

Confessions of a Rookie Marathoner:

Reflections on a Twenty-year Pastorate

By Dwight K. Nelson

In just a few days (God willing, of course) the starting gun will sound, and I'll join 40,000 other runners in the twenty-sixth running of the Chicago Marathon. It will be my first (and perhaps last!) marathon—26.2 miles of nonstop running through the Windy City. The champions will race it in two hours and eight to 10 minutes—I'm just praying to complete it... between four and half and five hours!

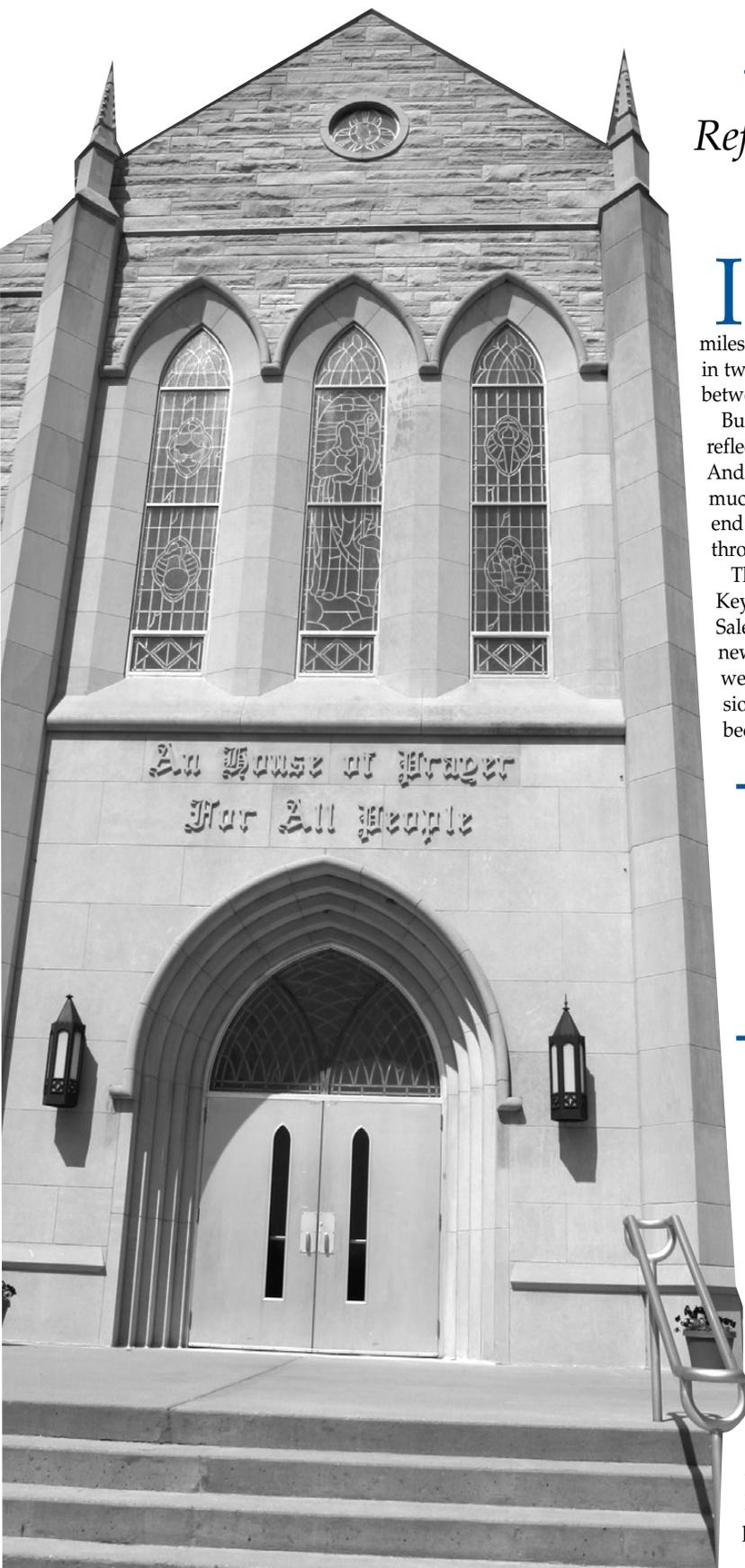
But as I've ruminated over my assignment to write a piece for *Focus*, reflecting on our twenty-year pastorate here at Pioneer Memorial Church and Andrews University, it has occurred to me that long-term pastorates are very much like marathons. (And I don't mean that you collapse in a heap at the end either!) So let me share with you what it's been like for us running through these past twenty years.

