their experiences was so helpful. Jordin shared: "I found it incredibly encouraging to find I'm not the only one in that boat. That it's a common enough experience, that there was a lot of head-nodding and agreement across contexts and generations of pastors that were experiencing similar things. And to know that it's church-wide and not just context-driven." This, they said, led to a "sense of 'ahh I'm not a crazy person,' this is a real thing, other people are feeling and experiencing life in a similar way." In other words, hearing others normalized their experiences. Dallas explained what helped was: "Just that sense of realizing you're not alone, so your identity is not that you're alienated or that something's wrong with you, but you see ok, this is just a common thing, experience among pastors. So that's been really helpful." Robin also commented on echoing, saying

“the one thing I draw the most from it is how similar actually some of the major points we all agree on were,” explaining that this, “validates and also affirms that ok, I’m not just the odd one out, but that we all share these struggles together and felt very much the same way.” Again and again, the assessment was that echoing helped because it normalized participants' experiences. It showed them that their struggles were not unique to them or due to a personal deficiency.

Participants elaborated on the benefits of this normalization process in terms of healing. Robin, for instance, explained that “it is a good way to be nicer to yourself, by knowing other people went through it and they were nice to themselves.” In their case, the group time helped them to be more loving and kind to themselves, as they saw others practicing self-love in similar circumstances. They also commented, “I think in some ways sharing is therapeutic.” Jordin described the group experience saying: “It was affirming. It was encouraging. It was an encouraging healing moment.” They explained the healing they received, saying: “To hear in other people’s stories, echoes of your own story and situation, that was great. Because then you're like maybe I can keep going with this thing then.” For them seeing that others had endured similar experiences gave them a sense of hope and the resolve to keep going. Pat described the same phenomena, saying: “I will have the resources to get through this. Others are doing it. I can too.” Jordin also commented that the experience allowed us to enter into communal mourning, lamenting our suffering together. Finally, Dallas said their ability to relate to others in the group had led them to be more open with others, saying: “I share that more now when people ask how I am. I don't make it

dramatic or anything, but it’s just an awareness. And that really helped me, but it also helps other people.” In their case, the group experience has led to ongoing healing, and even healing in others, as they continue to relate their experiences.

Participants also shared why they felt the group meeting worked so well. I have recorded their responses in Table 9, as this will highlight which factors were identified most frequently.

Table 9: Factors Contributing to the Success of the Meeting

Response	Pat	Jordin	Dallas	Robin
The size of the group was right.	✓	✓		✓
Having the questions in advance.	✓	✓	✓	✓
The open-ended nature of the questions.	✓	✓		✓
The length of the meeting was right.		✓	✓	
Pre-existing relationships.	✓	✓		
Clear rules regarding confidentiality.		✓		
The diversity of the group.		✓		✓
The facilitation of the meeting.			✓	

Pat explained part of why the meeting worked was its size, saying: “If it was any bigger I would have felt like I was just lobbing in a comment or two, and being more of a statistical gathering than it felt like at least. Because what it felt like was more of a conversation.” They also explained that the open-ended nature of the questions helped because “I didn’t feel like you were targeting us for a particular response.” Jordin said part of why the meeting worked was because “it was timely, it was needed, it was necessary.” They also explained that “deep non-judgment affirming safe spaces, brave spaces, those are few and far between

in church.” Dallas complimented my leading of the group, saying I was a “guy next door” and “very friendly.” They felt I created an environment in which they could be relaxed, be themselves, and say what they wanted to. Robin explained that the open-ended questions worked because they could consider: “With questions like these, how far am I willing to venture with it? Do I share everything - my deepest darkest thoughts? Or where are my guardrails?” They also shared, “we just don’t have a lot of places to talk about preaching.”

In terms of possible improvements, Pat, Jordin, and Robin felt the experience would have been better had it been done in person. However, they all agreed that given the state of the pandemic at the time this was not possible. Jordin felt the experience might have been even better if it had been done over a weekend retreat. They also would have liked to have had additional meetings on other topics. Our lone female participant felt it would have been good to have more female perspectives, but she did not feel this was a major issue.

Researcher’s Interpretation

My participants have done an excellent job analyzing the time we spent together, and I want to emphasize that their insights are as valid as mine. I affirm and echo all of their comments. However, I can perhaps add to their insights by wrapping up and summarizing their interpretations, as well as offering my own interpretation as the researcher and a fellow participant.

Above all else, what is clear is that the focus group meeting was a positive experience for everyone involved. That positivity showed up in the meeting itself and was explicitly confirmed by all participants during follow-up interviews. No

one reported any negative impacts, and it was felt that little could have been done to improve the meeting. This meeting touched upon and ministered to a need. It is true that participants may have joined the study because they wanted what the study offered, so that need may not be universal. But it certainly exists.

In identifying that need, I go back to the idea of preaching into a void. At the time of the group meeting, we had spent the better part of two years preaching with little sense of connection to our congregations. We had received scant feedback, positive or negative, on our preaching. Also, as several participants noted, when we did receive input it was disconnected from the experience of preaching. It came afterwards and as a result, was unsatisfying. What we were lacking then was a real dynamic human connection when we preached.

