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Tyndale University

Establishing and Maintaining Interpersonal Ministry  
to Members of First Baptist Church, Montreal  
During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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

by

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Toronto, Canada

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## **Abstract**

In its nearly two-hundred-year existence in the city, First Baptist Church has seen the best and worst of life in Montreal. Still, the current congregation shows no signs of giving up our corporate goal to be "*A House of Prayer to All Nations*." This portfolio reflects my evolution as pastor of this vital community and the church itself, especially during my time at Tyndale.

As challenging as the ministry is in general, it takes on another dimension of difficulty when the congregation to whom we minister is gone. The question that loomed large over my pastorate was how I could continue ministering to people in such an event. COVID-19 left us searching for alternate ways to minister to congregational needs despite restrictions on interpersonal contact. We partly addressed this ministry through online services, but many members could not avail themselves of this resource, being unable to access computers or the internet. Government-enforced church closures complicated the issue, as did some individuals fearing the risk of exposure by physically attending the church when open. The threefold foci of this research concentrated on how best to preach to an absent congregation, encourage them in prayer, and maintain a sense of communal fellowship despite enforced separation. The research project documents how we addressed these problems through regular telephone and mail contact to alleviate the isolation members experienced. This outreach included the distribution of printed sermons and prayer requests. We reassured members they

were loved and cared for while reminding them of the congregational unity and community of those sharing their struggles. The project had some success, constrained mainly by its eight-week duration. However, we learned valuable lessons and continue using the process we developed, ensuring regular contact without overlooking any of our members.

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## **Introduction**

I begin Chapter One by examining my journey to this intersection with First Baptist Church in Montreal, where I serve. The chapter provides insight into my developing self-understanding of who I am as a minister and preacher of the Gospel. The reader should consider this self-understanding a fluid picture of where I am now. Starting as a new convert to Christ and on to my years of estrangement from organized church and then to my slowly evolving and maturing faith, I present the reader with a view of how this gradual, circuitous, and often painful transformation occurred.

Chapter Two focuses on the church I have served for the last eight years. First Baptist Church in Montreal's history extends back to the earliest days of Baptist work in the city. However, my concern in this chapter is the present day and the ministry context. It will be apparent that this is not the same church it once was. Ministering today in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual congregation is becoming less unusual as time passes. Still, it often presents some complex circumstances challenging for any pastor. The first two chapters examine how the Doctor of Ministry program impacted the church and me.

The original intention of the third chapter was to document a research program examining the implementation of a preaching training program I wanted to create at First Baptist Church. I was in the preliminary stages of putting this

together when the COVID pandemic struck. Our church was forced to shut down, rendering the preaching-specific focus I had intended impossible. Public assembly was off-limits, to say nothing of assembling a team to preach to people who were no longer present. The pandemic's profound effect on churches pushed everyone to the limits of experience and wisdom. I am grateful that if this had to happen, it did so at a time when I had the resources of the Doctor of Ministry program to help me cope. In Chapter Three, I detail the ministry intervention we undertook during COVID-19. While preaching was formerly my sole focus, the intervention broadened to include ministry focusing on preaching, prayer, and interpersonal contact during this crisis. We learned some crucial lessons, and those lessons did not go unheeded. The resources gained at Tyndale mitigated many of the unprecedented challenges faced. For instance, the critical importance of thinking theologically about unfolding events and learning to process them in reflective solitude before God was exceptionally significant for me, requiring deep personal reflection to keep on track throughout this period.

Scripture teaches that God often draws seemingly unrelated experiences together for a given time and place. Following the last eight years with these wonderful people, especially during the pandemic, I can attest to that truth. Beginning my walk with Christ, I never imagined that he would lead me on the journey I have experienced. The years in the Doctor of Ministry program at Tyndale have given me vital resources for which I thank God.

The appendices include a reference list, relevant maps, photographs, demographic details, and supporting documentation.

## Chapter 1: Personal Preaching Identity

### *Theology of Preaching*

What is preaching? The answer to that question depends heavily on who you ask. Even among preachers, there are differences, both major and minor, emphasized in their responses. Some of my colleagues understand preaching to be essentially an exercise in rhetoric, with the onus on the skills and abilities of the preacher alone to make a case for God or for God's will, which they feel compelled to defend. Other preachers I know feel it is entirely a matter of the Holy Spirit, thereby relieving them of the responsibility of deep study and thought, believing that the Spirit will be pleased to use whatever they say to accomplish God's purposes.

Like most preachers, however, I fall somewhere between these two extremes. I have found throughout my preaching career that it is more a blend of continuous refinement of skills, knowledge, and abilities, such as one can gain in Tyndale's Doctor of Ministry program, consistently empowered, inspired, and led by the Holy Spirit of God. Neither human intellect alone nor a nonchalant approach to this sacred calling will suffice to communicate God's Word to human beings effectively.

Preaching is a divinely sanctioned method of God speaking his Word into people's lives. It is not the only means God uses to talk to the human heart since he can communicate with us in any way he chooses. God

sometimes speaks through circumstances, other people, sickness or pain, or even health and joyous blessings. However, the primary means God uses to communicate was and remains through the act of preachers faithfully preaching the Word. As a preacher, I am both humbled and deeply honoured to know that he speaks to my congregation and me through this seemingly simple yet profound act of grace.

It never ceases to amaze me how God can take the message I preach and apply it to someone's life regarding a matter I had no previous knowledge of. Nearly every Sunday, I have people approach me and tell me how God used his Word on that day to speak to an issue in their life. I always hope and pray that God will do such a thing in my hearers' lives, but I find it astounding that he does so in ways I could not imagine.

This phenomenon is where the juxtaposition of the preacher's preparation and the work of the Holy Spirit on individual hearts becomes most evident. God is doing things in, through, and for people far beyond my grasp. I preach the message God laid on my heart, and he somehow transforms that into a message someone needs to hear. The very thought of that process amazes and humbles me. I may lean toward preaching the Word with a specific emphasis, but God frequently does something with it that escapes my comprehension. It is crucial, therefore, to seek proper training to preach to the best of one's ability, but the result is in God's hands.

God speaks to my heart, soul, and mind in preparation for the sermon, which I strive to proclaim faithfully, yet he is not restricted or bound to my

limited understanding of what a text can do in someone's heart and mind. While I preach, the Holy Spirit simultaneously moves hearts to receive his message. Therefore, I can confidently assume the pulpit on any given Sunday, knowing that I have done my best to prepare to share what I believe God is saying. The Spirit of God stands in full authority behind it all. The emphasis of the Preaching Track throughout the Doctor of Ministry program pressed home that truth repeatedly. As pointed out by Johnson, Jesus does not command us to be witnesses but promises that the Holy Spirit will witness for us and in us (Johnson 2009, 96). That is to say; he does the witnessing through us. In addition, while “preaching is a human activity, it is not merely a human activity” (Long 2016, 17). In other words, we do our best to proclaim God’s truth, but the Holy Spirit is the one who brings that truth home to our hearer’s hearts. Preachers must never forget this reality, regardless of one’s confidence level.

When I preach, I need to be confident that this is what God wants me to say to his gathered people now and in this place. Lacking such an assurance would preclude my being able to preach the message. If I do not feel the Word is relevant and applicable to me, I cannot assume such would be true for anyone else. Having that conviction in my heart is vital to my preaching process.

Making assumptions about those who hear our preaching was discouraged throughout the program. Like many other preachers, I had those moments when God took my words and used them to bless and comfort

someone in their specific situation. Beyond myself, however, I have learned that I cannot claim to know where anyone might be situated in their life circumstances, their relationship with God, or any issues they may face at a given moment. But God knows, and that is the blessing of understanding the presence and power of the Holy Spirit working in individual lives far beyond anything I might consider saying. To me, this is one of God's great and beautiful mysteries.

As we learned, everyone has an unavoidable lens of perception for what is said and their theologies, worldviews and social contexts through which they hear a given message. Thus, human preachers must be in a sacred partnership with God for preaching to have its God-intended effect. The preacher uniquely partners with God in declaring his voice to his people.

My theology influences the style of preaching in which I engage. That style frequently changes depending on the text and the contextual factors at any given moment. My main concern in preaching is a straightforward exegesis of the original text, complemented with a relevant application. The verse-by-verse reality a passage presents to my congregation and me is for here and now. I prioritize relating these ancient texts to the congregation's daily experience.

#### Basic Theological Approach

One might ask how my theology and preaching philosophy work out in terms of preaching week by week. This section will describe my core theological assumptions about preaching.

My theology has a direct impact on the way I prepare to preach. First, I believe the Scriptures are reliable and trustworthy in everything they assert and teach. I believe the Scriptures are indeed the Word of God written to show the way of salvation, guide and direct our path on life's journey, and stand above every other religious writing regarding authority. This God-breathed Word gives us a saving knowledge of God and his will for our lives. Willimon describes this high theological view in the following way: “Christian theology has always affirmed that the cross is not only a window through which we see the true nature of God as the embodiment of suffering love but also the truthful mirror in which we see ourselves.” (Willimon 2005, 70). The practical outcome of this theological stance is that preaching a sermon is concerned not with simply relating facts about God, but it becomes a tool that impacts how we live (Hulst 2016, 118).

Recognizing the authority of Scripture makes me as much a subject to it as well as my congregation. I consider it my responsibility to preach the whole counsel of God. This responsibility also applies to selecting a preaching text and prevents the danger of hobbyhorse preaching on those texts I may prefer.

I also acknowledge that my theology provides the lens through which I read, understand, apply, and preach the Bible. I try to remember, too, that my hearers bear within them a lens through which they receive the Word. I try to remember that these people have not received the training I enjoy. They see and understand from their working world perspectives. They may be

going through situations I cannot grasp, but I try to understand and meet them where they are. These dynamics are a practical aspect of the personal and Spirit-led partnership I referred to previously.

Nevertheless, there is a common interpretive framework in which my preaching functions weekly. As members of a single autonomous church, we have a statement of faith that aligns with the Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec (CBOQ) Baptist distinctives study guide entitled “*This We Believe*,” and the widely accepted (though not universal) understanding we share as a local congregation. That understanding has evolved throughout the years of this church's existence. The people have learned that there is no distinction of persons in Christ, including ethnicity and gender (Gal. 3:28). They have come to understand that others’ equally valid points of view enrich us as a community. A community must have some common understanding to endure over the long haul.

#### Preaching with faithfulness

The essence of my preaching depends upon the Scriptures touching me first. Throughout the Bible, people relayed God's message, convinced of the truth God laid on their hearts. Similarly, I cannot preach the Word with integrity until convicted within my soul of the truth of that Word, the message that I understand God to be speaking, and the application of the message to my congregation and me.

Regarding the truth of the Word of God, I sincerely believe that everything the Bible contains is the absolute truth, without exception.

Scripture is the reliable and dependable source of God's truth and the final authority for the believer in every area of life and practice. I have had the unpleasant experience of hearing people preach and teach Scripture without feeling even a note of reverence or, at best, that it has only partial truth. To preach the Word as less than that, or that only parts may be called true, is, in my opinion, reprehensible regarding the divine truth revealed, its authority over our lives and its integrity and reliability. I preach only on this basis; if I thought otherwise, I would do something else with my life. We must regard the Bible as the written Word of God, or it is not worth discussing. I have learned that discussing or debating a point with someone without a common frame of reference frustrates both parties since there is no recognized source of authority. Thus, it becomes an argument of opinion.

Any serious student of Scripture will recognize that regardless of how many times we may pore over its pages, it always has something new to say. Doubtlessly, the scriptures give us new insights, revealing God in new ways and situations. The Word is a living document, and we gather together each week to hear frequently recurring words and teachings from the text. Yet, somehow there is a more profound significance or emphasis that we have not previously seen or understood. This aspect of Scripture is a significant part of the value of preaching. Indeed someone, somewhere, at some time has preached on every portion of the Bible, but it keeps coming to us, revealing new facets to us every time and in every age and circumstance.

I consider this an essential part of the weekly message in my preaching. The big question is, "What is God saying to us right now?" The same principle applies, whether dwelling upon the Bible in our private devotions or assembling in a Bible study. God will always say something new to us as we come to him, receptive to the message that he wants to give. Thus, the Bible is an inexhaustible resource to the preacher.

Therefore, as part of that discovery, my congregation and I must be open to receiving the message given under the authority and direction of the Holy Spirit. Some people complain that the Bible does not speak to them. My response is that God will speak to any heart willing to listen. I believe that often, the heart of that complaint is that people are not ready to hear what Scripture says; they are unwilling to obey and submit themselves to its authority. Other people have difficulty believing that God (if he exists) would not be interested in speaking to them personally. I understand that some of what the Bible says is difficult for believers and unbelievers to receive. Preachers must be sensitive to their listeners' difficulties without disregarding God's revealed truth. Sin, repentance, and judgment are difficult subjects to preach or hear. Some people want to hear only the things that please them and are easy to hear, as Scripture points out (2 Timothy 4:1-4). Nevertheless, that is the current cultural context in which we preach.

I understand the source of these desires to hear only pleasant things. Who wants to hear bad news about our sinful human condition? Yet, if I surrender to the human desire to hear only good and lovely things that make

people feel better about themselves for a while, I fail before God in my calling to preach the whole counsel of God. The dark side of the human condition is not the end of the story, though it is a part of it. I also have the joy of proclaiming the answer to this dilemma, which God makes freely available in the life, death, resurrection and imminent return of Christ. That truth is, first and foremost, why I have given my life to preaching. As our program considered some of the realities of preaching in our current context, this struggle with biblical truth frequently came to the fore. To speak the truth compassionately, we need only look to Jesus, who embodied truth. To the woman taken in adultery, Jesus speaks his truth gently and compassionately (John 8:11). In addition, Paul addresses the Athenians, beginning with a common ground and moving out from there (Acts 17:22). Both models speak truth to the hearers while fully recognizing the listeners' perspective. We learned that sensitivity and compassion rather than condemnation are critical. In the next chapter, I will deal more with these issues in my context.

Preaching the practical application of Scripture to daily life requires deciding what we will do with what we have heard. Either the Scriptures apply to us or do not; there is no in-between. While I realize that serious problems arise with some preachers' unfortunate misapplication of Scripture, that does not invalidate what the Bible says. For example, some preachers even today insist on strict observance of some imagined ethical standard to gain God's approval, but that does not invalidate the gospel of grace. This truth doesn't mean that the Law is inapplicable; instead, it points to the

beautiful fact that Christ fulfilled all the requirements of the Law. The Word is not invalidated but confirmed. To point to Christ as the solution to humanity's plight is the privilege of every preacher of the Gospel. From its beginnings, the Church has faced this struggle and continues to do so today (Acts 15).

My congregation and I must never approach the Bible lightly; we need help to see, listen, and obey in a way that exceeds our human capability. What we must all prayerfully determine then is not whether Scripture is applicable but how it applies in our lives here and now. This application requires much prayer for enlightenment and illumination from the Holy Spirit. Faithful preaching requires it. Once again, God remains faithful as we seek his guidance and wisdom in applying biblical truth to our lives. This principle underscores the profound importance of a serious and studious approach to Scripture, such as that used in the Doctor of Ministry program.

#### Preaching with relevance

I turn now to what I see as the second fundamental principle of preaching. That is the importance of relating a given text or sermon to the daily lived experience of my hearers. No matter how beautifully crafted, eloquent, or clever a sermon may be, I have no business preaching any message from the pulpit that does not directly apply to the lives of those listening. Such human compositions may have their place, but that does not mean we should preach them as God's Word. I will explain how I try to avoid this fault.

My goal in preaching each week is to share the message I have received with my congregation to help them integrate God's truth into their daily experiences. I suppose everyone has heard at least one sermon assembled beautifully, spoken wonderfully, and almost a work of art to hear. In the end, though, its application and relevance to one's life were left untouched. Despite its rhetorical beauty and poetic rendering, there is little, if anything, to relate to the challenges that will meet the hearer once they step out the church's front door.

I am thankful for the emphasis on this tenet from Tyndale's instructors. If my preaching has no relation to what people are experiencing in their daily lives, then I ought not to use a church pulpit to declare my message. Indeed, preaching benefits greatly from a well-constructed message employing powerful rhetorical techniques, but stopping there misses the point of preaching. What does the sermon mean to the person in the pew? Can they apply these truths to their lives? What difference does it make hearing this at this point in their life? These are among the questions that my preaching must be able to answer, which is my responsibility to God and the people listening to me. To be sure, I must declare God's truth, but that truth needs to impact those who hear me through a precise, meaningful delivery of the message. I can preach the most excellent sermon of my life, but if people don't understand its meaning and how it practically applies, what do they gain?

Preachers face much competition in speaking a relevant and meaningful message to a distracted world. Preaching with relevance is a

constant challenge for me and everyone else who would preach. Likewise, having people remember what we have said can present difficulties. So, the challenges preachers face include giving people something they can take once they leave. Whether I like it or not, we live in a digital, fast-paced, and visually oriented culture. Nowhere is this more apparent than in our younger generations, though certainly not limited to them.

As we learned in our preaching classes, there are several approaches to these problems, but regardless of method, the bottom line remains: People must hear the message with help to retain as much as possible. Therefore, I strive to make the message as straightforward as possible through careful study. I also try to make it memorable with well-chosen illustrations, suggesting practical applications and using visual aids when time and resources permit., Though I have not yet finally conquered this challenge, I am far more aware of it, thanks to some excellent teaching,

Some preachers have adopted the culturally accepted means of communication wholesale, and if it helps to get the message of Christ across, it is worth celebrating. I still believe that the power of excellent communication does not originate with the preacher but with the Holy Spirit, who is pleased to bless my efforts and our church with beautiful results as I endeavour to preach his Word faithfully, and with relevance to his people.

### Writing the Sermon

We will now consider how I produce a sermon each week. As I spend time praying and contemplating before God, my heart invariably moves to a

passage of Scripture that speaks to something I find compelling, a known congregational need or some specific issue facing the church. God has much to say to and teach his people and has never failed me in giving a Word to the church. Believing that God still speaks today relieves the stress that might otherwise fall on me to "find something to say."

Once I conceive the core idea of a message, I like to mull it over in my heart and mind and pray for the direction and conviction of the Holy Spirit in mining the message I receive. First, I ask that the passage may speak to me as it invariably does, and then I seek God's wisdom in how to bring the truth to his people. I spend the week before I preach praying, studying, and contemplating, and this cycle repeats as the message crystallizes within me. I take notes as the text is digested and start writing a manuscript on Thursday or Friday. This latter practice has taken on increased prominence since the COVID pandemic struck. Formerly, the manuscript was a tool to help me flesh out the text, and then I preached from notes. The manuscript is now produced weekly and mailed to interested parties, as I discuss in chapter three. Through it all, I try to hear God's message as clearly as possible. My greatest joy is that I find myself working for God and with him (Johnson 2009, 21–101). The partnership with the Holy Spirit that produces the finished sermon is the basis on which everything else stands.

When I step into the pulpit, I seek God's presence, asking him to speak through me while striving to remain open, listening for his voice at this late stage. That means being flexible enough to change words, phrases and

even emphases on the spot. In contrast to pre-pandemic times, I now try to stay close to the manuscript to minimize differences between the preached sermon and that delivered via mail, with varying success. I can then confidently approach Sunday morning, knowing that I am giving the message God intended me to preach.

But even as I preach the message, I know this is not the final step in the process. The things God shows me in my preparation stay with me well beyond the times of my daily research, and I pray that God somehow uses my words to reach into and touch the lives of my hearers. I frequently hear people refer to something I have said in a sermon from a couple of weeks prior or even those sermons that stick out in people's minds long after preaching. I see here evidence that God continues to work in his people even after I do my part.

In my sermon preparation process, I usually use approaches such as Robinson's "Big Idea" (Robinson 2014, 15–26), Chappell's "Fallen Condition Focus," or FCF (Chappell 2018), or Wilson's "Four Pages" (Wilson 2018). These are just a few of the preaching models that have helped me improve my clarity of thought and speech and focus on the congregation. I have found that using varying combinations of these excellent methods, depending on the text, has greatly assisted me in preparing my sermon material and has greatly benefited the final delivery of a message. The models mentioned above seem to me to reflect a common purpose. They are all after the idea of presenting the message of Scripture most effectively and directly. My congregation

values this approach most, and I share this desire with them. I credit the Tyndale teaching staff with opening my eyes to the wide variety of resources and help that have gone far in refining my preaching.

### My Pilgrimage into Ministry in the Baptist Church

I did not begin my journey of faith as a Baptist. Though I celebrate my God-given role as a preacher apart from the denomination I serve, I am happy to belong to the Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec (CBOQ) tradition. This grouping of over 300 churches links with similar groups in Atlantic and Western Canada.

At twelve, I gave my life to Christ as my Savior. My journey started in a small Brethren church called the Gospel Hall in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. This church downplayed denominational affiliation in favour of simply regarding ourselves as Christian believers. While fundamental issues such as Christology, soteriology, and most other theological matters were well within the limits of what most Protestant Christians would consider orthodox, I felt a growing discomfort regarding the rigidity I experienced in this fellowship. Perhaps it was simply youthful teenage rebellion, but I began to feel unnaturally constrained within that setting. I saw a greater emphasis on what one does (especially in public view) as opposed to the spiritual development of church members. I also sensed a close-mindedness toward the outside world. It seemed we were some unique little enclave God had deemed disconnected from all other cultural reality. I left that church with a

profound sense of disappointment, wondering why God would ever have chosen to make this the way that church should be.

As I left behind this notion of a church, I began to learn more and see new, biblically faithful ideas of what the church is and can be. I understood that not all churches were like the one I had left and that a true church could be much more than I had experienced. Still, I remained somewhat hesitant towards affiliation with any church at that point in my life.

After spending my teen years away from the organized church altogether (though curiously not my faith), I was eventually led back partly by exposure to the rise of the "Jesus Movement" taking place in the early to mid-1970s and partly by an odd but persistent longing to have a church home. My then fiancée (later my wife) and I began visiting several churches to find someplace where we could feel comfortably at home. We considered many churches from a variety of denominational backgrounds. We had many options and took the time to explore several.

Finally, we found a church where we could put down roots. This church was a CBOQ congregation called Val Royal Baptist Church in the Cartierville district of Montreal, where we enjoyed the company of fellow believers. We ultimately married and worshipped in that church for many years. The genesis of my preaching and pastoral ministry took place there.

Over time, I came to appreciate the expression of faith indicated in the official CBOQ statement of faith, *This We Believe*. Frankly, these doctrinal affirmations were something I already believed and therefore presented no

challenge to me from a theological point of view. My wife was very open-minded and did not hesitate to adopt the CBOQ distinctives as something to which she could give full support.

After joining this loving and accepting worship group, we became members. That led us to further involvement with the many areas of ministry that interested us. Serving on the Board of Deacons and other functions led to a deepening connection with the church. I enjoyed the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing work of ministry.

While intimidating, the first exposure to group leadership did something inside me. After four years with the church, someone approached me to lead an adult Bible study since the pastor was unavailable, and I reluctantly agreed. Once done, however, I felt exhilarated and surprised at this nascent teaching ability I didn't know existed. Shortly after that experience, the pastor began encouraging me to take the pulpit when he was away, which led to my becoming the resident stand-by preacher for that pastor and all our subsequent pastors.

As I started preaching regularly, people soon began recommending me as a guest preacher for our sister churches and even some churches outside the Baptist tradition. I grew to love preaching more each time I had the opportunity and had frequent suggestions from my hearers that I should also consider undertaking full-time pastoral ministry.

I was in my mid-twenties then and felt responsible for taking advantage of opportunities to make more money and provide for my growing

family. At first, I resisted becoming a pastor, and I intentionally avoided giving it much consideration. Still, this idea kept following me despite my battle to keep it suppressed, and I tried to convince myself that preaching was enough and that God would be satisfied with that. After many years of struggling within, I realized this internal battle would not stop until I stepped out in long-overdue obedience to the voice calling me.

I finally surrendered, giving up the fight and returned to school for theological training leading into pastoral ministry. I earned a Bachelor of Theology and a Master of Divinity through a joint program with McGill University and Presbyterian College in Montreal. I was already pastoring at Lakeside Heights Baptist Church in Montreal's West Island by graduation. The church leadership encouraged me to seek ordination credentials within the CBOQ. As a pastor in what became my second Baptist church, I recognized and publicly committed to the Canadian Baptist statement of faith. I appreciate the CBOQ's acceptance of a wide range of views within the confines of the official CBOQ doctrinal statement. While some see this denomination as too liberal for their liking, I believe there is a comfortable space within the CBOQ for several theological approaches. Some highly conservative people can be found within the tradition, while others may push the boundaries of liberalism. Still, I think the majority can be found somewhere in between, where I put myself.

Naturally, everyone interprets the meaning of these statements from their unique background and perspective, and I am no exception to that.

However, I believe they provide enough biblical evidence of a traditional and decidedly orthodox theological position in keeping with the teaching of the believing Church.

#### Historical Influences

Powerful preaching is not dependent on developing a new reading or understanding of a text. Instead, I consider it my sacred duty to expound as best I can on the received text as the Holy Spirit illuminates it to me and as guided by the church's faith down through history. This responsibility means delivering Scripture as the Word of God with an application for the here and now. Therefore, what guides my preaching is reading, exegeting, and interpreting Scripture based on the central traditions that have shaped me, including my Protestant and Baptist heritage.

For me, recognizing the wide variety of preaching traditions, styles, and varying cultural realities across the many churches of the CBOQ is a very liberating thought. I fully accept and rejoice in the knowledge that our corporate calling as a local church is to faithfully proclaim and live out the truth God has revealed among us. God speaks to any number of people in different ways, all within the realm of his divine truth, and each church must therefore be faithful to testify to what God has shown them. Each of us seems to have our little part in the mosaic God created as his bride, the Church.

Preaching is central to the standard Baptist worship service (Wayland 1857, 20–29). While this claim is perhaps not universally valid, it is for our church. Baptist history is replete with examples of fine biblical preaching,

and I feel obliged to contribute to the ongoing excellence of that history (Piper 2006). Names like John Bunyan, William Carey, Oswald Chambers, Billy Graham and many more have preached from Baptist pulpits. At First Baptist Montreal, the lectern is to the congregation's right, while the pulpit is an elevated platform to their left, indicating Scripture's lofty place in the Baptist tradition. Our church has a large Bible on display at the center of the front platform. It aptly symbolizes the front and center nature the Bible holds in our Baptist church.

Regarding our worship style, we are a church nearing 200 years in Montreal. With this lengthy historical background, it is not surprising that the church has a very traditional style of worship. We also follow a well-developed liturgy. In our context, however, the entire service revolves around the centrality of the sermon text and the message. I often use the Revised Common Lectionary readings and the sermon text to emphasize the week's theme throughout the service. The selected hymnody and our public prayer work alongside these elements to contribute to the service's coherence. Whenever possible, my preaching aims to unite all these components into an interrelated whole. I frequently note the contribution of our other readings or hymns to our understanding and application of a given text.

#### Positive Preaching Influences

Many illustrious preaching voices contribute to and influence my preaching. These influences are by no means limited to my tradition. I am delighted to live in a day and age that gives easy access to the collected

wisdom of preachers, famous and obscure, past and present. I count it a privilege to look at my bookshelves full of some of the greatest preachers and teachers. Again, the preaching track of Tyndale's Doctor of Ministry program exposed me to some great preaching voices, past and present.

Perhaps no preacher has more profoundly impacted me than Charles H. Spurgeon, whose whole-hearted embrace of all Scripture is evident in his writings and preserved sermon manuscripts. His sermons tackled the most challenging theological issues of his time. Typical examples of this inspiring man's sermons are evident in "The Personality of the Holy Spirit" (Spurgeon 2011, 1-2:45-65) or "Christ's People – Imitators of Him" (Spurgeon 2011, 1-2:252-73). As I read his sermons even today, I am astounded at his depth of reading, expounding, and applying Scripture to his listeners. Often, he would take a single verse, or even part of a verse, and develop an entire multifaceted sermon out of a passage that others might have left untouched. His command of the English language was exceedingly powerful, though it might appear dated to the modern reader. The courage and conviction his preaching demonstrated serve as an inspiration to preachers like me, dealing with a culture that is no less challenging than his. While 19<sup>th</sup>-century England does not reflect my current reality in Canada, Spurgeon has set the bar high regarding a preaching standard that does not retreat in the face of opposition. Spurgeon's preaching in and through difficult circumstances became particularly relevant to me during the COVID-19 crisis, which I detail in Chapter Three. How can a pastor and preacher inspire hope in those who feel

hopeless while personally struggling with the same issues? Spurgeon continued in the strength God gave him, and I discovered that the same power to keep moving forward was there for me. The project we implemented at First Baptist Church was our way of giving hope to those who were suffering.

I also suppose that much of my affinity for Spurgeon springs from sharing with him the Baptist heritage and my understanding of how this great man struggled with depression, as do I. Helmut Thielicke quotes Spurgeon's attitude toward depression in these words:

“The lesson of wisdom is, be not dismayed by soul-trouble. Count it no strange thing, but a part of ordinary ministerial experience. Should the power of depression be more than ordinary, think not that it is all over with your usefulness. Cast not away your confidence, for it hath great recompense of reward. Even if the enemy's foot be on your neck, expect to rise and overthrow him.” (Thielicke 2016, 248).

I am personally encouraged and inspired as I have read of his struggles with depression. As I continue my battle with Bipolar Disorder, I am often subject to times when I wonder why God would choose someone as obviously flawed as myself. Spurgeon, and many others through the ages, discovered God's pleasure in using the weak things of this world to confound the strong (1 Corinthians 1:27). God glorifies himself in using people like me, as others can see that God uses imperfect people despite human limitations.

For me, Spurgeon remains the standard in eloquent, studied preaching. The collection of his lectures to theological students further exemplifies his high standards in preaching and ministry in general (Spurgeon 2010). Regardless of the passage of time, he remains an ideal picture of the life of pastoring, preaching, and teaching.

Another figure that has been influential in my preaching life has been Tom Long, who comes from the Presbyterian tradition. His classic work on effective preaching is prominent in my preaching library (Long 2016). Power-filled preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is essential to many in Long's Reformed tradition. Having studied at the Presbyterian College in Montreal and preached in many Presbyterian churches, I sense a solid theological bond with this tradition.

The warmth, honesty and heartfelt nature of Tom Long's preaching move me whenever I hear him. Long's vocal style alone immediately gives a disarming and natural tone to what he says. Sermons that epitomize his unpretentious yet powerful style include "Is There Joy in God's House?" (Long 2004) or "Hot Tubs and Fishing Trips" (Long 1987). While calm and soothing, his speech is nonetheless serious, but I feel I am listening to a friend rather than a preaching professional, which I consider a mark of fine preaching. He is a master of captivating, relevant and meaningful illustrations and getting to the heart of the matter at hand, not only in his preaching but also in his writing.

Long's approach and style inspired the project intervention we used to reach out to the congregation during COVID. It is comforting to people in crisis to have those nearby who are compassionate and walking alongside them. Long's spirit of warmth, compassion and comfort was something that I wanted to demonstrate in our response to the pandemic. This notion led us away from a clinical type of information gathering toward a conversational

interaction between researchers and church members. The project was not a “study” but an outreach to people experiencing trying times.

Among the many other preachers I admire are the great men of the Church's history, like Martin Luther and John Calvin, who set a high standard for anyone who would follow in their footsteps. Their dedication to fully expounding the truth of Scripture led to the Protestant Reformation, saving the Church from the grievous errors into which it had fallen. Luther and Calvin bravely and diligently led the charge of many other reformers who carried on the Church's historic battle with heresy and corruption of the gospel. Their extensive and comprehensive knowledge of Scripture and their lives of dedication to God still shine as brilliant examples to all who would learn from them even today. Of course, other magnificent preachers preceded them, going back to Augustine and the early church fathers and, in fact, to the disciples and Jesus himself, who is without equal.

These courageous preachers certainly rank among the most significant influences on my preaching. More recent historic exemplars I would include are preachers like Jonathan Edwards, whose passionate preaching led to great revivals and the salvation of many souls. George Whitefield and others like him contributed to the battle for truth in the eighteenth century. Dwight L. Moody, Henry Ward Beecher and Catherine Beecher, along with William Booth, not only inspired their hearers to a more profound devotion to God but, in some cases, began entire movements throughout the nineteenth

century. These people inspire me continually as I read their biographies and writings (Willimon and Lischer 1995).

Into the twentieth century, figures like Martin Lloyd-Jones and A.W. Tozer continue to motivate me, reinforced by exemplars like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., and John Stott. Even today, I admire the continuing influence of great preaching in the likes of Barbara Brown-Taylor, Fredrick Buechner, Charles Stanley, John Piper, Mary Hulst, Tim Keller, and William Willimon, all easily accessed electronically. I gladly listen to any of these people preaching the Word whenever possible. Thankfully, the sermons of these and other gospel communicators are easily accessible to nearly everyone in this internet age.

I thank God for blessing me by giving me a preaching ministry with such illustrious mentors as these and others. Not only do they provide fine examples of the craft of preaching, but I am constantly encouraged in my overall ministry by people who, like me, need to be prepared to preach weekly. I consider it a special privilege to share some small part in this great calling of preaching God's Word to his people, a calling shared by great names and the countless unknown witnesses beyond the context of their local churches. It is all to God's glory.

The lives and ministries of those I mentioned above impacted the ministry intervention we ultimately used to reach out to our church's people during the pandemic. Different preachers have strengths and weaknesses; I am no exception to that rule. What these preachers do have in common,

however, is a sense of hope in God's ultimate triumph, no matter what may come our way. The preachers and preaching I have highlighted above moved me to make an effort to comfort, inspire hope and confidence in God, and encourage the people of First Baptist Church. In the same way these preachers have done this for me, I tried to do so for others as the Apostle Paul reminds us (2 Corinthians 1:4). I cannot be everything to everyone. Still, God has given me a unique congregation to which he has called me to minister. I preach, teach, and lead in keeping with who I am before God. Imperfect and flawed as I am, I aim to share my vision for this church and to be myself in the most sincere way I can. I believe that my union with this church is a God-ordained event that gives the church the person/pastor they need at this time and place, and this is the church I need.

#### Negative Preaching Influences

Unfortunately, there are also numerous examples of what to avoid in preaching. The negative side of preaching manifests itself in the profoundly damaging impact of pulpit abuse, which is evident far too often. In today's culture, neither Christian preaching nor a life of ministry appeals to most people as something they want to imitate in their own lives. Of course, that is not new, but this decline in respect for the clergy and preaching has affected churches deeply. Much of this decline is undoubtedly attributable to the clergy's frequently reported moral failures celebrated only too willingly by enemies of the church. Other sources include preaching that has nothing to do with the Bible or its gospel message. Preaching for many has become an

opportunity to display one's intellectual skills or an attempt to influence hearers for selfish ends. Widely reported cases of seeking personal gain at the expense of the vulnerable and the influence of the prosperity gospel have caused many to become skeptical about anything to do with preaching.

Compounding all the above are pulpit abuses exemplified in extremist preaching, as witnessed in the case of Westboro Baptist Church in the U.S.A. While Westboro may be one of the most widely known, it is unfortunately not unique among corrupted and corrupting approaches to the gospel. Countless congregations become known more by what they judge or condemn rather than the freedom, forgiveness, and salvation offered to people through the faithful preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Modern preachers can at least find some comfort in knowing that such abuses have always been the case throughout the history of the Church. Though its manifestations vary, even Jesus and later the Apostle Paul had to deal with the corruption of the declared Word of God. Therefore, I can confidently say that my calling is to stay true to the tradition, faithfully proclaiming the saving power of Jesus Christ and leading well the flock he has given me in obedience to Scripture. To be sure, I must do what I can to counter error and abuse, but the responsibility and ultimate triumph of the gospel remains in God's hands as always.

## *My Calling, Experience, and Gifting*

In my journey toward ministry, several elements that shaped me for service to God's people came together. The following section outlines the major contributing factors that have led me in this direction.

### *My Pilgrimage to Ministry*

It is humbling to know that God remains committed to using imperfect human beings to communicate his perfect truth and salvation to the world. On my part, despite being a deeply flawed creature, I commit in return to fulfill to my utmost ability his calling to serve him as I understand God to be revealing himself to me. I never intended to go down the road I am presently travelling, but God had other plans for me. He has made that abundantly clear to me over the years and throughout the Doctor of Ministry experience, which is what this section intends to explore and articulate.

My brothers and I used to "play church" as young children. Ironically, even then, I always became the preacher in our childish game. I think of this with amusement today, never imagining the foreshadowing of the day I would enter full-time ministry.

Reflecting on my sense of calling and how that affects my preaching, I must backtrack several years to see how this originated. Since actively rejoining the body of the church in the 1970s, I felt a keen sense of connection not only with my local church but with the body of Christ worldwide. I have always known and appreciated excellent preaching from local ministers and influential communicators in North America and

elsewhere. An acute awareness of my verbal and social weaknesses certainly played a part in my initial dismissal of anything or anyone suggesting that God might want to develop me as a preacher. My studies at Tyndale taught me that it is not about my perceptions of my capabilities. Instead, it is about God's call. He calls and gifts us accordingly. As Mark Batterson states, "God doesn't call the qualified; he qualifies the called." (Batterson 2016). Haddon Robinson, comparing preaching to Jesus' distribution of the miraculous feeding of five thousand from a child's lunch, makes the following observation:

"Only Jesus Christ through his Spirit can do that. You must give your sermon to him. Preaching is ultimately his work. It's astonishing, sometimes, how he not only multiplies our effort but also creates in listeners a hunger for what we offer them." (Robinson 2014, 169).

While discovering and meditating on my giftedness was encouraged throughout my journey through the Doctor of Ministry program, it remains clear that what I have to offer must be turned over to Christ for the full benefit of both my hearers and myself as a preacher.

When I began to sense the call of God in my life as it pertained to ministry, I was incredulous at the thought that this should be God's desire for me. Despite the persistence of that sense of calling, I remained resistant to the idea. Indeed, knowing that God had his pick of virtually anyone with far more to offer than me, I attributed it all to mere fantasy. As this sense of conviction grew, it became increasingly difficult to deal with the matter in such a dismissive way. I grew anxious, not knowing what God would do in my life.

Only after I surrendered, after a long and arduous detour, did I undertake the matter with the gravity it warranted. As I did so, I discovered things about myself that had long remained dormant and hidden within, and this process only accelerated at Tyndale. While I previously felt awkward at mixing with crowds and speaking convincingly, it all began to crystallize as I journeyed down the path of obedience. Slowly but surely, God revealed the gifting he had placed in me. God made up for any lack on my part, and the mission he had called me to was his, not my own. Indeed, he has repeatedly shown me that his grace is sufficient for me (2 Corinthians 12:9). That extended grace of God was even enough for following through with a Doctor of Ministry program despite my fears of inadequacy.

The struggles I experienced led me to understand and empathize with those who are likewise battling with the sometimes-difficult reality to which God calls his people. I feel keenly the sense of inadequacy that many feel towards the Lord's work, and I sympathize with the internal warfare that often accompanies such decisions and commitments. It makes me a better preacher because it has opened my eyes and heart to what is happening within them. I encourage such people when I can because I have been in that position myself. Instructors and fellow students in the Tyndale Doctor of Ministry cohorts demonstrated empathy and compassion, which were a tremendous help in getting through some challenging times in the program. I am so grateful for those who were such a blessing to me, and I hope that I was able to help them in return.

How does someone who has always been painfully shy and self-conscious become a preacher and minister to a church? As I have discovered along the way, that question is wrong. The question doesn't even involve the worthiness, confidence, or credentials of the one chosen; it is all about God's choices. As the Bible clarifies, God is not concerned about human approval. Didn't Moses use the excuse that he could not do what God called him to do (Exodus 4:10-13)? Could God not have chosen someone more suited than Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 4:13)? Of course, he could have, but he decided otherwise. The same principle applies to Jesus' choice of disciples (Matthew 4:18-22). The mysterious nature of God's choices is again exemplified in the call to the previous enemy of the faith, Paul (Acts 9:3-6). Human nature would doubtlessly have made different choices, but that divine choice makes God's will so wonderful. Like Moses, I have learned through these studies that God is not interested in excuses but obedience.

C.S. Lewis once wrote to a friend, "You ask, 'for what' God wants you. Isn't the primary answer that he wants you?" (C.S. Lewis 2007). I believe this was the heart of the issue with which I struggled. I looked at what I had to offer and convinced myself I had nothing. However, God was not to be stopped by my assessment because he would give me everything I needed to obey that call. When God called me, he was not relying on any skills and expertise I might find impressive; he would gift and enable me as necessary to bring him glory. Even now, it pains me to think of how myopic and

unperceptive I was. Nevertheless, God naturally triumphed, and I received the blessing.

God's gifting, I eventually realized, does not come until we take those first faltering steps of obedient faith. After all, Peter discovered this only as he left the boat to begin walking on water (Matt. 14:22-36). Nowhere was this more evident than in my preaching and teaching. I suppose I secretly expected God to make me a preacher before I stepped into a pulpit, but the reverse proved true. I learned that despite all my trepidation, God would put his words in my mouth as I obeyed by opening it. As discussed in one of my Doctor of Ministry courses, *DMPC 0941 Articulating the Journey*, I began to see he would be faithful, and I was encouraged not only to speak but to work hand in hand with God to refine and develop this gift. This process is also valid in all the other requirements accompanying the charge to the ministry. I grew more comfortable with public speaking, being in crowds, and administrative things like chairing meetings and supervising people by doing them. Until I began this journey, I could never have imagined being able to do these things.

All of this has directly contributed to my preaching as well. The more I experienced, the more confident I became in the power of God to perform in and through me the very things he was calling me to do. Knowing this, I regularly preach this message with increasing confidence to my hearers. I believe it is something we all need to hear repeatedly. I frequently heard this

in preaching classes at Tyndale, and now I want to encourage it in others, especially our younger preachers beginning their journey.

My route to the preaching ministry has been very circuitous, like Israel's wilderness travels. As I reflect on how God was dealing with me along the way, I can now see that, even though I was unaware at the time, all my life experiences, good and bad, would contribute to my development. There is no replacement for life experience, and I believe God uses all our experiences to shape our preaching and other ministries (Romans 8:28).

If I may refer to my life either away from or resisting God as a wilderness journey, I have learned valuable lessons from God that add depth and breadth to preaching. I know what it is like to feel alone, estranged from God, with the guilt and shame that such times can often evoke. I know the pain that comes out of resisting God's will. Life has also taught me about the daily struggle involved in working in the business world, raising a family, and many other things that I could never have learned in a classroom. That is not to dismiss the pursuit of academic development as a critical component of successful ministry. Yet, if that is all we have, our preaching will miss some essential elements. The combination of theological studies and real lived experiences gives me a perspective that would be missing from either alone.

Looking back, I can see that even during the most challenging circumstances of my life, God was moulding me into something he could use. Having an appreciation for that is a near-impossibility to most people at the time it is happening. In retrospect, however, we can sometimes see how God

was and is using these things to shape us into people he can use. Good and bad, our experiences teach us much about God and ourselves, which is never a waste. The gift of being myself is something that Tyndale helped me accomplish.

By God's grace, I can not only preach his Word to my congregation based on my studies and abilities gained in the Doctor of Ministry program but also empathize with them regarding many of the things they are enduring. As I continue to live my daily life and pursue further studies, God uses all these building materials to make me a better, more effective preacher and compassionate pastor, which were my chief goals in entering the program. God continues his work in me even today as I learn and acquire new skills, exercise natural abilities he has endowed me with, and strive to remain sensitive to the spiritual gifts he has seen fit to give me (Clinton and Clinton 1998).

I believe, therefore, that my call to pastoral ministry does not consist simply of what I do; it is something I am. Being consistent in showing who I am before God and people is not always easy. It can be very challenging at times. But I strive nonetheless to remain in submission to God by serving him and his people, and I trust him for forgiveness, for picking me up and dusting me off when I fall. Ultimately, God's faithfulness, not mine, will carry the day.

As a preacher, I must be ready to acknowledge my human weakness. Though I consider the role one where I must exemplify what I

say, I know sometimes I fail. God's grace abounds in taking a very human, fragile, and frankly sinful creature such as myself and using me to proclaim his truth to equally broken people. Hiding my humanity does nothing but create a false image, which is dishonest. While I do not want to focus on who I am when it comes to preaching, I must be ready to acknowledge to the congregation that I identify with and share their struggles.

### Receiving Ministry

I recognize the danger inherent in serving in a role where I minister only to others. There is a risk that many pastors face in continued giving of themselves in ministry to others to the point where we can forget the importance of receiving ministry. I once had a colleague tell me that as pastors, our job is to be there for the congregation, not the other way around. While I concur that we are not looking for a support group for our needs, we need support and encouragement from the community where God has placed us. It is a mistake to think that we must remain stoic when we face trying issues, but we must identify trusted members of our fellowship with whom we can confide and pray, especially in times of trouble. Paul himself sought out and willingly received the ministry of others to his needs (Philippians 4:15-20). He repeatedly asked the recipients of his letters to pray for him. Ministry today requires no less of a need for graciously receiving the help of our congregations. Here once more, the instructors of Tyndale were instrumental in helping me see that I, too, need to confide in trusted friends and colleagues.

The major problem with the one-way focus of many pastors is that we can only give so much before we exhaust our resources. We must acknowledge that God has placed us in a community for a good reason (Ecclesiastes 4:12). Many pastors who make their ministry all giving and no receiving are often exhausted, depleted, and lack fruitfulness in their service. Naturally, the strength and comfort we receive from the Holy Spirit are necessary here. However, the ministry of others is likewise essential to our human needs.

I have already mentioned the invaluable help I have received from fellow students and the leadership of Tyndale. This a wonderful gift from God because I have been deeply blessed and strengthened by having others with whom I can share honestly. I know the rich blessing of having a couple of people in my congregation and others outside the church to whom I can say almost anything without fear that what I say will be repeated. Of course, this requires a great deal of trust in the people who do this for me, and we are well-advised to ensure that trust factor beforehand.

I had an unfortunate experience in my former church where someone betrayed my confidence, so I know the deep pain resulting from misplaced faith. I thank God for receiving great prayerful support from some wise people during that time. These mentors had far more experience than I did. I cannot imagine what it might have been like to attempt to pass through that difficult time without their support. I learned some crucial things about receiving ministry that I now try to share with fellow ministers and preachers.

Even after I finally entered an environment where it felt safe to share, I ensured I had trusted outside resources to maintain some sense of equilibrium. I believe that every pastor and preacher needs such support, without which our ministries will invariably suffer in one way or another. A spiritual director or a ministry colleague is a perfect resource for such times.

I realized an additional blessing in seeking others to minister to and pray for me. God blesses those called to serve in this way. As we look at the biblical examples of Paul and the many fellow believers who provided help to him, we can see that God does not intend for anyone to go it alone (Romans 16:31). Everyone needs others, from the people in the pews to the ones serving up front, and that is the value of community. I have shared freely with my colleagues in the Doctor of Ministry studies and have not regretted it. Indeed, the notion of community is also vital to Tyndale.

Preaching is all about communication, and my message to my congregation each week concentrates on ministering to the community's needs. The give and take of daily serving in that church heavily influence my ministry. However, I am particularly blessed as I know that people pray for me as I preach, even as I do for them. No aspect of ministry, be it preaching, teaching, counselling, or visitation, is beyond the give and take of mutual ministry. That is why community is so essential to the Christian faith.

Even though I preach every week, I need to hear solid biblical preaching as much as anyone else, perhaps more so. I want to emphasize the great blessings I have known in hearing the preaching of others. Committing

to preaching every week can put me in a position of hearing only my voice, as blessed as I may have been in preparation. I find it a great benefit to listen to others preach to me. I make it a practice to intentionally seek out and listen to the preaching of others as often as possible, whether done through my computer or listening to a podcast in my car. I also find it a wonderful experience to sit under the preaching of fellow gospel ministers while on vacation or when I can visit another church apart from mine. There are some terrific preachers out there, and failing to take advantage of listening to them impoverishes my ministry and spiritual life. I hold firmly to my conviction that ministry in general and preaching specifically, God never intended it to be a one-way street. Tyndale exposed me to a great deal of preaching and preachers who I might never have heard otherwise. By taking hold of the resources God has made available to me, I have become a better preacher and a stronger leader under God's will.

### Preaching through Crisis

The road to ministry can lead in any number of directions. As we meet with challenges and difficulties, we draw on our sense of calling, past experiences, and our God-given gifts to deal with these challenges. Never before had these elements become so vitally important as they became during the COVID-19 pandemic that swept the world.

I had developed comfort with my calling to ministry through the years. My experiences as a pastor helped me face new challenges, and my gifting had been exercised many times throughout my life as a minister of

Christ. Then COVID suddenly came along, testing all of this life experience in a way I had never encountered. All the old, reliable parameters suddenly disappeared, as did my congregation, as the church was forced into shutdown. Worse yet, even casual physical contact was not permitted. It was as though the world had changed overnight, and nothing was the same anymore.

The shock of such a rapid and profound change affected everyone, including me. We suddenly experienced separation from our church, our families and friends, our workplaces and ultimately everything that constituted our daily lives. I felt deeply for my congregation, as I, too, experienced what these people were going through.

