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Leah A. Zuidema
Dordt College, leah.zuidema@dordt.edu

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Six Hundred Sermons

A Closer Look at One Pastor's Writing Practices

Leah Zuidema

Ask me how most people write, and I'll have plenty to tell you. I'm an English professor, after all, and it's my job to know. But ask me how ministers write sermons? Until very recently, I'd have had to say I was mystified. My visions ranged from the comedic (imagine the *Veggie Tales* song-and-dance rendition of "A Message from the Lord") to the saccharine (think Christmas-ornament angels descending with scrolls) to the psuedobiblical (in which ministers climb mountains and return with glowing faces, divine messages in hand).

I ought to know better. My husband is a pastor, and I can report with confidence that Todd has never written a sermon while dancing like Larry the Cucumber, has never received airmail delivered by angels, has never preached from a stone tablet. However, until I interviewed him, I knew little about my husband's actual sermon-writing process—except that it involved a laptop, stacks of books, and long stretches of time.

When we finally talked about Todd's approach to writing, I learned plenty of details about his typical sermon-writing routine. But what I found most intriguing was the realization that a pastor's writing life is much like that of many academics. Writing sermons—writing—is hard work. Inspiration is certainly part of the process, but it doesn't fall from the sky: it is cultivated through careful reading, diligent study, and quiet contemplation. Prayer is part of it for preachers (and probably is for most writers, if only in moments of desperation). A little writing experience doesn't hurt, either. When I asked Todd what has made him a skilled writer, he was quick to answer: "Six hundred sermons.

Practice, practice, practice."

He's had plenty of opportunities to practice. He served for six years as pastor of Mayfair Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and he is currently in his fifth year as pastor at Hope CRC in Hull. Over the years, Todd has developed a rhythm to his writing work. "After writing so much," he says, "you kind of understand what works for you and what doesn't." In the early years he started by writing out his sermons; later he went through a period where he instead wrote detailed outlines. He has since come full circle and now writes out full-text sermons that closely match the messages delivered on Sundays. Todd notes that he sometimes adds an impromptu sentence or short paragraph in the midst of his preaching, but most of what he shares from the pulpit is pulled straight from the page. His sermons are written to be heard, composed with his listeners' ears in mind.

Although Todd does display PowerPoint slides as he preaches, he avoids showing outlines or listing point-by-point summaries. Instead, he uses the screen to show definitions for new words, to display key phrases or verses, and to share relevant maps or photos of objects and locations mentioned in the biblical passage. The slides themselves are quite plain—white text, black background—because Todd wants them to serve as aids that help the congregation to focus on the spoken message. Last Sunday night's sermon on Ruth, for example, included a slide with the definition of "usufruct" and the phrase "Almoni Pelsoni"—a Hebrew name that translates loosely to "Mr. So-and-So." Slides like these don't stand alone; people in the pews need to listen to the sermon in order for the on-screen words to make sense.

In addition to writing for people's ears and eyes,

Todd also thinks carefully about the length of the sermons he writes. Pastors occasionally receive some good-natured ribbing about long sermons, and Todd is no exception. I have it on good authority that sometimes it's the preacher's spouse who is the first to offer unsolicited advice about sermon length. However, if you've ever found it difficult to sit through a long sermon, you should feel grateful that you don't have to watch the even longer process of writing the sermon.

First, there is the business of choosing a text and topic. Todd points out that the biblical text should drive the sermon—not a preacher's pet peeve or a theme with a proof text tacked onto it. Some of us may imagine our preachers choosing the text when they hear God whispering, "Psst! Preach this Sunday evening on Psalm 24." Not so. At least, the whispering isn't that direct in Todd's case. Instead, he feels led to a particular text in more ordinary ways. As Todd explains it, he may notice that it's been some time since he's preached from the minor prophets or from a New Testament epistle. He may, in his own devotional Bible reading, find a set of passages that intrigues him or raises questions for him. Or he may, in his weekly meeting with other pastors from the area, decide along with the group that all of them would do well to share with their congregations their studies of the parables, of the fruit of the Spirit, or of a particular book of the Bible.

When the text has been chosen, Todd pulls out his yellow legal pad, a favorite fountain pen, and his NIV Bible—the plain version, not a study Bible. He reads the text as well as the surrounding verses, and then he proceeds through a careful line-by-line, verse-by-verse study. Next, Todd consults commentaries and examines a Hebrew or Greek version of the text. All the while, he writes notes about the key ideas and motivations that he sees as the heart of the text, working to determine what is "the big picture message . . . the point of the text."

Todd's notes usually include questions, too, which he says can become starting places for discussion in the sermon: "I figure if I don't know and I want to know, then others won't know and will want to know, too."

This sentiment about the importance of questions is familiar to me. When I as a professor write about teaching, it's my own questions that keep pulling me forward. As Todd proceeds to describe the rest of his process, I see more and more parallels in our approaches to writing. I nod in agreement when he explains about the importance of the "hook" or introduction: "I need to know how it starts, because how it starts sets the tone for the whole message." When Todd tells about constantly monitoring his writing to make sure that it is relevant for his audience, I have flashbacks, especially when he comments on what prompts him to rework a draft in progress: "If I've gotten this far without making any reference to 'Why should I listen to this?' then I need to go back and answer the 'So what?!' question."

By the time Todd mentions the importance of writing steadily but also of taking breaks, I've started to realize that his process isn't so mystical after all. I'm not surprised when he relates that on the second day into writing a sermon, he starts by reading the previous day's writing, knowing that it will help him to recapture his earlier thinking and to "trigger" new ideas.

In the end, I find that not only am I noticing the similarities in our writing processes; I'm also thinking about what we could learn from each other as writers. I take his last remarks as advice, a helpful reminder from one writer to another.

A sermon is good, says Todd, if it keeps his interest as a preacher and if the response is, "I really needed to hear that." More simply put, good writing reaches both the writer and the audience.

To which I say, "Amen. Preach it, pastor!"