

“In an age when a pastor’s average tenure is just five years, Bruce Salmon’s 33-year pilgrimage with one beloved congregation is nothing short of inspiring. Full of stories and sermons that rise off the page, *Preaching for the Long Haul: A Case Study on Long-term Pastoral Ministry* is cause for celebration.”

—Rev. Julie Pennington-Russell
Pastor, First Baptist Church of the City of Washington, DC

“Village Baptist Church is a wonderful embodiment of authentic Christian community. Bruce Salmon, pastor of the community for a remarkable 33 years, is an exemplary model of authentic shepherd leadership. This volume is the story, told in candid personal reflections and inclusive sermons, of how a community of parishioners and pastor over many years grew together to become an authentic reflection of the diverse oneness that is the image of God.”

—Dr. Bruce T. Gourley
Historian, author, and *Nurturing Faith Journal* contributing editor, Bozeman,
Montana

“I have known Bruce Salmon so long I can’t remember when we were strangers. Our parents were good friends, we lived across the street from each other, and we played every sport we saw on television. As we got older, we stayed in touch, and I’m glad to say we’re still good friends today. Bruce Salmon lives the words he writes about in this volume. He genuinely knows and cares about his family, friends, and those he has reached through his ministry. His message in the book—a great collection of sermons and personal stories—emphasizes the joys of watching a church worship, struggle, and triumph over adversity during three decades of growth. I have already learned a lot from this book. And as I read it, I’m very grateful that Bruce and I are friends...for the long haul.”

—Rix Quinn
Fort Worth, Texas

“A tenure of 33 years by a pastor at one congregation today surprises almost everyone! Such a length of service forces both compassion and creativity. Dr. Salmon demonstrates these characteristics, proving that one can cross cultures while leading worship and proclaiming God’s Good News. Many will wonder at his labor to preach in fresh ways as he interacted with congregational circumstances and personal challenges. His work, both in preaching and writing, invites the reader to both deeper reflection and higher praise.”

—Robert D. Cochran
Executive Director/Minister, D. C. Baptist Convention

“This is a chronicle of living faith and leadership. Rev Bruce Salmon invites the reader’s imagination onto the firm soil of an extended ministry. His narrative of one congregation’s life is complemented by accompanying sermons reflecting biblical insight in the context and life moment at hand. He bundles these sermons together with a chronicler’s skill and takes us through 33 years. His skill of taking us with him on this personal journey, reminds me of the movie “Boyhood,” when the director returned to the same cast annually for 12 years until he had a complete and complex Oscar winning story.

Each chapter explores a transition time in ministry or a ministerial response to some clear set of changing needs. This is not a handbook of daily ministry, but a beautiful, annotated collection of shared sermons and narratives that can complement anyone’s cycle of ministry and lend perspective to the professional arc of ministry in any given place.”

—Rev. Suzii Paynter
*Co-Director, Pastors for Texas Children;
former Executive Coordinator, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (2013-2019)*

“If it’s possible to capture the beauty and complexity of one’s life, Bruce Salmon’s book, *Preaching for the Long Haul*, is it. To know the Book, you have to read lots of books about the Book. I’ve read oodles of religious books in my time; and written a few. A lot of them are spent elucidating the self-evident, answering questions that haven’t been asked or explaining things already understood. The content is up-to-date, and utilizes a pen with language that sparkles, to jab you awake. Its truth puts you to dancing on the graves of past tradition and worn out phrases.

While staying true to the scriptures, yet offering signposts to new paths, rather than driving down stakes marking out old boundaries. Br’er Bruce even kept our proud motto: “We reserve the right to accept everybody!” The readers will be pushed out of some of their old ruts, but at the same time reminded of the good ones worth holding onto. Isn’t that what we would expect of any good book?

Bruce and I go back a ways; attended the same seminary, learned from the same mentors, ministered in the same church, loved the same people—except he stayed two decades longer than me! Whew! There is irony in a guy who gets the 10-year itch writing a review of one who stayed 33 years. It takes a special form of giftedness to “stay by the stuff.” Bruce has that.

Reading about a place I served from one who came after me has been like going back through home again. Over the years you forget details, but not the people, who remain seared in my memory. Some churches are the kind that drain the pastors. Village Baptist is one that makes the pastor. I commend this autobiography of a dynamic preacher baring his heart and soul, as well as his church’s, that took place over 6 decades as an example of the way church oughta be.