The church lost members who succumbed to the virus, and I could feel their pain as I also lost a close cousin and my dear sister. I felt the loneliness of isolation, the concern for family, and fears about the purposes of God in it all. I would be less than honest to say that I never had doubts, fears, or anxieties in the face of what seemed then to be an unstoppable virus.

This pandemic was a time of testing that I had never experienced before. But through it all, God proved himself faithful to us all. Throughout the pandemic, God showed me that his calling had not changed. God demonstrated that the circumstances contributed to and built my experiential resources. New experiences develop more profound strengths, and God supplies the gifting required to face these times. God has shown me that I can count on him no matter what may come along. COVID made me stronger, not

weaker. My calling is stronger than ever, my experience has expanded, and my gifting has strengthened.

Knowing what I did about my experiences made me aware that the congregation faced the same difficulties as me. A drastic modification to my original project intentions was, therefore, necessary, prompting a search for a means of ministering to this immediate need. I longed to give these people hope amid the widespread discouragement surrounding us. The desire to preach hope, encourage prayer and find alternative means of interpersonal communication drove me to use my calling, experience and gifts to reach out to God's people. I detail in Chapter Three the approach I used.

### ***Developing as a Preacher Through Spiritual Practices***

Becoming a pastor and preacher to God's people demands a willingness and an eagerness to continue to learn, develop, and evolve as a minister of the Gospel. My interest in learning as much as I can absorb has been with me since childhood, but now much of my effort centers on learning and applying effective methods of getting better at what I do. While I certainly recognize that my ministry is a gracious gift of God, I fully believe that he expects me to do my part in working out and growing in those gifts as much as that lies within me, hence, my enrolment at Tyndale. I see the proper approach as keeping with Jesus' parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). I believe it is appropriate to thank God for the gifts he has entrusted to me and then do everything I can to steward those gifts wisely for his kingdom's sake. The Doctor of Ministry program has been a critical part of that stewardship.

I am not the same pastor and preacher I was five years ago or even one year ago. God continues to work in me to bring all the spiritual gifts he has given me, along with my natural abilities and acquired skills, to the fullest possible fruition throughout my ministry. The motivation behind my desire to enter the Doctor of Ministry program at Tyndale is a corollary of this belief. I now have a greater appreciation that with God, it is never simply about who and what I am but who and what I am becoming. The following paragraphs outline what I have found to be vital in my life and ministry.

#### The Practice of Reading Scripture

I need to be a devoted and disciplined student of Scripture. I need to know, love, obey, and apply what I learn in my daily devotional reading of the Scriptures. While the need for knowledge of Scripture might be evident for reasons of preaching, I firmly believe that I must study God's Word and apply its truths to my life before thinking of how it applies to others. In my opinion, it is far too easy to apply the truth to others rather than subject oneself to the authority of the written Word. This approach precludes simply using the Bible as a ready source for preaching texts.

I believe that the core success of a pastor or preacher builds on the foundation of the reality and depth of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, as is true for any believer. Maintaining one's relationship with God is another responsibility encouraged in the Doctor of Ministry program. Everything I do and say, even how I think, depends on the health of my relationship with Jesus. To take this with less than the full gravity it warrants

is a sure road to problematic ministry, to say nothing of the lives potentially affected by such an approach. Indeed, the Scriptures warn that the servant of God is held to more stringent standards than others in words, deeds and attitudes that teach others about the God we serve (James 3:1). The frequent practice of Lectio Divina in our morning devotions at Tyndale inspired me. I carry on the practice even now.

Were it not for my relationship with God, my life of preaching and ministry, in general, would make no sense. The vitality of this relationship, therefore, remains paramount. As a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I must be in close communion with Christ. How can I comfort those who desperately need to hear from God unless I am a dedicated student of the Word? How can I encourage a prayer life in my congregation if it is not something I practice? How do I inspire others to love, kindness, and generosity if not evident in my life? These questions force me to acknowledge that some ministers have done so by simple hypocrisy, which has a disastrous effect on any church, not to mention the impact on that individual. I understand God's calling to devotional life is addressed first to me before I worry about others. As Jesus said, I must remove the log from my eye before removing the speck from my brother's (Matthew 7:4-5).

So how does that work out in the reality of my daily life? I try to read, study, and dwell upon the Scriptures daily. Thanks to modern technology, the Bible is available virtually anywhere, anytime. Even in the rush and bustle that so often surrounds us, it is a blessing to know that even the briefest

moments of quietness offer an opportunity to sit at the Lord's feet. Of course, prayer works in the same way. I serve a God who is more than ready to hear me twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week.

Thankfully, I do not live every moment of every day at such a furious pace, so the practice of spiritual disciplines has become increasingly important with time. Moreover, thanks to my studies at Tyndale and other recent personal experiences, I have realized the vital importance of these disciplines. I have also understood that they do not naturally happen unless one takes the time and makes the place necessary for growing in Christ. These practices, exemplified by our morning gatherings for devotions before studies, were a perfect example. Like everything else that is worthwhile, they require regular practice.

I cannot honestly say that I practice all the disciplines faultlessly or without fail, but I strive to observe them, which helps to keep me in close contact with God. I can say that I do so as often and faithfully as possible. As mentioned, the chief discipline among these is regular, systematic Scripture study. This practice goes hand in hand with prayerful meditation, given the significance and power of God's Word for every believer. For several years after I first became a Christian, I read the Bible regularly, but that was where it ended for the most part. I studied to learn things about God and to learn something about the Bible, but there was no real sense, early on, of dwelling in and meditating upon not only what he says but what that means to me as his child. Meditating on the Scriptures benefits my ongoing connectedness to

God and is a great boon to my preaching and teaching when the same principles are applied. I do not rush in my meditation any more than I would a visit with a close friend. Hurry is the great enemy here, as it is in nearly any area of our Christian experience. Several leaders promoted Lectio Divina within our group gatherings at Tyndale, something I found to be a profoundly meaningful experience.

### The Practice of Prayer

To preach with integrity and authenticity requires daily prayer and the development of my spiritual life (Brown and Powery 2016). Prayer is the basis on which my preaching, teaching, and ministry to people stand or fall. I must depend on the Spirit to produce anything of value in my ministry. If God does not give me a word to preach and convict me of the need to apply that truth to my own life, then nothing I can do or say will be of any lasting value. I cannot preach that which is not valid in my life, nor do I have any business trying to do so.

The meditation required in studying Scripture also applies to prayer. Once again, I have learned that the important thing here is to intentionally carve out time to spend in literal conversation with God. Of course, we can pray anywhere at any time, but this time differs primarily in that this is not simply a quick cry out for help but is a two-way conversation between God and myself. Dialogue, by its very definition, requires that I both speak and listen. I have often been surprised and deeply moved by what God says when I pray. Some moments of profound joy in my life have come in prayer before

God. The discipline of silence fits perfectly here, especially in the busy and noisy world we live in. I was recently on a spiritual retreat with a small group at a local convent that focused on the importance of silence, simply taking time to shut off the world and our ubiquitous electronics in the desire to hear from God in the silence. A spiritual director led us through exercises designed to increase our awareness of God's presence at that moment, and it was one of the richest experiences I have ever had. Prayerful meditation and contemplation are something I heartily encourage in my preaching.

#### The Practice of Journaling

As I have moved deeper into these disciplines, their importance to my ministry and preaching has never been more apparent. Before coming to Tyndale, I had often heard people speak of the blessings they had experienced in journaling. Thanks to my exposure to this discipline in the program, I finally understand why people feel so blessed. I have discovered the benefits of journaling as a spiritual practice. This practice takes me to another level of reflection that becomes a written record of my journey. Writing in my journal enables me to reflect deeper on my life experiences, and in recording them, I can see the activity of God in my life in a new way. Journaling has added depth to my relationship with the Lord.

#### The Practice of Fellowship

Some have also referred to Christian fellowship as a spiritual discipline (Mathis 2016). I would agree with that statement. It is far too easy for believers to adopt a careless approach to the regular assembly of ourselves

regarding church attendance, small group participation, and even personal one-on-one company with other believers. The Bible itself warns against negligence in our responsibility of coming together to encourage other Christians and to be encouraged and strengthened by them (Hebrews 10:25). The world makes it difficult enough to live a life of faith without disregarding God's provision for our mutual support of one another.

All spiritual disciplines or practices require a commitment on my part to hold to them as far as possible. I must resist the temptation to be legalistic about these matters, focusing instead on the blessings, strength and joy they offer me. My life is not about keeping a strictly regimented set of rules to impress God or others. Instead, I have learned to look at these practices as a natural means of moving my heart closer to the one I serve and love and growing in his grace. In doing so, it is not only I who benefits but also the church and community.

#### The Practice of Loving My Family

I strive, admittedly not always successfully, to ensure that my life does not disqualify me from the privilege of preaching (1 Corinthians 9:27). I understand that my relationships with other people in my life are also crucial to being an effective preacher. I consider my relationships with my wife and family of prime importance in being faithful to my calling. Care for, and faithfulness to my loved ones come second only to God. They are the ones who know me best and are the first to recognize the validity, or lack thereof, in anything I propose to preach. They see the real me, the

person outside of the role of pastor. While I certainly know I have pastoral responsibilities to them, I am more than a pastor; I am a husband, father, and grandfather. If I fall short of loving them, how can I care appropriately for the church (1 Timothy 3:5)?

## **Chapter 2: Preaching Context**

### ***Introduction***

This chapter presents my understanding of the ministry context and my role as Pastor of First Baptist Church in Montreal, where I serve. In the Doctor of Ministry program of study, I have noticed that my comprehension of the entire context of my ministry continued to evolve and deepen as I continued studying and applying what I had learned. This chapter, however, is limited to my perception of the church at the time of writing.

This resumé illustrates some of the significant factors contributing to our present environment. I begin with an overview of the community in which the church operates. I then lay out an account of the congregation's history and development, profiling our current cultural makeup. The final section is devoted to my preaching strategy and understanding of how to most effectively proclaim God's Word for this church while faithfully carrying out my ministerial charge toward the flock entrusted to my care.

### ***The Neighborhood***

First Baptist Church in Montreal is in the suburban community of Hampstead, Quebec, a quiet and affluent city area approximately 15 minutes from the downtown core of Montreal. Our church building serves a small congregation of about 140 people located on a busy thoroughfare that

runs through the city, creating a dividing line between the community of Hampstead and its nearest neighbour, Côte Saint Luc. According to Statistics Canada, both communities have a large Jewish population (75% of the total populace for Hampstead and roughly 60% for Côte Saint Luc). While the former's percentage of the Jewish population is higher, the population of Hampstead is much smaller at approximately 7,000 persons, while that of Côte Saint Luc is close to 34,500. Hampstead and Côte Saint Luc receive wide recognition as Jewish enclaves within the larger metropolis of Montreal. The population in these areas is among the largest per-capita concentrations of Jewish people outside of Israel, respectively, as numbers five and six in Jewish population by city as a percentage of the total population. People are often surprised to hear that our protestant evangelical church is in this area. The area with the largest Jewish population in the Montreal Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) is Cote St. Luc, with just over 25,000 Jews. According to the Berman Jewish databank, this area of the island has the largest number of Jewish children, teens and young adults, and adults aged 25-64. Seniors 65 and over comprise more than a third of Montreal's Jewish elderly. The data come from the last mandatory census Statistics Canada carried out before switching to a voluntary survey model (Shahar 2022).

The city's website reports that the original settlement of what began as the farming community of Côte St. Luc took place in 1818. Subsequently, it became incorporated as a village in 1903, a town in 1951,

and a city in 1958, one year after First Baptist Church opened its doors at its current location in the community. In 2002, the attempted mega-city merger of Montreal saw the city incorporated into the Borough of Côte-Saint-Luc-Hampstead-Montreal-West, with 14 other boroughs total. There was a great deal of dissatisfaction with this action, regarded as the imposition of an unwelcome political agenda foisted upon voters. Residents demanded a referendum on the issue, as frequently happens in Quebec. As a result of the demerger referendum that took place in June of 2004, 87% of the area voters in both Hampstead and Côte St. Luc chose to leave this new city structure and reconstitute the former cities. According to the Côte St. Luc website, it is now the third-largest municipality on the island of Montreal.

Côte St. Luc is a well-established neighbourhood with many long-time residents but also includes numerous new immigrants, especially among apartment dwellers. The city's description comes closest to Nelson's concept of a distributed community (Nelson 2008, 154). Anonymity among residents receives higher priority than widespread participation in community-related events. Cultural community events such as Canada Day or La Fête Nationale du Québec usually see good, if not overwhelming, participation. I have observed that such events can be well-attended occasionally, though not with the same degree of joint involvement as typical for the Hampstead community. Given the more homogeneous ethnic nature of Hampstead, however, this is not surprising.

Côte Saint Luc has a substantial working-class populace, which includes large segments of the working poor in some areas. That reality is evident in the number of tenements near the church. The economic disparity between the two communities is apparent even to the casual observer. Average household income for 2016 in Côte St. Luc was just below \$94,000 (compared to Hampstead's \$250,750), with 43% of households reporting under \$50,000 total income (compared to Hampstead's 24%). Hampstead boasts several almost mansion-like residences. Large, manicured lawns and gardens, expensive imported vehicles in driveways and all the trimmings of the common cultural ideals of success are easy to find, but simply crossing the street in front of the church shows a different picture. The visual contrast is quite startling. On the Côte Saint Luc side, private dwellings tend to be much older and more tightly packed, and apartments abound, many of the latter in various states of disrepair.

According to the same statistics above, Côte Saint Luc also had more recent immigrants to Canada (3.9%, approximately 1,250 people) than Hampstead (2.4%, a mere 170 people). The total Muslim population in Hampstead is just 0.6% (less than 50 persons), and Côte St. Luc has 0.4% (approximately 1300 persons). As with the case of the Jewish population, the overall population size affects the appearance of these percentages.

While the church property is officially in Hampstead, these remarks and statistics focus on the point of origin from which most of the church's

nearby attendees come, namely Côte Saint Luc. Others come from distant communities, but no one in the congregation reports Hampstead as their residence. Nearly half (46%) of the population of Côte Saint Luc consists of couples with children at home. Despite the economic stresses many in the community endure, the area remains family-friendly in general, and the streets are relatively safe. According to city statistics for 2015, Côte Saint Luc had the lowest crime rate of all areas of Montreal.

Côte Saint Luc Road, the church's postal address, is a mix of commercial and residential use buildings. This major east-west artery has several multiple-residence apartment buildings. Private homes are primarily further north or south of the street's dividing line. Public transportation provided by city buses and subway (the Métro) is popular in the area. Many of our Sunday attendees use these methods for travel to and from church services. The heavy use of public transportation is a natural consequence of larger businesses located elsewhere in Montreal, with the immediate area being mainly residential. Rising fuel costs also contribute to the tendency to rely on public transit.

Several religious institutions are within a 10-minute walking distance from First Baptist. These include a Synagogue, a Roman Catholic Church, a Kingdom Hall (Jehovah's Witnesses), and smaller Protestant Arabic and Chinese churches. While our interaction with these other religious establishments is limited, mutual invitations to special community events often transpire. For example, the active promotion of Passover,

Easter, Christmas, and other neighbourhood-oriented events such as health care issues, elder care, and job training are commonplace. It is evident that despite the official policy of secularism promoted by the governments at all levels in Quebec, religion is nonetheless alive and well, given the number of nearby institutions. Quebec has strong ties remaining to its French Catholic heritage, at least in a nominal sense. It is nearly impossible to find any district on the entire island of Montreal that is not within easy reach of a house of worship. Though certainly on the decline, the New York Times' record of Mark Twain's observation remains relatively accurate: "you cannot throw a rock in Montreal without breaking a church window." (*New York Times* 1881).

A couple of somewhat dated-looking shopping centers are within the neighbourhood. I use the term dated since they appear well-maintained, with various successful businesses, but are both open-area centers (strip malls) instead of the numerous enclosed malls that are now so common. Parking lots are full on most days as the centers are kept busy. The area also includes several small private businesses, restaurants, and convenience stores (*dépanneurs* in Quebec). Most enterprises are well-known to residents, with turnover and closures on the low side. In fact, in the time I have served this church, I know of only one business in the area that has closed its doors.

The neighbourhood is a multi-ethnic, multicultural environment where many languages thrive. In addition to the traditional French and

English languages (64% of local area dwellers are bilingual), some communicate regularly in other languages, sometimes without French or English abilities (2% of residents). As one would expect, French and English are commonly heard on the street, but so are many other languages from all over the world. The congregation of First Baptist mirrors the neighbourhood's multi-lingual nature.

A quick map consultation shows that at least ten public or private schools are within a 10-minute drive from the church. A French-language public high school and a privately funded daycare are located directly across the street from our building. Both institutions have standing arrangements with us, designating First Baptist as a safe space for children in the event of difficulties or emergencies. A neighbourhood park is directly behind the high school, a clean and well-maintained area. The park offers plenty of space for families with children to play safely, including a public swimming pool throughout summer and ice hockey in winter. The local arena is also within the confines of this park. The area sees a lot of active users, as it is close to residences and the local school. Smaller public parks and play areas are abundant, with almost 20 nearby locations.

The church building itself serves several needs of others in the community. Prominent among these other groups is a community service group to whom we rent space from Monday through Friday. This group serves area residents' needs by providing free clothing and toys for children and conducting mother-and-child classes with infants and toddlers. They

have proven to be a valuable resource in the neighbourhood. Introductions to and from the church have frequently taken place. We have often suggested this organization to new immigrants as a place to obtain needed clothing, household items, daycare, and even some integration assistance as they settle into Canada.

### ***The Congregation***

The church's history in Montreal dates back over 190 years to its original founding. The work that later solidified into First Baptist Church began as early as 1820, as a small group worshipping in a home for a decade, and officially incorporated as a church on November 13, 1831. This original group of 25 devoted individuals built a modest meeting house in what is now the core of downtown Montreal. Since then, this mother church has been instrumental in directly or indirectly planting nearly all Convention Baptist churches on the island of Montreal. Moving west and north on four separate occasions, from its origins in the city's downtown area to its current site, the church has been in its present location for over 60 years (Brassard 2017).

As is true for nearly every English-speaking congregation in Quebec, the seismic cultural changes brought about by the "quiet revolution" of the 1960s culminating in the election of a French-speaking separatist government in 1976 have profoundly affected the English churches. The resultant departures from the province virtually decimated all English church memberships. As an English evangelical congregation, the

church finds itself among a tiny minority in the province of Quebec. We minister in an officially secular culture alongside the mainly French-speaking Catholic majority, mainline Protestant churches, other religious traditions, and a sizeable population of religious "Nones and Dones" that constitute the people of Quebec. According to recent studies, the total attendance at evangelical worship services in the province of Quebec is 0.5% of the population (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015, 81). That percentage represents evangelicals of English, French, and other languages combined. With just over 8 million people in the province, the total English evangelical church population is a minuscule fraction of the total of the roughly 40,000 people self-identifying as evangelical. Thus, among the challenges for churches like ours is simply surviving. Despite the many challenges small English churches in Quebec encounter, the congregation has responded well and continues to look toward our future with confidence. We can still make a difference in the neighbourhood, and we actively engage in seeking out opportunities to be a witness to the people of our community.

#### Culturally Mixed

In examining the church's historical records at its present location, it is apparent that a wave of cultural and ethnic change has profoundly affected the congregational makeup. Over the years, what started as an almost exclusively white middle-class gathering in 1957 has slowly transformed into the multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual

congregation that meets now. The neighbourhood has likewise changed in its composition. Looking back at photographs of the inaugural worship service of the church might lead one to believe that this cannot be the same church. This church is radically different in composition, and seeing the difference between then and now is startling.

This church is racially and ethnically the reverse of what it was when its doors opened. Several long-time members from our black communities shared stories with me of how this church once made them feel uncomfortable and unwelcome as underlying attitudes of the then-accepted forms of endemic racism directly impacted their inclusion in church activities. Yet, they continued to attend and identify with the church for reasons I, as a white person, cannot fully understand. Their persistence has blessed this church in many ways, leading to where we are today.

Like the multi-ethnic communities we live in, the church is a living example of that reality. The church motto is "*A House of Prayer for All Nations*," as seen in weekly bulletins and our website. The congregation takes this idea seriously, as evidenced in our gatherings. Consulting our active member/adherent list shows that much of the current church membership has origins in the Caribbean Islands (38%), several African nations (15%), and a significant number come from the Philippines (12%). Aside from these major groups, we have members with Chinese, Korean, Eastern European, and Central and South American backgrounds. A small minority, including my family and I, are of white, Western European origin.

While this can sometimes present challenges for me in fully identifying with the cultural realities the membership lives out daily, it is more often an enlightening and uplifting experience of seeing how similar we are underneath it all. Humanity in relationship to God is something we can all share with equal joy.

We face significant language barriers regarding the church's outreach to the community. French and English do not present a problem to most congregants, but some area residents have not mastered either language. This impediment can sometimes become a communication challenge, but thanks to the church's linguistic range, it does not present the problem it could. So far, we have had successes in outreach and ministry to many other language groups. Even if there is sometimes a lack of outright fluency, we can often find someone within the church with some exposure to or understanding of a particular dialect. Moreover, our church has undertaken a ministry outreach to the community by offering French-language instruction without cost to the participants, whether they are residents in the area or not. This effort has proven to be an effective means of practical outreach to the community, and other churches and, in one case, has even resulted in a request for baptism.

There are striking differences between my current congregation and my former charge. My last church mainly served white middle-class families in a far more affluent section of Montreal than my present church. I experienced an element of culture shock when I came to First Baptist. As

Lenora Tubbs Tisdale notes, this is common when pastors move from seminary to a local church or a church with different cultural values (Tisdale 1997, 8ff). Despite being denominationally connected, this new church had virtually no visible similarities to the previous one. This realization highlighted the profound nature of the unique cultural context of each congregation in its own specific identity. The Doctor of Ministry program emphasized every local congregation's cultural and contextual uniqueness.

#### Members From Near and Far

Most of our weekly attendees come from the nearby area of Côte St. Luc. A substantial portion (about 35%) come from significant distances all over Montreal, on and off the island. Many of these people are former residents of the area who now live further out in the city's outlying suburbs (primarily Montreal's South Shore and West Island), choosing not to sever their ties to this church. That loyalty may indicate a sense of belonging and love for the community they experience at First Baptist. Some remain with us because of family ties, and others enjoy the familiarity of staying connected to a church they call 'theirs.' Despite these physical distances, the congregation focuses primarily on the immediate neighbourhood as its parish (Sparks, Sorens and Friesen 2014). There is plenty of need in the local surroundings of the church, and the assembly is committed to helping them.

Many in our neighbourhood and several of our members came through the rigorous stresses of the immigration process, some leaving behind families, poverty, lack of opportunity, and even religious persecution. As a result, the congregation demonstrates excellent sensitivity to newcomers by intentionally attempting to provide a welcoming community, especially for those new to the country. Some who have brought newcomers to the church will often introduce their guests to the congregation in the opening moments of the Sunday morning service. Visitors frequently come and stay, remembering the warmth of the welcome and the feeling of inclusion (discussed further in chapter three). As pointed out by Tisdale, people go where they feel most at home (Tisdale 1997, 15). I see the slow but steady growth that has been taking place over the past several years as a strong indication that we are on the right path.

#### One Church, Many Beliefs

Baptist identity is moderately important to some members but is not evident as a priority. Instead, in my conversations with members, it appears that orthodox beliefs are the primary concern for most of our fellowship. Our fellowship comprises diverse theological traditions, including the many flavours of Baptists, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Anglican, Roman Catholic, and other religious traditions (some even from Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, and animistic backgrounds before coming into the Christian faith). Even among those who have been lifelong Baptists, our theological understandings are anything but universal like-mindedness. At the same

time, specific points of doctrine seem to be fundamental to congregational beliefs (for example, salvation through faith in Christ alone and faith in Scripture as God's inspired and authoritative Word). There is a refreshing array of faithful expressions of those beliefs that are as varied as the people themselves. There appears to be a genuine openness to hear and live in harmony with others, despite the differences in secondary matters that may arise periodically. This exotic mix of backgrounds and experiences gives the congregation depth and breadth, making them unique. All of us, it seems, came from somewhere different to find a common identity in Christ and his church. The atmosphere of differences in ethnicity, culture, and theological points of view makes most members very open and receptive to others' uniqueness.

In terms of beliefs and values, the fundamental theological value is that of God's immanence. Whether I am directly involved in a one-on-one conversation or hear from members in public discussions, the presence of God here and now frequently rises to the surface, especially regarding trials or facing challenges. The often-heard refrain is that God is kind, loving, supportive, and ever near in times of trouble. Such sentiments are, of course, common in many churches. However, it is inspirational to know the difficult path that so many have travelled and witness how they continue struggling with circumstances beyond their control. These are not just pious phrases for these people, but a lived reality.