As Powery points out, there is a call and response dynamic to preaching; the preacher speaks, but so does the congregation through their eyes, their body language, their laughter, and in other subtle ways (Brown 2016, 197). We may think of preaching as a monologue, but it is a dialogue. While preaching during the pandemic, our conversation partners had been taken away. What is evident, looking at participants' stories is that this lack of connection and conversation placed an added burden, beyond all of the other challenges of COVID-19, upon us all. We continued to put a great deal of ourselves into our preaching but received little response in return. So energy was going out, but not coming back in during sermons.

What the focus group meeting did was allow us to see that this experience was not unique to any of us. Everyone present had gone through something

similar. This is noteworthy given that participants came from diverse backgrounds and ministry settings. Everyone described their pandemic experience using different language. We had learned different lessons along the way. No two stories were exactly alike. But in spite of this, everyone present could relate to the experience of preaching into a void.

This relatability was a major feature of the project. In my coding of the data, more than anything else I observed participants echoing each other. In follow-up interviews, participants focused on how similar everyone's experience had been and the realization that they were not alone. It is also what I emphasized most in my journal entry after the meeting.

Why was the ability to relate, particularly around the experience of preaching into a void so significant? It led to the realization that we were not alone. That our experiences and struggles were not unique to us, and not a product of some personal deficiency. The burnout we are experiencing is a product of the times we are living through and the conditions we are working under. Sharing our stories, hearing the stories of others, and seeing how much we all had in common allowed us to see this and normalized our experiences.

Sharing our stories helped us to process what we had been through. Even more importantly it led to healing. While it would be an overreaction to say participants went away fully healed, participants described the experience as therapeutic. They said they felt renewed hope, that they were learning to be kind to themselves as a result. There seemed to be something cathartic in the very act of story sharing.

In understanding this need to process I go back to my observation of how unprepared I was to anticipate and understand what I would encounter in this project. How I lacked models to prepare me for it. This is also true of my participants. Our experiences during the pandemic were novel. Nothing had adequately readied us for them. How are we to understand our own stories when we have never heard one like it before? But when we heard the stories of others suddenly we had a reference point.

There were two aspects of the focus group that were particularly key to its success. First, the small size of the group ensured all participants were able to tell their stories without being rushed. Second, having open-ended discussion topics in advance allowed participants to reflect and come prepared to tell their stories.

In summary, my interpretation is that the focus group meeting was a positive and effective intervention. We had all been through two difficult years. In particular, we were burnt out by the experience of preaching into a void. Sharing this common experience allowed us to relate and see that we were not alone. It normalized our struggles and pain. Most importantly, in doing so it contributed to our healing.

Outcomes

One of the goals of this project was to better position my denomination, CBOQ, to support and care for its pastors as they recover from the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to determine the degree to which the project achieved this aim, I sent my findings and interpretation to Paul Lam, who is a

Church Life and Leadership Associate at CBOQ, to get his input. I will share some of the feedback he provided.

In terms of the effectiveness of the project, Paul points to several ways in which the data collected is helpful for him and his colleagues. First, it helps them to “understand the difficulty of pastoring during the pandemic.” In particular, it puts “into words the difficulty of preaching to a camera.” Paul found the language of “preaching into a void” particularly helpful. This is a reminder that we are dealing here with a phenomenon so new that we lack a vocabulary for it. So one of the potential outcomes of the project is simply giving the community of CBOQ a name for such experiences.

Paul also wrote that the project provided insight into how to use ministerial gatherings to help support pastors. In particular, it highlighted “the importance of story-telling for pastors.” Also, it shows the need for smaller group sizes and creating safe spaces for open sharing of experiences and struggles without intended or forced outcomes. Finally, Paul comments that: “The positive response of the participants and the excitement around the group reminds us of the need for these types of spaces.” So another potential outcome is giving CBOQ insight into how small groups can be used to help other pastors process their pandemic experiences.

Looking at Paul’s feedback, this project has indeed been helpful to CBOQ. While it is yet to be seen exactly how this study will shape the ministry of the denomination, it has provided them with valuable information that has the ability to inform and empower the way in which they support pastors, as well as

language that can be used for future discussions of these issues. Whether this means creating more groups in the exact mold of the one studied here or making adjustments to existing structures is yet to be seen. But either way, if CBOQ is more informed and empowered, and if its pastors are better supported as a result, then the project has achieved its desired outcome. Additionally, it must be emphasized that this project has already had a positive outcome in the lives of its participants, myself included. Five people have already been helped. So even if the data collected is not used to shape future interventions, this project still achieves a meaningful and worthwhile outcome.

While the outcome of helping pastors was hoped for, the way in which this unfolded was unexpected. I anticipated that participants would benefit by gaining a greater sense of how much they had learned, achieved, and overcome. I also expected these lessons and achievements to fall into typical preaching and pastoral categories, such as lessons about contextualization, leadership, and spiritual disciplines. Instead, the outcome was more therapeutic than anticipated.

I did not go into the project with a well-developed understanding of preaching into a void. I knew that I felt disconnected from my church and that this had taken a toll on me. But I saw this more as a personal weakness than a phenomenon to be named and studied or as something others needed help with too. This discovery created a different outcome than expected. But in helping my participants as well as myself name, understand, and start to heal from the experience of preaching into a void, this project actually achieved a better, more meaningful outcome than I had anticipated.

Conclusion and Implications

This project gathered a group of five CBOQ preachers, myself included, to tell our stories of preaching through the COVID-19 pandemic. While we all described our experiences using different language and shared different lessons, a strong sense of connection emerged, with participants echoing each other's experiences. In particular, participants communed through the shared experience of preaching into a void; we had all suffered as a result of preaching without a sense of connection to our audience. Seeing that this experience was shared by others normalized it for participants, helping us to process the past two years. Most significantly this led to healing, having a therapeutic effect that included renewed hope and increased self-love.

What can be concluded from this is that the simple act of sharing our stories of preaching through the COVID -19 pandemic was a positive and helpful intervention. This is my conclusion as a researcher and as a participant. It is the assessment given by participants in follow-up interviews. Also, it is the appraisal given by my denomination.

There are several implications that can be drawn from the positive outcome of this project. First, there is merit in running similar groups for other CBOQ preachers. This study was too small to conclude that every preacher would benefit from such a group. However, the fact that every participant found the experience helpful and positive indicates there are most likely many other CBOQ preachers out there who would benefit in similar ways. Therefore there is value in making this experience available to other preachers in CBOQ.

The success of this group does not mean that subsequent groups must precisely replicate the one studied here. While the format studied did work for the study's participants, that does not mean that it is the only or the optimal format for such a group. There are, however, several helpful factors participants pointed to that merit further exploration and repeating. Namely the small size of the group, creating space for everyone to speak and be heard, and giving participants open-ended discussion topics in advance.

Also, while this study focused specifically on preachers in CBOQ, there may be value in applying its findings to other faith communities. The realities that led to the experience of preaching into a void are not unique to CBOQ. Many pastors in other denominations in our region, and even in other regions, have been working under similar conditions. As such, there may be value in offering them an opportunity to tell their story.

Additionally, while the specific experience of preaching into a void may be unique to preachers, there may be merit in studying whether storytelling can be used to help other kinds of pastors process their pandemic experiences. It may, for instance, be the case that youth pastors have suffered unique hardships and that they would benefit from connecting with their peers in a way that allows them to share, name, and normalize their experiences.

So far I have focused on the implications of this study for my denomination and potentially for other faith communities. However, this project also has implications for my own ministry. Especially as I near the end of my own doctoral studies and consider what God is calling me to do with the lessons I have

been learning. This project has shown me the need for spaces in which preachers can share their experiences. The focus of this study was on sharing stories of preaching through the COVID-19 pandemic, and that is a particularly pressing need right now. However, this project has left me wondering if there is also a need for such spaces on an ongoing basis. Preaching is never easy. As Paul Lam commented in his feedback, CBOQ pastors were under stress even before the pandemic. So there is a risk they will continue to be overburdened after it ends. What I am personally sensing is a calling to explore the value of creating communities where preachers can share their experiences. Most likely this will begin by creating another group like the one in this study, allowing another cohort of preachers to share their COVID-19 pandemic experiences. But my desire is to follow this up by running additional meetings to further guide participants through their recovery from the pandemic and support them beyond the end of the pandemic through the regular challenges of ministry.

I believe there are many pastors in my denomination who would benefit from being part of such a community. I also believe I am one of them. During the focus group meeting I felt a level of connection and comradery that I have always needed, but up until now had not experienced in ministerial gatherings. I believe such a group would be beneficial in sustaining my own preaching ministry as well as the ministry of others.

Preaching through the COVID-19 pandemic has been the greatest challenge of my ministry. Nothing else has brought me so close to burnout. But through this project, it has also led to one of the most positive experiences I have

had as a pastor. So my personal conclusion is that I should not let this experience be a singular occurrence. I hope to carry the experience I had during the focus group and the lessons learned from it into the future, allowing me to better support and sustain my own preaching ministry as well as that of other preachers.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE

This portfolio has covered three distinct periods in my ministry journey: my past, my future, and my present. But now, as we reach its conclusion, it is time to shift entirely to the future. It is time to ponder, implications, plans, and next steps, all of which take us beyond the present, well beyond the past, and straight into the future. However, that does not mean that two-thirds of this portfolio's chapters are suddenly irrelevant. As it is precisely at this moment, as we consider what is to come, that we must reflect on what is and has been. For it is impossible to chart a course without knowing where you are, and it is tremendously helpful if you know where you have come from.

The purpose of studying my future was of course to prepare for it. But my examination of my past and present were equally oriented toward tomorrow in their own distinct ways. I studied my past in order to learn from it, gaining a better understanding of my God-given identity and calling so I can walk within them. I studied my present to find my bearings, taking stock of what I have been through and am still going through during this current disorienting phase of my pilgrimage. All three phases of this portfolio serve to help me plan my route going forward. This entire endeavour has been future-oriented. So as I turn to the

horizon I will begin by considering all three phases of my journey, finding guidance in each for the road ahead.

In my first section, *A Preaching Journey*, I focused most intensely on my past. The surest thing that emerged for me in doing so is a clear sense of my calling to preach. This was my first calling, even before my call to vocational ministry. As time has gone by God has added to it, compelling me to lead, shepherd, counsel, care and do the dozens of other things that go into pastoral ministry. But he has never taken my first calling away. Preaching remains my primary vocation.

Writing my biography confirmed this sense of calling by allowing me to see God's providence in my journey. I went all the way back to my childhood in telling my story because I can see God shaping me for my vocation even then. He is the one who gave me a loving mother who read to me constantly, and he is the one who allowed me to face the adversity of dyslexia, both of which gave me the love of words that led me to preach. In these and so many other experiences, I can see him guiding me long before I had any awareness of him, forming me for my vocation. Seeing this affirms that preaching is fundamental to my calling. It is what I have always been meant to do.