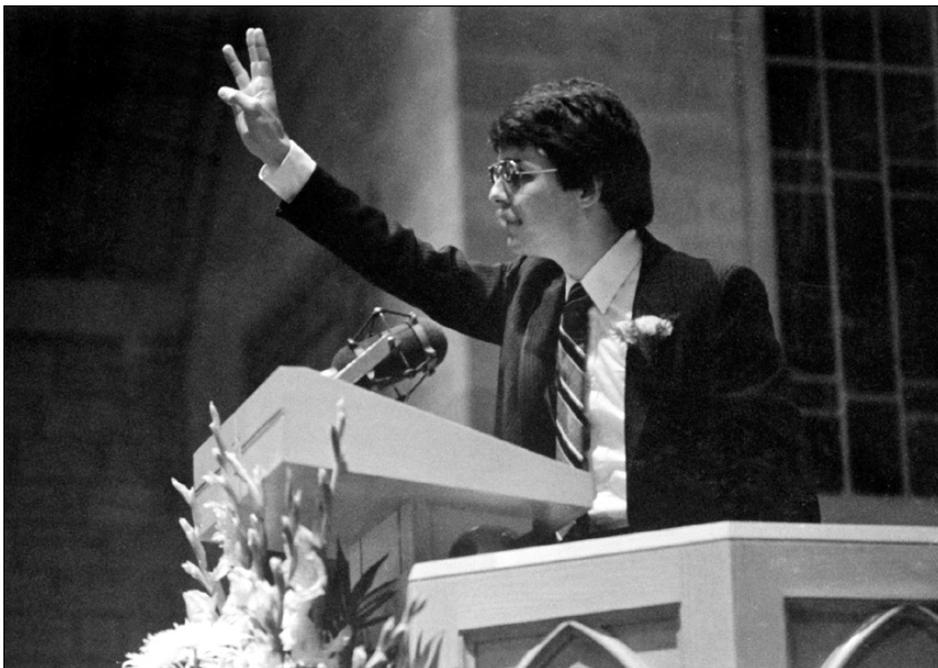
The starting gun went off on April Fools' Day, 1983, when Charles Keymer, the Michigan Conference president, phoned Karen and me in Salem, Ore., with the invitation to come east at the age of 31 and begin a new pastorate on the campus of Andrews University. And I can assure you, we've been running ever since! We thought it would be just another professional sprint a few miles down life's road—never dreaming that it would become the long and winding marathon that it has.

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But we've been blessed and exhilarated by every bend and mile! And I don't want to go a word farther before expressing our heartfelt gratitude to God and to the students and faculty and community members and pastors of Pioneer and Andrews for granting us the high honor of running this marathon with them. When you run beside someone for that long and that far, your hearts become inextricably bound up in ways no other human experience can imitate. And so to God who issued the call and to this campus and congregation who opened the door, we say Thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Even if the marathon should end tomorrow, it will remain deep within our souls as the most satisfying and fulfilling run of our lives!

