

I was 84 when I prepared
and preached this.

Sermon: for 60th Anniversary Celebration of Sturgis Wesleyan Church Aug.21, 2005

"Memories and Lessons from 63 Years of Ministry"

I am so happy and amazed to be alive and here to participate in this wonderful celebration. I have lived longer than any male in my family in at least two generations. I am the patriarch of the Gearhart family, and have been ordained longer than any pastor in the Florida District of the Wesleyan Church. I feel honored and humbled to be asked to minister to you today. Recently I was talking to a friend on the phone and shared with him my excitement of preparing for this occasion. I confided to him my apprehension that I might be considered just an old man giving a swan song and asked for his prayers. His reply encouraged me. He said, "Pastor, just remember, the older the violin, the sweeter the tune." I trust it will be so.

I read once of an executive giving a talk to a group of business men. He began by saying, "If I could just trade my experience for what it has cost me, I could retire easily." What I am sharing with you today are insights I have learned about ministry and building the church. I learned them by living them. They were costly. They are not methods, they are principles. Methods change with the times: principles are enduring. I learned them by starting two churches from scratch and shepherding them to maturity, from seven years of administration as a District Superintendent, and ten and a half years as pastor of an overseas, inter-cultural, bi-lingual, multi-denominational congregation in Puerto Rico, and from serving as an Asst. Pastor teaching Evangelism Explosion in an established church for six years after retirement. I am practicing them now as a member of a small church whose minister is in the third year of his first pastorate.

Part 1. The Ministry Begins with a Divine Call

Exodus 13:11-13 "After the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites and gives it to you, as he promised on oath to you and your forefathers, ...you are to give over to the Lord the first off-spring of every womb. Redeem every firstborn among your sons"

Bill Gothard began to notice a strange phenomenon about the thousands of ministers who attended his seminars. A great majority of them were eldest sons in their families. He came to believe God is still exercising this requirement even though the O.T. law is no longer in force. He feels it is an eternal principal.

This is an interesting thought. By way of illustration, I am an eldest son. Our son Joel, also a minister, though not the firstborn is an eldest son. When Margaret Gallup, Ann's mother and a charter member of this church, was buried, her pallbearers were six of her grandsons, four of the six were eldest sons in their families, and those four were ministers.

I gave my heart to Christ in a revival meeting when I was five years old. I think I always felt called to the ministry. When I was six or seven I used to go to the neighbor next door, an older man who never went to church. I would play church with him, and preach sermons to him, much to his amusement, especially when I took up the offering at the close. As I remember he usually contributed something.

I can remember at about eleven years of age being all alone upstairs in the parsonage and singing at the top of my voice "Joy to the World the Lord is come, Let earth receive her King" I especially loved the last verse.

No more let sin nor sorrow grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground.