

# Answering the call

## Presbyterian Rev. Jeff Veenstra was slow to come to the vocation, quick to respond to Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul

By HARVEY SHEPHERD, Freelance December 24, 2010



Rev. Jeff Veenstra, the new minister at the Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul, conducts a bible study session. "It is vibrant and alive, rich with tradition," he says of the church.

**Photograph by:** JOHN KENNEY, THE GAZETTE, Freelance

Appropriately enough, the new minister at the Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul, historical downtown flagship of Presbyterians in Montreal, is a lifelong Presbyterian.

Nevertheless, Rev. Jeff Veenstra, 50, gives the writings of two Roman Catholics some of the credit for putting him on the road that led to his induction last fall as the seventh minister of the church since the churches of St. Andrew's and St. Paul's amalgamated in 1918.

They were not just any two Catholics. Both are known for a spiritual appeal that crosses denominational boundaries. They are the late Henri Nouwen, a Dutch priest and author who carried out much of his ministry in the United States and Canada, and Jean Vanier, Canadian founder of the L'Arche movement of communities where developmentally disabled people and friends who assist them live together.

Veenstra's parents came to the North York area north of Toronto from Holland in the early 1950s, a few years before he was born. In Holland, they belonged to a church of the tradition associated with John Calvin and John Knox, known in continental Europe as Reformed and in Scotland as Presbyterian. Veenstra's father, who worked in middle management for Sears Canada, was also active as a self-taught church organist. An uncle on Veenstra's mother's side was a Presbyterian minister and became something of a mentor to the young man.

Young Veenstra continued to be a churchgoer as he finished secondary school and launched himself in a career as a commercial insurance broker. But by his early 20s he had come to a crossroads in his faith.

"The message I was hearing from the pulpits didn't resonate with me."

It was then that his uncle introduced him to Vanier and Nouwen and their spirituality of community and compassion. Not only did his reading of the two authors encourage the young man to keep going to church, he developed "a passion for theology."

It was nourished at lunches with his uncle. The lunchtime conversations did not refer to the thoughts the young insurance broker wrestled with for a long time about whether he was called to the ministry. Or so he thought. Yet one day, apparently out of the blue, the uncle asked in rather blunt terms when the young man was going to stop dithering on the issue.

By that time, he and his wife, Diana, had three young children and a mortgage on their house in the southern Ontario city of Cambridge and he had no university education but what looked like an excellent shot at moving up rapidly in the insurance firm.

Nonetheless, Veenstra, then in his early 30s, enrolled in Wilfrid Laurier University in nearby Waterloo in 1991 for a three-year BA course, which was followed by another three at Knox College, the Presbyterian seminary at the University of Toronto. He was ordained as a minister in 1998. Along the way, Diana had a fourth child. He served a cluster of four churches around Creemore, south of Georgian Bay, part-time while at Knox College.

As a new minister, he served a church at Dunnville, on the north shore of Lake Erie., then moved on to St. Andrew's Church in Hespeler, a district of Cambridge, in 2001. He was in Hespeler when he was told that the Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul was looking for a minister. One thing led to another.

Following a common practice, Veenstra's induction service at St. Andrew and St. Paul's was actually his third service at the church. He preached once in April, ostensibly as one of several ministers who entered the pulpit to relieve Rev. Rod Ferguson, who was filling in as interim minister (and is now back as part-time assistant minister). He returned in mid-June for a customary last hurdle that Presbyterian and some other Protestant churches refer to as "preaching for a call."

Speaking of preaching, Presbyterians have a tradition of being particularly fond of it. St. Andrew and St. Paul's has had several distinguished preachers. Not the least of them was Veenstra's immediate predecessor, Rev. Richard Topping, assistant minister in 1997-99 and senior minister in 2000-09 and now professor of studies in the Reformed tradition at the Vancouver School of Theology.

Veenstra carries on that preaching tradition.

"Preaching is what energizes my ministry," he said. "Preaching and the study of scripture are what fuel me. For Presbyterians, the Word is central, and St. Andrew and St. Paul's has a passion for preaching. I hope I don't disappoint them."

He won a couple of awards in preaching while at Knox College and prepares his sermons with zest and focus. He usually takes a day, generally Saturday, to prepare his text and get familiar with it -and then tries to refer to written notes as little as possible while in the pulpit.

He sometimes preaches on a topical issue or devotes a few sermons to exploring a particular subject, but most of the time his sermons are based on what is called the Common Lectionary, a calendar of Bible readings for the year shared by Roman Catholics and several Protestant denominations.

"It's a great discipline. It keeps you from just riding your own hobby horses."

These days, Canadian Presbyterians are often thought of as having a centre of balance, on average, a little more on the traditional side than members of some churches, but Veenstra himself is well acquainted with liberal ideas. In his student years at Knox College, he wrote a thesis on the influence of scholars, such as John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, who try to separate what Jesus actually did and said from what the church attributed to him in later generations.

These people tend to raise the hackles of some people of more evangelical hue, but not Veenstra's. However, he has moved somewhat away from their viewpoint.

"By nobody's standard am I a fundamentalist, but I find that the more I read I become slightly more orthodox. I find a deep richness in the teaching of the church. I would describe my position as a very generous orthodoxy."

"I still find Crossan and Borg helpful, but there are strong limits to what historical scholarship can do. Really, all we have of Jesus is in the Gospels" (the narrative first four books of the New Testament).

The opportunity to minister in an urban, multicultural environment such as Montreal was among the big attractions of St. Andrew and St. Paul, and in his first few months there it is abundantly living up to its expectations.

"It is vibrant and alive, rich with tradition. What I discovered was a church that is multi-ethnic and multi-cultural, known for the excellence of its music and with a strong church school. Lots of children. Lots of energy. In the pre-Christmas period the church was printing 450 copies of its bulletin for Sunday worshippers.

"There is also a hunger for outreach, very alive and very strong" and is expressed in a range of social-service ministries -supported by, among others, McGill and Concordia University students who attend St. Andrew and St. Paul's and care about both the world and the Bible.

"Christianity has a lot to say about poverty, hunger and the degradation of the environment."

If Veenstra embodies some Presbyterian traditions, he does not live up to all the cliches. He is not dour, for one thing. The six-foot-four, 240-pound minister enjoys golf and a wide variety of musical genres. (When his golf was serious enough for him to keep track of his handicap, it was around 12.) He admits to still being "a tormented fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs" but joined fully in rejoicing over the recent Grey Cup win of the Alouettes.

He and Diana now live in the church rectory with their daughters, Rachael, 15, who is attending Trafalgar School in Westmount, and Melissa, 20, who plans to attend Concordia in January. Justin, 25, is at the University of Windsor in Ontario, and Jacqueline, 22, also in Ontario, is working with troubled teens.

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