Coupled with this assurance of God's immanence is the belief that God not only hears the prayers of his people but answers them. This deep-seated faith of so many members assures the church leadership that any event that focuses on the people's prayers will see a healthy attendance level. This factor will become even more evident in Chapter Three. We hold a weekly time of worship aimed explicitly at prayer requests following our morning service. People always respond to this, demonstrating the need to receive and offer prayers for others.

A charismatic/neo-Pentecostal perspective exists among a substantial segment of the fellowship. These people firmly believe in the miraculous and that such things can and do happen when we pray. The widespread understanding of God as One who heals is central to these matters. One of these people's most deeply cherished beliefs is God's ability to respond to his people's prayers for divine healing. We have held special prayer meetings for that purpose, as many church members deal with severe health issues. I must admit that I have often been surprised at some of the great answers to prayer we have seen. While I wouldn't classify myself as an outright skeptic, these people have taught me a great deal about simple, genuine faith in the goodness of a loving God and how he responds to humble prayer.

Of course, these deeply held beliefs about the immanence of God or the efficacy of prayer are not universal values for every individual within the congregation. However, such widespread confidence in these beliefs

simplifies my approach to community relations. I also hope that such a powerful influence of faith-filled belief will work its way into the thinking and practices of those who remain unpersuaded.

Other widely supported beliefs include the idea that while we may not be perfect in our faith expressions, God is forgiving and is pleased to use us nonetheless. We all have a circle of influence, be it small or great. Our homes, workplaces, schools, and so on are all places where we can bring glory to God. Many members invite the people they deal with in these environments to join them in church, and we have frequently seen people respond favourably. I like to encourage this viewpoint as often as possible since I see this as a positive way of showing outsiders that these people do not claim perfection or superiority but a vital faith in a living and active God. They are people loved by God, who love him in return through their actions and words.

The congregation also shows a commitment to the environment. Active recycling policies are in place, and thanks to continuing community educational emphases, the church is very committed to the wise use and reuse of natural resources. We strive to keep the issue of environmental concerns in the foreground as an essential consideration of our fellowship and an integral part of our theological expressions in caring for the world that God has entrusted to us.

The spiritual orientation of this church is primarily one that supports the notion that we carry out the work of evangelism one person at a time.

As evangelicals, our understanding is that God must touch each heart. This concept is not as opposed to or in replacement for the corporate experience of God that we share as a church, but that a personal experience of God's grace is a prerequisite to the fullness of our corporate worship. We can better serve one another's needs by developing a consistent theology as a body. For some members, the conversion experience was a sudden and dramatic transformation; for others, it was a process slowly taking place over time. Members widely recognize both forms of transformation as legitimate means whereby God changes the heart, inclining us toward him. The bottom line is a personal knowledge of Christ as Savior and Lord, which becomes fully expressed in the corporate worship and fellowship of the church. As "iron sharpens iron," our corporate living out of the faith includes checks and balances, helping us avoid inappropriate individualism in our outlook and beliefs.

### Conflict

These people commonly hold the Bible in high regard; at least, they speak in those terms. However, this regard is not necessarily reflected in biblical literacy, as I frequently discover in conversations with or observing the behaviour of church members, including the leadership. While members generally seem to have a certain level of due respect for God's Word, I have witnessed situations where applying the Word to real-life situations raises questions in my mind. The actions and words of some are especially evident in church conflict. For example, the considerate treatment of one

another when in disagreement causes me to wonder about the practical application of stated beliefs.

These conflicts have never been about spiritual matters, at least during my tenure, and no one has ever gone on record as bringing up such issues. Instead, the conflicts usually center around personality issues, matters of administration, or budget disputes. As in any assembly, differences of opinion in these areas can quickly turn molehills into mountains. One recent example was a conflict involving three members and eventually me as arbitrator. In this case, each party was from a different ethnic and cultural background, which led to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of one another's actions and reactions. I acted as a mediator, trying to explain to each the intentions behind the actions of the other. As I learned, unfortunately, not quickly enough, some minute gesture or expression can mean something entirely different to someone with another cultural frame of reference. This possible hazard is inherent in mixed congregations, and I need to be conscious of it in communicating with them. I am thankful that my training at Tyndale recognized this risk in multi-ethnic communities and offered some valuable advice. It was not until I could get them all together for a discussion that the matter was finally understood and resolved.

People are people, and misunderstanding and miscommunication are bound to occur when they come together. It would be one thing if only cultural misunderstandings led to these issues. Unfortunately, it is not

limited to those circumstances, as nearly every pastor I know can attest. I know that such unhappy conflicts are part of dealing with what I must accept as a part of ministry, the "childish behaviour of even some 'mature' believers" (Gibson 2012, 77).

### Mutual Respect

In fairness, however, most members do their best with genuine openness and positive responses to one another, and they attempt to understand. They learn through sermons and Bible studies about how the scriptures apply to life and relationships, even when that becomes a struggle. There appears to be a sincere desire for expressions of the truth described as "seriously imaginable" (Tisdale 1997, 43). Abstract ideas and concepts do not have much effect in this congregation. These people desire concrete applications. There is a deep longing to learn how the scriptures speak to daily life. The average member's primary concern is often something like, "How does this apply to me, here and now?" Praxis is, therefore, of critical concern to most church members. This assertion is not to say that more cognitive abstract theological concepts and truth mean nothing, but the primary concern that finds expression in such matters is, "Now that we know that, what does that mean in terms of how we live?"

### Our Changing Nature

Gender roles have also been deeply affected over the years. The church began in a day when much of the leadership was concentrated solely on male members. Except for Sunday school and women's groups, women

were not commonly visible in the everyday operations of the church. This bias did not stop women from profoundly influencing the outreach work of Convention Baptist churches, resulting in a tremendous impact worldwide. These labours of loving commitment still stand today as a witness to the faithfulness of these women.

Changes have been well received for the most part, even though they may sometimes be slow in coming to fruition. In contrast to these behind-the-scenes undertakings of earlier days, women now form a majority of the congregation. The composition of the leadership of our church council has shifted to women holding more than 50% of the positions. Women represent a regular voice in the preaching ministry in this church, and I can regularly tap into this rich resource, for which I am grateful. Though substantial transformations have taken place, the history of the church remains significant to many, especially the older members who act as guardians and gatekeepers of the historical life of this community.

The church's power structure shifts very slowly. For First Baptist Church, that shift involves progress in moving away from the former apparent racism and sexism of the church's "ruling class" (Nieman 2008, 15-16). The governing body of our congregation is the Church Council, which presently has a high rate of long-time male and female members who do not surrender those positions easily. I try to encourage the participation of newer and younger members, which can be an uphill struggle for many

younger members in dealing with the existing power base. Understandably, joining the church council as a contributing member is intimidating to many of them. I sometimes need to remind myself that most of our newer and younger members come from cultures where deference to elders is typical, even as it is for me to a lesser degree. I do not mean to convey that the wisdom of long experience in the congregation is something I want to cast aside. Still, I want to find ways to encourage interest and participation in this church's ongoing direction and development. More fresh minds and ideas are necessary for our continued flourishing. I hope to find ways to encourage the inflow of those new thoughts while maintaining a healthy respect for the many years of wisdom represented on our council.

It sometimes strikes me as peculiar when I consider who the congregation is now and compare that to our physical and liturgical environment. We worship in a space that was quite common for churches in the 1950s: high arched ceilings, stained glass, fixed pulpits and lecterns, and even an electronic organ which replaced the pipe organ in the 1990s. The services follow a traditional liturgical pattern that I found “High Church,” especially for a Baptist congregation. The building, furnishings, liturgy, and symbolism have their own stories. Still, for the better part of the congregation, these stories have a less-tangible connection to them than they may to long-time members.

Nevertheless, even newer and younger members acknowledge that this is how church is done here and accept it. One young recently-

immigrated Brazilian woman shared with me her view that, contrary to many people in her age bracket, traditions are more critical to faith than keeping up with the latest megachurch trends. It is not that the desire for change is non-existent, but the history of the church has a mitigating influence on the pace and the depth of changes insofar as that relates to the practices and appearances of the church. Lose rightly states that "for tradition to have validity, it must, in some way, touch, shape and fit into our experience." (Lose 2014, 27). My concern is that we must be careful to avoid the observance of traditions and history that have little, if anything, to do with our current congregational trajectory and God's plan for us. Our history inevitably influences every aspect of our ministry, and while we must respect that, we must not allow it to control our present or future.

However, this connection with the status quo has a different origin for even more members than the life-long connection for older members. A quick perusal of the church's recorded history (Brassard 2017) will lead the reader to discover a critical event in the late 1990s. I refer to what the members often refer to as the "near-death" experience of the church. A literal 50/50 split in voting about a decision to close the church or remain open at that time depended on one deciding vote, notably that of a member still with us. That vote favoured remaining open, but the moment of decision is clearly embedded in the memories of many and will often arise in discussion. This significant moment in the church's history can make for some complex maneuvering when it comes to tolerating risk, a fact of

which I must be conscious and consider whenever suggestions for change come forward. The church has been rescued from the brink of closure once, and I must be careful that I do not do anything that makes the guardians of the church feel that I am jeopardizing that narrow escape. I want to gently lead the church to build on the past rather than reliving its fears. I am slowly learning to navigate such matters with sensitivity and pastoral care. We frequently considered issues like this in our contextual studies at Tyndale, and I sincerely appreciate the wisdom I have gained there. As Gibson mentions, “a church living under the influence of the past often needs to re-learn its faith.” (Gibson 2012, 27). This re-learning is something I hope to help this congregation accomplish.

Milestone events like birthdays, anniversaries, graduations and other major life events also hold high importance in the church. Such events become community celebrations and are recognized publicly in our bulletin and announcements. Monthly community meals are vital to our members and are always well-attended. Members often share a luncheon to mark important occasions. The congregation strongly emphasizes corporate unity and togetherness in our social gatherings.

#### Local and National Missions

The congregational concept of mission is not based solely on strict adherence to some preconceived notion of what mission entails, nor is the idea defined narrowly. The congregational ethos is one of understanding that to feed souls, we must also provide for and tend to physical bodies. We

demonstrate our mission in feeding physical as much as spiritual hunger. The mission field is understood to start on our doorstep, and typical congregational responses to appeals for help bear that out. The congregation responds well to compassion-based ministries and is ready to do whatever is necessary to help others, whether across the street or worldwide.

Church efforts to address physical needs in the area supplement our support of a nearby neighbourhood food bank. Offerings of food and financial support for this organization are taken up and delivered to the food bank at regular intervals. In addition, we have a container for non-perishable items known as “Give and Take,” where attendees are encouraged to give what they can or take what they need.

The church has another unique service which we offer to those in need. At one point in its history, the church had an apartment space created for a live-in janitor. While that is no longer the case, we have remodelled the apartment, which we use to offer a temporary residence and shelter for families experiencing financial or immigration difficulties. We used the apartment recently to accommodate a Kenyan family temporarily admitted to Canada for humanitarian reasons. One of the daughters needed emergency medical care that was provided free by the Shriner's Hospital with the proviso that they could house themselves. In partnership with a Toronto-based organization, we arranged to have them come to Canada,

where this young girl underwent therapy. The family has now relocated to the Hamilton area.

First Baptist also provides worship and office space to several other smaller congregations. The physical church building is busy nearly all week, and many people know of the church through direct contact or one of these smaller groups. A Spanish congregation (affiliated with our CBOQ convention) meets on Sundays at the other end of the building. This group is thriving and quite lively. In addition, we also rent space to a Bulgarian congregation that meets on Friday evenings, a Seventh-day Adventist group that meets on Saturdays, and we are in negotiations with a Messianic Jewish community that also wants to meet Fridays and Saturdays. Former rental agreements included a group aimed at meeting the needs of the disabled, Alcoholics Anonymous, a Russian congregation, and one from Ghana. We make a conscious effort to accommodate the needs of these smaller groups as a means of Christian witness to the community.

Most congregation members perceive our immediate neighbourhood as the primary focus of outreach efforts, but it is by no means the only one. There is also a strong core of members who see that focus as extending into the places where we live and work. I frequently hear testimonies from those who take their beliefs and love for God into their daily work relationships and encounters with people outside the church. Living out what we believe has often resulted in visits to and friendship with the church, even if joining the church is not what our guests have in mind nor the intention of our

witness. We are grateful for such relationships outside our church as well as inside. The self-image of our fellowship is one of caring for the needs of others inside and outside the church. I remain concerned for many of our Jewish neighbours, who still need to hear about Christ's salvation without presenting any apparent physical needs. I encourage members to think about ways we can live out and deliver the gospel message to them.

Our studies on the power of partnering emphasized at Tyndale have given me renewed hope that this will at least be a part of our future direction as a church. Given our limited financial resources and size, this often means partnering with people, groups, and organizations to accomplish things we could not do otherwise, like the groups mentioned above. Partnering also includes working alongside other denominations and other faiths as we support efforts to house and feed the homeless, assist in settling immigrants, and provide for different needs as they arise.

Further afield, we are becoming increasingly involved in ministry opportunities with the First Nations people, many of which are around the immediate Montreal area and further north in Quebec. Thanks to the connections and resources of our Baptist Convention associates, we are engaged in exploring ways to reach out beyond our local community to extend our impact. Reimer and Wilkinson note that one of the National Church Life Survey's significant conclusions was that "If there is one core quality that stands out as making a powerful difference in church vitality, it is the presence of a clear and compelling vision." (Reimer and Wilkinson

2015, 97). I believe this church has such a vision for the community where we worship, and that vision, while present, needs to find more profound expression within the congregation's lives.

We are a small congregation, but God has consistently demonstrated his power amid our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:10). The church certainly has its blind spots. Still, God has shown us that our concern need not be on our inability and insufficiency. Our dependence must focus on him to do the things we cannot do through us. I see this little congregation as a group consistently demonstrating how God can do amazing things through trusting hearts. This confidence is something that I try to keep in front of our congregation regularly. It is one of the primary concentrations of my preaching and teaching efforts with them. Like most Baptist churches, local autonomy is essential, but we take comfort in knowing that we are part of a much more significant presence in the city, the province, and the country. Fortunately, we can and often do use resources from our Toronto-based denominational offices, which provide financing, training, literature, and media resources to help us reach our neighbourhood. We also have the Quebec Association of Baptist churches. Through this association, we frequently have opportunities to join in outreach efforts and unique services to the city of Montreal and outlying provincial areas.

I hope the preceding has shed a little light on the people God has blessed me with serving. In light of what I have written, I am nevertheless reminded that "No student of a congregation can ever presume to have

captured its essence." (Ammerman et al. 1998). I, for one, am entirely sure that this assertion is true. This congregation and their reality have a direct impact on my preaching. I now turn to a consideration of my preaching strategy.

### ***Preaching Strategy***

My preaching strategy stems from my conviction that a preacher must deliver a message from the living God to his people. That message is grounded in the church's historic faith, as summarized by the Protestant Reformation hallmarks of *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Fide*, *Sola Gratia*, *Solus Christus*, and *Sola Dio Gloria*. These provide a solid foundation for all Christian preaching and teaching and inform my preaching.

I believe that Scripture is the only authoritative source for all matters of doctrine and the faithful practice of every believer. The preacher and congregation are both subject to this authority, constituting all we need to know regarding our salvation and the theological interpretation of the world in which we live. Indeed, valuable truth exists outside of Scripture, but in terms of faith and practice, the Bible alone stands supreme.

Therefore, I can assume the pulpit with the conviction that I already hold everything the congregation needs to come to a saving knowledge of Christ and live a life of faithful obedience. Other things may be helpful to my preaching, the wisdom of scholars, the insights and advice of others who preach, and the great benefits of continued training and educational pursuits such as that obtained in the Doctor of Ministry program. But these things

enhance my preaching; they do not and must not be allowed to replace the essence of truth perfectly and wholly contained within the Scriptures.

Faith and grace make us stand justified and cleansed before a Holy God (Ephesians 2:8-9). God justifies or puts us right by grace, which we have received as God's gift. This declaration is central to biblical preaching and warrants frequent repetition. In resisting the common doctrine of works righteousness, preaching this truth is welcome news to those weary of trying to save themselves. To look upon preaching as an opportunity aimed at listeners' self-improvement or seeing it as some form of group therapy is repellant to me. It is God-given grace and faith alone that marks us as his people.

I try to direct every sermon I preach toward the profound truth of *Solus Christus*. As Christ was and is the incarnation of the fullness of God, he is the essence of all biblical preaching distilled in one being (Colossians 1:15-20). For this reason, Jesus Christ in his life, death and resurrection must be front and center in all my preaching. I strive to keep Christ as the foundation of every sermon. Indeed, I have nothing worthwhile to say if he is not.

Finally, my preaching must consistently drive toward the proclamation of the foundational truth that everything and anything about human life, our very existence, has one ultimate purpose, to glorify God. Our aim as human beings finds beautiful expression in the words of the Westminster Catechism, "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." Anything apart from that falls short of

our calling as Christians and, in fact, as human beings. To preach anything else would lack integrity.

As I preach then, these principal declarations of the Christian faith provide the backdrop on which I strive to remain centred. These tenets are nothing new, of course. My theology is quite conservative but has served my congregation and me well, especially when challenged by more radical departures from the historic declarations of faith. A consistent frame of reference gives me a stable guard against slipping into error in my faith and practice. It also helps me read, interpret, and exegete Scripture for my congregation.

It is also apparent that some theological issues and questions move beyond the essential foundation of the "Sola" declarations. In secondary matters such as these, I try to keep an open mind and encourage the same from my congregation. Most schisms separating believers fall into this category. I believe the theological matters on which believers disagree are often a matter of conscience, and we should respect them accordingly. Even our denominational statement of distinctives, *"This We Believe,"* holds that matters of individual conscience are a treasured principle. We must be open to that if there is no evident departure from or contradiction with scriptural teaching. I am in the pulpit to preach God's Word, not mine, and I must delineate personal opinion, ensuring that people understand the difference. Proof texting and argument based solely on human traditions or personal

preferences must never be allowed to influence the pulpit while being promoted as the Word of God.

### ***Preaching into my Context***

Several significant areas of concern govern the priorities I give to preaching week to week. The variety of scriptural emphases provides plenty of opportunities to branch out in several directions when preaching. The following are some of the recurrent themes which I frequent.

#### **Preaching Discipleship**

My call to preach is to nurture discipleship. "Preaching is discipleship." (Gibson 2012, 14). Preaching that concentrates on the Gospel of salvation to "whosoever will" remains a central emphasis of what I attempt to convey. For believers, my preaching focuses on working out our daily discipleship in practical terms. Gibson emphasizes, "We may be tempted to speak to our concerns, our agenda, and not the spiritual needs of those we're discipling." (Gibson 2012, 28). I feel compelled to preach about how Scripture affects our life choices and how we can appropriately express our faith in the neighbourhood, workplace, or school. As Nieman astutely observes, "[We] today find contextual realities unavoidably forced upon our preaching." (Nieman 2008, 16). My preaching context demands that the everyday issues people face are taken seriously by their pastor and spoken to openly and honestly. That requirement may occasionally involve numerous hot-button problems (same-sex marriage, abortion, divorce and remarriage). My congregation also has concerns about immigration

policies, politics relating to churches, and the treatment of minorities. Supposing I fail to address them from the pulpit with a biblical perspective. In that case, the people are at the mercy of popular media in forming a theological perspective to think through such matters. In practical terms, these sermons commonly elicit a positive response, which I attribute to the congregation's sincere desire to follow Christ.

As a pastor and teacher of God's flock, I am responsible for helping people see that God is not another component of our busy lives but is the very center of our existence, if I may allude once more to the Westminster Catechism. My prayer life, spiritual condition, and walk with God influence my preaching (Gibson 2012, 56-59). These factors affect my congregation too. Therefore, I need to keep a watchful eye on those God has entrusted to my care, especially regarding their spiritual development and devotional lives. This state requires an intimate knowledge of the congregation and the various challenges they face in understanding, believing, and applying these concepts. Therefore, in my preaching, I repeatedly emphasize faith as a lived relationship with God instead of superficial and hollow religious ceremonies. Ritual practice does have its place, of course, and while it serves essential purposes and needs, it is not a substitute for living in a daily relationship with God, in other words, discipleship. I often return to this theme because I recognize the bombardment of contrary-minded cultural messages these people receive daily.

The concern to contextualize God's Word is, of course, ever-present with me as it is for any preacher. I remain mindful of the risk of "Blind adherence to contextualization – making scripture fit our agenda rather than reverse" (Helm 2014, 15 ff.). For many years before becoming a pastor, I worked and lived in the same world the congregation does now. I know how hard it can be to maintain even a minimal level of God-consciousness in the flurry of activity that fills our lives. This situation underscores the importance of maintaining as much contact with the congregation as possible in visits, telephone calls, and social media interactions. I sometimes feel discouraged when I think about my limited time with my community each week to engage their thinking about spiritual matters. Nonetheless, I hope God is pleased to transform our shared moments to develop another experience level in each member's life.

#### Preaching as Reminding

I like the idea put forth by Jeffrey Arthurs that "One of the most crucial functions preaching accomplishes, a function often neglected in homiletical textbooks. is the stirring of memory." (Arthurs 2017, 4). That notion resonates with me as, week after week, I preach to people who have heard this all before. Although many of my listeners and I may have repeatedly listened to these familiar passages or themes, we all need reminding. Whether it is the most fundamental truths of the Gospel, matters of doctrine, or hearing a familiar parable again, we all need reminding periodically. Even as a preacher, I need reminders as much as, perhaps

more, than anyone else committed to a faithful and obedient walk with Christ. This aspect of preaching as reminding is something I welcome for myself and for those to whom I preach. Quoting Edmund P. Blair, Arthurs points out, "In the Bible, 'remembering' is more than mental recall. It involves emotion and volition as well as cognition. It is a whole person activity." (Arthurs 2017, 15). Thus, while reminding my congregation of God's truth may be simple, it is not simplistic.

Equally important, an essential element in helping people is teaching them to "forget what they should forget" (Arthurs 2017, 46). Everyone has had repeated encounters with sin, failure, and human brokenness. Inappropriately dwelling upon these moments leads to an undue fixation on past regrets, control of our present, and influence upon our future. For many of us, such concerns already have far too significant an effect. I attempt to remind my congregation and myself to forget what was. Our sin and failure no longer define us. My preaching, therefore, must frequently emphasize the reality of our newness in Christ, forgiveness, and reconciliation with God. Reminders to forget are thus a vital part of my responsibility of proclaiming the whole counsel of God, the good news of total renewal.

#### Preaching as Admonition and Correction

I feel that gospel preaching should encourage and bless listeners regularly, but responsible preaching sometimes calls for sensitive correction to believers' paths. Sometimes a critique or challenge to behaviour or belief

is necessary, but I strive to avoid judging, preferring to encourage rather than dishearten. I believe people can be helped much more by compassionate encouragement than scolding. Congregational feedback on these occasions is frequently positive, even when the message may have touched a nerve or has been a personal challenge to the hearers. On those occasions when the feedback was not so positive, I remember preaching was never intended to be about pleasing people but about faithfully proclaiming the message and pleasing God. Far better to have an adverse reaction than no reaction at all, so long as the basis of the reaction is a response to the message and not something I did or said to offend someone through insensitivity.

Like a parent dealing with an erring child, preaching must sometimes act as a corrective. This responsibility is not a pleasant part of the preaching ministry but it is necessary. Errors like an overemphasis on certain charismatic spiritual gifts, resistance to change, or even our responsibilities amid interpersonal conflict have arisen. I deal with such issues as kindly as possible, but I must be firm and emphasize a scriptural basis for my position. To constantly coddle a congregation in error or ignore damaging attitudes or actions is neither fair nor helpful to their spiritual development. But correcting errors is a responsible fulfillment of God's charge to me. Thankfully, this congregation does not present many opportunities to me in this regard, but I must be attentive to it when the need arises.

## Preaching in the context of Worship

I try to remember that preaching is an act of worship for my listeners and me. As noted by Sally Brown, "Preaching is as much an act of worship as praise or confession, baptism or prayer." (Brown and Powery 2016, 80). Therefore, I must keep this concept before me as I give myself over to share what God has given me. The Holy Spirit must first be present in the preparation and delivery of the sermon, to be sure, but also in his work in human hearts that follows what I preach. Without the Spirit's presence in every step, I am convinced that even my most disciplined and dedicated efforts will fail. As Sally Brown and Luke Powery remind us, "preaching is a Spirit-driven event that takes place within Spirit-created communities." (Brown and Powery 2016, 9).

