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Dan Anders

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*"I have not yet reached my goal, and I am not perfect. But Christ has taken hold of me. So I keep on running and struggling to take hold of the prize."*

*~ Philippians 3:12 Contemporary English Version*

## The Preacher's Personal Journey: Challenge and Change

By Dan Anders

That word "personal" is daunting. What does the editor mean? Does he want an *impersonal* personal? These challenges and changes happen to *most* preachers along the ministry road. Or a *personal* personal? These have been *my* challenges and changes in nearly forty years of preaching.

After much soul-searching, I have opted for a *personal* personal. There are two risks in telling you that. One, you may not be interested and may stop reading now. Or, I may only tell you some Anders trivia that is mostly irrelevant to your preaching trip. I'm taking both risks, not because it's necessarily the best way to do this piece. It's the only way I can do it. And be true to ministry. And to myself. And, I think, to God.

I can only hope that some of these experiences track with yours and, if not, that they may at least nudge you to reflect on your own preaching pilgrimage. The "journey" metaphor came alive after hearing Sheila Bost, director of Pepperdine's Volunteer Center, give a convocation talk on her own faith journey. She spoke so movingly of her life experiences under the trip paradigm that I have shamelessly copped her "road signs" and adapted them.

### Learning to Drive

Although our life's trip begins, in a sense, long before we're born, most of us track our pilgrimage from early child-

hood. It was here, at a remarkably early age, that I began learning to drive on the highway of preaching.

I shall always have to confess, and give thanks, that my ministry is partly due to the godly influence of committed Christian parents. Before I saw the light of day they were already followers of Jesus, as best they knew how to be. So they brought me up in the matrix of the Christian faith as lived in our Church of Christ understandings. More than that, they raised me to be a preacher.

My parents—the only ones I have ever known—could not have children. After ten years of marriage, they decided that they would adopt some unwanted infants to raise as their own. Long before they got the message that a baby boy was available, Mother was praying, Hannah-like, that if God would give her a son, she would give him to God.

Throughout my earliest years, then, the impressions were of church—unfailing Sunday worship, Wednesday "prayer meeting," and long summer gospel meetings in small wooden buildings with rough plank benches and funeral parlor fans. The heroes held up to me were always gospel preachers. Frank L. Smith and Hulen L. Jackson are the two earliest I can recall, at Dallas' old Trinity Heights congregation. Then there was Flavil Colley, and Coleman Overby; later, John Banister and George Bailey.

There was a tradition in our family every night for years: a Bible story, read by my mother from a maroon-backed

children's book, and our bedtime prayers. So my soul was shaped, not by Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, but by the likes of Abraham and Daniel, John the Baptist and Jesus. The stories of King David and the journeys of Paul were more familiar than Tom Sawyer or Roy Rogers. Mother loves to tell the story of my preschool-age correction of a preacher in Ladies' Bible Class. He said that some thought the disciples were called Christians in derision. "No," I retorted, "it was in Antioch!"

And there was Scripture memorization. Before first grade, I had committed big chunks of King James text to memory and was shamelessly paraded at home and church to show my skills.

On top of all that, there was even youthful training in oral interpretation of literature. "Expression lessons," we called it in those days. By sixth grade I was giving solo recitals of declaimed literature. I memorized "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere," "Evangeline," "The Tale of Hiawatha," and "Snowbound," along with countless shorter pieces. Others might excel at hitting a baseball; I gave speeches!

In one sense, then, I didn't choose preaching. Preaching chose me. Somewhat like Jeremiah, I was consecrated a preacher before I was born. Have I ever resented that parental pressure to preach? Probably. But I long ago made peace with it.

Most folks, I think, are pushed toward something. Some are businesswomen or physicians because of firm fatherly or motherly nudges. My journey was headed down the preaching road. And I have chosen, gladly, to keep it there.

Do you identify with any of that? Maybe in bits and pieces. Perhaps not at all. Any lessons? Only that parents and churches play major roles in creating preachers. I suspect we have few aspiring ministers of the Word today for an obvious reason: ministry is a sadly underrated vocation. If we want more preachers, this ministry must be restored to its rightful place as a high and holy calling, not just a pygmy profession cowering beneath classier careers like medicine or law.