Also, I see confirmation of my calling in the theology of preaching I have developed over the course of my journey. I have not mastered everything there is to understand about preaching. But looking at the core values and convictions catalogued in this chapter, I feel I have arrived at a robust understanding of what it is to preach. Granted, I believed this many years ago when I was ignorant and

immature. But I have now been through the valley of self-doubt that comes with learning and the accompanying realization of just how little one knows. But I have now emerged from this valley with a proper confidence in my grasp of my craft, which again confirms my belief I belong in the pulpit.

While the main effect of exploring my past has been to affirm my call to preach, it also has expanded my sense of calling. Parker Palmer suggests that one of the ways to discern our vocation is to “seek clues in stories from our younger years, years when we lived closer to our birthright gifts” (Palmer 2000, 13). Since finishing my master's degree and becoming the lead pastor of a congregation, preaching has been my primary focus. But writing my biography reminded me that I have a love of words that is older and broader than my call to preach. I have yet to properly explore my love of writing, and I sense God calling me to do so going forward.

In my second section, *Imaginative Leadership*, I focus directly on my future. The most significant thing to emerge for me from this chapter is a vision of leadership that I can fully embrace, and that fully embraces me. Up until now, it has always felt as though I was wearing someone else's clothes when I lead. I could perform the task, but it felt unnatural and uncomfortable. But now I feel I have a philosophy of leadership custom tailored for me. Of course, I still need to put my new clothes on, and my old wardrobe is not easy to part with. But this is what makes this chapter so helpful in plotting my future. There is so much in it that is still aspirational.

In looking at the vision I have tailored for myself, the primary feature that stands out to me is how word-centric it is. But this of course was my intention. I was seeking a philosophy that would allow me to lead through my primary calling and passion, which as we saw in chapter one is preaching. But it is a philosophy of leadership that is not limited to preaching. I explore other potential avenues for imaginative leadership in the chapter, including vision and equipping. But reflecting on this chapter has beckoned me to find even more ways in which I can use words to guide people and institutions to new horizons. I wonder if there is some way in which I can use the love of writing I uncovered in my biography to help lead the church forward in some small way?

While I am still unsure of the exact direction imaginative leadership will take me, I am confident that the work I have done in this chapter has equipped me for the journey. In the biblical prophets and pastor theologians, I have found guides for imaginative leadership. In practices such as playful exegesis, practical theology, and spiritual disciplines, I have found tools for the trek ahead. No doubt I will need and find more resources along the way. But I now feel sufficiently provisioned to head out. And as I embark on this journey, perhaps the best gift I have given myself is permission. Permission to strike out and find my own way. Permission to find God's way for me. Permission to lead according to the identity and calling God has given me.

But before launching into something new, it is important to see where I presently am, which is what I do in my third section, *Preaching into a Void*. The most obvious and significant insight I take away from my study of preachers'

experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic is that I have just been through, and to some extent am still going through, a traumatic event. The pandemic has taken a toll on preachers. The experience of speaking without a sense of connection to one's congregation added to the mental and emotional burden of the past two years. This was the experience of all my participants, and I am no exception. Indeed part of the takeaway is how unexceptional I am.

Participating in the study did help with my healing process, mainly by normalizing my experiences. I now see my struggles not as stemming from personal shortcomings, but as the result of working under unhealthy and unsustainable conditions. This in turn has helped me to be more gracious and understanding with myself. But I am by no means fully recuperated. How can I be when the pandemic refuses to fully go away? I simply have not had the time and space needed to recover from such an ordeal. So I am currently still in the position of needing to recover.

However, there has also been another, more positive takeaway. Conducting this study showed me I am capable of doing original work. Throughout my academic career, the writing I have done has felt derivative. I have spent years studying and reporting on the work of others. My preaching itself is also highly derivative. As an expository preacher, I am always speaking about the Bible, and as a responsible preacher, I am always relying on commentaries and other resources to do so. Indeed I have long thought of my role as being limited to explaining and clarifying others' ideas. I have no qualms about doing so. I do not consider the task beneath me. But in conducting my research

project, I saw I am capable of creating original content and making my own contribution to the world of ideas. Seeing this has expanded my sense of what I am currently capable of. It has opened a new horizon for me.

Having taken stock of what I have learned about myself from studying my past, future, and present, it is now time to focus on new steps; finding ways to walk in the calling God has given me over time, while stepping into the vision for the future I have crafted, setting out from where I currently am. As I do so the first step seems to be to do nothing. Or at least nothing new. Absolute and total rest may not be possible, as I still have responsibilities, such as my church and my family. But I can hold off on adding new burdens to my workload for a while. It has not been easy pastoring, working on a doctorate, and becoming a first-time dad during a prolonged global crisis. As my research project demonstrates I have a legitimate need to recover. And the end of my formal education gives me an opportunity to step back and recover.

The lessons I have learned during my doctoral studies have prepared and positioned me to take on greater challenges, and we live in a time when new answers and solutions are needed. I would like to do my part and contribute, even if only in a small way to imagining a new future for the people of God. But not right away. For a little while, I would like to focus on the basics. Preaching excellent sermons. Returning to the fundamentals of ministry. Being a good husband and father. Reading books of my own choosing. Maybe even playing a video game or two. Recovering my humanity in the process. I am not sure how long I can make such an oasis last, but I would like to step into it for as long as I

need to. Then, when I am ready, I will begin to apply myself in new and challenging ways.

