

Authority figures: Advice to new clergy

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 24, 2007](#) issue

For the past few years the religion department at the Chautauqua Institution near Buffalo has sponsored a program for new clergy and their families. This summer I was invited to meet with the group, especially to talk with them about prophetic and pastoral preaching.

It was not hard to remember my early years in ministry and the sense I had then that there was not enough of anything—not enough time, money, encouragement or friendships. I remember feeling overwhelmed, with more things to do than hours of the day, and guilty about not spending more time with my family.

My modest advice to the new clergy was to set priorities and keep to a sane schedule. I told them that without a discipline of sermon preparation they would always be behind, frantically putting a sermon together on Saturday night while the rest of the world was eating, drinking and making merry. I recalled for them the day when I decided that I would not miss another of my children's concerts, plays or basketball games. (In his wonderful tribute to his late wife, *About Alice*, Calvin Trillin said Alice believed that if parents did not attend their children's school plays, the government would come and take the kids away.) I suggested to the group that if they were feeling overwhelmed by the demands of the job, they might invite three church members to form an advisory committee to the pastor—most church members respond gladly to an invitation to help their pastor be more effective.

I passed on the best advice I've ever received: Listen for a year or two before proposing changes, and when the time comes, start with a small group of invested leaders—recruit them to support or, better yet, to propose the changes you want to see happen.

As for prophetic preaching, I said that congregations will give the preacher the right to be prophetic to the degree they know her or him to be their pastor. I suggested that prophetic preaching should be done in a pastoral voice and should name a

complex reality that the preacher himself or herself is struggling with.

I recalled William Sloane Coffin's pithy reminder that we are called to be "fools for Christ," not "damned fools." Preachers always need to ask about the intent of the prophetic sermon: Is it delivered to convince the congregation and enable change, or is it offered simply to get something off the preacher's chest? And I passed along an observation that someone made to me early on: Jeremiah was not exactly eager to be a prophet—nor did he chair the religious community's governing board.

The young ministers who listened were bright, committed, lively and gracious. They renewed my hope in the whole enterprise.