### Getting My License

I do not remember the precise date when I was baptized, but it was in June of 1948, my twelfth year of life, Thursday night of a summer gospel meeting. It was a classic transition. After several white-knuckled nights of hanging onto the pewback through invitation hymns, the powerful preaching of Eugene Smith brought me down the aisle.

And Henry McCaghren, the part-time preacher for our little church, immersed me in Christ.

Ten days later I delivered my first "sermon." It was at a Saturday afternoon youth rally at south Dallas' old Hatcher Street Church. Brother McCaghren had mostly prepared the talk for me. I parroted his ideas. For a long time, I would follow that easy rut. Repeating a moving message heard from G. C. Brewer or Homer Hailey. Grabbing an outline from booklets by Lloyd Ellis. Pirating some thoughts from Leroy Brownlow's *Seed for the Sower*.

Incredibly, people wanted to hear a teenage preacher preach! I was invited to speak to youth groups and mid-week services in many Dallas churches. At the ludicrous age of 16, my home church sponsored my first gospel meeting—open-air, in a vacant lot with wooden folding chairs and yellow light bulbs to keep away the bugs! Invitations came faster than I could possibly have deserved. By college, I was conducting revival meetings almost all of every summer.

When I was a junior in high school, the little band of believers at Scurry, Texas, placed unbelievable trust in me. They asked me first to preach for them one Sunday each month. Within a short time I was their "regular preacher." I continued, in season and out, speaking the **Word** to those patient saints for over five years—all the way through my undergraduate years and M.A. courses at Abilene Christian. They were kind enough to release me in summers to do meeting work. They, with others, generously helped send me on a mission study trip around the world. I undoubtedly owe the Scurry sisters and brothers much more than I know for their long-suffering endurance of my youthful preaching!

Then it was off to ACU. My experience was not greatly different from that of other eager "preacher boys" who flocked to the Hill in those years. We were shaped by the likes of Frank Pack, Carl Spain, J. W. Roberts, J. D. Thomas—and many others equally worthy of mention. We cut our preaching teeth in Monday Night Meetings where fledgling ministers tried out sermons on bemused coeds. We heard guest ministers like Cleon Lyles and Batsell Barrett Baxter and M. Norvel Young. We debated heated issues in uncooled dorms until wee hours of the morning. And all of it, silly or serious, was chalking up some practice driving until we were ready to take the wheel ourselves.

One of my big pushes along the road came from the sainted E. W. McMillan. With amazing grace, he risked

having me, just after graduation, accompany him on a four-month trip around the world. Six weeks in Assam, India, was the big race, with visits to Europe and Palestine as prelims, and the Far East to wind up the trip.

### Driving Alone

Next came that first “full-time” ministry at Graham Street church in Stephenville, Texas, where a remarkably

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resilient fellowship braved four years of my occasionally brilliant, often clumsy pulpit efforts. Overseers like Colin B. Jones nurtured and nourished my embryo theology with heavy doses of grace, in theory and in practice. Best of all, I found on a short visit to town a lovely ACU woman, Judy Snow, who eventually was brave enough to think she could live the rest of her life as a parson's spouse, and who has graced me in uncounted ways for more than thirty years.

However your concrete experiences differ from mine, I suspect there may be a couple of similarities. You probably agree that miles of travel have changed you and your preaching. I look back at some of those Stephenville outlines with a mix of amazement and amusement. Did I really preach that?! How could people have taken me seriously? Or did they?

I read where one old minister opined that he believed everything just like he did when he graduated from college—only more so. He must have forgotten a lot of what he believed way back then! All life is process, a journey. If anyone spins his tires in the same spot for fifty years, there will be lots more heat and smoke than light.

And I hope you found (or find), in your starting years, some loving disciples who lavished you with the Christian graces of understanding and long-suffering and forbearance. Such unmerited goodness—and forgiveness!—can keep a man on course through lots of dark and lonely stretches of road.

Like many another preacher, two degrees in Bible mostly left me knowing how much I did not know. So I,

too, wanted more fine-tuning for my engine. That led to a big change: a move to the West Coast and four busy years in El Monte, California. Two daughters were born, more ministry was learned and done, and a degree garnered from Fuller Theological Seminary in the process.

My Fuller years were (no pun intended!) fulfilling. The seminary was in its Golden Age. Evangelical pacesetters like George Ladd, David Hubbard, Paul Jewett, and Ed Carnell were near their prime. Lee Travis began the School of Psychology and Donald MacGavran, the School of World Mission. Billy Graham, John Stott, F. F. Bruce, and Leon Morris taught and preached.