The first project I have in mind is designing a teaching series. Up until now, nearly all of the teaching I have done in the church has been based upon a premade curriculum. This has been in part because I lacked the time to write my own content. But the greater issue was I lacked confidence in my ability to write my own material. However, my doctoral studies have renewed my desire to write, and given me confidence in my ability to do original work. They have also shown me that such work is a vital part of how I am called to lead and needs to be prioritized. So I plan on setting aside the time it takes to properly develop a series that is my own creation.

What I have in mind right now is a series on ecclesiology, aimed at the “umms.” A term *Christianity Today* recently coined for those who, in the wake of the pandemic, remain committed to Jesus and even the idea of the local church, but are unsure of where they fit within it (Moore 2022). I want to work on communicating a vision of the church that helps reengage such people. I believe this is a project that can help my church and denomination going forward. But the key thing is not this project itself, so much as stepping into content development and seeing where it takes me. I believe this is a step that is faithful to what I have learned about myself in this portfolio.

Also, moving beyond this initial project, I feel called to continue developing content by exploring my call to write. It is my first section that reminded me of my love for this craft. But all of the writing I have done during

the course of my doctoral studies has rekindled my passion for it. The most consistent comment and encouragement I have received from my professors is that I write well. This has laid writing upon my heart as not just a passion but as a responsibility. Frederick Buechner describes vocation as “the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need” (Buechner 1993, 119). I find tremendous joy in writing, so if I have a genuine ability for the task, that indicates to me that it is a part of my call and I must pursue it.

Writing of course is a monumentally broad task. There are so many avenues, roads, and streets one can go down. There is the question of what to write, as well as where to write it. At this point, I do not know what direction writing will take me. Friends have long teased me by saying “when you write your book” and that may happen. Then again it may not. At this point, I think it is best to start small. I have a few papers that professors have suggested could be developed for publication. So I may begin simply by adapting them and seeing if anyone is interested in them. I also know of several small local publications that are always in need of content and can offer them my services. Maybe these early ventures will lead nowhere, or maybe I will eventually write a book. I do not know, I will not know until I try. So the important thing at this juncture is simply that I explore this dimension of my calling.

So far I have focused on new ways in which I can serve, tapping into underexplored aspects of my calling. But perhaps the application most important to write about is the one I already pursue week after week: preaching. If this portfolio has taught me one thing, it is that I am called to preach. It is my first and

remains my primary calling, my leadership philosophy is built to incorporate it, and it is the dimension of ministry I chose to research. A doctorate in leadership can open up new possibilities, such as serving in parachurch organizations, a denomination headquarters, or as an executive pastor. None of which necessarily involve preaching. I believe taking on such roles would be a mistake. I may be wrong about every other application in this portfolio, but I am sure I am called to preach. This must always be a part of my ministry until God tells me otherwise.

However, that does not mean that I cannot add new dimensions to my preaching ministry. While I may not be the world's foremost expert on preaching, I have been blessed to receive a level of education and training few pastors are afforded. So I feel I have a responsibility to search for ways to share what I know with others. Recently a fellow pastor who I respect and even admire asked me to be their preaching coach. I was deeply touched by the invitation, as it is wonderful to know someone I esteem in so many ways believes I have something to share. I have taken them up on their offer and view it as an opportunity to explore how I can bless others. This may lead to coaching others down the road, perhaps to running a preaching support group, or maybe offering classes or workshops. All of these options would allow me to tap into the equipping dimension of imaginative leadership, and the calling to support other pastors I experienced at the conclusion of my research project. So I will begin by helping my colleague and then go from there, seeing how I can help others.

As you can tell from reading this conclusion, I am not entirely sure where the lessons I have learned will take me. I have ideas and inclinations. But until I

explore them, I will not know where they will take me. Also, it will be challenging preaching and pastoring full time, while developing original teaching series, writing for publication, and coaching other preachers. I am not so naive as to think I will be able to do all things all at once. Something will probably have to give. Only God knows what I can do and what I should do. But until he shows me exactly what to do, I will simply keep trying and experimenting.

I do not want the lessons I have been learning to go to waste. Especially as these are lessons I have been learning about myself. God has given me a rare opportunity to discover who I am and what I am called to do, and I want to write the next chapter or chapters of this portfolio, building upon the work I have already done. I do not know exactly how the story will end. But I want to get there.

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

Topics for Sharing During the Group Meeting

These topics were generated with the feedback and help of my DMin cohort peers. The goal was to make the topics broad and open enough to allow participants to tell their own stories in their own way.

As you reflect on these questions please keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers. It is up to you to decide what constitutes your first COVID-19 sermon, as well as what counts as a challenge or a triumph. The point is for you to share your perspective. You are invited to share as much – or as little – as you feel comfortable with.

Topics:

1. Tell us the story of your first COVID-19 sermon.
2. Tell us about your struggles and challenges preaching through the pandemic, and the lessons you learned through them.
3. Tell us about your triumphs and victories preaching through the pandemic, and the lessons you learned through them.

APPENDIX B

Questions for Follow-Up Interviews

The following questions were meant to roughly guide my conversations with participants and ensure certain topics were covered. However, I will allow the interview to go where the participants take it, asking follow-up questions based on their responses.

Questions:

1. Can you describe your experience of the group meeting?
2. Was sharing your story with others helpful?
3. Was hearing the stories of others helpful?
4. What contributed to the meeting working?
5. Were there any ways in which the experience was negative?
6. How could the experience have been better or more helpful?
7. Has this experience impacted how you preach, or how you see yourself as a preacher?
8. Is there anything else you wish to share?