Former Senator Hillary Clinton wrote a book of her own, “It Takes a Village—to Raise a Child,” based on an African proverb. Well thanks to Bruce Salmon’s long-haul tenure in Bowie, Maryland, all I gotta say is: “It Takes a Church to Raise a Village!”

—Br’er Dan Ivins
*Former Pastor, Village Baptist Church, Bowie, Maryland (1974-1984); Former
Pastor, The First Baptist Church in America,
Providence, Rhode Island (2006-2014)*

“Bruce Salmon genuinely lives his faith, and he has spent half his life sharing that faith with his Village Baptist Church family. These stories and sermons illustrate how good he is at making his messages memorable. Revisiting these stories and sermons reminded me of how much I admire Bruce Salmon’s ability to communicate his vibrant faith in a way that anyone can understand. I know that his 33 years at Village Baptist Church have been crucial to my own journey.”

—*Dave Thompson, Ph.D.*
Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, Maryland;
Member, Village Baptist Church, Bowie, Maryland

“Readers get a glimpse into what it must be like to have a caring pastor and gifted preacher stick with a congregation through many seasons of its life. Village Baptist Church is truly a special place—a diverse and open church that welcomes guest preachers including me with open arms. That beloved community didn’t just happen; it was nurtured with the love and spiritual guidance of Bruce and Linda Salmon. One can witness the relationship that was built upon honest vulnerability among these Christ followers over many decades in this inspiring collection of sermons.”

—*Amanda Tyler*
Executive Director, BJC

“When we were in seminary, retired seminary professor, Dr. Gaines Dobbins provided great counsel to Bruce Salmon and me. We were in our mid-20’s, and he was in his late 80’s. Bruce and I both took his advice to heart. He encouraged us to put down roots and stay in one place to minister for years and years. Bruce served as pastor of the Village Baptist Church for 33 years, and I served as President of Dallas Baptist University for 28 years. We were both blessed beyond measure by taking Dr. Dobbins’ advice. As you read this book, you will see a pastor who loves Jesus and loves the flock he has been given to provide and care for as a shepherd.”

—*Dr. Gary Cook*
Chancellor, Dallas Baptist University

“How can a preacher address the same congregation every week for over three decades with something fresh to say every Sunday? (Okay, most Sundays?) Bruce Salmon shows us how and shares 35 of those sermons with us in this helpful volume. Orally-delivered homilies in the context of worship are meant for the ears of saints in the pews. But those same sermons are just as valuable when printed for the feasting eyes of all who would read and be edified by them. Thank you, Bruce, for allowing us to eavesdrop on the sacred conversation between pastor and congregation.”

—*J. Brent Walker*
Executive Director Emeritus, Baptist Joint Committee

BRUCE C. SALMON

Preaching for the Long Haul

A CASE STUDY ON
LONG-TERM
PASTORAL MINISTRY

FOREWORD BY DANIEL VESTAL

© 2019

Published in the United States by Nurturing Faith Inc., Macon GA,

www.nurturingfaith.net.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN: 978-1-63528-074-6

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In Loving Memory of

James A. Langley
(1925–2018)

Pastor, Preacher, Poet
Mentor, Friend

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Foreword

By Daniel Vestal

Through the years my heroes have changed. Once I looked at esteemed theologians, social icons, or persuasive authors with unequalled admiration. Now I find inspiration and encouragement from individuals who effectively and faithfully practice Christian ministry in a local context. Of course I still draw insights from literary and spiritual masters, but at this stage in life I find myself admiring saints like Bruce Salmon, who are unnoticed except in their particular community. And that is exactly where the transforming presence of Christ's kingdom is at work—in particular communities. These are the saints, both clergy and laity, through whom God does extraordinary things.

Bruce Salmon has become one of my heroes. He has been pastor of Village Baptist Church in Bowie, Maryland, for thirty-three years. And the sermons in this collection chronicle a beautiful journey that a pastor and people have made together “for the long haul.” These sermons reflect a particular time and place, which means they are incarnational. They have the taste, touch, and feel of real life, which means they are authentic. But these sermons also connect and relate beyond their time and place. The messages are timeless. The prose is compelling and at times poetic.

