Staying power: Reflections on a long pastorate

by Martin B. Copenhaver in the March 20, 2013 issue

Village Church, Wellesley, Massachusetts. Used by permission of Village Church.

I have served as senior pastor at the same church for 18 years. The members of my congregation no longer ask how long I am going to stay, probably because they assume I will stay until I retire (which is a good thing because I assume that, too). Eighteen years is not exactly a towering pinnacle, but it does provide some interesting views. So much looks different from the time I first started.

After all, much has changed over the course of those years, not just in the congregation or in the surrounding culture but in how I see the congregation as well. When I preached my first sermon here at Wellesley 18 years ago I was overwhelmed by the sight of a largely anonymous sea of faces. Now, after so many years, there is hardly a trace of anonymity to be found. As I look out at that same congregation, I am still overwhelmed, but for an entirely different reason—now I see so much. I am overwhelmed by the familiar.

Now I see not just the faces, but faces over time. I see a face traced with grief, and I also see that same face from an earlier time when laugh lines spread like beams of light from the corners of his eyes. I see the young mother trying to keep her son still in the pew, and I also see her when she was a restless teenager herself. I see the potbellied man, and I also see him at an earlier stage when he was fit enough to run a marathon. These days, more often than not, I am confirming teenagers I baptized as infants or young children, which feels a bit like picking up a corner of time, peering inside and seeing it in all its dimensions.

I can even see people who are no longer there. When I stand in the pulpit and look out at my congregation, I can see the deceased husband of the woman who now comes to worship alone. I can see the man who somehow ended up with the church in the break-up with his partner, but I can see the now-absent partner as well. And there is a pew that may be full today but still seems somehow empty because the family that used to fill it has moved across the country. It is like what interpreters of art call pentimento—the reappearance in a painting of an underlying image that had been painted over. In a pentimento one can see both the old and the new somehow together and at the same time.

A pastor who is new to a congregation will not be able to see a pentimento. A new pastor is not able to see the older layers or the people who are no longer there. That kind of pastoral vision comes only over time.

The layering of time adds thick texture to both individual narratives and the narrative of the congregation. After 18 years I not only know the back stories, I also know the back stories of the back stories. I know who has a difficult time getting along with whom. I can sense when a particular person is out of sorts, because I have seen her in enough contexts to be able to sort out the range of emotions reflected on her face. When one person says he is overwhelmed I know not to take it too seriously because he is often overwhelmed, and when another person says she is overwhelmed I take notice because this is something unusual for her.

To be sure, after all this time a sense of been-there-done-that can creep into some of my pastoral duties. This year’s stewardship campaign is numbingly similar to other campaigns. When writing my annual report, I am tempted to lift whole paragraphs from reports from previous years. And after 18 Christmas Eve sermons I have pretty much said all I know to say about the nativity. The congregation, however, becomes more interesting over time, much as a good novel becomes more interesting as each chapter nuances character development and plot in ways that are not possible in shorter literary forms.

I am convinced that the best preaching is done by pastors in their own congregations. That is because preaching is highly contextual. It benefits from deep and nuanced readings of three complex entities: the biblical text, the wider world and the congregation. The best preaching, in my experience, stands at the intersection of all three. A visiting preacher may be able to exegete the text and analyze what is going on in the world with brilliance, but an extra dimension is

added when the preacher knows the congregation, particularly over a period of years. Harry Emerson Fosdick was fond of saying, “Preaching is sometimes like trying to put drops into someone’s eyes out of a ten-story window.” Preaching to one’s own congregation over time may not change Fosdick’s image, but it shrinks the distance. When you know a congregation well, you feel like you are preaching at much closer range. The drops are more likely to find their target.

And, of course, after all of these years the congregation knows me well, too. They know my gifts and how those gifts can be put to optimal use. They also know what gifts I lack and have learned over time how others can help shore up my ministry where it is weakest. They can follow my train of thought, often arriving ahead of me, and they are tuned in to my sense of humor. They know a good deal about my passionate commitments, and they know all too much about my pet peeves.

Most important of all, over time my parishioners have learned they can trust me: I will listen without being judgmental; I will keep confidences; I won’t bear grudges or play favorites; my judgment is largely sound; for the most part, I will not say or do something that is harmful to the congregation. Most pastors are trustworthy in these basic ways, but in congregations like the ones I have served, trust is earned over time, sometimes over many years, one pastoral engagement at a time.

When I first started at my church, I asked the moderator when the nominating committee was going to meet. He cleared his throat and said, “It is not our practice to have the pastors attend meetings of the nominating committee.” He was gentle but firm. I was shocked. At other congregations I had served I not only attended the meetings of the nominating committee, I considered it one of my most important duties.

Fast forward 15 years: the chair of the nominating committee tells me about some of the challenges he faces in filling various positions. I respond, “How about if I come to one of your meetings? Perhaps I can help.” He jumps on the offer, obviously thrilled that I would deign to attend such a meeting: “Oh, would you? That would be wonderful.” I now have an open invitation.

When that kind of mutual understanding and trust exists between a pastor and congregation so much becomes possible. Like partners who have been dancing together for decades, they can anticipate each other’s moves, which means that whomever is leading can use a lighter touch, more gentle and more graceful. In such

instances, grace arises out of familiarity.

The affection I have for my parishioners has only grown over time. That affection extends to those members of the congregation who can be quite difficult. If I were to encounter these individuals in another setting, I might not be as devoted to them, but there is something about being entrusted with the care of someone over time that can soften the heart. As a pastor, I can relate to Franklin Roosevelt's famous remark about Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza: "He may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch." The word *but* may be the pivot point of that sentence, but it is the our that makes it possible.

