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Why I Preach: Five Parishioners Trade Pews for Pulpits

Beverly Matiko

Sandra Mendez

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WHY I PREACH

FIVE PARISHIONERS TRADE PEWS FOR PULPITS

BY BEVERLY MATIKO

When **Jeff Veldman** decided to become more involved in his home church, he knew the perfect job for him: running the public address system. “I’m a ‘Don’t look at me!’ kind of guy,” Veldman admits. “I never want to be up front or in the spotlight.”

Becoming a pastor was the furthest thing from Veldman’s mind. “It wasn’t even on my radar,” he says. “When I graduated from Wisconsin Academy, I went straight to work. For the next 30 years I was a herdsman, first on my uncle’s dairy farm and then someone else’s. I also did other farming jobs and worked in a feed mill and with utilities for a time. “God kept stretching me in His service,” Veldman explains. “I accepted a wide range of church offices over the years. I started working online toward an associate degree in Bible—which I finished. I remember thinking, ‘Just don’t ask me to preach!’”

Clearly, God had more plans for this volunteer. Currently, Veldman pastors the Superior, Ashland and Hayward churches in Wisconsin, along with a church plant in Herbster.


“Pastoring was quite the leap for me,” Veldman remembers, “from pew to pulpit!” I started with prison ministry and as a part-time lay pastor, while retaining some of my other church and non-church jobs.” Eventually, when

the conference decided a full-time minister was needed, Veldman’s congregation made a request, “May we please have Jeff?”

When the official call to full-time ministry came, Veldman and his wife repeatedly prayed, “Close or open doors, according to Your will.” They knew full-time pastoring would require many changes at a life stage when most people are gearing down, not up. Accepting a multi-church appointment would mean relocating and other adjustments, including professional sacrifices for Veldman’s wife. These they accepted and never looked back.

As Veldman reviews his work history, he admits that farming and pastoring aren’t as different as one might think. “On the farm,” Veldman explains, “you’re on call seven days a week. Any time of the night or day, your plans can be derailed by a birthing, a storm, machinery breaking down, or cattle getting out. You learn to expect surprises. Pastoring is much the same. You never know what a day will bring.”

PHOTOS BY SANDRA MENDEZ

A man with a mustache and glasses, wearing a light-colored suit and a patterned tie, is sitting on a red tractor. He is holding an open book in his hands and looking off to the side with a slight smile. The tractor is red and has a large black steering wheel. The background is a barn with wooden beams and corrugated metal walls. A large silver metal pipe is visible on the right side of the frame.

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BORING LIFE, BORING SERMONS.

Pastoring, Veldman discovered, also presents unique challenges. While he yearns to know his congregations better, they and Veldman acknowledge that this takes time. With four churches, Veldman typically sees most of his congregants just once a month. The round trip from home to his farthest church takes two hours and 40 minutes. “I use that driving time to pray, meditate or listen to recorded books and podcasts,” Veldman shares. “My wife always comes to Sabbath services with me. On the longer drives especially, we enjoy that together time. Occasionally, she also accompanies me mid-week for visitation or Bible studies.” Veldman laughs when he says, “She always lights up faces when the people see her. Sometimes I think they’re happier to see her than me!”

While Veldman finds strength and encouragement throughout Scripture, one verse particularly speaks to him: “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry” (1 Timothy 1:12 NKJV). To anyone at any life stage who may be considering pastoring, Veldman advises them to pray earnestly and ask for direction. “If you’re married, be sure your spouse can support this direction for your lives,” he adds. “Your spouse must be ‘all in.’ And remember, you’re never too old to serve the Lord!”

Though Veldman’s move to ministry may seem the exception, current trends suggest we will be seeing more people following in his footsteps. “1 in 4 Pastors Plan to Retire Before 2030,” announces a recent Christianity Today headline. Citing research from the Barna Group, the article states, “In 2022, just 16 percent of Protestant senior pastors were 40 years or younger. The average age of a pastor is 52. Thirty years ago, 33 percent of US pastors were under 40, and the median age was 44.”¹ The numbers speak for themselves: we are witnessing the “graying” of our clergy.

The situation in the Adventist church is no exception. According to Rodney Palmer, chair of the undergraduate religion and biblical languages department at Andrews University,

just five university undergraduates with no previous college experience enrolled during the fall 2023 semester. About a decade ago, the numbers were 15–20. Several sister institutions are experiencing similar declines.