These sermons are real and relatable because they were born out of a pastor's relationships with God and the people of God in a specific congregation in a specific community. They are not theology in theory, but theology through personality, the personality of Bruce Salmon and Village Baptist Church. They are both biblical and narrative in the best sense of the words. They effectively communicate in relevant and delightful ways, but they point to the eternal truth revealed in Jesus Christ and recorded in Scripture. In reading them I found myself at times chuckling in amusement and then in the next moment moved to the point of prayer.

Perhaps sermons are best heard rather than read, but these sermons will bless those who are privileged to read them, just as they blessed those who were privileged to hear them. This is because they are crafted by someone who understands the gospel and also understands people. They come from

one who embodies the kind of pastoral leadership that is so needed in today's church and world. Bruce leads with vision and passion, but he is humble. He loves people, but he knows how to be prophetic both in the pulpit and in the daily life of the congregation.

And he has stayed with it, in one place, with one congregation, over a long period of time. It hasn't always been easy. Tenured ministry never is. During that time he has changed, and the congregation has changed. And that longevity, along with healthy change and growth, has produced a wisdom and prudence that is reflected in this book. Now Village Baptist Church is a multicultural congregation, still committed to the gospel and its community.

All the literature I read today tells me that the future of the church must be intercultural, interracial and intergenerational if it is to embody Christ's kingdom. Village Baptist Church is a congregation anticipating that future. And much of its success is due to the pastoral preaching and leadership of Bruce Salmon. May the Spirit use these printed sermons to inspire and instruct us all, just as the Spirit used them when they were proclaimed.

*Daniel Vestal, Distinguished Professor of Baptist Leadership,
Mercer University, Atlanta, Georgia*

Preface

Bruce Salmon served as pastor of Village Baptist Church in Bowie, Maryland, for thirty-three years. He began his service at Village on January 1, 1985, and retired on December 31, 2017. Before that, he served as associate pastor of Montgomery Hills Baptist Church in Silver Spring, Maryland, for eight years. Thus, his entire full-time ministerial career was spent serving two congregations in suburban Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C. Both churches are members of the D.C. Baptist Convention.

A native of Fort Worth, Texas, Salmon received the bachelor of arts with a major in English from Baylor University. He received the master of divinity and the doctor of ministry from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He also received the master of arts in counseling psychology from Bowie State University, with a specialization in clinical pastoral counseling.

Salmon has served on several commissions of the Baptist World Alliance and several committees of the D.C. Baptist Convention. He is the author of the book *Storytelling in Preaching*. He also authored a cover feature for *Preaching* magazine, “Preaching Without a Net,” which is available online.

Introduction

The year was 1975. I was a student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. One day in the seminary dining room, I saw my friend Gary Cook sitting at a table with an older gentleman I did not know. The man was old enough to be Gary's grandfather, maybe even Gary's great-grandfather. I thought to myself, "I wonder why Gary is having lunch with that old geezer." Well, before I could say anything, Gary saw me and invited me to join them. Gary introduced his lunch companion as Dr. Gaines Dobbins, who I later found out was eighty-nine years old.

Dr. Gaines Dobbins—somehow the name sounded vaguely familiar. Gary explained that Dr. Dobbins used to teach at the seminary. He had retired in 1956 when he reached the mandatory retirement age of seventy. After he retired from Southern Seminary, Dr. Dobbins was invited to teach at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in California, where he served as professor of church administration. He later served as a visiting professor at Baptist seminaries in Switzerland and Nigeria. He also served as chairman of the Baptist World Alliance Commission on Bible Teaching. I didn't know any of this when I sat down for lunch that day. I later learned that Dr. Dobbins was one of the most influential Baptists of the twentieth century in many areas—Christian education, church administration, missions, evangelism, and pastoral care. He was a living legend in theological education. Dr. Dobbins had returned to Southern Seminary in 1975–76 as a visiting lecturer in the Boyce Bible School, a division of the seminary for students without college degrees. Besides serving as a seminary professor, Dr. Dobbins had served as a pastor and as a chaplain during his long ministerial career. He also was a prolific writer, the author of thirty-two books and approximately 5,000 scholarly articles. To put it simply, Dr. Dobbins was a giant in theological education.

