

Staying power: Heim at the helm

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 1, 2005](#) issue

The congregation I serve recently surprised me by publicly recognizing the 20th anniversary of my arrival. I've never understood why longevity in ministry is any more deserving of celebration than staying the course as a physician, teacher, police officer, plumber, homemaker or spouse. Nevertheless, I appreciated and enjoyed the occasion. With each passing year my gratitude deepens for the great privilege of ministry and for the unique relationship that develops with a congregation over an extended period of time.

I've been thinking a lot about vocational longevity these days. The truth is I never thought I would stay anywhere for 20 years, never thought I had enough to say and do to last that long. After all, if you are a lectionary preacher, staying 20 years means that you are revisiting the same texts for the seventh time.

I remember two mentors—who were nearing the end of their ministries as I was beginning mine—who taught me a bit about staying the course. William Laws was a longtime pastor in Columbus, Indiana. He was wise, witty and deeply respected in Columbus and throughout the church. My guess is that he had plenty of opportunities to move but decided to stay put. I recall attending a retreat at which a contemporary of mine said he had been in his first church after seminary for two years and was burned out. He asked Bill if he ought to think about moving. I suspect every young pastor in the room was asking the same question. I'll never forget Bill's answer. He said he couldn't advise anyone when to move, and that the Holy Spirit has ways of helping us make those decisions. All he knew for sure about the subject, Bill said, was that it took him five years just to get started, five years to know his congregation and community—and then real ministry started. We were pretty disappointed. We thought five years in our current congregations sounded like an eternity. But I think he was right.

J. Dayton McCormick, who died recently, enjoyed a long and distinguished ministry in Lafayette, Indiana. I asked him once how one knows when it is time to move. You should move, Dayton said, when you are too comfortable. Your job should always

scare you a little—it should always be a little bigger than you are. That was good advice, too.

At the Christian Century we've had the privilege this fall of celebrating David Heim's 20th anniversary with the magazine. He has served as executive editor since 1998 and has been the heart of our magazine these past seven years. The Century lecture in September provided us the opportunity to recognize David's important contribution to the magazine and to express our hopes that there are many more years of fine journalism, thoughtful editorializing and wise leadership ahead.

In the meantime, from this perspective 20 years feel very much like a precious gift.