Alarm bells are sounding. In the next five years, says Ivan Williams, North American Division ministerial director, 2,000 new pastors will be required to fill openings created by retirements in the NAD. In 2022, the most recent year available, only 82 theology majors graduated from undergraduate programs in all the NAD Adventist colleges and universities, according to Carl Cosaert, chair of the School of Religion at Walla Walla University, who keeps track of these numbers. While the situation seems bleak, Luis Fernando Ortiz, director of the MDiv program and adjunct professor of Christian ministry at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, acknowledges that one easy place to start is through local church members encouraging youth with potential to choose pastoring and teaching occupations.

Ortiz admits, however, that many young Adventists have become disillusioned with their church. Pastoring no longer seems to be the attractive choice that it once was. When asked why so many of their peers reject a career in ministry specifically, and church employment generally, young church members often list these reasons: inadequate compensation, work-life balance challenges, hierarchical work structure, equity and inclusion issues, and insufficient resources to foster employee success and satisfaction. In short, the widespread perception among the young is that the demands of ministry are too numerous and onerous, and the rewards too few.

Priorities and perceptions can and do change, however. Some Adventists, after enjoying fulfilling, successful careers, choose to set them aside and join the ministry instead. According to Ortiz, over the last ten years about 40–50 percent of students entering the seminary are second-career students. The reason most often given for abandoning a career and pursuing ministry? Divine calling.



OVI RADULESCU

Ovi Radulescu heard the call while growing up in Romania during its Communist era when it was virtually impossible to get seminary training to become a minister. He worked as a firefighter, welder, public school teacher and watchmaker. Sometimes Sabbath observance became a point of contention, necessitating more changes. When communism fell, Radulescu began working for Voice of Hope Radio while finishing his theology degree.

Radulescu had no thoughts of emigrating, but when his wife surprisingly won a visa through the United States government lottery system, they decided that the family would step out in faith. They knew almost no English when they arrived here, and immediately set about taking English classes. Radulescu found work in construction, eventually becoming a licensed contractor. An official call to ministry came a few years later from the Arkansas-Louisiana Conference. Currently, Radulescu pastors the Northwest and Hammond Adventist churches in Indiana.

Radulescu remains grateful for each of his earlier careers. “Everything adds up, builds up,” he explains. “You gain a greater understanding of life and people with everything you do. One of my seminary professors, Dr. George Knight, once told us, ‘Boring life, boring sermons.’ He warned us against getting stuck in a rut. He encouraged us to live full, rich lives, to pursue interests, opportunities, hobbies, travel and embrace new ideas. I have done that all my life. Some of it by necessity. Much of it by choice. These pursuits

continue to make the best possible difference to my ministry and to me.”

Radulescu acknowledges that ministry, like any vocation, does present its own challenges. “There is the temptation to ignore self-care,” Radulescu counsels. “I am a strong advocate of ‘Prevention, prevention, prevention!’ Establish positive habits and boundaries early and stick with them. Encourage your congregations to do the same.”

Along with the rewards of pastoral ministry, Radulescu has experienced heartaches. He cautions future ministers against giving up when bad things happen—which they will. Once, after dutifully traveling every Sunday for four months to study with a family in their home, Radulescu was met at the door with these words: “Don’t come back. You’ve been lying to us. We’ve talked to people in our own church. They told us Adventists are a cult.” Radulescu recalls, “After working so hard to establish trust and build relationships, such a response is devastating. It takes a toll. It took me a long time to process and recover from that experience.”

For strength and sustenance, Radulescu turns to Scripture. Especially meaningful to him are these Old Testament words: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward” (Genesis 15:1 NIV). Radulescu clings to and celebrates the present tense in this passage. He explains, “We sometimes get so focused on a future reward that we forget we already have the greatest possible reward. The presence of God! Here and now!”

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TO THOSE CONSIDERING MINISTRY, TAYLOR SAYS, “TRUST IN THE LORD AND MAKE SURE YOU’RE DOING WHAT GOD WANTS YOU TO DO.”



LAMONT TAYLOR

Lamont Taylor, like Radulescu, knew early on that he wanted to be a minister. Now pastoring the Gurnee and Northbrook Adventist churches in Illinois, Taylor acknowledges, “The route I took wasn’t typical. For me it was ‘over the mountains and through the valleys’ to reach the High Way.”

Taylor worked for 15 years as a counselor to those with histories of sexual abuse, substance abuse and mental health issues. His clients, primarily in the 18–26 age range, often had more than one major challenge. “It could be difficult sorting out which problem was fueling the other,” Taylor discovered.