During our lunch together I was wise enough to ask questions and then listen carefully to what Dr. Dobbins had to say. He made one observation about pastoral ministry that I have never forgotten, one that greatly influenced my own ministry. Dr. Dobbins was bemoaning the fact that most pastors don't stay at a church very long. They tend to move from church to church, either for more money, or more challenges, or more prestige, or

sometimes to escape from conflict at their former church. That observation is certainly true. The average pastoral tenure is just three to five years.

Dr. Dobbins made the comment that a pastor's most effective ministry occurs over time, after the pastor has been at the church long enough to establish trust and get to know the people. Then Dr. Dobbins suggested what I considered to be a radical and impractical ideal: "What if a pastor were to go to a church and stay there?"

At first hearing, that idea seemed to be almost impossible. My mind was flooded with questions. How would a pastor get a meaningful raise staying at the same church? How would a pastor enjoy the prestige of leading a larger congregation? How would a pastor be able to keep people happy over many years and avoid church conflict? How would a pastor come up with enough sermons to last an entire career at the same church? Frankly, I didn't see how it could work. Nevertheless, I was intrigued by the concept.

Well, eventually, I served as pastor of Village Baptist Church in Bowie, Maryland, for thirty-three years. It was not my entire ministerial career, but the major portion of it. Right out of seminary I served another church for eight years, so I served only two churches since I graduated from seminary in 1976. I also served part-time at a couple churches in college and was a pastoral intern at a church while in seminary.

After being pastor at Village Baptist Church for thirty-three years, I learned to appreciate the wisdom of what Dr. Dobbins was advocating. Over that time I began to answer some of my own questions about how it could be possible for a pastor to stay at the same church a long time.

Over the years I did have opportunities to leave. After my book was published, I was approached about becoming editor of a preaching magazine. A few years later, after the pastor of a former church retired, I was asked if I would be interested in returning to that church.

After serving at Village for twenty years, I came close to going to a church in Texas. It was after my father died, and my wife Linda and I had become concerned about my mother living by herself in Texas. We were thinking maybe we should consider moving closer to her. A church in Texas flew us down for a visit, and members of the pastor search committee came to Maryland to hear me preach. Linda and I really didn't want to move, but we felt we had to remain open if it were God's will for us to move. The search committee members knew we didn't want to leave Village, and they didn't call us. Shortly after that, my niece and her family moved from Chicago to

live with my mother in Texas. A couple years later, my mother decided to sell her house and move into a retirement community with all levels of care available, should she ever need them. In retrospect, it was not God's will that we move, but we did have options to leave over the years.

Why did we stay at Village so long? Well, for one thing, we loved the people. Some of them are among our closest friends. One of my greatest satisfactions as a pastor was getting to know and serve people on a personal level. Our church was small enough that I could know almost everybody, if they wanted me to know them. If some people preferred to keep their distance, that was okay; I respected their privacy. But if they wanted a pastor to relate to them on a personal level, I was their man.

The second reason we stayed at Village is because the church needed us. In the early years of our ministry, the church needed someone to continue the effective ministry of the former pastors, Dr. Ken Bradshaw, Rev. John Woodall, and Dr. Dan Ivins. Ken was at Village less than a year; John served Village three years; Dan was pastor at Village ten years. When we came to Village, the church needed us to help keep it going.

Over the course of the next fifteen years, by God's grace, the church prospered and grew. Then, on a cold January day in 2000, the church building caught fire and was destroyed. After the church building burned, the church really needed us. Those thirty-four months of displacement were the toughest years of my ministry. We lost more members than we gained. We had to rent worship space from another congregation. After a while, their new pastor was anxious for us to leave. Rebuilding took a lot longer than any of us expected, with a lot more complications than I could have imagined.

Some Sundays after worship I was so discouraged that I wondered if I could keep going. Some ministerial friends knew how miserable I was, and they were eager to help me move to another church. But there was no way I was leaving when the future of Village was so precarious. After we finally entered our new building at the end of 2002, it took several more years to rebuild the congregation. I only considered leaving after our congregation was stronger than it had been before the fire.