APPENDIX C

Information Letter Regarding Research Taking Place in CBOQ

by Rev. Ryan Lawrence on the subject of

Preaching Through the Pandemic: A Narrative Study of CBOQ Preachers' Experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

and request for your consent in participating in this study.

The past year and a half of ministry have been like nothing else we have experienced. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted nearly all aspects of life in Ontario, church being no exception. With in-person gatherings suspended for much of the pandemic, we have had to adapt nearly everything we do, including how we preach. Many of us have been preaching in our living rooms or empty sanctuaries, all while guiding our flock through an international crisis.

We have all been through a great deal as preachers, and the goal of this project is for participants to help one another process these experiences by sharing our stories. The hypothesis of this project is that sharing our own COVID-19 preaching stories as well as hearing the stories of others will help us to better appreciate how much we have already learned, accomplished, and endured in this past year and a half. Seeing this, it is hoped, will have a positive impact on participants' identity and practice as preachers.

This study will involve two phases. In the first phase, I will gather pastors together so we can share our experiences of preaching through the COVID-19 pandemic with each other. We will begin with a single two-hour-long meeting, with an option to schedule additional meetings if group members desire. This will be done in a group setting for two reasons. First, this will replicate the ministerial groups that already exist within CBOQ so others can repeat this process if it proves to be helpful. Second, it is hoped that hearing the stories of others will help participants to process their own experiences. The second phase will be a one on one interview with me in order to get your feedback on whether you found this process helpful. Both phases will be audio recorded, unless we have to meet over Zoom, in which cases sessions will be video recorded.

There is a risk that sharing your experiences of the past year and a half may surface negative or even traumatic thoughts and emotions. If this is the case, with your permission I will work with a church Life and Leadership Associate from CBOQ to get you support for processing these experiences.

This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of Tyndale University. Research will be conducted under the supervision of my Portfolio Advisor, Rev. Dr. Kevin Livingston, Program Director, Dr. Mark Chapman, and Track Leader, Dr. Michael Kraus in the Doctor of Ministry Department at Tyndale University in Toronto. This study will conform to all requirements of Canadian ethical guidelines as outlined in the

Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans and the Tyndale Research Ethics Policy Manual.

I invite you to participate in this study and join me in sharing our COVID-19 preaching experiences. At least two weeks' notice will be given in advance of the group meeting, which will be conducted either at Malvern Baptist Church in Scarborough or over Zoom, depending on conditions. An individual interview will be scheduled at a time and location of your convenience approximately one month after the group meeting.

All data will be stored in password-protected files. Findings will be shared with CBOQ, but your identity will be concealed unless you desire to be named. When the project is published your identity will be kept out of it unless you desire to be named. Total anonymity will not be possible due to the group component of the project. However, all members will sign an agreement to keep everything shared in the group meeting confidential. Also, you will be given discussion questions in advance of the group meeting so you can consider what you are comfortable sharing. You are invited to share as much – or as little – as you feel comfortable with. Your participation is completely voluntary and you will be free to opt-out of the study at any time without consequence. You are not waiving any legal rights if you choose to participate in this research.

The research project will conclude at the end of 2021 and my final portfolio will be presented to the faculty at Tyndale Seminary in 2022.

If you have any questions, please direct them to me, Rev. Ryan Lawrence at

You may also direct any questions or concerns about the ethical nature of this study to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at Tyndale Seminary at reb@tyndale.ca.

Thank you for considering participation in this study as we seek to learn from the past year of ministry, sharing the lessons God has taught us with others.

Blessings,
Rev. Ryan Lawrence

APPENDIX D

Research Study Consent Form

Preaching Through the Pandemic: A Narrative Study of CBOQ Preachers' Experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Name (please print):

1. I have read the above Information Letter outlining the purpose and details of this research project and have had an opportunity to ask any relative questions.
2. I understand that I will be participating in a study that involves sharing information about preaching through the COVID-19 pandemic. I will be asked to participate in a group sharing time with other preachers, as well as a one on one follow-up interview. I will be asked to answer questions about my preaching experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without consequence. I am not waiving any legal rights by participating in this study.

I understand that every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of the data now and in the future. The data may also be published in professional journals or presented at conferences, but any such presentations will not identify participants and will never breach individual confidentiality. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings.

5. I understand that due to the group component of the study complete anonymity may not be guaranteed. I understand that as a participant I am not to divulge anything shared during the group meeting, including the identities and experiences of other participants.

6. I am aware that if I have any questions about study participation they may be directed to Ryan Lawrence at _____ Concerns about this project can be directed to CBOQ Church Life and Leadership Associate Paul Lam at plam@baptist.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, reb@tyndale.ca.

I have read the above statements and freely consent to participate in this study:
YES ___ NO ___

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX E

Verbal Script of Contacting Potential Participants

P = Potential Participant; I = Interviewer

I - May I please speak to [name of potential participant]?

P - Hello, [name of potential participant] speaking. How may I help you?

I - My name is Ryan Lawrence and am a CBOQ Pastor as well as a student in the Doctor of Ministry program at Tyndale University. I am currently conducting research on preaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of my research, I am conducting a discussion group as well as follow-up interviews with other CBOQ preachers to explore our experiences of preaching during the pandemic.