I met devout believers from fellowships I had never encountered—Evangelical and Free Church, Covenant Church, and parachurch brothers like Navigators and Wycliffe Translators and InterVarsity. My eyes, and heart, were opened—slowly, cautiously, warmingly, lastingly—to the vast breadth and depth of the Christian faith. While my own journey would continue in the tracks of Churches of Christ, there will always be added light for the road from seminary years.

### Pit Stops and Detours

The next quarter-century was spent in two megalopoli, Houston and Los Angeles—or more precisely, Malibu. Time would fail me, to paraphrase Hebrews 11, if I should tell all of these years. I shall restrain myself to map three challenging jogs in the journey.

One was the pain of preaching in failure. Judy and I arrived at Houston's Central Church in 1969 with a fresh M.Div. and a one- and three-year-old in tow. I thought I had died and gone to heaven!

Oh, it should have been obvious from the start that Central had seen better days. The congregation had shrunk from its Burton Coffman glory years, with over a thousand members, to less than half that size. Members had steadily packed for the suburbs as the city sprawled. The stately Romanesque building was showing its age. Once-elegant Montrose Boulevard slipped steadily toward seediness.

But I had trouble seeing any of that. I swelled with pride preaching in that elite, if half-filled, edifice. For the first time, I had an associate minister, two church secretaries, a full-time elder, a highly educated flock, and in-house printing. Those were heady days. But major cracks were already threatening the highway.

Central took great, legitimate pride in its Christian Home for the Aged, a nursing care facility nonpareil among

Texas churches of any brand. But we all made an honest, fatal mistake. The facility was built on a faulty roadbed—a foundation of huge, short-term debt.

Painstaking efforts to amortize the obligations over several years met with repeated failure. Eventually the nursing home was turned over to creditors, and our vaunted cathedral was sold to pay on our debts. Our congregation merged with the Southwest Church, which graciously took us in.

Other churches rallied, if tardily, to Central's aid. A staggering million-dollar debt remained, with no further assets to apply. Champions like Charlie Floyd and Howard Kelly of Bammel Road asked superman James O. Baird to help. In a matter of months, all debts were paid!

During those years I discovered as never before that I not only preached to sinners, I am a sinner dependent on God's grace and the love of my brothers and sisters. Because I experienced the goodness of God and his people, I learned, I think, to speak with passion, probably for the first time, of how deep and broad God's love really is.

After Houston have come ten years in incomparable Malibu, preaching at the Pacific's edge on the Pepperdine University campus. These have been vastly rewarding years. No challenge stimulates me more than speaking the Word week by week to bright, eager young minds—and some great older ones, too! This ministry is not easy, but it gives blessings unrivaled by Malibu's beautiful mountains and shore.

Still, on this wonderful leg of the trip, there has been a "pit stop from hell," as Sheila Bost called her own major illness. My journey was detoured by two bouts of cancer, a lymphoma in my abdomen in 1989, and another in a sali-

vary gland in 1992. I have already written at length in this journal of that detour, so I shall not retell the story.

Suffice it to say that I shall be a cancer patient the rest of my days. Regular medical checks and chemotherapy maintenance treatments keep the stench of mortality strong in my nostrils. Even on the best of days, potholes of fear and doubt sometimes jolt me. "When will the big one come? In a vital organ? A tumor that can't be put in remission?" No oncologist can answer those questions.

Through it all, I am slowly, sometimes fitfully, learning firsthand of God's large faithfulness. And occasionally I can preach it, not as it deserves to be proclaimed, but as one broken clay jar pouring death-slaking life into others.

### **Around the Bend**

For years, Charles Kurault's CBS series "On the Road" opened and closed with a theme that said, "Up ahead the road is bending. Wonder what's around the bend."

Nobody knows. There may yet be unforeseen twists and turns. Some unseen wreck may lurk around the corner. The whole vehicle may blow up in my face, or yours. There are no money-back guarantees with your "ministerial license." Ordination does not come with collision insurance.

Only one thing is sure. "We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence" (2 Corinthians 4:14 NRSV). That destination makes the journey, smooth or rough, all worthwhile.

"I believed, and so I spoke." Amen.

DAN ANDERS is the pulpit minister for the Malibu Church of Christ, Malibu, California.