The third reason we stayed is because of what Village became. When we came to Village in 1985, it was not a very diverse congregation. We had a couple of African-American members and their children, but the congregation was largely monochromatic. We gained a few more minority members before the fire, but the church was still not very diverse. I remember visiting

Loretta and Marion Shipman to talk with them about joining our church. Loretta remarked to me about the lack of diversity in the congregation. I invited Loretta and Marion to join us and help make it more diverse. That's exactly what they did. They joined, stuck with us during our displacement, and became key leaders after we occupied our new building. As our community became more diverse, so did our church. It was exciting to be pastor of a congregation open to all people.

This story is not just about me, but about what God has done through Village Baptist Church. I will take credit, however, for bringing two amazing women to the church. In 2011 I became acquainted with a young minister, Rev. Starlette McNeill (now Rev. Starlette Thomas), at the D.C. Baptist Convention. The more I got to know her, the more I recognized her potential. I started praying about her, and I started trying to figure out a way to get her to come to our church. Well, our congregation stepped out in faith, and she stepped out in faith, and in 2013 Pastor Star became our associate pastor. She would go on to serve as the Village interim pastor after I retired at the end of 2017.

The second amazing woman I brought to Village is my wife Linda. She has been a partner in ministry in every aspect (except for drawing a paycheck). All that she gave to Village was as a volunteer, and what a volunteer she was! Linda was a Sunday school teacher, a deacon, a commission chairperson, a children's storyteller, a worship dancer, a Vacation Bible School craft leader, a banner maker, a costume maker, a hand-bell ringer, a nursery volunteer, a meal provider for our Lenten Bible studies, a "flip flop sister," and a friend to many. Some churches might call her the "first lady," but Linda cringed when she heard that title. If anything, she was first in service.

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul wrote, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" (Rom 1:16 NRSV). That's my testimony too. The only difference is that Paul wrote those words before he ever came to the church in Rome, and I was at Village thirty-three years.

In the time I served at Village, my friend Gary Cook (who introduced me to Dr. Dobbins in the seminary cafeteria) went on to bigger and better things. After seminary Gary served in churches, and then he got involved in student ministry, and then he got involved in higher education. Eventually, Dr. Gary Cook became president of Dallas Baptist University in Texas. But I wouldn't have traded places with the university president. Even though I

never got a promotion or even a new title, being pastor was fine with me. (By the way, Dr. Gary Cook served as president of Dallas Baptist University for twenty-eight years [1988–2016]. He continues his service as chancellor. So maybe Gary was listening to Dr. Dobbins too.)

After I had preached my “trial sermon” at Village in fall 1984, the chair of the pastor search committee, Maury Sweetin, phoned that afternoon to say the church had voted to call me. Maury said the vote was very positive, but not quite unanimous—it was 64–1. I never knew who voted against me, but I tried to be the best pastor I could be so maybe even that one dissenter might develop a different opinion.

The biggest challenge for me of a long-term pastorate was the preaching. How does one come up with something “new” to say every Sunday? By the time I retired, some parishioners had heard me preach over 1,000 times. Dr. Dave Thompson, an astrophysicist with NASA at the Goddard Space Flight Center, had heard me preach over 2,000 times since he attended both worship services most Sunday mornings. Yes, the Bible is a vast trove of sermonic material, but the same preacher Sunday after Sunday struggles to interpret a fresh vision of biblical truth that stimulates the mind and touches the heart. Yet it is possible.

The purpose of this book is to illustrate how it is possible. It is a case study in long-term pastoral ministry. Included are sermons from thirty-three years at the same church. Over the years I preached on some biblical texts many times. Yet I never repeated a sermon in thirty-three years, except for preaching basically the same sermon at the two Sunday morning worship services during the school year. The only difference is that I preached the sermon extemporaneously from the floor for the early contemporary service, and I stood behind the pulpit (with manuscript) for the traditional second service. Thus, the sermon wasn’t the same for the two services, but Dave Thompson said they were *essentially* the same.

Beyond that repetition on Sunday morning, however, no one ever came up to me and said, “I remember you preached that sermon before.” For thirty-three years I preached original sermons every Sunday, except for the Sundays we had a guest preacher or choir cantata or other special event. “Preaching for the long haul” requires commitment and study and creativity and prayer, but by God’s grace, it can be done.