As you have preached through the COVID-19 pandemic, I would like to include you in this project. Is this a convenient time to give you further information about the study?

P - No, could you call back later [agree on a more convenient time to call the person back].

OR

P - Yes, could you provide me with some more information regarding the research you will be conducting?

I - Background Information:

- The group meeting will be scheduled after all participants have been contacted. You will be given at least 2 weeks' notice before the meeting.
- The group meeting will be approximately 2 hours long. There will be an option to schedule additional meetings if group members desire.
- The group will either meet at Malvern Baptist Church in Scarborough, or online over Zoom, depending on conditions.
- The follow-up interview will last about one hour and will be arranged for a time and place convenient to your schedule.
- Involvement in this interview is entirely voluntary. The only anticipated risks are that you may share something you later regret or find talking about your experiences painful.
- In the group meeting, you will be asked to share your response to three topics which you will be given in advance.
- In the follow-up interview, you will be asked about your experience in the group. I will have some general questions to guide our discussion.

- Throughout the project, you may share as much or as little as you feel comfortable doing.
- With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded or video recorded to facilitate the collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis.
- Your identity will be confidential unless you wish it to be included in the final paper
- The data collected will be kept on a secure password-protected computer, and disposed of in three years' time.
- This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Tyndale Research Ethics Board.
- After all of the data has been analyzed, you will have an opportunity to review the final paper before it is published.

With your permission, I would like to email you an information letter which has all of these details along with contact names and numbers on it to help assist you in making a decision about your participation in this study.

P - No thank you.

OR

P - Sure [get email address from potential participant].

I - Thank you very much for your time. May I call you in a week to see if you are interested in participating? Once again, if you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to contact me at

P - Goodbye.

APPENDIX F

Definitions of Codes

Table 10: Definitions of Codes

Category	Code	Definition
Personal Experience of the Pandemic	Disorientation	The feeling of losing one's bearings or sense of direction.
	Impact	Feeling like you've been punched in the gut.
	Naivety	A sense of having been fooled or misled, including by yourself.
	Unknown	Realizing there are key things you do not or cannot know.
	Excitement	A feeling of enthusiasm or exhilaration.
	Change	The sense that things are rapidly shifting around you.
	Business as Usual	Carrying on as if nothing has changed.
	Prior Hardships	The sense that your past is worsening your present.
	Caution	Being fearful or tentative.
	Challenge	The feeling of facing adversity and hardship.
	Determination	A confident sense of resolution in the face of challenges.
	Alone	The feeling of being left to deal with challenges on your own.
	Satisfaction	Taking joy or pride in overcoming challenges.

Lessons Learned from the Pandemic	Providence	Gaining a greater sense of God's care and power.
	Clarifying	Gaining a clearer sense of your calling or mission.
	Growth	Overall growth as a person.
	Preaching	Improving in some way as a preacher.
	Accepting Uncertainty	Learning to accept the uncertainty around you.
	Confidence	Growing in your belief in yourself.
Mental Health During the Pandemic	Burnout	Experiencing the effects of chronic stress.
	Counselling	Seeing a mental health professional.
	Self-Love	The ability to accept and care for yourself.
Preaching into the Void	Void	Disconnection between the preacher and their audience.
Echoing	Echo	Resonating or identifying with another participant's experience.
Race and Gender	Female Experience	Experiences unique to females.
	Immigrant Experience	Experiences unique to immigrants.
	Chinese Experience	Experiences unique to Chinese culture.

APPENDIX G

Follow-Up Interview Questions and Responses

I asked each participant eight follow-up questions. Below I have listed the questions, along with highlights from participants' responses to each question.

1. Can you describe your experience of the group meeting?

Pat said the number of participants was ideal, explaining: "If it was any bigger I would have felt like I was just lobbing in a comment or two, and being more of a statistical gathering than it felt like at least. Because what it felt like it was more of a conversation."

Jordin shared that: "I found it incredibly encouraging to find I'm not the only one in that boat. That it's a common enough experience, that there was a lot of head-nodding and agreement across contexts and generations of pastors that were experiencing similar things. And to know that it's church-wide and not just context-driven." They also felt we were able to collectively enter into mourning, explaining: "There's something different about sharing in the context of other people that are in the context. People that have been in the trenches... You don't know unless you know." They also added that such contexts are lacking in the baptist community.

Dallas commented on the overall experience, saying "I found it really good." In regards to burnout, they said: "It was really nice to hear that I wasn't the only one. That people were saying 'yeah.' And so I share that more now when people ask how I am. I don't make it dramatic or anything, but it's just an awareness. And that really helped me, but it also helps other people." They said that during the pandemic: "You're still trying to survive, so there's no space to just

be still with others and to discuss it. And I think that's what I enjoyed about it the most. Because everything else was dropped in that moment." Finally, they added that: "This is something that you really need others to help you analyze and discuss. Because when you discuss things it's the spoken word, it's naming it, it's identifying it, and you can't do that alone."

Robin began by saying, "I think it was a very positive experience for me." They commented that, "the one thing I draw the most from it is how similar actually some of the major points we all agree on were," explaining that this, "validates and also affirms that ok, I'm not just the odd one out, but that we all share these struggles together and felt very much the same way." Finally, Robin said the experience: "Reveals how much we need to have engagement as preachers. How much we need feedback. Also, we just need people present. Eye contact."