It is not all rosy, of course. There also is a sense of loss that can come with a longer pastorate. Each year beloved ones die. Parishioners move away or, what is often more painful, simply drift away. Then there are those who leave in a huff—they never got over what you said in a sermon or the fact that no one called when a parent died. These losses add up over a period of years. So these days, when I drive down the streets of our town, passing the homes of those who are or once were members of our church, it can feel like I am surveying a lifetime of relationships, many of which, for one reason or another, are no longer what they once were. This sense of loss is unique to the longer pastorate. Sometimes it is enough to make me long for a fresh start.

Eugene Peterson, who served one congregation for 29 years, is a big proponent of long pastorates: "The *norm* for pastoral work is stability. Twenty-, thirty-, and forty-year-long pastorates should be typical among us (as they once were) and not exceptional." Drawing on the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, Peterson advocates, and for many years lived out, a "vow of stability," which he summarizes in four words: "Stay where you are."

Clearly, Peterson found his long pastorate generative, but I wonder if he is guilty of generalizing from his own experience. I have known pastors, even faithful and effective ones, who stayed too long in their churches. What began as generative and fruitful faded through the wear of time—not through laziness or boredom, but through something like an excess of comfort.

Such pastorates can be like the home a family has lived in for 25 years. Over the years it may have become more comfortable, but after a certain point it is less likely that the ragged carpet will be replaced or the paint will be freshened up. In fact, the

need for such improvements might not even be seen by the family who lives there—ironically, because they have lived there so long, they may see less than a visitor will. The heart and mind have a way of making accommodations for the familiar.

As a young pastor, Reinhold Niebuhr confessed that he found the prophetic edge of his preaching softening—not because he feared criticism from his congregation, but because one shrinks from saying hard things to those you have come to love. In my experience, this dynamic only increases over time. It also goes in the other direction: over time pastors can have difficulty getting honest feedback, particularly when parishioners feel somehow beholden to us for having been there for them at key life events.

Staying fresh in a long pastorate requires not only a willingness to change, but also a certain drive toward change. That change may come in the form of something like a new programmatic initiative, but for some the change can be as simple as moving some furniture. One pastor I know rearranges his office every year or two and has changed the location of his office three times. He swears that each time he has made such a move his perspective on ministry has been enhanced. People often decry “change for change’s sake,” but I am beginning to think there is something to be said for it.

Inevitably, the mere passage of time brings about its own changes. I am not the pastor I was when I started in this congregation. When I first arrived I was younger than most in the congregation. Now I am older than the average parishioner. What has changed is not only the number of gray hairs on my head. Just by virtue of my getting older my role in the congregation changes as well. A friend who has served one congregation for many years reflects, “When I came here I was the young guy—and then I wasn’t. I knew suddenly that what this congregation really needed was a sage, and I couldn’t even say the word without giggling, let alone imagine ever applying it to myself. But I knew that to be faithful I had to grow up or get out.”

I find it particularly chastening to recognize that I have known pastors, even savvy ones, who do not see when it is time to leave. They could spot such a time in another pastor’s life from a hundred paces, but not in their own. Knowing when it is a good and appropriate time to leave is more art than science, of course, but that may be just another way of saying that it is difficult to know.

The challenge can be complicated by economic considerations. Many pastors are retiring later these days. Is that because they continue to be effective at a later age or because their pensions took a hit during the recent economic crash and they cannot afford to retire? So many factors influence our thinking, and we are not always able to sort them out on our own.

In my own setting, I have toyed with the idea of giving one or two trusted members a poison pill, so they could slip it to me when they sense I have stayed too long. As a congregation we practice communal discernment with every manner of decision before us. We are particularly intentional in our discernment about important matters. So it is interesting that I find it hard to imagine how to engage the congregation appropriately in communal discernment with a question as important as, How long should I stay on as pastor?

So I am left largely to my own perceptions, as well as the counsel of friends and family. I have learned a few things by observing other pastors. Clearly, a severe loss of energy is a sign that one should leave, but noting where a pastor's energies are deployed can be telling as well. Most of us lose energy for routine eventually, but if there is a lack of energy for anything new, that is a sign that one has stayed too long. Some pastors devote more and more energy to commitments outside their congregations—to church-related organizations and social service organizations, for example—and that can be a sign, too.

I have noticed that some pastors, the longer they stay, make more references to the past than to the future of their congregations, and that seems telling.

I would also add that a telltale sign a pastor has been in a congregation too long is when he or she makes frequent reference to how long they have been there. I am hesitant to add that because, increasingly, it describes me.

Before we can fully assess the benefits of a long-term pastorate, it is necessary to consider what happens after a long-term pastor leaves. Successors of long-term pastors often struggle, many remaining only for a few years.

There are various reasons why this is so often the case. After so many years, parishioners can have a hard time transferring their loyalty. Also, without anyone intending it, over time a pastor's approach to ministry begins to be assumed as normative, as if it is the only way to do things, and the successor can seem guilty of diverting from that norm. This dynamic is all the more pronounced with a long

pastorate.

Whatever the reasons, the experience of so many who follow long-term pastorates should give us pause. It may not be possible to know if a pastor has stayed too long until a number of years after that pastor has left. It may be only then that anyone can know if the long-term pastorate equipped the congregation to thrive after the long-term pastor leaves.

In the meantime, a mother tells me I cannot possibly retire because ever since her three daughters were little they envisioned me officiating at their weddings. Another parishioner hands me plans for her memorial service. Although she is in good health, she assumes that I will be there to carry out these plans. Those kinds of encounters are happening more frequently these days.

So I remind myself that Paul planted, Apollos watered and the rest of us are just passing through. In the church, none of us pastors are indispensable. That is a good thing because, in the larger scheme of things, none of us will remain for long. Only Jesus is indispensable.

But even knowing that is not always enough. I can’t help but wonder: Who will do that parishioner’s memorial service?