## Preaching into an Urban Context

The practical aspects of living out biblical truth amid a modern city's sometimes bewildering and alienating environment concern me, as they do for most of those I regularly address. I try to share that biblical focus with the congregation in preaching. In addition to preaching to the fellowship-oriented relationship of believers, I also deal regularly with interpersonal matters. Typical subjects are how we can deal with increasingly aggressive challenges to our faith lovingly, accept others without compromising our faith, or share our faith. Emphasizing the significance of interpersonal connection in the often isolating conditions of large cities like Montreal is vital for my congregation. People living in big

cities often encounter individuals and groups quite unlike themselves. Teaching the membership about dealing with alternative worldviews and lifestyles takes on urgency as these formidable forces will not go away. How we handle such concerns is vital, but I also like to focus on the reasoning behind our beliefs, like why a solid knowledge of Scripture is crucial and why we must learn to apply it correctly. Faithfulness to Scripture, understanding our part in it and relating to those within the church and the world outside provide ample fodder for preaching. Every church must guard against cocooning itself apart from the world we are trying to reach. Bridging the gap between our sometimes too-comfortable world inside the church and the world we inhabit beyond our doors is a significant point of reference in my preaching strategy. This approach is in keeping with what Gibson calls "purposeful preaching to move people from one level of maturity to the next" (Gibson 2012, 86).

#### Preaching in a Postmodern, Secular, and Pluralistic Context

Like every other church, the pews of First Baptist Church are not occupied solely by believers. In a context that is postmodern, secular, and pluralistic (Lose 2013, 6), I cannot afford to lose sight of those within the church and those without who are looking for the truth found only in Jesus Christ. Kalas says, "Broadly speaking; the preacher tries to relate to two audiences. Some people are already committed to Christ to one degree or another, and some are still marginal or unreached." (Kalas 2014, 53). While I concentrate most of my sermons on the walk of faith, I understand that

several people present on any given Sunday do not know God through saving faith. To ignore these people would be a severe dereliction of duty regarding my responsibilities in the pulpit. The proclamation of the Gospel, confession and repentance, and invitations to trust Christ as Savior are recurring themes for me. My sermons are often oriented to a direct evangelistic call to respond. This style is especially true of those times in the church year when the participation of unbelievers is exceptionally high, like Christmas or Easter, or even at weddings and funerals. I consider these events ideal opportunities to issue explicit invitations for people to open their hearts to the love of God. In my experience, these are great opportunities to preach the Gospel of Christ to people who might otherwise avoid a church sanctuary. Particularly in the case of funerals, people are often in a position of sensitivity and openness to the message. I must remain vigilant in such opportunities to testify. As has been said so eloquently, "Our job is to testify; it is up to God to make that testimony potent." (Lose 2013, 22). My approach is that of witness testimony rather than dogmatic assertions, which in my view, alienate people far more often than they do to persuade. Specific times and circumstances call for a polemic apologetic strategy, but I find that increasingly unhelpful in our current cultural context.

### ***Preaching practices***

I usually use the Revised Common Lectionary to select my preaching texts. I try to choose those readings that I feel are most

appropriate to the congregation's current needs, concerns and circumstances. I try to avoid a slavish adherence to those readings by breaking off from time to time for exceptional circumstances or events that need addressing or even for a needed break. For the most part, however, I find the designated texts of the lectionary helpful, particularly in observing the church year and avoiding hobby-horse preaching. In using the lectionary, I see a broad exposure to many texts of Scripture that challenge my hearers and myself. The lectionary selections do not deal with biblical illiteracy. Still, they help expose the Word, and I hope the congregation will benefit over time.

The comments and reactions I receive to infrequently preached texts would suggest that these sermons are helpful for many to see the comprehensive teaching of the whole Bible. Wednesday evening Bible studies and Sunday school classes are also keyed to the lectionary, so there is ample opportunity to hear of issues raised with a given text, problems faced, and even to answer pressing questions. Having everyone in the same place, scripturally speaking, lends itself to an open environment where we simultaneously deal with the text. This practice also allows me to treat a text in advance from the congregation's perspective since the mid-week study usually deals with the text for the following Sunday.

I also try to remain open to requirements for relevant preaching material in hearing from members about their daily experiences. I think about ways to preach series on books of the Bible to enhance members'

exposure to the broader picture of the Bible. While I do not regularly preach sermon series, I include this as a strategic preaching method for the congregation's benefit. These methods require flexibility regarding the use of the lectionary. I benefit from the exercise in further developing my exegetical skills. I also welcome suggestions from the community to deal with matters of present concern.

### Preaching for Practical Application

I try to emphasize the practical aspects of helping my congregation live out the truth of Scripture in the world and their relationships with one another. Effectively doing this requires knowing what is happening in members' lives. Regular discussions with members, formal and informal, go a long way toward accomplishing that. I am continually surprised at how often a text I plan to preach will come up in conversation with church members without their being aware of that fact in advance. I treasure these opportunities to speak these words into their lives during the week and in the Sunday morning sermon. Not only does it bless them, but it blesses me to witness God's message unfolding with a practical application. I try to encourage and build upon our fellowship as often as possible. If people can leave the Sunday service feeling they have heard something that helps them in their Christian walk or something applicable to their situation, I think I have done what I should.

## Preaching a Balanced Biblical Diet

My preaching efforts aim to balance Old and New Testament exposure or preaching the whole counsel of God and strike an appropriate balance in preaching Scripture's inward and outward focus (Hybels, Briscoe, and Robinson 1991). The objective remains that of simultaneously working to build the church up from within while emphasizing the importance of reaching beyond the confines of the church, something the membership is already quite good at, but I remind them nonetheless.

In the search for balance in my preaching ministry, I think it is accurate to say, "Within and among congregations, then, there are people who come to knowledge in very different ways." (Tisdale 1997, 135). Recognizing that not every sermon I preach will be heard in the same way by every person helps me to remember that my ministry of preaching is not the only thing going on in the church during a typical service. While congregations like ours make the sermon the central area of focus during worship, there is more than that co-occurring. The liturgy touches people in different ways; the songs and hymns, the various readings of Scripture, the prayers, and even the symbols evident in communion and baptism all work in several ways that are unique to each individual. Often, it will be the sermon that touches someone, and just as often, as I have seen, it will be something else. In preparing a service, I work towards integrating all these aspects into a cohesive whole, but I never know what God will do in a person's heart, mind, or spirit or how he will bring it about. The various

elements of the service become tools in the hands of God's Spirit. It bears stressing that worship encompasses the "complex and mysterious" nature of preaching (Tisdale 1997, 138). I would add that the heart of worship is irreducible to simplistic formulas.

The Spirit-led community needs a healthy balanced diet which requires me to seek God's leading in various preaching methods, styles, and the chosen biblical genres I try to present. In the short work *"Determining the Form,"* the author points out that "...the sermon's content determines the appropriate form." (Allen 2008, 4). Thus, I try to be sensitive to keep the congregation engaged in the sermon by frequently varying the form and style of the message. However, that variation must consistently come from the text and be appropriate.

### Preaching Style

The preaching style I commonly gravitate towards is meeting the people where they are. This congregation is not impressed by verbal flair and eloquence so much as by simple, straightforward, and easy-to-understand language. But I cannot say I throw caution to the wind in the language or style I preach. I must still recognize that my rhetoric has inherent, sometimes unintended, effects. But in the final analysis, the Spirit of God is the one who takes what I say and transforms it into a fitting word for my listeners. Again, Sally Brown and Luke Powery point to the truth that "the life- and world-saving effect of the word cannot be accounted for in terms of human wordcraft and performance alone, though there are

rhetorical dimensions to it." (Brown and Powery 2016, 4). Recognition of that reality is essential to preaching successfully to my congregation. A conversational tone and style seem to have the most positive effect on the membership.

#### Preaching from a Manuscript

Formerly, my delivery of sermon material was preaching from a set of minimal notes to guide me in speaking. From there, I went on to write manuscripts that, while never read aloud, were in the pulpit with me as I preached. I have found both methods effective, but each one leaves me with a sense of over-reliance on having printed papers with me. I have made an effort to write a manuscript encapsulating the essence of my understanding, the application of the given text, and then preaching from memory without support material of any kind except the Bible in the pulpit. This discipline has led to a sense of liberation and has helped me feel more connected to the congregation. The more natural conversational style I mentioned is enhanced when I don't consult my manuscript to ensure I am on track. It requires more memory power, but eye contact and conscious connection with the people compensates. As I document in chapter three, the pandemic imposed significant overhauls of this approach.

#### Preaching by Other Witnesses

Aside from the preaching I do, I have implemented a program where personal testimonies of members take place on any month with a fifth Sunday. Not only has this proven to be an efficacious means of

communicating the general sense of God's working among us, but it has also given those testifying a means of expressing how they interpret the practical events and circumstances of their lives by thinking theologically. These testimonies of God's activity in the lives of everyday people powerfully show the dynamism of what Sally Brown and Luke Powery call "the living word of the living God in the world—incarnate, flowing from Scripture, and proclaimed" (Brown and Powery 2016, 7). Several of these testimonies have been extremely powerful and moving, and I am grateful that the church has had such opportunities to hear them. These life stories often communicate with the congregation in a way that might otherwise be impossible for me. The members' response has been overwhelmingly positive, deepening the existing sense of God's immanence among us.

### ***Changing as a Preacher***

Lose emphasizes that "Christian leaders are, first and foremost, entrusted with telling the Christian story." (Lose 2014, 24). This concept highlights a change of perspective that I have been undergoing since beginning my studies in the Doctor of Ministry program. Earlier in the program, for example, I had lamented, in writing, along with many others, the contemporary cultural fact of widespread biblical illiteracy in the church. My thinking has been modified somewhat over these past years. Lose, in particular, has helped me to see that it is not simply biblical literacy *per se* that is the real issue at stake; instead, it is the lack of familiarity with the overarching story of the Bible itself. In other words,

many fail to understand "the plot" and how that is seen and lived in day-to-day life experiences and circumstances. "Our identity as believers is the story we tell about ourselves." (Lose 2014, 85). Therefore, we must see ourselves as being in continuity with and an integral part of the unfolding of the biblical story. I have come to see that a significant factor in the spiritual education of God's people is helping them to see and appreciate that the Bible is also *their* story, and their lives are thus a part of God's continuing story. This assessment is much more helpful regarding where my preaching has to go. Bartholomew cautions, "We should not take it for granted that we and our congregations know and indwell the biblical story." (Bartholomew 2015, 37). Indeed, familiarity with the words, stories and emphases of Scripture is critical, but seeing ourselves as people involved in and a part of God's redemptive history with humankind might be even more so.

"Christians must be able to see themselves in the biblical story and the ongoing story of God's love." (Lose 2014, 25). I try to teach my members that the story of God we read in Scripture is not simply something from the past; it continues now in our lives and gets lived out daily in our relationships with God and the people who are part of our lives. Jesus still calls us to follow him, witness to him, and carry on his work in us and through us.

Inherent in our love for God and his love for us is the concern of remaining in that love as Jesus commands us (John 15:9-12). "Key to developing and pursuing that love is knowing what God says and what that

Word means in our lives. This practice can then become a tool for us in ‘navigating the world that becomes built-in’”(Smith 2016, 35). The story God tells us and the story we tell about ourselves are inseparable from one another in the fullest expression of Christian living. My preaching must steadily drive home the essential unity of the entire story.

### ***My Convictions Amid Life’s Changes***

To conclude, my strategy in preaching to this congregation which God has entrusted to me is not elaborate or complex. As I outlined in Chapter One, my theology remains much as it always was, at least in principle. Still, thanks to the Doctor of Ministry Program, that theology is more profound and broader than it was at the beginning. Tyndale has shown me the value of nuances in thinking about God and others. The studies have also helped me see myself more clearly. For this, I am forever thankful.

Three core convictions have become vital for me to keep in balance as I preach God’s word at First Baptist Church: faithfulness to God, faithfulness to the congregation, and faithfulness to myself.

First, I must remain faithful to God in preaching the message he has given me as accurately and clearly as possible. This necessity requires a great deal of hard work in digging into the text before me with care and all possible precision. This work depends on prayerful sensitivity to what the Spirit of God may say in a specific time and place. I aim to deliver God’s particular Word to these people for this time and in this place. Faithfulness

to God demands the absolute best I can offer to the one who gave his very best for me.

Second, I need to remain faithful to God's people in preaching. The congregation does not come to be entertained by my cleverness in the pulpit. They sincerely desire to hear God's Word here and now. Not only do I betray their trust by failing to deliver God's message, but I also betray God by mishandling the Word he has given, leaving their hunger unfilled with the needed nourishment. God's people, indeed every human being, are indisputably the most significant natural resources on this planet. If, by preaching, I can have some tiny part in calling God's creation back to him, I consider that to be indescribable honour.

Third, I must remain faithful to myself as an under-shepherd of God's flock. My physical, spiritual, and intellectual life needs balance and health. I cannot encourage people to pray if I fail, nor can I promote a deep engagement with the written Word when that is lacking in my own life. I must faithfully exercise the physical, spiritual, and intellectual muscles God has given me before I can preach that to anyone else. As a Christian and a preacher, I acknowledge that my body, mind and spirit are a temple of the Holy Spirit and deserve appropriate treatment.

This "strategy" is neither new nor ground-breaking, but it is doable, with the help of Almighty God and the self-discipline and commitment necessary to one who senses the hand of God in one's life. The strategic methods, styles and approaches to preaching the whole counsel of God are

all subject to the call of *faithfully* proclaiming what God lays on my heart in the manner that best serves that purpose. In the many years of experience that lie behind me with all the failures, missteps, and distractions I have pursued, God has seen fit to take even me and set me in this place as a remembrancer, a proclaimer, a messenger, a preacher of God's Word to God's people. I've tried doing many other things, all disappointing at best. I preach because my heart will not permit it to be otherwise. I preach because, if I may borrow a phrase that has been attributed to Martin Luther, "Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me, God."

The preacher and pastor I am today have been shaped and moulded considerably by the congregation I serve. Throughout the years I have served in this church, I have learned what these people need, what they expect, and, most importantly, who they are. There have been missteps, but they have led to a deeper understanding of who I am concerning this church. That understanding and God's leading and guidance have shown me the path to take.

The preaching practices I have outlined are specific to this congregation. I have learned their desire for practical application of sermon material, balanced preaching from the Old and New Testaments, and a modest, approachable delivery style feeds the hunger these people have for the God who loves them. I preach to who these people are, not who I would like them to be. They are unassuming, godly people who love God, and I, in turn, cannot help but love them. They have shown me their need for a

pastor who understands and walks alongside them, and their ministry has transformed me.

The unique nature of this congregation takes time to explore and appreciate. If I were to pass on some of the most critical aspects of their nature to a successor, I would begin with their desire for practical application in teaching. I would also emphasize the humble and unassuming nature of most members. I would speak of their deep concern for anyone in need and their longing to help others whenever possible. These people need a humble and gentle shepherd to lead them, and given that, they will respond with enthusiasm to kindness in a pastor's leading.

#### Facing Change and Challenge

This chapter has attempted to give some understanding of First Baptist Church in Montreal and reveal who I am concerning this church. Of course, every pastor is unique in their identity, making every pastorate unique. These elements combine into an overall ministry distinct from every other ministry based on the characteristics of the church, the pastor(s), and other leaders involved.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the impact of the COVID-19 virus on churches. Different churches and leaders reacted to the virus restrictions in several ways. Some churches chose to try to remain open, challenging government authorities regarding quarantine mandates. Others grudgingly closed their doors and took to the streets in open outdoor protests. Still, others elected to abide by government restrictions and find alternate

ways to “be the church” in the interim. First Baptist Church chose the latter method as an appropriate response. This reaction fit my desire as a shepherd of people vulnerable to threats of the virus, and the church concurred. The mutually shared concern of the leadership was to protect the flock of God under our care. Here, the synthesis of pastoral and church identity merged to create a response that was our own. The following chapter describes our intervention regarding this challenge.

## Chapter 3: Action Research Project

### *Introduction*

*Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. (Matthew 18:10-14)*

Jesus' parable about searching for the sheep separated from the flock was particularly pertinent to our labours throughout the implementation of this research project. COVID-19 presented us with unique challenges to shepherding God's flock. Congregants were scattered far and wide as churches closed down under government-issued health and safety requirements. Meanwhile, our church struggled to preserve our identity as God's flock and as a family. This project attempted to rise to the occasion by searching out new ways to live out who we are in Christ. The church leadership believed it was essential to take the time and effort necessary to establish and re-establish our shared connections. The project underscored our familial relationships with all participants, both with the congregation we sought to reach and the researchers themselves. Recognizing the unique opportunities that the virus created in these circumstances, we saw a potential blessing in disguise.

The project focused on meeting the congregation's spiritual needs in searching for the lost sheep scattered by the pandemic. Regardless of restrictions

on our physical access to the church building, we had to find ways to keep up the ministries of preaching, praying, and remaining in contact with one another to encourage members' feelings of inclusion in church life at First Baptist Church, Montreal during the COVID-19 crisis.

Enforced restrictions on gathering negatively affected relationships during the worst of the pandemic since the usual methods of interpersonal fellowship abruptly disappeared as a means of support. The government enforced church closures on two separate occasions, from December 2020 to March 2021 and then again from December 2021 to February 2022. Before we felt the full impact of the virus, church attendance had already suffered due to general uncertainty about the nature of what was happening around us. At the onset of the virus, the church leadership had no reliable, systematic process for determining whether we had reached out to as many people as possible or how effective we were. Nor was there any organized means of sharing the weekly sermon or prayer requests with isolated church members, especially for the technologically disadvantaged.

One study indicated that caring telephone contact could prove a valuable resource for ministry, even if less effective than physical contact to break through the loneliness, depression, and isolation many members were experiencing. (Kahlon 2021). According to the study's author, the success of outreach by telephone depended on callers' empathy, demonstrated in conversations.

We had to start somewhere, so we developed an organized process for incorporating those isolated from the church (Beaunoyer et al. 2020, 7). We delivered a series of regular telephone calls once every week or two by our

research team members, intended to help congregants feel a sense of connection, even if limited, with the church. We focused on this alternative way of delivering inter-personal ministry outreach through periodic telephone calls and included sermon manuscripts and prayer lists mailed weekly to interested members. This outreach helped us identify isolated individuals and created a means of continuing spiritual nurturing through personal contact.

#### Opportunity or Problem?

The pandemic highlighted the need for extra effort in communication with members. With personal attendance at church services and visitation ruled out, we required a way to systematically involve as many isolated members as possible in the church's fellowship, attempting to embrace them with the only means we had available. A key concern was the lack of electronic access for many, especially our elderly members. An American survey indicated that over forty percent of Americans aged sixty-five and above do not use the internet. (Zickuhr 2013). We suspected similar statistics would apply to Canada, confirmed by a study done for Statistics Canada showing that while declining over time, more than thirty percent of Canadian seniors remain unconnected (Davidson and Schimmele 2019, 8). We understood that the risks of doing nothing jeopardized the spiritual, mental, and physical health of everyone, again, especially the elderly (Vahia et al. 2020, 2253). We did know, however, that they all had a home and a telephone, giving researchers an opportunity for direct involvement in a ministry of caring.

## Response

The greatest challenge the pandemic presented required us to adapt to contact restrictions imposed by COVID. While there is no replacement for in-person contact and fellowship, our response addressed some challenges with varying degrees of success. Whenever the church building was permitted to open, everyone could attend the service, access the sermon online, or read the week's sermon manuscript, providing alternative means of receiving the preached Word. The different methods of sermon delivery offered a way for me to minister pastorally by preaching encouragement and hope to people who desperately needed to receive biblical comfort in a trying time. The assistant researchers conducted pre-and post-intervention surveys to investigate if our efforts had the desired effects. We also collected data from phone calls throughout the project to develop a picture of any measurable shift(s) in perceptions before and after the intervention. Several members indicated positive and encouraging responses, signalling that our attempts at maintaining interpersonal ministry throughout the pandemic were not fruitless.

## Definition of Key Terms

**Isolation:** Separation from the general church population due to the non-contact dictates of emergency COVID-19 restrictions. This term further applies to shut-ins and elderly members unable to attend services even after pandemic restrictions lifted.

**COVID-19 Restrictions:** these restrictions “mean(s) any quarantine, ‘shelter in place,’ ‘stay at home,’ workforce reduction, social distancing, shut down,

closure, sequester or any other applicable Law, order, directive, guideline or recommendation by any Government of competent jurisdiction instituted in response to the COVID-19 virus.” (Covid Restrictions Definition n.d.). These restrictions affected home and hospital visitation, weddings and funerals, requiring physical distancing and even limited singing. The church carefully observed these government restrictions on gathering as they applied in Quebec.

**Members:** This term applies to church members and adherents who received researchers' calls, inquiries, etc. Members included in the survey represent roughly sixty percent of the church population.

Supervision, permission, and access

While the research team and I acknowledged the need to give our church population the attention and consideration they deserve, we also needed to be sensitive to the right to privacy and ethical concerns related to disseminating possibly sensitive information, particularly prayer requests. To address ethical concerns, we observed the following conditions:

- 1) Researchers signed a consent form before we used any information that could identify them.
- 2) Due to imposed contact restrictions, researchers requested at least verbal consent from members before divulging any sensitive or personal information obtained. The researcher indicated members' permission or refusal on each call sheet.
- 3) Researchers were required to sign a non-disclosure agreement for any information gathered for any reason beyond the defined purposes of the project.

4) Data collected was reported, handed over to me, and kept in encrypted digital form. Paper records were stored securely under lock and key in my residence.

After collection, I instructed researchers to destroy their electronic records.

5) I was guided in this project's ethics implementation by the Tyndale Research Ethics Board and the leadership of the Church Council of First Baptist Church, Montreal.

### Context

The context for this project was my current pastorate, where I have served for over eight years. The church of slightly less than 140 members presents unique ministry challenges as the membership comprises various ethnic and linguistic groups. Members are a lively mix of ethnicities, including Caribbean and African origins, the Philippines, Eastern European, South American, Asian, and Middle Eastern peoples.

The church is located in a suburb of Montreal at the borderline of two distinct communities. First, Hampstead, Quebec, the official church address, is an affluent professional community with a large Jewish population. None of our members are from that area. Second, most of our membership resides in Cote St. Luc and the surrounding suburbs. This area has both a sizeable middle-class population and areas of newly arrived immigrants, many of whom are struggling financially. This latter group represents a substantial proportion of our Sunday attendance.

The congregation is a representative cross-section of the community. Adults between thirty to sixty years comprise thirty to forty percent of the church

population, with seniors making up approximately twenty percent of members. Before the arrival of COVID, we had about thirty children in our Sunday school ranging in age from two to sixteen. Young adults were somewhat less well-represented, with eight to ten young adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty. That began changing with an influx of Iranian immigrants from late 2019 to mid-2020, contributing to an increase in young adults. Unfortunately, the virus rapidly brought this trend to an end. Even when we were permitted to open periodically, the pandemic profoundly affected our regular attendance, with Sunday services only in June 2022 beginning to recover to pre-pandemic levels.

In her book, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, the author talks about the “symbolic texts” that have meaning to the congregation and what attracts people to a congregation (Tisdale 1997, 62). Members’ church backgrounds reflect numerous evangelical and charismatic traditions, various mainline Protestant denominations, and former Anglicans and Roman Catholics. According to many of those I have spoken with, the common attraction and bond they share spring from the familial ties they experience within our fellowship. The ordinance of water baptism for believers is an essential doctrine to most members, who find it a potent symbol of their identity as Baptists and believers. There is also a powerful sense of unity in our ethnic diversity that many members see as epitomizing who we are. Many in our church also refer to the warmth and acceptance they feel that keeps them returning.

In this church community, we understand our responsibility to minister to the needs of all who enter our doors. We see many cases where the stresses and

strains of Canadian immigration policies profoundly affect many of our members' financial, emotional, and physical states. Several elderly members share those stressors, even if for different reasons. As one writer put it, "...human emotions are being recognized as increasingly more significant for understanding the human condition. Yet at the same time the emotional suffering of aging becomes more like a straitjacket for many seniors." (Houston 2011, 173). We wanted to serve all these needs, and the need for continuity in our ministry of help and hope only increased during the pandemic.

Aside from the physical consequences of the viral illness, to which several members, unfortunately, succumbed, the psychological and spiritual sense of loneliness was demanding on everyone. People who built their week around Sunday fellowship faced an irreplaceable gap. Others who depended on corporate prayer or our weekly Bible study had no alternative means of sharing with fellow members. Still others who loved our times of singing together as a church family felt like they were on their own. Members keenly felt the effects of a long and challenging separation from one another. Several members mentioned their feelings of sadness that we could not be together.

I was encouraged to attempt this project intervention because, as their pastor, I felt I was doing something to help them carry the burden in a highly problematic context despite the growing negativity evident throughout this outbreak. Daily headlines trumpeted dissatisfaction with the government's actions, the confusion in hospitals and other institutions, widespread shortages, and the seemingly endless onslaughts of COVID variants. The project attempted to

provide participants companionship and empathy since we could at least share in the struggle to cope.