2. Was sharing your story with others helpful?

Pat responded: "Certainly. It's kind of the invitation that doesn't come naturally to us in the world, because as preachers and pastors we're the ones that are the listeners of other people, and so when someone has a story to tell you don't want to jump in and throw your story at them." They also added that: "The welcoming part of that gathering was the invitation to say ok what you have to say is of value and we want to hear that. So that was a delight."

Jordin asked the rhetorical question: "When do we have an opportunity to talk about our stuff, be heard, but also affirmed and validated?" They also spoke of: "That sense of, is this just me or is this a real thing? And then people that you

know and respect go ‘no buddy, this is definitely a real thing.’ And there's that sense of ‘ahh I'm not a crazy person,’ this is a real thing, other people are feeling and experiencing life in a similar way. Finally, they also added that “ministry is pretty lonely,” and that “deep non-judgment affirming safe spaces, brave spaces, those are few and far between in church.”

Dallas said that “sharing with colleagues was really important, with people in the same situation, that was really important.”

Robin began by saying, “I think in some ways sharing is therapeutic.” They explained that in the type of group we created: “You can share openly because none of these people go to your church, none of them are your board members or anything like that, so you feel very safe to share, and also you know that they understand because they are in the same shoes.” They noted this was the most affirmation they had received recently. They also commented directly on the experience of preaching into a void, saying, “so there was like nothing, you were speaking into a vortex, you were speaking into a black hole, and everyone resonated with that.”

3. Was hearing the stories of others helpful?

Pat commented: “Relatability. We're in this together. And yet there are nuances to what each of us was doing.” They added “I think commonality came out. And it came out because we were able to pursue it as a dialogue.” Pat, shared: “Anytime I struggle and then I find there's company, I kind of feel I'm not the odd guy out. I'm not any worse off than somebody else that's experiencing life at

this time.” They explained that this leads to a realization that: “I will have the resources to get through this. Others are doing it. I can too.”

Jordin shared: “To hear in other people’s stories, echoes of your own story and situation, that was great. Because then you're like maybe I can keep going with this thing then.”

Dallas said, “I really enjoyed hearing from others.” They also shared that they wrote down things other people shared that spoke to them.

Robin said they felt a sense that we were pastoring each other. That we were not just learning from each other, but affirming and showing empathy. They also added, “there was no judgment whatsoever when we were sharing”

4. What contributed to the meeting working?

Pat explained that this meeting worked better than a typical ministerial gathering because such gatherings are too large and impersonal. They also explained that the open-ended nature of the questions worked because “I didn’t feel like you were targeting us for a particular response.” Jordin said part of why the meeting worked was because “it was timely, it was needed, it was necessary.” Dallas complimented my leading of the group, saying I was a “guy next door” and “very friendly.” They felt I created an environment in which they could be relaxed, be themselves, and say what they wanted to. Robin explained that the open-ended questions worked because they could consider: “With questions like these, how far am I willing to venture with it? Do I share everything - my deepest darkest thoughts? Or where are my guardrails?” They also shared, “we just don’t have a lot of places to talk about preaching.”

5. Were there any ways in which the experience was negative?

No participants reported any negative experiences. Jordin said, “it was a very positive experience.” Dallas shared “I just think in general it was very well done.”

6. How could the experience have been better or more helpful?

Pat, Jordin, and Robin felt the experience would have been better had it been done in person. However, they all agreed that given the state of the pandemic at the time this was not possible. Jordin felt the experience might have been even better if it had been done over a weekend retreat. They also would have liked to have had additional meetings on other topics. Our lone female participant felt it would have been good to have more female perspectives, but they did not feel this was a major issue.

7. Has this experience impacted how you preach, or how you see yourself as a preacher?

Pat shared, “I don’t think there were huge aha moments” and that for them, “it was more the sense of community, commonality, feeling like ok other people have gone this direction too.” Also, they commented: “Our preaching is strengthened by the number of interactions you have with life, with people, with your congregants. The less you have, the more isolated you feel and also the more isolating your preaching style is. You have very few reference points, you’re just talking to a camera and you get little or no feedback.”

Jordin said, “yes, I think it has.” However, they struggled to articulate exactly how. They also shared: “It made me wonder, am I ever going to feel like a good preacher? Because here are these people I respect going ‘Ah, I didn't feel

like I was doing much' and I was like 'What are you talking about? If you're not a good preacher what am I?'" They also said the experience led to a realization that we are not just sharing the gospel, we are sharing ourselves in preaching.

Dallas explained what helped was: "Just that sense of realizing you're not alone, so your identity is not that you're alienated or that something's wrong with you, but you see ok, this is just a common thing, experience among pastors. So that's been really helpful." They also said the experience helped them see there are different ways to preach.

Robin said "Now you know so many people suffered the same way you did when they can't see people." They added to this by saying, "it is a good way to be nicer to yourself, by knowing other people went through it and they were nice to themselves." Robin also commented on how the experience had changed their self-understanding, sharing that someone recently complimented them on their self-awareness, and they attributed this to the focus group meeting.

8. Is there anything else you wish to share?

Pat said: "It was good. It was good." They also told me "it was good having you as part of the conversation." Jordin said: "It was good. It was a really interesting project. I'm expecting great things from the effect it had on people." They also commented, "even during the thing, people were commenting on how valuable an experience this was and is at the time that it was happening." Finally, Jordin shared "it was affirming. It was encouraging. It was an encouraging healing moment." Dallas said they are looking forward to seeing the people from the study in person when things open up.

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