Taylor’s earlier professional experience continues to help him immensely as a pastor. “I learned to meet people where they are,” he says, “and to love without being judgmental. I refined my counselling skills. I also learned that it is possible to be loved one day and called every name in the book the next. Part of my takeaway from such episodes is that you must guard against the temptation of trying to be a people-pleaser. I was given that advice early on, and I share it with my clients as well as young ministers and anyone interested in ministry.”

To those considering ministry, Taylor says, “Trust in the Lord and make sure you’re doing what God wants you to do.” Taylor recalls planning a move to Phoenix, a change he and his wife felt would benefit their immediate and extended families. With his extensive

work experience and credentials, Taylor was sure he would easily find a new job in the counseling field. He sent out numerous resumes but was shocked to receive only one response. One day, still waiting for responses to his queries, Taylor received a call from the ministerial director for the Illinois conference: “Lamont, would you consider transitioning from the part-time pastoring you’re doing now to full-time pastoring?” Taylor remembers, “There I was, sitting in Olive Garden, watching God close Arizona doors and open Illinois ones.”

Taylor finds that some of the greatest rewards in ministry come from seeing individuals move from “down-and-out” to “Praise the Lord!” He clings to a verse in Romans for direction and stability: “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (10:17 NKJV). This text reminds Taylor that he must stay grounded in the Word. He knows there are no substitutes, no shortcuts.

Taylor is a firm believer in “keeping me a Peter, James and John.” He explains, “It’s good to have a small support system—a few trusted individuals that you hold close. They need to be people who will tell you things straight, advise and counsel you, and be there when you need them—just as you will be there for them.” He adds that it’s important not just to seek out these companions for help. You must get together regularly to celebrate the good times and the ordinary times, too.



Thorly James is another pastor who believes in the importance of celebrating, though for him, those times may not typically happen spontaneously. They are more likely to come about from prompts on an Excel spreadsheet. “I live by spreadsheets,” James admits. “They help me be where I need to be so I can do what I need to do. They also help to ensure that self-care and family time happen, including date night with my wife. It’s too easy to let those things get pushed to the margins or disappear altogether. I’ve helped set up similar scheduling and accountability systems for ministerial colleagues. They tell me spreadsheets help them greatly, too.”

James currently puts his professional expertise and passion for the gospel into pastoring two Adventist churches in the Lake Region Conference: Calvin Center Church in Cassopolis, Michigan, and the Praise Fellowship Church in South Bend, Indiana. Superb organizational skills—often learned the hard way by many professionals, including ministers—have become second nature to James. Before earning an MDiv and MSc in community and international development, James graduated with a degree in manufacturing and engineering technology. He subsequently worked as an aerospace engineer for 14 years, overseeing the implementation

of innovative practices and methods for the military and the airline industry. “In addition to introducing and implementing change, I was charged with obtaining buy-in from all levels in the organization. That was often the steepest mountain to climb,” James says. Also in his portfolio was risk management.

While growing up in Jamaica, James never saw himself as a minister, even though his father and grandfather both were clergymen. When he immigrated to the United States, he became acutely aware of “how many were struggling in this land of opportunity.” This realization spurred in him a growing conviction: “The church should be the center of the community.” He became personal ministries director for his church in Brooklyn and “burned to open the church more than just one day a week.” He longed “to meet the needs of people and then say to them, ‘Follow me to Christ.’”

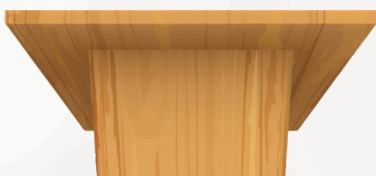
To anyone considering ministry, James admonishes them to “Count the cost.” He cautions the young especially not to be caught up in what some see as glamorous parts of the job—authority, respect, admiration. James strongly recommends first making a commitment to volunteering in your home church. There you will get a sense of the real work that needs to be done, while

A PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE THAT SUSTAINS JAMES IS “THIS IS THE CONFIDENCE WE HAVE IN APPROACHING GOD: THAT IF WE ASK ANYTHING ACCORDING TO HIS WILL, HE HEARS US” (1 JOHN 5:14 NIV).



THORLY JAMES

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PRAY AS IF
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seeing that results are not always immediately apparent.