#### Models and Other Course Materials

When choosing the appropriate materials to conduct this project, I wanted to avoid anything that would not be a natural extension of the existing relationships within the congregation. The approach needed to be something researchers and church members would both be comfortable with. Therefore, I collected the required information in a relaxed, conversational atmosphere.

I used action research as the research methodology for my project because the nature of the action research cycle or spiral fit the church's situation nicely (Sensing 2011, 64). It provided for repeated iterations and facilitated the refinement of our ministry with a member-generated feedback cycle as we went along. The first iteration exposed the congregation to the process, and researchers gained a better understanding of what we must do to maintain the project's goals beyond completion. As a result, we now have a beginning in that direction.

There was an element to this research that helped me see better what was going on in this church despite the “complex and contradictory nature of congregations” (Tisdale 1997, 63). As we discovered in *Intercultural Leadership Competency Studies (DMML 0905)*, my identification with, and empathy for, the cultural mix of the membership inevitably demonstrated gaps in understanding. With a comparatively privileged white, Anglo-Saxon upbringing, I needed to understand better the exceptional life circumstances many members face daily. Trying to understand these frequently complex situations on a deeper level, such

as immigration matters, helped the researchers and me to improve our knowledge and appreciation of one another. During the pandemic, topics such as unity and solidarity took on an increased urgency. Above all, I wanted to ensure that our researchers fairly represented the congregation as fully as possible, and that was one of the guiding principles in the research team selection.

In addition, while the entire course load of the Doctor of Ministry program was beneficial in carrying out the research, the coursework in *Exegeting the Congregation (DMPC 0905)* and *Discerning the Setting (DMPC 0942)* proved to be of exceptional value. These courses also helped me look deeply into the congregation beyond superficial appearances. However, as we learned in *Articulating the Journey (DMPC 0941)*, I needed to remain aware of my motivations and responses throughout this project. I also needed to consider the actions and reactions of researchers and members and the possible influences these factors could have on our perceived success. The additional mental, spiritual, and social stresses imposed by the virus were also substantial and required serious attention.

Throughout the intervention, I worked on focusing my preaching on encouragement (Reid 2006). I also wanted to enhance congregational communication by admonishing and urging members to mutual support in person, electronically and by telephone.

#### Background from Theological and Personal Foundations

The principles of outreach and inclusion expressed in nearly all of Paul's letters to churches comprise a large portion of the New Testament. Paul mainly

wrote to people with whom he no longer had physical contact. Yet, he still enjoyed a close fellowship with them despite his imposed separation and imprisonment. His methods seemed apropos of the situation we were all passing through because, like him, the church was undergoing an imposed separation from one another, which none of us desired. Paul sent letters from afar because of circumstances he could not control. The pandemic's restrictive conditions left many members similarly imprisoned in their homes, cut off from our church.

While today numerous people enjoy technology's benefits, these potential benefits are not universal (Marston 2019). For church members lacking the technology, we relied on something that does work. For Paul, that was writing letters and communicating encouragement to those churches discouraged or disoriented by difficult circumstances. For us, navigating the pandemic meant communicating by telephone and postal services for those members who did not have or did not want to use technological means. A study conducted in 2020 confirmed that many older adults felt reluctant to use the technology even if they had it (Marston et al. 2020, 27-28). Likewise, immigrant populations encountered similar roadblocks, feeling hesitant to adopt certain aspects of technology unrelated to accessibility (Ramsetty and Adams 2020, 1148). Many people in this latter group did not trust online services as safe and secure communication. Given these realities and the high percentage of both groups in our church, we adopted telephone and mail services to reach out to members who did not use computer-based communication.

In the Preaching and Communication track I followed in this Doctor of Ministry program, the vital importance of clear and effective communication was constantly affirmed. Our emphasis was on keeping communication channels open and flowing. For our church, the means whereby we communicated was of secondary consideration. While preaching in person to an assembled gathering remains the standard means of delivering a sermon, it is not the only way. I modified my typical preaching style to include a written manuscript instead of the simple notes outline I have followed previously. Though this challenged my comfort level with sermon delivery, it exposed members to the written version of the message preached each week. Not unlike the discourses and hortatory messages contained in the written record of the Bible, I anticipated that well-articulated written messages could also contribute to the building up of the church. Encouraging participation in a congregation's learning and spiritual development by telephone and mail could help those isolated feel included in the church's life. The chosen manuscript approach appeared to offer certain benefits, but it also had drawbacks, as will be discussed in this chapter.

The Bible frequently references the redeemed children of God (Ex. 4:22; Hos. 11:1; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:7; 3:20; etc.). As God's children, we share a common bond with our saviour Jesus Christ, indwelling us by his Holy Spirit and connecting us to God, our Father. We are, in a genuine sense, siblings or family members. The notion of a family united under God is a fundamental principle to the church community of First Baptist, Montreal. It is especially so for those separated from their human families for economic or political reasons. The

pandemic only added another dimension of separation with which these people had to cope. A family needs to communicate and include one another because we build, strengthen, and help each other in that communion designed by God. “It is not good for man to be alone.” (Gen. 2:18). God did not create humans to live solitary lives in isolation from one another. Thus, we received yet another motivation to reach out with this project.

While it was easy to lament the strange new world the Coronavirus had brought us, this was not the first time unprecedented challenges have arisen before God's people, nor will it be the last. We recognized that in keeping with the overall history of the church, we are not immune to troubled times. A host of issues commonly present themselves as potentially problematic, forcing believers to face up to and wrestle with the realities before us. The book of Acts details the pressure on the early church caused by persecution aimed at individuals or entire groups. People then were scattered far and wide, necessitating the mother church to send apostles to continue outreach. We, too, had to reach out in a proactive way to keep members connected to their home church. The congregation had an opportunity to respond in a God-honoring way, another priority among the underlying concepts of this project.

More recent history further influenced our decision to reach out in this crisis. For instance, during World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings and sermons were inspirational to an oppressed and isolated church (Bonhoeffer 2012). His preaching helped his church maintain a Christian witness during uncontrollable and often dangerous events while continuing to work effectively

under stress. Even amid the chaotic circumstances of the time, he speaks encouragingly of the ultimate victory of life over death in a November 1939 sermon entitled “Death Is Swallowed Up In Victory” (Bonhoeffer 2012, 207). Though our situation was hardly comparable to Bonhoeffer’s Germany, it required us to expend concentrated focus and effort to maintain connections and give comfort and hope to God’s people in potentially dangerous circumstances.

Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated the same call to solidarity and faithfulness in his writing, teaching, and preaching during the upheaval surrounding the civil rights movement of the 1960s in the U.S. south (Kirk 2014). We echoed King’s rallying calls to solidarity, mutual support, and encouragement in our efforts to keep everyone in touch and unified as God’s people encountered another of life’s storms. The survival and thriving of the church throughout history’s most difficult periods provided plenty of encouraging background resources to address our situation.

We had abundant examples from Scripture and human history to which we could turn and see parallels on which we could draw to guide us in our response to the virus. In this worldwide event, no one was exempt from the fallout it caused. Our church experienced several deaths and unprecedented disruptions in our gathering and fellowship, and everything that made us who we are as a church seemed threatened. God, however, did not change and proved himself once again as the only source of stability, hope, and genuine confidence we have. Therefore, efforts to preach, pray together and mutually encourage one another with every means at our disposal took on the utmost importance.

## Other Literature and Cases

The onset and effects of COVID-19 were rapid and dramatic. Despite the speed with which the pandemic overwhelmed us, the availability of research materials explicitly related to this pandemic seemed to improve daily. That research was indispensable since most of us in ministry were caught unprepared for what was coming, and I count myself among them.

One source was N.T Wright's written contribution encouraging people to see the hand of God at work in the trying events unfolding (Wright 2020, 52-53). Others included assessments of the economic and social fallout (Schwab and Malleret 2020). One author called the pandemic the “greatest test of leadership ever known” (Bhagat 2020, 99).

Further validation for the approach we chose came from a study published by the psychiatry division of the American Medical Association (Kahlon et al. 2021). Researchers discovered the positive effect of a program of empathetic telephone calls to adults subject to loneliness, anxiety, or depression during the pandemic.

Given the number of elderly members in our congregation, we felt particular concern for them. An article appeared early in 2020 in the UK health journal *The Lancet*, addressing the potential consequences of socially isolating older adults, calling it a “serious public health concern” (Armitage, Nellums 2020, 2468). Moreover, according to *The Gerontologist*, seniors “most frequently discussed challenges involved social relationships.” (Heid et al. 2021, 51). Social isolation and loneliness heightened as the pandemic progressed (Leclair et al.

2020, 5). A survey conducted before COVID by the American Geriatric Society showed, “Frequency of in-person social contact with friends and family independently predicts risk of subsequent depression in older adults.” (Teo et al. 2015, 2014). We had more than enough evidence on which to base our communication attempts.

According to another study, “Physical distancing mandates have the potential to fundamentally change the way older adults interact with other people and may have long-term impacts on their health and well-being.” (Heid et al. 2021, 49). Thus, we felt justified in using even this most basic means of outreach to mitigate the influence of these factors on our congregation, with an emphasis on our elderly members.

#### Project Methodology and Methods

The selection of researchers for the project relied on the relationship each had with the congregation. I aimed for an environment that encouraged openness without feeling clinical. I wanted the membership to feel comfortable with the researchers who would be contacting them since our small church fosters that kind of intimacy.

I wanted to include the entire church in our outreach efforts but focused especially on those who could not be with us due to age or infirmity. In doing so, I wanted to lay the groundwork for post-COVID outreach since these people would remain affected even after the virus had passed.

Our approach to establishing and maintaining contact with members was via telephone to gather information, and then we disseminated updates like prayer requests and sermon material via mail weekly.

#### Field

All participants, researchers, and our target population were members or adherents of our church. Several researchers had served on the church council, and all had been with the church for many years. They were well-known in the church, and this project gave them hands-on experience of the challenges and blessings of ongoing daily one-on-one ministry. One purpose in selecting these individuals was to practically involve each researcher in a cohesive team with whom members would be comfortable talking. The project positioned the church to encourage this type of personal involvement throughout the congregation, starting with the leadership.

Indeed, the church is much more than weekly gatherings, and COVID profoundly accentuated that reality. The effects of church closures and individual requirements for isolation or minimally cautious fellowship placed us in circumstances we had never experienced. Meanwhile, being a caring community undoubtedly called us to express care not only to those who could be present with us each Sunday when possible but also to include those who could not be there due to the pandemic or other reasons.

When mobile members slowly started returning to church, many others still could not or felt apprehensive about returning to an enclosed worship

environment. Still, we had the telephone to maintain our connection with them, so we used that resource to keep communication channels open.

We conducted our telephone contacts and began weekly mailings throughout March and April 2022. Each researcher contacted members on a rotating basis and exchanged call lists regularly. This step helped to reduce the number of repeated calls from the same person and gave each researcher a chance to speak to a broader range of members, aimed at improving contact between members and leadership throughout the church. We started the project with five researchers, but competing obligations compelled two of them to drop out before the project ended, leaving three researchers by the end. While this condition was not ideal, the remaining researchers finished the project with a manageable, if somewhat longer, contact list that allowed for timely completion.

I received several notes of appreciation for the efforts the researchers were making and for the comfort and encouragement members felt when contacted. Church members readily responded to our inquiries, and many were glad to have the opportunity to pray with researchers, share their requests, and participate willingly. I was also blessed in my pastoral role by having the eyes of several researchers scanning for potential needs as they arose. Another dimension of ministry opened up as researchers helped me monitor the congregation for pastoral needs.

#### Scope

One strategic concern was maintaining contact with those separated from the church and with whom we had limited means of connecting intentionally and

systematically. With the previously noted emphasis on the elderly and infirm, we attempted to contact the entire membership that had indicated a desire to participate. Researchers contacted some members more than others owing to members' availability at the time of calls (e.g. night shift workers). In cases where more than one researcher contacted a member, the response counted only once. A differing response would also count if it reflected a change from a previous inquiry.

I did not measure congregational response to our online preaching ministry since that ministry began sometime before the project started. By contrast, the alternative of mailing sermon manuscripts was a new method of sharing our preaching ministry, and members' response to this was measured.

We also generated a weekly prayer list to include in our mailings. Every member contacted was asked if they had any prayer requests they would like recorded. With their permission, we included the request in a list mailed out weekly along with the sermon manuscript. I updated this list each week as contacts continued. Often, members contacted researchers or me to share an update on the request. The weekly prayer list was designed to promote mutual caring relationships with others, even for those who connected electronically. Copies of this list were also distributed weekly in our church to attendees.

This project examined the general sense of member connectedness and inclusion in the church's life. The distinction of the emotional versus spiritual connection was understandably a question many members had difficulty making. Often, answers were a combination of the two, and I have tried to discern which

of the two categories of answers belonged where that was sufficiently clear. I rated responses that indicated anger, frustration, happiness, sadness or fear to be on the emotional side. On the spiritual side, responses that indicated faith, trust, confidence in and dependence on God, assurance or hope in God were grouped together. The responses were frequently not as clear cut as I might have hoped, but I used my best judgment coupled with my knowledge of the people I serve.

Throughout the project, we avoided making additional ministry changes that could affect people's connection or involvement with the church. We wanted to examine if these measures helped people feel cared for and included as a member of the family of First Baptist, Montreal both before and after the project. We wanted our study strictly limited to the effects of this project on its own to prevent possible confusion.

## Methodology

To begin this project, I assembled a team of assistant researchers, all members, and divided our current membership directory into a contact list for each. We identified vulnerable persons for special attention. Adherents who are not members are regularly added to our directory as a standard practice. Hence, the term member is non-specific in this context. An asterisk identifies actual members on our current list to guide researchers, but they ignored this distinction for all intents and purposes throughout the project's duration. Each researcher was assigned a list of names to contact, which they exchanged roughly every two weeks. This way, members would hear from different researchers throughout the project, emphasizing familial connectedness. Likewise, every researcher had an

opportunity to communicate with as many members as possible, again to build relationships.

For each call made, researchers filled out a Call Sheet recording details of the conversation. In it, we collected requests for prayer and pastoral visitation. I did not provide a script for callers to follow but encouraged them to engage members in conversation since one of the aims of the research was to engage members in a continuing dialogue. This emphasis meant a clinical question/response format would not suffice. We had conversations that reflected a moment in time between the caller and the member. This factor meant that much of the information we had needed interpretation concerning both parties in the conversation when it took place and external influences like the state of the pandemic as it progressed. Thankfully I had my relationships with members to guide me, giving me some understanding of the people involved. Researchers passed the accumulated information on to me for record-keeping purposes, and I visited people when possible or called them when it was not.

Critical to any plan for improvement, accurate measurement required that we knew where we stood prior to the intervention before analyzing or interpreting the results. The action research approach allowed us to look at any shortfalls or gaps in our thinking as we continued this dialogue with the congregation. For instance, making assumptions about members' physical, emotional or spiritual health was quickly shown to be inadequate for determining their well-being. Quick chats at the door on Sunday mornings did not replace the need for in-depth conversations to determine the actual situations the people were facing. The

congregation's voice then catalyzed necessary changes or adaptations, removing the risk of imposing solutions conceived by a few onto the many.

My eight-year relationship with this congregation led me to use this data collection approach. I understood that a simple, informal, and relaxed manner of conducting the surveys would better serve the nature of this congregation. The conversational style of calls from researchers seeking the information we desired was better suited to the context than a highly formalized format. The team obtained information in an approach that would not impose unnatural rigidity on either researchers or members. I kept the questions and possible categorizations of responses focused on perceptions, and I did not want to force any response into a category that didn't fit. While the categories chosen and the responses may lack clinically strict definitions, they did reflect honestly and freely expressed opinions.

Research began with a pre-intervention survey (completed once for each member) from February 27 to March 14, 2022, to capture the feelings of connection with the church as the project commenced. Since all researchers were well-known in the congregation, each member had an equal opportunity to interact with them, furnishing an additional reality check on members' perspectives. We could then compare an individual's responses to inquiries from each researcher.

Data collection took place from February 27 to April 30, 2022. The pre- and post-intervention surveys bookended the data collection period. Did church members perceive the nature of the church the same way as the researchers or

me? Did they see the project as a practical implementation of our stated values? Not necessarily, according to some of the answers received. Some members felt disoriented and disconnected from the church during the pandemic. Such responses were a corrective to any assumption that we were all on the same page.

Interviewees were encouraged to state their perceptions honestly and openly. I did not participate in the data collection activities based on my understanding that my role as a pastor could have had undue influence on members' responses. Because of the power differential in a pastor/member relationship, I did not want members to feel obliged to give an answer that would please me. I restricted my calls to requested pastoral ministry where members had indicated that desire during the data collection process.

Members were called regularly by their fellow members who comprised the research team, soliciting prayer requests and asking if members wanted to be included in our weekly mailings. Each call response was written onto a call sheet, indicating their interest in the mailings and the level of sharing with which they were comfortable for any stated prayer requests. Researchers invited members to indicate their desire for calls from other church members besides the research team, and if so, I would share their needs with attendees at our services.

Analysis and interpretation of the data took place throughout May 2022. As stated earlier, I wanted to understand how members perceived their connection to the church. Since the data I was interested in related to subjective perceptions within the congregation, I chose the following simple method of categorizing the responses. I customized our data coding within a unique context that made sense

(Saldaña 2016). I decided to separate responses according to the general categories the data supported.

Table 1: Coding of Initial Survey Responses (Feb.27 to Mar. 14, 2022)

Initial Survey			
Emotional Connection	Connected	Tenuous	Isolated
Spiritual Connection	Connected	Tenuous	Isolated
Sense of support	Strong	Some	Unsupported
Pandemic personal impact	Negative	Positive	Elements of both

I began with the member’s sense of emotional connection. In an environment that was undoubtedly emotionally draining on everyone, I wanted to know if their church connection gave them any sense of emotional stability. Did the church help them see their situation with hope and confidence? Responses broke down into three categories that I created based on survey responses:

Connected: Members felt their church connection provided sufficient hope and confidence as they were comforted in knowing we were all facing this together, come what may.

Tenuous: These responses reflected members’ sensing emotional instability in the face of the unprecedented challenges of COVID. These members frequently had difficulty seeing how the church could help them deal with the trying circumstances.

Isolated: Answers in this category indicated an emotional sense of hopelessness as the virus continued. Members frequently felt despondent and separated from emotional support despite our outreach.

I then addressed members' sense of spiritual connection. COVID-19 presented a challenge to everyone’s spirituality as well. Every problematic situation calls upon our spiritual resilience. I wanted to determine if their church connection gave them needed spiritual strength. Did the church inspire them to keep going, to sense God in the circumstances? I used the following three categories:

Connected: Member's spiritual bond to the church inspired faith and trust that God would see us through this trial.

Tenuous: While some hopes remained, these members vacillated in confidence that they or the church could weather the storm.

Isolated: These responses indicated a sense of despair that the church could not help them cope. They expressed a deep sense of hopelessness.

In our surveys, researchers asked about the members' perception of church support before and after the project intervention. I wanted to measure if there was an appreciable change in perception following our efforts. The categories for these responses were:

Strong: Members expressed feelings of ample support from the researchers' calls. Members appreciated the calls and cited the encouragement and prayers offered as helpful to their struggles during the pandemic.

Some: Responses in this category reflected members' ambiguous feelings regarding support. Members acknowledged some help but felt it was insufficient to make a significant difference in their opinions.

Unsupported: This category included those responses that did not perceive any help from researchers' calls. Their views of our intervention expressed feeling inadequate as a means of outreach.

The pre-intervention survey also inquired about members' perceptions of the pandemic in their personal lives. I looked at members' feelings about the personal impact of the pandemic on their daily lives and relationship with the church. Did the congregation see the hand of God at work, or was it all meaningless? These responses broke down into the following categories:

Negative: Members in this category saw the pandemic's impact as having nothing to contribute to the life or development of the church body.

Positive: Answers here indicated members' perceptions that good things were coming out of the circumstances. Their outlook on events was highly optimistic. They perceived affirmations of lessons like how important it is to gather together, pray, maintain connections, etc.

Elements of both: These responses showed members' perceptions that while many negative things were happening, positive aspects mitigated the negative.

Call sheets were accumulated and categorized as the project progressed (February 27 to April 30, 2022). After the cycle of telephone calls, a post-intervention survey was conducted, once for each member (April 23-30, 2022). This survey gave us a picture to compare to the before responses. Call Sheets provided a written record of interim happenings in each member's life (frequently identified through prayer requests) that served as a resource for subsequent interpretation of differences in the survey results.

The categories for the post-intervention survey included members' perceptions regarding the intervention strategies used in the project. These indicated a simple Positive, Negative, or No Response to the methods used.

Table 2: Coding of Post-project Responses (Apr. 23-30, 2022)

Post-project Survey			
Emotional Connection	Connected	Tenuous	Isolated
Spiritual Connection	Connected	Tenuous	Isolated
Sense of support	Strong	Some	Unsupported
Perceived effect of:			
Mailed Sermons	Positive	Negative	No response
Prayer List	Positive	Negative	No response
Telephone contact	Positive	Negative	No response

My role as pastor of this church requires me to preach a weekly sermon to God's people. Given that I was in the Preaching Concentration of the Doctor of Ministry program, one of my main concerns in this intervention strategy was getting the Word out to people whether they were present for the sermon in church, watched it online, or read it in the weekly mailings. While the gathering restrictions doubtlessly created difficulty for those who usually are in church on

Sunday mornings, I felt personally challenged to write a sermon for reading while preaching that same sermon to be heard. I did not expect the challenges this would present. I will address this issue further later in this chapter. In addition, I compiled prayer requests into a prayer list mailed out each week with a copy of the weekly sermon transcript to interested persons.

I separated answers into Yes, No, and No Response for the call sheets to simplify our record keeping. The exceptions to that approach were responses to questions about the level of sharing the member wanted in the event of a prayer request. Possible answers were:

Researcher or Pastor only: The need for prayer shared with either or both.

Researcher only: Used for immediate sharing between researcher and member.

Church-wide: The member was comfortable having the prayer request indicated on the weekly prayer list.

Table 3: Coding of Call Sheet Responses (Feb. 27 to Apr, 30, 2022)

<b>Call Sheet Responses</b>			
Verbal consent obtained?	Yes	No	No response
Include in mailings?	Yes	No	No response
Desire to hear from others?	Yes	No	No response
State a prayer request?	Yes	No	No response
Share the prayer request?	Yes	No	No response
Share Level	Researcher or Pastor	Researcher only	Church-wide
Request pastoral contact?	Yes	No	No response

### Ethics in ministry-based research

Our church's tagline, “*A House of Prayer for All Nations*” is central to our cultural ethos as a congregation. This principle has guided our church policies and our staffing of the Church Council, Sunday School, and other administrative offices for many years. The church also had long-standing egalitarian policies

regarding every church office. Men and women work together as standard practice in leadership. A valuable by-product of these policies is that gender and ethnically mixed groups are the norm, not an exception. Ethical principles require that no one, regardless of language, gender, or ethnic background, should be excluded from any office for which they are qualified. Our research team met these requirements and performed their task admirably.

The faithful commitment of members attests to adherence to and love for our common bond in Christ shown to one another. This bond helped us avoid perpetuating biases within the church. The church is composed almost entirely of visible ethnic minorities, many of whom have suffered from discriminatory biases, prejudices, and stereotypes. Each of these subgroups has had some experiences that those outside that group may not share. For instance, police profiling black individuals is a well-known phenomenon in Montreal (Moran 2022). While most visible minorities may experience different forms of racism, this is particularly problematic for black people. Researchers were selected from the various ethnic groups within our congregation to represent, as closely as possible, a cross-section of our membership. I considered existing relationships where we could minimize, if not eliminate, the potential for discomfort for anyone unfamiliar with their co-workers in this ministry.

I also selected researchers based on the criterion that they had some leadership or senior-level role and were well-known by the church population, enhancing our ability to communicate comfortably with researchers and congregational members. I wanted researchers who routinely demonstrated

sensitivity and empathy to the needs of others. In addition, I looked for approachable people, good listeners and gentle in dealing with others.

My personal relationship with participants was a potential power differential since I was their pastor. For this reason, I refrained from direct involvement in gathering data through telephone calls to avoid unduly influencing responses (Moschella 2008, 91). In eight years of ministry among them, however, our relationships are well-established, and people feel comfortable expressing themselves openly to me. Still, I did not want to make that assumption in this project. As the pastor of this congregation, my concern and duty are to protect and care for all members. In addition, this project originated within the governing church council itself. I was accountable directly to them for my actions among these congregants. I also stressed that participants' free and willing consent was necessary for the project's success. No one needed to worry about affecting our current relationship in any way, shape, or form.