Over these past 20 years of miles, the scenery has certainly changed! (Which is one of the joys of marathon pastoring—you don't keep running the same three-mile strip.) I've watched five cycles of freshmen and freshwomen run their four-year races across campus. In the beginning, hair was bushy, sideburns and bangs longish, clothes outlandish. Ten years later we males had to grow a goatee to prove our place in the GenX pantheon. But now in the third millennium, hair is





A youthful Dwight Nelson, circa 1983, preaches from the old PMC pulpit.

back to clean-cut (even though sometimes shaded blue or green or violet). And jeans, once verboten, rule—student fashion ever shifting with the times. But then, what goes round, comes round (which is why I'm still hanging on to all those narrow ties).

Look at the scenery on campus, if you want to talk about change! When we arrived, James White Library had a giant field beside it (no Chan Shun Hall in sight), nobody had ever heard of Harrigan or Howard, the seminary looked just like the Ad building, Pioneer was a long skinny sanctuary with children's Sabbath Schools meeting in university classrooms all over campus, and the gymnasium—well, some good things never change and neither has the gym.

The metaphor of life and ministry as a marathon means that you have the privilege of intersecting your race with the marathons of others. Which, of course, keeps changing the scenery, too. During these past 20 years, it's been an honor to serve three university presidents (Grady Smoot, Richard Leshner and Neils-Erik Andreasen), four union presidents, three conference presidents, two Berrien Springs chief of police and a handful of Campus Safety Directors—the latter being individuals in power I've sought most carefully to obey!

In this marathon I never cease to be delighted at how the generational scenery keeps changing. One of the joys of a long-term pastorate is that you get to journey with young adults who fall in love, get married, graduate,

become parents and then bring their babies for dedication, then for baptism, then for graduation, and then for a wedding. And on and on.

The first wedding I conducted at Pioneer was for biology professor Jack and Helena Stout's only daughter, Lynn, who was marrying a young premed biology major, Dan Reichert—who, after graduation at Andrews and Loma Linda and a stint as a medical officer with the U.S. military, returned to Pioneer with Lynn and the children to join the medical practice of the Hamel twins, Loren and Lowell

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(also hometown boys), at the University Medical Clinic. And their own marathon (Dan, an experienced marathon runner, will also be in the Chicago Marathon, way ahead of me) continues.

Just like the Zygowiecs. Kristopher and Lois were in grad school when we arrived in 1983. Our boy Kirk and their son Krystian were both three. Kris then graduated from Andrews. The family headed into the world on their own pastoral marathon. But as fate

would have it, a few years later they returned to Andrews as faculty and staff, raised their boys here through three graduations and a marriage this past summer for Krystian, an Andrews aviation grad. Oh, the joy of a long-term pastorate—the scenery keeps changing.

But there are sorrows in such marathoning, too. And here it is better that I not mention names. For the pain of the loss, though years ago, is still fresh. And when I walk with reverence through the fields of flowers and tombstones at Rosehill Cemetery, the stories all return. The memories. The tears. For children and young adults in the blossoming prime of their youth, their own marathons just beginning. But tragically, inexplicably cut short. Just a few paces into what was promising to be a winning race. And not only the young. But the middle-aged, too. And the elderly. It is the sacred but protested honor that befalls a pastor who journeys down "the long and winding road" of life and death.

And it is because the finish line keeps ending in death far too many times that my own pastoral soul has increasingly over these two decades felt the deepening weight and burden of Christ's call to "look forward to the day of God and speed its coming" (*II Peter 3:12*, NIV).

I'll never forget that Sabbath morning, July 17, 1987. We four Nelsons (Kristin was born three years into our marathon here) were crammed into a campmeeting cabin (we called ours the Tiltin' Hilton) up at Grand Ledge, and I was having my private worship ("private" being a euphemism in those quarters). Something I read in Acts, coupled with a Walter Scragg comment in the lesson quarterly, triggered an avalanche of thoughts and broodings. And when the Spirit was through, I walked out of that cabin strangely affected—a vision of God's calling ignited deep within as never before. A world, a generation that must be reached. And just like that—astounding pieces began falling into place.

Roy Naden, professor of religious education at our School of Education, approached me with the idea of shooting a television pilot during Pioneer worship.