“Success in ministry requires the Usain Bolt Method,” James maintains. “It took this track and field phenomenon years of focused, dedicated training to reach that point where, in 9.58 seconds, he finally accomplished his dream of breaking the world record in the men’s 100-meter race. We only see the tip of the iceberg when we see such great things accomplished. We don’t see what’s below the surface. For Bolt, in addition to years

of intense training were personal sacrifices—things like giving up his favorite chicken nuggets and time spent just hanging out with friends. Commitment makes demands.”

In addition to commitment, confidence is essential for James—confidence that comes from a relationship with God. A passage of scripture that sustains James is “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us” (1 John 5:14 NIV).



JENIFER DALEY

Another career-change minister who, like James, finds herself back in the neighborhood of her most recent alma mater is **Jenifer Daley**. She currently serves as pastor for administration at Pioneer Memorial Church in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Previously, she pastored in Jamaica and at two churches in England while studying at Newbold College, where she earned a license in theology. She later earned an MA in religion and a PhD in systematic theology from Andrews University.

Daley brings to pastoring a wide array of expertise garnered earlier in the finance

and education sectors. Before answering the call to ministry, Daley earned a BSc and MSc in accounting, an ACCA (Association of Chartered and Certified Accountants), and a PhD in economics. She worked in financial analysis, accounting, auditing, consulting, commercial bank managing, as a senior central bank economist, and as a university professor.

Daley describes her current vocation, ministry, as “an act of obedience, a way of returning to God the life and the many gifts with which he has gifted me.” While some may struggle to see the connection between

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ministry and her previous professional realms, Daley is quick to point out that “economics and theology make for a priceless partnership for preaching and practical theology.” Daley is grateful that “the professional values and attitudes garnered in my prior service continue to prove invaluable and indispensable to wholehearted ministry.” She claims with conviction, “No experience or gift is ever lost.” She praises God for “the wonderful reality of how He weaves his grace into the tapestry of my life to bring me fulfillment and flourishing.”

To those who prayerfully may be considering becoming pastors, Daley points out that rewards can be observed outwardly but also felt internally. Key to her experience is this word: “transformation.” She explains, “It occurs both in the self and in others as a result of the work of the gospel. The ripple effect is wonderful.”

Daley admits that pastors are not immune to difficulties and discouragement. “There will be challenging times,” she says, and you will be called upon to “pastor effectively to challenged and challenging people.” What helps her through such times is following the advice that she offers to anyone considering becoming a minister: “Spend much time in secret with Jesus alone. Pray as if your life depends on it. It does.”

Daley knows firsthand that “pastors always seem to be at work—mentally and/or physically.” She stresses that self-care is crucial. “It takes tenacious intentionality,” she insists. Hosting people in her home for meals is one of the things she enjoys doing for a change of pace, especially as she combines it with “relearning the art of simplicity.”

Daley finds comfort, encouragement and direction from the apostle Paul: “We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the life of good deeds which God designed for us” (Ephesians 2:10 REB). That firm conviction helps Daley in other ways, too. She

knows that “to be in God’s will is the best place to be.” She faces each day’s tasks with this resolve: “I determine, by his grace, to bloom where I’m planted.” She is quick to add, “I also determine to be ready to be transplanted as He directs.”

So where will our next pastors come from? The lives of Pastors Veldman, Radulescu, Taylor, James and Daley testify that some will be “transplants.” These five also show us that pastors can and do come from many walks and many places.

Scripture also bears this out. Speaking at Pentecost, Peter quotes the prophet Joel who quotes the Almighty: “‘And in the last days it will come to pass,’ God says, ‘that I will pour out my Spirit on *all people*, and your *sons* and your *daughters* will prophesy, and your *young men* will see visions, and your *old men* will dream dreams. Even on my *servants, both men and women*, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy’” (Acts 2:17–18 NET, *emphasis added*).

Sons, daughters, young men, old men, servants, men, women, all people. Each of us can find ourselves in this list. We can find everyone we know and all of humanity in this list. The prophets, visionaries and dreamers called to proclaim the gospel will come from every possible group. Of this we can be sure. God’s list excludes no one. The Father of all wouldn’t have it any other way.

¹ David Roach, *Christianity Today*, April 28, 2023, accessed July 22, 2023.

Beverly Matiko, a retired English and communication professor, lives in southwest Michigan. She enjoys writing, conversation, public speaking (including preaching), and just about anything involving words—except call-in radio shows.

Sandra Mendez has been a professional photographer and photography/art instructor in the Chicago and Indiana region for the past 25 years. Her work has been exhibited nationally and showcases her life story. Sandra’s passion for teaching and her love of the arts is demonstrated in the classroom, as she shares her talents with her students.