Regardless of role, I advised every participant that participation or continuance in the project was purely voluntary and that decisions to participate or withdraw at any point would carry no negative consequences whatsoever. I gave a written guarantee that participation was strictly voluntary, with no pressure of penalty or benefits for anyone wishing to join. I issued an agreement form reflecting non-obligation and included contact information for the church council and Tyndale authorities. I had a neutral third party unconnected to our congregation send a letter of invitation to the whole church family to participate in the research project. This letter helped to eliminate any potential sense of

obligation. The letter also promised anonymity to all participants regarding the publication of the study results, promising that identification of anyone would not be possible. Thus, we averted the risk of potentially damaging or embarrassing attention (Moschella 2008, 99). We gained permission to use the information provided via signed or verbal consent forms where isolation prevented direct contact. Researchers ensured ongoing consent at every contact with isolated members (e.g., prayer requests).

While certain risks (noted above) were unavoidable given the context of this project, the risks were no more than they would have been in simply encouraging the participants to continue community-building efforts, a regular emphasis of our ministry. Whether I had conducted this research as a ministry project or not, efforts to support and encourage one another would still have occurred. Participant involvement allowed me to examine our efforts' impact in a more structured, observable, and controlled way. Prayer requests, for example, were recorded and passed on among the researchers, where permitted, as a standard part of telephone contact with members. Without the members' consent, however, sharing was not possible. I shared no personal information in this project portfolio that could identify anyone. The project intended to measure the impact of the work, not to share individuals' details.

I presently keep the collected paper records in my private personal files stored under lock and key in my home office, held there for destruction one year following the project's conclusion. The Tyndale Research Ethics Board approved this project on January 11, 2022.

## Findings, Interpretation, and Outcomes

During the initial examination of the accumulated call sheets and surveys, no particular impression came immediately to mind. Many responses were about what I had anticipated, some were not, and a few cases among the unanticipated responses disturbed me. However, certain particulars began to surface after repeatedly sifting through the data. This surfacing information needed much contextual interpretation to understand what it was saying.

Our efforts in this project were not unrewarded. We rediscovered the value of physically coming together for worship as God's people, and the survey responses affirmed the importance of prayer for this congregation. The place of the preached Word as a beacon of hope found new recognition.

## Findings

The emotional connection suffered the most in several cases, given the understandable upheaval everywhere. Despite this reality, many felt tightly bound spiritually to their church community.

As previously stated, our elderly members held particular concern for us, given the higher incidence of risk the virus caused them (Heid et al. 2021). We were also concerned about the inability or unwillingness of many of them to connect virtually via internet access (Zickuhr 2013). Several of our older members had a computer in their homes but required some assistance in using it effectively. This help, often provided by a family member, was not always readily available, so they chose to refrain from using this access method. As further evidenced in another study,

“...having access to ICT (Information and Communications Technology) does not guarantee that seniors can and will want to use ICT to its full potential. In fact, research shows that some seniors are not comfortable and that the second-level digital gap based on age continues to widen.” The author continues, “ICT usage competency increased social capital but increased feelings of emotional loneliness as well, and in turn, had no direct influence on social loneliness. In our view, this result reveals the complexity of the link between ICT and psychological well-being. Moreover, it warns against holding an idealistic view of technologies, in thinking that they may resolve all psychosocial challenges that individuals face, especially among seniors. Loneliness is a complex and multidimensional feeling that may not be fully overcome by virtual contacts, as shown by our study and previous studies.” (Lagacé et al. 2021, 9).

While the elderly were by no means our sole concern, they remained a central priority for contact and care. We provided computerized access to those who could or would use it because we felt compelled to do something. Many members made good use of their technology and benefitted from it. Still, it was of limited use to elderly members (Marston et al. 2020).

A few members declined to participate, as they could choose that option. A majority of 79 out of 137 members decided to participate. I had expected a participation level on the order of forty percent. I was pleasantly surprised, however, to see a participation rate of fifty-eight percent of the congregation.

Amid the widespread emotional stress of the pandemic, I wanted to understand where people found themselves at that moment. To mark our starting point, we first administered a pre-intervention survey which included a question about members' sense of emotional connection to the church. Researchers conducted this survey by calling members in March 2022, when Montreal's pandemic was still spreading rapidly. Daily reports reflected continual negative

news on these numbers. The responses broke down as indicated in the following table:

Table 4: Pre-Project Reported Emotional Connection

Respondents: 79

Question: How would you describe your emotional relationship with the general congregation?

Emotional Connection	Responses	Percentage of Responses
Connected	55	70
Tenuous	17	22
Isolated	7	8

A post-intervention survey conducted at the end of April 2022 compared the effects of how the pandemic continued to influence members' emotional lives. Responses reflected a decline of 20% regarding emotional connection to the church, as restrictions on open congregational assembly affected members' emotional health. Despite this project's best intents, the decline in emotional well-being and connectedness went unchecked significantly. Maintaining a positive emotional connection as time passed was becoming more challenging.

Table 5: Post-Project Reported Emotional Connection

Respondents: 79

Question: Since the project began, do you see any change in your emotional relationship with the general congregation?

Emotional Connection	Responses	Percentage of Responses
Connected	38	47
Tenuous	34	43
Isolated	7	10

In addition to looking at members' sense of emotional connection, I wanted to inquire into people's feelings of spiritual connection. The pandemic's emotional toll was obvious even to the casual observer, inside and outside the church. But what kind of impact was this situation having on the congregation's spiritual connection to the church and one another? The following tables outline their responses to this line of questioning:

Table 6: Pre-Project Reported Spiritual Connection

Respondents: 79

Question: How would you describe your spiritual relationship with the general congregation?

Spiritual Connection	Responses	Percentage of Responses
Connected	53	67
Tenuous	22	28
Isolated	4	5

Researchers asked the same question after the project:

Table 7: Post-Project Reported Spiritual Connection

Respondents: 79

Question: Since the project began, do you see any change in your spiritual relationship with the general congregation?

Spiritual Connection	Responses	Percentage of Responses
Connected	55	70
Tenuous	10	13
Isolated	14	17

It didn't prove easy to gauge what was happening here. The imposition of pandemic restrictions affected members in ways that were often beyond my ability to measure. While members reported a marginal increase in spiritual connection, reports of tenuous relationships declined, and those reporting feelings of isolation grew.

Next, I examined the perceived level of support the congregation was experiencing. Before the implementation of the project, a clear majority felt adequately supported. Still, some members only felt limited support, and ten percent felt unsupported altogether. These results underscored the need for special efforts to reach out and embrace members, especially those battered by the ongoing crisis and who thought they were alone. A report in September 2020 noted the necessity to actively reach out, understand and support people suffering from social isolation (Beaunoyer and Guitton 2020, 9).

Table 8: Pre-Project Perceived Church Support

Respondents: 79

Question: Please describe a time when you felt supported or encouraged by members of the church.

Sense of church support	Responses	Percentage of Responses
Strong	57	72
Some	14	18
Isolated	8	10

There was encouraging news, though, following the project, in which members reported strong support from the church. This increase was substantial, representing fifteen percentage points. Reports of corresponding drops among those reporting limited or only some level of support accounted for the difference. While the level of those expressing a sense of isolation remained constant, the increase in members reporting a strong sense of support pointed to the success of our outreach strategy.

Table 9: Post-Project Perceived Church Support

Respondents: 79

Question: Please specify a time when you felt supported or encouraged by church members during the pandemic.

Sense of church support	Responses	Percentage of Responses
Strong	69	87
Some	2	3
Isolated	8	10

In the post-intervention survey, I wanted to explore members' perceptions of how the pandemic affected their relationships with the church. Were the intervention results worthwhile? Was it all bad news, or did some members think there may have been a hidden blessing in a negative situation? The following table indicates those perceptions.

Table 10: Perceived effect of the Pandemic on the church

Respondents: 79

Question: Briefly describe how the pandemic has affected your relationship with others in the church.

Effect of the pandemic on the church	Responses	Percentage of Responses
Positive	20	25
Negative	46	58
Both positive and negative	13	17

The overall effects of the pandemic were seen as primarily negative by the better part of the membership. I was surprised that seventeen percent of the congregation could see the events' good and bad aspects, and a quarter of our members saw positive things coming out of the circumstances. These responses were not a total revelation, given what I know of the makeup of the congregation. As mentioned, many of our members have come out of challenging situations. These people know about heartbreak, persecution, and dangerous living conditions. The courage and positive spirit of determination they continue to exhibit go a long way toward explaining the high rate of positive responses. I plan to investigate the reasons behind their responses in a subsequent study.

I also sought answers to questions about the effects of the significant elements of the intervention, beginning with how people may have perceived the implemented measures. The first to be considered was the sermon manuscript mailed each week.

Table 11: Reaction to mailed sermon manuscript

Respondents: 79

Question: Briefly describe what (if any) effect the following items have had on your relationship with the church. (Mailed sermons)

Mailed Sermon manuscripts	Responses	Percentage of Responses
Positive	30	38
Negative or unchanged	20	25
No response	29	37

Overall, the reaction to mailed manuscripts indicated they were well received by over a third of the membership, corresponding to the numbers requesting inclusion. Unchanged or no responses came mainly from members who had not asked for the manuscripts, with eighteen percent of negative or unchanged responses coming from those who received them.

However, the weekly mailing of a continually updated prayer list was a different story showing positive reactions by just under three-quarters of the membership. Negative or unchanged responses originated primarily from members who declined to receive the list. It was unreasonable to expect a different outcome from those who had never used the list. The following table reflects the responses to the prayer list mailed out weekly.

Table 12: Reaction to the mailed prayer list

Respondents: 79

Question: Briefly describe what (if any) effect the following items have had on your relationship with the church. (Prayer list)

Mailed Prayer List	Responses	Percentage of Responses
Positive	58	73
Negative or unchanged	21	27
No response	0	0

The data above covers the entire congregation, including those who had requested the weekly mailings and those who had not, rendering a more accurate view of how the whole church responded, which was a project concern. After our re-opening, prayer lists were picked up in person by several people not even on the mailing list.

Interestingly, there seemed to be little impact from the telephone calls themselves. I had hoped for a reaction to the calls from researchers by members, but it is, in one sense, understandable. A study by the American Geriatric Society showed that the frequency, increased or decreased, of telephone contact, had virtually no effect on depressive symptoms in adults (Teo et al. 2015, 2019), while face-to-face contact did. Unfortunately, the pandemic left us with little choice in the matter. Perhaps the congregation saw telephone calls as the means of outreach, not the intervention itself.

## Interpretation

A few noticeable trends did surface in my data analysis. The number of years one had been a member or attended the church was a good indicator of the likelihood of noticing positive changes happening, whether via the intervention itself or regarding the effects of the pandemic. Based on my conversations with members throughout the intervention, our situation's most optimistic assessments came primarily from people who had been members for many years. While this is only a casual observation, it may prove interesting to investigate this in future iterations. The church has existed for nearly two hundred years and has seen many difficult days. A few of our older members have attended for their entire lives. Perhaps the past experiences of members who had weathered other church crises assured them.

Physical distance from the church, which for several members is significant, did not appear to play any major role in positive or negative responses. Yet, there was a relationship between member involvement and commitment, indicating that active participation in the church's daily life also influenced positive responses. Deeply involved members typically demonstrated a brighter attitude regarding the notion that we would weather the circumstances successfully. For example, long-time members tended to answer along similar lines and have similar responses to people heavily involved in the church, though that was not a hard and fast rule. Once again, detailed research into the reasons behind responses deserves further attention outside this project's scope.

My main concern in interpreting the acquired data was finding out what the general population of the church was experiencing. Naturally, the intervention could not affect non-participants, so there are other experiences that never showed up in the data. This reality would suggest that further exploring more inclusive research methods is necessary. While participation exceeded my expectations, I would like to explore alternative approaches to increasing the level even more.

My pastoral role in the church has taught me that spiritual and emotional connection to others in the church is often the result of gathering, sharing our struggles, and corporate prayer. The linkage between all of these areas remains challenging to define. Results may indicate that our efforts may not have directly impacted their sense of emotional or spiritual well-being but gave our members what they needed during the crisis. This assertion is reflected in a simultaneous increase in the perception of church support.

The reported drop in emotional connection to the church throughout the research is understandable, given the compound effects of emotional fallout as the pandemic continually pushed everyone to unprecedented levels of personal and social stress. Other research has indicated the devastating impact conditions had on mental and physical health, comparing the consequences to three times that of unemployment during non-Covid times (Kaddatz et al. 2021, 7). Despite our best intentions, the sense of emotional connection to the church dropped precipitously as the ongoing isolation requirements constrained our intervention. Telephone contact notwithstanding, people suffered the trauma of separation from one another and the inherent benefits of in-person communication.

Fortunately, the spiritual connection between members and the church fared better. An increase in the sense of isolation some members were experiencing offset the marginal increase in reported feelings of spiritual connection and the decline in tenuous connections. The telephone contact method possibly even highlighted the dire social conditions we were all facing. While unavoidable during the worst days of the virus, the ineffectiveness of telephones in building a genuine community showed itself in the lack of response to our closing survey's question about the perceived effect of phone calls during the pandemic. In retrospect, the question might have better concentrated on the sense of ministry people perceived from researchers contacting them.

The church and society were in flux due to the virus, leaving any concrete determination of results ambiguous. The good news is comparing the pre-and post-intervention levels of perceived church support. The evidence suggests that outreach and support efforts to members did not go unnoticed. Perceived church support jumped fifteen percent throughout the project. While our telephone outreach may not have reflected what I had hoped to find, members recognized that the church was reaching out to them. Perhaps feeling supported had a different meaning for these individuals. This question, unfortunately, was not asked at the time but needs investigation in future implementations of this action research project.

One intriguing aspect of this research that came to light was what members saw as the overall impact of COVID-19 on the church. It is not surprising that nearly two-thirds of the membership saw the pandemic as negative

with no redeeming value. What is enlightening is that seventeen percent of the respondents could see both the good and bad effects of the virus. In contrast, one-quarter of all responses saw something positive arising despite our circumstances. This optimistic viewpoint speaks loudly of the resilience of believers in the face of adversity. Comments like “This has taught me the value of gathering together” or “The pandemic has made me more aware of the importance of staying in touch with others” were frequent. The lessons learned will be valuable subjects to address in future preaching.

Aside from the lack of measurable impact of telephone calls noted, I also sought opinions on the other methods of intervention used. The mailed sermon manuscripts were generally well-received, but this mode of delivery did not work for one-quarter of the respondents. One issue that may well be involved in this response is the inherent challenge of writing manuscripts that cater to the eye rather than the ear. As the preaching scholar Henry Grady Davis has noted, “The serious writer, the poet and the preacher must write for the ear, not simply for the eye” (as quoted in Kuruvilla 2019, 210). I lean toward the idea that sermon material should be heard rather than read. I had not fully appreciated the compromise involved in adapting what might be a verbally appealing message to a written format carrying the same weight. Regardless of the chosen method, trying to land somewhere between the two affects both delivery forms. This difficulty is not to say that one cannot do it, but that it requires serious consideration of the potential drawbacks of verbal versus written sermons. Just over a third of responses declined to receive the written sermon, opting for the

weekly video sermon for those with the capability and in-person attendance when possible. For those who did receive the written sermon, responses were positive. Several members described receiving the sermon as their week's highlight, which was valuable.

The reaction to the weekly prayer list was the bright spot of the entire project. I was pleased with the response received from members. Just under three-quarters of all respondents asked to receive the list. Several additional members who did not join the mailing list picked up a copy at Sunday services routinely made available each week after our re-opening. Accumulating requests added to the prayer list caused exponential growth in the length of the list week by week. Prayer requests for family, friends, neighbours, and workmates were added daily and published weekly. In many cases, people did not wait for a call from the research team but would contact a researcher or me to make a need known, understanding that they would be the subject of many prayers. The reaction confirmed our church motto, "*A House of Prayer for All Nations.*"

The context of our church is vital to understanding the connections between the accumulated responses. Emotionally, everyone was passing through extreme stress, which took its toll. With so many months of seeing no end and the appearance of endless virus variants, even the most courageous souls tended to get discouraged and downhearted. Indeed, it would have been unfair to expect otherwise. The spiritual connection to the church family doubtlessly suffered as a result, but as the scriptures remind us, it is at such times that the power of mutual

prayer comes to the forefront of our faith claims. The reaction to the distributed prayer list confirms that notion.

The post-intervention increase in the perceived level of church support was another matter connected to the spiritual sense of connection. Effectively addressing emotions about the trying circumstances remained elusive. However, seeing one's name and prayer requests published in a circulating list was likely helpful in feeding the understanding that we were all standing together in prayer, even during physical separation. Every member knew that others were praying on their behalf. Members could pray across the gap, as it were. The increase in members' sense of the church's support reinforces this assertion. All these factors contributed to maintaining the ongoing health of church relationships.

The variety of reactions to the different means of outreach used during the project's duration suggests some interesting paths for the future. While the apparent lack of impact from telephone calls on the emotional well-being of congregants came as a surprise, we should not underestimate its value as a means of communication, especially with isolated individuals. Telephone support and encouragement have been and continue to provide a way to regularly catch up with members' concerns. The communication content seems to be the priority, not the method used. Many of our elderly and shut-in members have deeply appreciated my calling and praying with them when I cannot visit. Perhaps people want to be reassured and prayed for, not simply contacted and checked off a list.

The research team wanted to encourage the church in crisis throughout the pandemic, and I think we accomplished that. As a preacher, I should have

recognized the gap between hearing and reading sermons but failed to do so. In writing a sermon, one can reflect on exploring nuances of the written language, choosing words and phrases that may reflect our preferred style. Eloquence in expression happens when we contemplate our personal choices that we find personally appealing, but it may be isolated from daily conversation. In my case, my writing and conversational style are different but still reflect who I am. In my preaching, it is a more casual, conversational style that I follow. Grammatically correct speech is important, but errors are much easier to overlook. The immediacy and intimacy of the preacher with the congregation keep the conversation going. Colloquialisms are frequently acceptable in speech but unacceptable in well-crafted writing. Specific emphases and even pauses in the tempo and volume of the preacher's voice are difficult to replicate on the printed page. After all, I prefer to hear preaching rather than read it, so disappointment here should not have come as a surprise. I expected the sermon manuscript to have a more significant impact than it did, but I cannot dismiss its effectiveness altogether. Some were indeed blessed; for any preacher, that is all one can ask. With this lesson learned, I press on to find an even better method in the coming days.

### ***Project Conclusion and Implications***

Initial results were encouraging, but I caution the reader that the results of this report are only the beginning of our measurements, and further study is required. A constraining aspect of the research was the project's duration. We

began seeing some changes at eight weeks, but it is difficult to predict whether this trend will continue over the coming months as we apply these practices.

This project aimed to examine our effectiveness in ministering to the congregation during the COVID crisis, paying particular attention to the elderly and infirm. We experienced some success and some failures, but in ways I had not anticipated.

### Printed Manuscripts

As a student in the preaching track of the Doctor of Ministry studies, I had hoped, even if somewhat naively, for a much more robust response to the distribution of printed sermon manuscripts. Here, I had overestimated the content's effect and underestimated the mode of delivery. While content is not unimportant, the same sermon preached in an environment of worship and physical assembly has a different impact than receiving the text in the mail to be read in isolation. Simply distributing printed manuscripts of sermons is no substitute for assembling and hearing the preached word, even if it may sometimes be moderately helpful. Adequately capturing the atmosphere of worship on paper is impossible. Of course, we were undergoing the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and needed to find an alternative, but it was not ideal. While sermon manuscripts may have been of limited value, they were not without use for some members, especially for those isolated without a means of electronic communication with the church during this period. The response to this material is a lesson learned and applies to our online preaching ministry. Perhaps we could have paired seniors up to discuss the sermon or included questions for their

consideration, a practice we regularly use in our Bible studies. Approaches like this may have increased interaction with the sermon text. Furthermore, I need to continue working to keep both readers and hearers in mind when developing sermons to maximize the effect on the congregation.

### Prayer List

Contrary to some other measures, the success of the distributed prayer list was a welcome confirmation of what I had anticipated. I did not expect the high popularity of the list or the level of influence this method would have on members' connection to one another and the church. The list kindled a resurgence of the kindred spirit and bonds for which this church is known. Opportunities to pray for one another have been a long-standing value for this congregation, with prayer meetings always well-attended. Keeping prayer at the forefront of all our ministry endeavours, we can start developing ideas that emphasize this facet of our ministry with great confidence, encouraging and facilitating human contact and mutual support.

What made the prayer list so successful compared to the printed sermon? I only have anecdotal data, but I suspect it is because we typically hear sermons in a corporate worship environment. When that environment doesn't apply, as in the case of COVID, sermons can lose some effectiveness. The same holds for attending a public speech of any kind. It's one thing to be there and hear the speaker and quite another to read or watch the address online after the fact. The mood and immediacy of the environment contribute a lot to the effect of any public discourse.

Prayer, on the other hand, is quite different. Of course, the benefit of corporate prayer is a great blessing to many and has its place. But there is a personal, private and intimate aspect of prayer that is unmatched by any other practice. We communicate with God uninhibitedly, especially when we pray alone. Even the thought that others pray for us can encourage us amid our struggles. Could this be why the prayer list was so popular compared to the written sermon? I cannot say with certainty, but my thinking leans in that direction.

#### Telephone Contact

Even the most well-intentioned telephone contact with members could not replace personal physical fellowship with one another. Our efforts, however, were not aimed at replacing physical contact with members but were intended to supplement that contact when no other way was possible. Once the telephone call has ended, members return to their struggles against loneliness, depression, and the ever-present sense of isolation that threatened many, particularly our seniors. This reality hearkens back to the need for person-to-person physical contact discussed above. Even as we examine and apply methods of encouraging a return to church for mobile members, we must redouble our efforts to visit the elderly, the sick, and others unable to attend, whatever the reason. During the project, we heard numerous comments and received appreciative letters and cards underscoring the value of our outreach efforts among these individuals. Members received encouragement talking with researchers, their prayers with and for members, and sometimes the written sermon. All of these contributed in some

way to the support of members. As restrictions lift, a crucial focus must be on our ministry efforts to establish and train visitation teams to minister to these vulnerable souls, emphasizing the human need for fellowship. The pandemic clearly showed everyone the value of in-person connection, including all members. The companionship and comfort found in personal visitation directly contribute to the physical, mental, and spiritual health of those visited and those ministering in this way.

Unquestionably, the most effective component of our approach was the circulating prayer list. Even now, list mailings continue for those who desire them, and copies are available weekly to attendees. Future outreach methods will continue to make limited use of manuscripts, acknowledging the drawbacks. Still, they must include developing and regularly promoting the prayer list and encouraging church-wide participation.

### Assembling Together

The pandemic showed us the importance of accommodating shut-ins as we encourage church leaders and members to unite. For instance, this change could be partially implemented by offering them transportation to weekly services. This approach would not have worked during the pandemic's shutdown of churches, but as conditions for socializing improve, there is no reason to ignore the profound value of meeting together. Online sermons as well might be seen by some as a marginal improvement over isolation. Still, nothing compares to the scriptural admonition to not neglect meeting together (Hebrews 10:25). We have learned an important lesson regarding corporate assembly. One of the

consequences of repeated shutdowns is apparent in the current situation where many worshippers have left churches, choosing to watch services or sermons online passively. According to other leaders I have spoken with, this new trend of watching services online rather than attending in person confronts several churches in our area. Searching for ways to encourage a physical return of members to houses of worship deserves further research. Our church will emphasize biblical teaching on the value of interpersonal fellowship as we develop strategies to promote communal worship in the coming days.

Naturally, some elderly and infirm members will always be unable to be with us in our services. The pandemic has emphasized the need to think of them as a vital part of our church congregation, and efforts to include them in our support for members must retain a strong focus. Regular telephone ministry is possible even when visitation is not. The important thing is not to leave them feeling forgotten.

The pandemic profoundly affected every aspect of daily life, and our church was no exception. As pointed out earlier, however, we were learning critical lessons about how a life of faith can positively contribute to changing believers' perspectives. Isolation itself may have prevented the spread of the virus. Still, the social consequences of that action were, in many cases, overwhelmingly challenging for those affected by these measures. Following the re-opening of the church building, many people mentioned the reassurance of being with people who care and are willing to pray about matters of concern. The rapidly rising return of attendees to the sanctuary on Sunday mornings proves these people want

to be together. While that is a good thing, it highlighted the plight of those who remain separated, and we cannot forget them regardless of circumstances.

The fear of contracting COVID and the loneliness imposed by the restrictions was a particular concern, especially for our elderly members, who comprised a high-risk group. As Houston astutely observed, “We only experience loneliness because we have also experienced relationships. Various disabilities of age, disease or infirmity, we have seen, may make us feel excluded.” (Houston 2011, 183). Fortunately, praying with members via telephone and the prayer list distributed during our multiple closures provided these members with some alternatives. Except for the phone as anything more than a convenient mode of contact, the sermon manuscripts proved moderately helpful to a small group of shut-ins. Members expressed appreciation for the research team’s intervention, even if it was modest compared to the overpowering impact of the virus.