Which led to a television studio down in South Bend and a program called "Perceptions." Then along came a new Adventist satellite network called 3ABN—and before long, a very homegrown, student- and campus-staffed worship production, "New Perceptions," began its ministry.

And then out of the blue, ABC television and the National Council of Churches were inviting Pioneer and Andrews to host the 1994 ABC Christmas Eve special that we named "A New Noel." Four and a half million viewers

nationwide came into the sanctuary of Andrews and Pioneer that Christmas.

And then, just as much out of the blue, the church in North America and the General Conference asked Pioneer and Andrews to host what would become the only simultaneous global evangelistic satellite series of our community of faith (to 100 nations in 40 languages), and arguably the most comprehensive evangelistic satellite series in the history of Christianity—something we all came to call NET98 or "The NeXt Millennium Seminar." After those five weeks in October and November 1998, how could any of us at Andrews really be the same again?

Why would God run our corporate and congregational marathon straight through the heart of such overt efforts to communicate the "everlasting gospel" of the Three Angels? The answer is simple, really. Because God—more than any of us—is living for the finish line. It's all He dreams of anymore.

Which is why I'm privately rejoicing these autumn days of this new school year—because I've never seen a class of students so eager and ready to be mobilized on behalf of Jesus' kingdom! Two weekends ago, 800 university students roamed through 63 ministry booths at Pioneer, signing up for volunteer mobilization. Benton Harbor, the inner city in the nation's headlines this past summer, is our neighbor. And our Andrews students have caught the vision. Science majors mentor inner-city kids in a new Socrates project. Music students fund-raise for inner-city violins. Students of every discipline pile into a bus and vans and cars every Sabbath afternoon for Benton Harbor.

I have never been more optimistic for a single generation than this one! They are ready to be motivated, mentored and mobilized. And this time I believe Andrews and Pioneer are ready, too. I keep hearing the words, "With such an army of workers as our [young] rightly trained, might furnish, how soon the message of a crucified, risen, and soon-coming Saviour might be carried to the whole world!" (*Education* 271).

No matter what lies around the next bend of this pounding marathon, the mobilization of God's young is the racer's edge that will propel this global movement through its final lap and across the finish line.

Because, in the end, it really is all about the finish line. Every marathoner knows that. You can be certain that God, the greatest Marathoner of all, has been living and running for the finish line for a very long time!

Scott Moncrieff, chairman of the English

Department here at Andrews, and a marathoner, told me once that crossing the finish line of a marathon is "the closest thing to heaven I've ever experienced." The long, long, grueling race is nearly over. Crowds of well-wishers are cheering at the top of their lungs

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On October 4, 2003, Nelson led a dedicatory "blessing of the runners" prior to the Detroit and Chicago marathons.

when you round the last corner toward that finish line. And somewhere in the crowd are the dearest people on earth to you—your family, a few friends—people who believed in you when you began the tedious and interminable training months and months ago—people who believed in you even when you didn't. Above the welcoming roar, you hear their voices—calling your name. Your name. And when you hear your name, something happens to you. As if adrenaline were mainlined into your aching limbs, your feet sprout wings. And you run now with every last

ounce of energy. No, now you fly! Across the finish line. In a burst of wild joy. You have finished the race!

"It's the closest thing to heaven."

"Do you see what this all means—all these veterans who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in" (*Hebrews* 12:1, 2, *The Message*).

For at the finish line of this marathon there He'll be. Above the welcoming roar, calling your name. And mine. Which is why as marathoners we must run with the end in mind. The finishline ending. Never lose that vision.

And when that day comes, I'm praying that I'll have the joy of crossing the finish line with 3000 students and 30,000 alumni. It's that vision that has kept me running all these years.

Twenty years closer now to the finish line. With Jesus. And you.

While his ministerial marathon continues at Pioneer Memorial Church, Dwight K. Nelson (MDiv '76, DMin '86) finished the Chicago Marathon in four hours, 58 minutes and 27 seconds.