While things have now returned to some level of normalcy, this does not mean we forget the lessons we learned or the project is closed. Reaching out to support isolated members remains a priority, and we are creating teams of visitors to continue our mission in this area. We make an effort to encourage ongoing, in-person fellowship for the entire congregation. My preaching frequently emphasizes the value of community and sharing in study and discussion. Results of these invitations so far point to increased participation in both Sunday morning worship and our Bible study and prayer groups.

## Response to the Intervention

Overall, the membership understood and appreciated the purpose of the intervention as an attempt to maintain and even enhance the sense of family connection we share as believers. Our outreach methods may not have been my ideal, but the calls, notes and encouraging comments expressed satisfied researchers with a well-done task.

Like most churches, the pandemic did affect our church culture in both positive and negative directions, with the focus of that reaction largely dependent on each member's perspective. The notion of familial identity took on intensified significance for many, as is borne out by the enthusiastic return to our services. For example, even higher participation by a broad range of members has been evident in our prayer and Bible studies. The pandemic has shown us all the deep meaning of belonging to a caring church family.

Different people may have individual conceptions of our future together. The consequent dialogue raised by this intervention allows us to encourage open discussion of these ideas and actively pursue the exploration and development of new ones. We saw how people perceived the church's outreach efforts throughout this troubling period. We must encourage members' insights further and develop an inclusive, widely shared vision of where we need to go. We learned that church members sometimes could see what the leadership did not and how important it is for us to listen to these voices in the future. Despite the research team expressing generally positive and hopeful attitudes as we conducted our work, a few members spoke oppositely. As Savage and Presnell stress, "our theological maps

can rapidly become outdated.” (Savage and Presnell 2008, 63). That requires developing new ones, and we must listen carefully to the stories, even if conflicting, of the impact of traumatic events on peoples’ lives (Savage and Presnell, 71). We require changes in our thinking, actions, and perceptions, as invariably happens when we stop and ask questions. Now, we can begin creating tools and methods to help us mine for the information we need to shape our mutual destiny. We will continue searching for effective ways to reach all members now that the pandemic restrictions have ended. Continued exploration of different research approaches offers a way to be more responsive to our entire church family's needs and concerns, thereby deepening our existing bonds in Jesus Christ.

#### In Retrospect

Reflecting on our outreach intervention, I would do a few things differently today. First, I would have had a full complement of researchers involved in the project, making the process a little less demanding on our small team and allowing for backup personnel for anyone who had to drop out. Next, I would set a greater time frame for the project. Eight weeks was minimally sufficient, but twelve weeks or even more would have been even better in helping us to gauge what was happening better.

The individual measurables of the research also need to be considered. The telephone method of communication was not ideal, though it was the only means available to us throughout the quarantine periods. I would have been wiser to consider its potential more fully. Telephone conversations may sometimes be

helpful to certain people but are not a replacement for in-person contact. The importance of creating and maintaining ongoing visitation teams for shut-ins has become quite evident. A pastor cannot and should not expect to meet these needs alone.

I have learned something of value regarding the sermon manuscripts. Today, as we do for Bible studies, I would encourage recipients to engage the manuscripts by supplying questions for consideration and further discussion in pairs or groups. Reading a sermon alone and uninvolved with others may help some people. Still, the Word is to be mutually shared because that is a fertile place for spiritual growth and maturation as we contemplate Scripture together. The results of the intervention do not in any way lessen my valuation of the ministry of preaching; instead, they increase it. Understanding that preaching has historically been the voice of the proclaimer to the assembled people only underscores the essence of preaching. The “voice crying in the wilderness” still applies to preachers (John 1:23). A preacher can proclaim the gospel via the printed page to be sure, as is demonstrated in the New Testament letters and the Bible itself, for that matter. Still, nothing matches the power of the Word proclaimed in the person of the preacher. Jesus preached, the apostles preached, and that has continued until today. Preaching retains its glory, despite my imperfect implementation of delivery methods throughout the pandemic.

As mentioned above, the prayer list stood out for its efficacy, and we continue to distribute that list now. Perhaps one change I would consider would

be the formation of prayer teams, again as a reinforcement of mutual fellowship that underscores the value of praying together.

We were facing an unprecedented situation, so we moved in the only way we knew how. However, important lessons have been learned, and we hope this newfound wisdom will serve us as we move into the future together.

The intervention did go looking for the lost sheep, and we found them, doing our best to preach encouragement and hope online and on paper to people who were going through great difficulties. We prayed together for comfort for those experiencing loneliness and loss. And the flock was kept together for our Master in our efforts to maintain communion and fellowship. With this crisis mainly behind us, we see that the flock has survived, returned, and even continues to grow past pre-pandemic levels, for which we give thanks to our great shepherd, Jesus Christ.

## **Conclusion**

The tripartite nature of the Tyndale Doctor of Ministry program was a profound blessing. Examining my spiritual self-understanding, my ministry to the church, and finally, the questions and answers the intervention of the action research project provided gave me a fuller understanding of my identity and my place in serving God by ministering to his people.

Any attempt to sum up my journey throughout my life to this point must necessarily risk sounding inadequate. The same holds for the last four years in the Doctor of Ministry program. The transformation I have seen in myself, coupled with a newfound sense of direction, has been astonishing. As many of my colleagues head toward retirement, I feel a renewed calling and purpose in my ministry. My deepest desire is for the reader to glimpse the God-ordained synthesis of many elements coming together at the right time in my personal, professional, and academic life.

The profound enrichment of my spiritual life by the outstanding teaching staff of Tyndale and the many colleagues with whom I studied is something for which I will always be grateful. I am encouraged by our many opportunities for input and feedback on each other's lives and ministries. The fertile environment for growth that Tyndale provides among students remains a rich resource even as I leave this program. Without hesitation, I would turn to many of these fellow

students for advice or suggestions. I could not find that anywhere before I began this Doctor of Ministry program.

The sense of personal strengthening and spiritual encouragement I found at Tyndale has significantly impacted the church where I minister. Many church members have commented on the difference from my early days at the church. It did not take long for members of my congregation to ask me what I was doing to improve my preaching as time passed.

Tyndale has only enhanced my love for continuing the pursuit of improvement through education. This factor made everything worthwhile because I entered Tyndale for ministry improvement. As I set out in these studies, I had a double goal: to become a better preacher and a more effective gospel minister. This dual goal has indeed been realized in no small part by my ongoing education in this Doctor of Ministry program.

Of course, the unanticipated challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic tested my personal goals and ministry experience in various unexpected ways. As my cohort began our first year together, none of us could have seen what was coming. I am genuinely thankful that I had the opportunity to prepare for this baptism of fire with the tools Tyndale made available to me. I don't care to think of what it might have been like to attempt to minister in the pandemic environment without the resources the Doctor of Ministry program provided for me. This idea is what I meant earlier in this portfolio when I said that God draws so many elements together at just the right moment for us to minister to others at such times.

The situation demanded action, and I was blessed to have an approach to ministry made available through the participatory action research project by which I discovered several lessons that will always stay with me. I learned that things are not always what they appear to be on the surface, and with good, in-depth research, asking questions, and listening to people, there is much to learn for the novice and the experienced.

As I began my studies, I made a lot of assumptions about people, some justified and some not. The Doctor of Ministry helped me see that assumptions should not be trusted, especially in today's ministry environment. I also discovered how much I did not know about those to whom I minister day after day. Part of being a responsible minister of Christ is profoundly loving the people he loves, which cannot happen from a distance or by chance. It takes time, energy, and effort to know people, their lives beyond the church doors, and the challenges and difficulties people deal with regularly. But the result is well worth the effort. Tyndale helped me to see this in a way I have never before appreciated.

In addition, I learned much I did not know about others and myself. Digging into these issues is essential to continuing this journey of discovery that the Doctor of Ministry has initiated, and I look forward to what is to come.

There remains much to do and learn, but now I have been equipped with at least a workable toolkit. Tyndale has invigorated me, giving me hopefulness and confidence as I look to the future. I have benefitted, personally and professionally, and so has my church. I am a better pastor, and the church is a better place. There

is nothing more that I could ask. For this, I give thanks and glory to God that he led me to Tyndale and this program

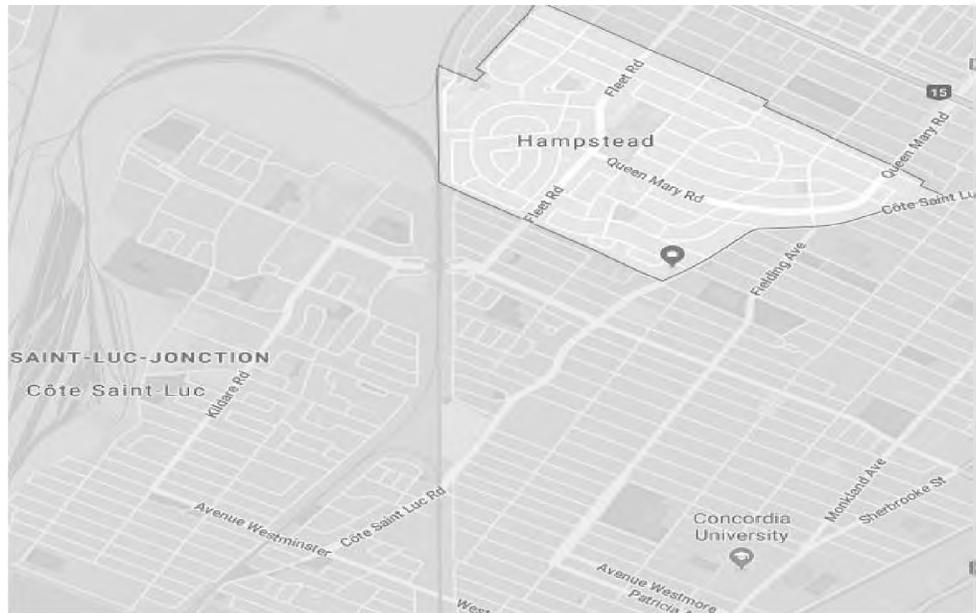
## **Appendices**

*Appendix I - Area Maps*

Hampstead relative to downtown Montreal

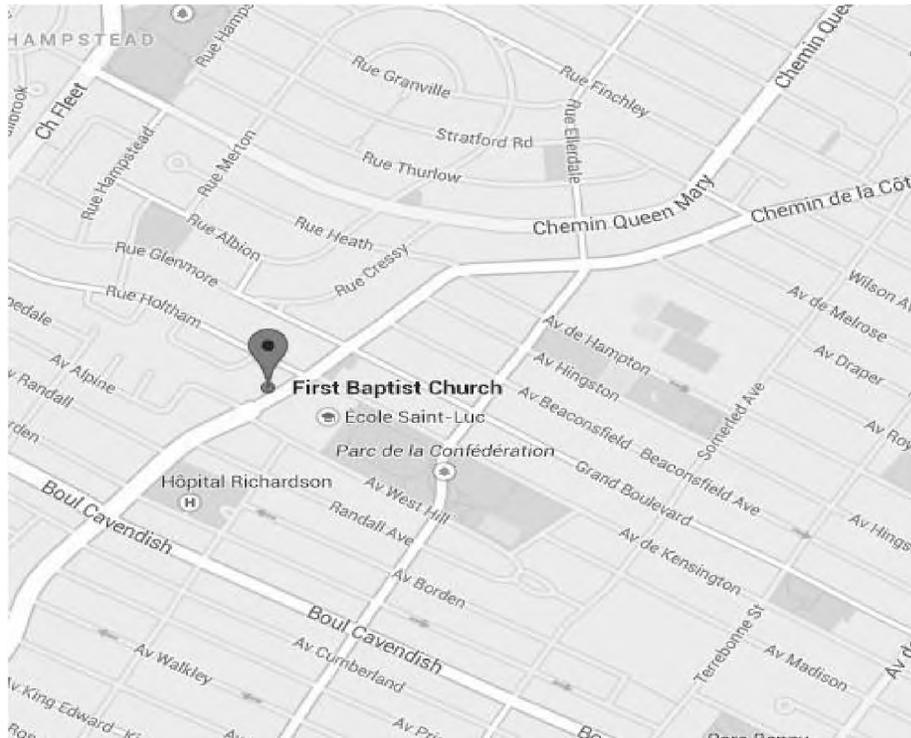


Hampstead relative to Côte St. Luc



(Marker is church location)

## Location of First Baptist Church, Montreal



## Schools located near the church



Nearby public parks and recreation areas



**Appendix II - Demographic Details**

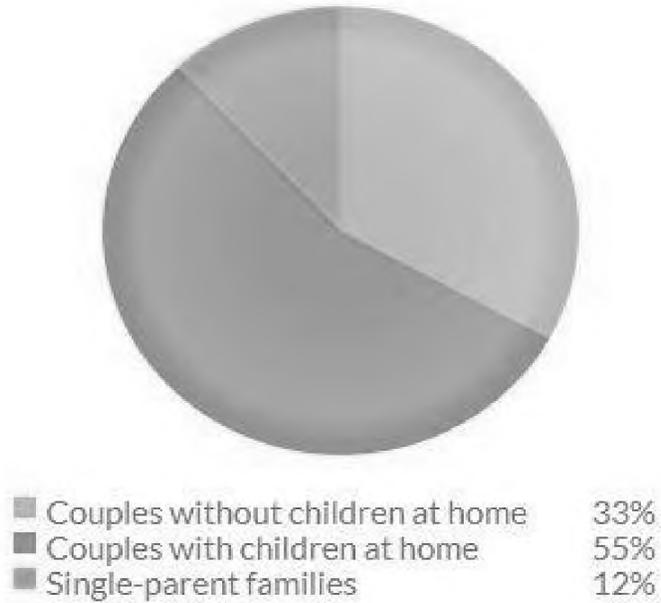
Percentage of Jewish people as a percentage of the city population.

**Jewish population by city as a percentage of total population (list does not include cities in Israel)**

Rank	City	Country	Percent	Number
1	Qirmizi Qesaba <sup>[99]</sup>	 Azerbaijan	100	3,300
2	Kiryas Joel <sup>[100]</sup>	 United States	99	22,000
3	Deal	 United States	91	600 <sup>[citation needed]</sup>
4	Beachwood <sup>[101]</sup>	 United States	90.4	10,700
5	Hampstead <sup>[102]</sup>	 Canada	74.2	5,170
6	Côte-Saint-Luc <sup>[103]</sup>	 Canada	69.1	20,146

**Hampstead – Population by family type**

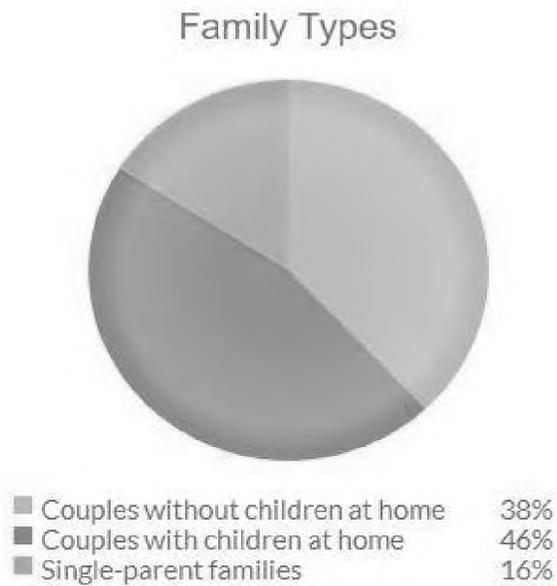
**Family Types**



## Hampstead – Household Incomes

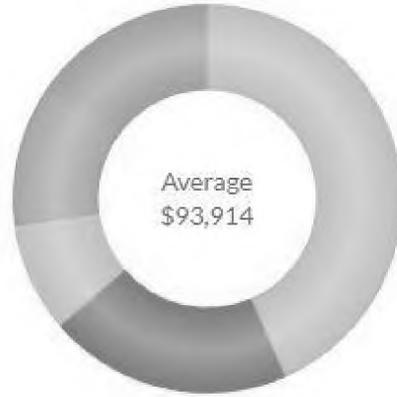


## Côte St. Luc – Population by family type



Côte St. Luc – Household Income

Household Income



■ Less than \$50,000	43%
■ Between \$50,000 and \$80,000	20%
■ Between \$80,000 and \$100,000	9%
■ Between \$100,000 and \$150,000	12%
■ More than \$150,000	15%

*Appendix III – Photographs*

The church:

South façade of FBC from Côte St. Luc Road



Sanctuary and Narthex



Preserved stained-glass window and Memorial plaques in the Narthex



The Neighborhood:

High School and arena



Low-cost housing and tenements near the church



Area high-rise apartments



Typical Cote St-Luc private dwelling



Typical private homes on the Hampstead side



Nearby religious institutions:



Area strip mall



A few of the area's small businesses



*Appendix IV Supporting Documents*

Letter to Participants



First Baptist Church  
6215 Cote St. Luc  
Hampstead, Qc. H3X 2H3  
(514)489-2110  
Rev. Ed Carruthers (Pastor)

April 3, 2021

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to join me in this outreach program to the members and adherents of First Baptist Church, Montreal. This letter will explain the strategy which we will use in keeping with the intentions of the project I am conducting as part of my Doctor of Ministry program at Tyndale University, Toronto. It is my hope that we can become even more effective in our outreach and communication with one another on a continuing basis long after this original project has been completed. Please know that your cooperation is deeply appreciated and highly valued.

Before outlining the procedure to follow, it is vital that you know that your participation is completely voluntary and carries with it absolutely no obligation on your part to continue to participate to the end. You are free to stop at any given point and may do so with no consequence of any kind. Instead, my desire is that this may be a blessing and joy for you from start to finish.

You will find attached a list of names and contact information for a subsection of everyone in our church contact list. These lists will be your contacts for the coming month, after which we will exchange lists for the

second and then the third months when the project will close. Of course, you are free to contact anyone else who comes to mind as well. I am asking that you contact the people on your list every 1-2 weeks as you are able. The information required for each call is outlined below. If you have any questions, please contact me at your convenience.

I will be preparing a text of my weekly sermon and a prayer list for interested individuals. The form below indicates the general approach I foresee for each call. If you have any feedback or modifications in mind, feel free to let me know.

Pastor Ed

Assistant Researcher Informed Consent Form

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Study Name:** *Establishing and maintaining inter-personal ministry to members of First Baptist Church, Montreal, during the COVID-19 pandemic*

**Researcher:** Rev. Edward Carruthers, 6215 Cote St. Luc, Hampstead, Qc.  
H3X 2H3, (514) 489-2110 (Office),

**Purpose of the Research:** To measure the effectiveness of an outreach ministry of mail and telephone contact, particularly related to isolated church members.

**What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research:** You will contact individuals on your assigned contact list, especially those who are isolated, praying for and soliciting prayer requests on a regular (weekly or bi-weekly) basis for the duration of the research project. The project will last from October to January 2022, and the weekly time required is left to your discretion.

**Risks and Discomforts:** I do not foresee any risks or discomfort from your participation in the research. You are free to opt-out of answering any questions you do not want to answer, and your decision to participate or decline will not affect our relationship in any way. I count on your complete honesty and openness, and you have my promise of the same.

**Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You:** The research will provide you with an opportunity to engage in one-to-one personal ministry with members of the congregation. We hope this ministry will deepen the relationships we share and strengthen the bonds of love and care in our church family.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary, and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer or discontinue will not influence the nature of your relationship with Pastor Carruthers or First Baptist Church, or any other group associated with this project either now or in the future. If you withdraw from the study, I will delete all possibly identifying data collected from you.

**Confidentiality:** All information you supply during the research is strictly confidential. Unless you expressly indicate your consent to publish your name, it will not appear in any report or publication of the study. Your data will be safely stored in a locked facility for two years (paper records) or three years (for electronic data). Only I will have access to this information. Following the retention period, I will destroy the data. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

**Questions About the Research?** If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, including your rights as a participant, please feel free to contact Dr. Mark Chapman, Director of the Tyndale University D. Min. program, either by telephone at (416) 226-6620, extension 2208 or by email [mark.chapman@tyndale.edu](mailto:mark.chapman@tyndale.edu). You may contact him directly should the need arise.

This research is conducted under the review and approval of Tyndale University's Research Ethics Board and conforms to the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines standards.

**Legal Rights and Signatures:**

I ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) consent to participate in the project entitled *Establishing and maintaining inter-personal ministry to members of First Baptist Church, Montreal, during the COVID-19 pandemic*, conducted by Rev. Edward Carruthers. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving my legal rights by signing this form, and my signature below indicates my consent.

**Signature** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date**

Participant

**Signature** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date**

Principal Investigator

Confidentiality Agreement

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree with the following statements:

**1. I understand the need to keep all the information I receive CONFIDENTIAL throughout this Ministry Project conducted at First Baptist Church, Montreal.**

2. I understand that I may obtain confidential information during my participation in the mentioned ministry project. As a condition of involvement with the assistant researcher team, I undertake to keep any information I obtain regarding any member in strict confidence while engaged in this research. I will do this under applicable laws, including those that require mandatory reporting.

3. I also agree never to disclose or remove any confidential material of any kind from the premises of **First Baptist Church, Montreal**. I will turn over all data obtained during this study to the researcher (Rev. Carruthers).

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Participant)      Date

Contact Record

**Your**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name of Contact**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Date of contact:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**EXPLAIN:**

**On first contact with the people on your list, please explain the purpose of your call. You can tell them that we are making an effort to be a more communicative church, in closer contact with one another, and reaching out to support and encourage them in whatever way we can.**

**You will also want to ask their permission to call back every week or two in order to maintain and deepen the connection. If they do not wish to be contacted, simply thank them and remind them that they are welcome to contact the church at any time.**

**INQUIRE:**

**Ask if your contact would like to be included in the weekly distribution of the sermon text (with no obligation). If they would prefer to receive the text by email, please enter the email address here:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**You can also ask if they have any specific prayer requests which you can record below:**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**CONFIRM:**

**Very Important!**

**Please confirm if they wish to have their prayer request published in the weekly circulation of the prayer request list.**

\_\_\_\_\_ **YES**                      \_\_\_\_\_ **NO**

**In either event, you are encouraged to pray with them on the phone as you speak to them.**

**ASK:**

**Do they want the Pastor to contact them directly?**

\_\_\_\_\_ **YES**                      \_\_\_\_\_ **NO**

**Once you have completed the above contact record, please store it in a safe place, since I will be collecting all of these records as the project progresses. You may make copies of this blank form as required, or you may request electronic copies from me as required at**

**Important Note: For privacy purposes, please do not store copies (paper or electronic) of these forms once they are filled in. ALL information is to be treated with the utmost ethical standards of privacy and no information is to be shared without express consent. Please turn over all records to the Pastor.**

Call Sheet

**Instructions:** *Please use one form for each call you make.  
Record the details of your conversation below:*

**Member's name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date called:** \_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS WITH A CHECK-MARK

**Is this your first contact with this member regarding this ministry?**  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ (If YES, please fill out an Initial Contact survey)

**Did the member give you verbal consent to share the information contained here?**

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

**Does this member want to be included in the weekly mailing of our prayer list and the weekly sermon? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_**

**If Yes, please confirm the mailing address or mark changes below:**

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**Is the member interested in hearing from other (non-participating) members of the congregation?**

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

**Call details/notes:**

**Prayer request(s):**

**Can you share this request for prayer? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
(If No, do not record)**

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**What level of sharing is permitted by the member?**

- 1) Myself and/or the pastor \_\_\_\_\_ 2) Research team only \_\_\_\_\_  
3) Entire church \_\_\_\_\_

**Does the member want the pastor to contact them?**

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Initial Contact Survey

The purpose of my call today is to let you know that the church is making an effort to better communicate with all our members. As a valued member of our church community, we would like to begin by asking you to answer a few questions.

**How would you describe your emotional relationship with the general congregation?**

**How would you describe your spiritual relationship with the general congregation?**

**Please describe a time when you felt supported or encouraged by members of the church.**

**Briefly describe how the pandemic has affected your relationship with others in the church.**

**Your identity will remain confidential. Thank you for sharing!**

Post-Project Survey

**CHECK ONE:**

I am An Assistant Researcher \_\_\_ / Member who was contacted \_\_\_

**Since the project began, do you see any change in your emotional relationship with the general congregation?**

**Since the project began, do you see any change in your spiritual relationship with the general congregation?**

**Briefly describe what (if any) effect the following items have had on your relationship with others in the church.**

**Mailed sermons:**

**Mailed Prayer lists:**

**Telephone contact:**

**Please specify a time when you felt supported or encouraged by church members during the pandemic.**

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