

Stand and deliver: Performers in the pulpit

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [April 7, 2009](#) issue

At the annual banquet of the University of Chicago Divinity School, a first-year student knocked 'em dead with a stand-up comedy routine. But then Rebecca Anderson has had some practice: she *was* a stand-up comic.

“When I tell people here I grew up in a fundamentalist family, they treat me like I just got out of a POW camp,” she said. Her eyes widen, feigning people’s sincere concern: “Oh my God, are you OK? What did they do to you?” Added Anderson: “But then there are some things I miss about the fundamentalists. Like a community that actually believes in Jesus.” Her fellow students burst out with laughter. Comedy comes from recognizing oneself anew, if with slight discomfort.

No doubt there is a thin line between being a pastor and being a performer. Both stand up in public and try to capture a group’s attention for a fixed period of time. Good ones value humor and have impeccable timing. Church may not be a fee-for-service activity, but pastors do get paid. Cicero’s description of the three-part task of rhetoric applies equally to ecclesial and to secular performers: they seek to instruct, to delight and to move.

Thinking that pastors probably can learn something from professional performers about the practice of ministry, I spoke with four pastor/performers: a comedian, an opera singer, a sports radio broadcaster and a champion storyteller. Their comments varied as much as their careers. But they also shared some views.

All four focused on the importance of delivery: pastors should attend to the flow of the worship service. Far from being afraid to practice their preaching, they should make a point of it. And they shouldn’t be afraid of entertaining—to an extent.

It didn’t take long for Anderson, 32, to be outted to her new colleagues at the divinity school in Hyde Park as a “celeb.” The summer before her first semester at divinity school, she took an intensive course in Greek. “It was beastly hot; there

were giant roaches; we took to calling ourselves ‘the missionaries’ and asking ‘Why did we do this? *Why? Why?*’” In the midst of the summer doldrums, her instructor Googled her name and found a *Boston Globe* feature praising her as a young comic to watch. Her profile included her description of her day job: “I’m a farmer. I enjoy milking things.” (In fact, she was working at a Jewish day school.)

Preaching was the family business. Notwithstanding her joke about the fundy POW camp, Anderson’s father is a United Methodist minister. While she was living in Boston, friends invited her to Hope Church, an Emerging church-style congregation affiliated with the Disciples of Christ. The open table especially appealed to her. “I used to have problems with Communion. I didn’t understand it. What are its implications?” But Hope opened its table to all. “I saw its deep connection to the hospitality I was offering to kids—encouraging them to be themselves.”

Anderson sees important parallels between her comedy work and the pastoral career for which she is preparing. “You can’t do preaching or comedy without *some* speaking skills—if you’re terrified or fearful of judgment. And you probably won’t make it if someone has to teach you to make eye contact with the people in the back.” Comedy has helped her overcome any fear of congregations (“I’ve been heckled”). But preaching must go beyond entertainment, and she expects more of the audience as well. “If I wanted mere listeners, I’d go back to comedy.”

As a preacher Anderson has to amend her style to a degree. “I won’t be hilarious as a preacher. You have to have some reverence.” That is, unless she can’t help herself. “The book of Revelation is just hilarious. I mean, he worships an angel.” She rolls her eyes in imitation of the angel: “Come on, get up . . .”

Comics tend to be outsiders. When Anderson gets teased for being a celebrity, she replies that she was just a nerd: trying to fit in. “Comedy is made by shame. It’s a place where you can say what you can’t say elsewhere.” She recalls a friend from an archconservative church asking where one could find “clean” comedy shows. She had no idea. “I was fairly filthy,” she said. “Because all jokes originate with shame, they are all inappropriate for kids, even if I wasn’t actually a *dirty* comic.” Also, Christian comedy has a terribly narrow range: “Boaz’s feet only works with a tiny crowd.”

Anderson does confess to missing the spotlight. It was gratifying to get instant feedback: “I never had to ask, ‘How am I doing?’” But she knew she had to get out:

she had been performing several nights a week for a few years and had plateaued. To reach the next level in comedy she would have had to make it a full-time job. With her call to ministry she is turning her comedic eye to mainline practice. “Can we drop the word ‘story’ just for a little while?” she asks. “And can we read miracle stories without getting all loopholey?” And her reaction to Emerging congregations like the one in Boston: “So you got a beef with old people?”

There is such a silky smoothness in Craig Kocher’s voice that one is not surprised to learn he was once (from 1996 to 2001) the voice of the University of North Carolina’s women’s basketball team and UNC’s baseball team. Perhaps he would have become the successor to the great Woody Durham as the Voice of the Tar Heels—probably the most recognized voice in the state—covering men’s basketball and football.

Kocher has the uniform—khaki pants, blue blazer—and requisite drawl common to university boosters, fraternity boys and preachers throughout the South. When in a broadcast he described a game-winning shot by Carolina star Nikki Teasley to beat rival Virginia in triple overtime in 1998, listeners could barely hear him shout “Unbelievable!” over the din. Then all he said, over and over, was “Oh golly!” It was enough. *Golly* had almost acquired three syllables.

Kocher, 33, is associate dean of Duke Chapel and director of the university’s religious life program, where he has served for the last seven years. Those familiar with the Duke-Carolina rivalry will not be surprised that he is often teased for his act of betrayal in working at Duke after being a UNC guy. Jokes aside, going to ministry from broadcasting was a significant break for Kocher. “I wanted my life to have more substance and meaning than that career could provide,” he says.

Kocher thinks that ministry has a lot to learn from broadcasting. “Calling the radio play-by-play of a basketball or baseball game is about inviting the listener, in a truck on the interstate or working in her garden, to participate in a ‘new world’ described only through words. Communicating the gospel isn’t so different.”

One area of similarity is the opening of a broadcast and that of a service. “Many pastors struggle with announcements,” Kocher says. “They tend to go on far too long. One of the things I learned in broadcasting is that a lot can be communicated—warmth, welcome, information—in 15 to 20 seconds if one thinks it through and says only what needs to be said.”

True to this lesson, his introductory announcements at Duke Chapel are extraordinarily brief and focused on the liturgy about to take place—uncluttered by the notices about bingo and Meals on Wheels that consume the first 20 minutes of many country church services.

Kocher sees other similarities between an hour-long service and an all-afternoon athletic contest. “To do a four-hour broadcast—some of it scripted, a lot of it ad-libbed, most of it simply describing what is happening in the moment, with thousands of people listening—is terrifying and exhilarating,” he says. Ministers ought to practice their voice and bodily motions intensively before they get in front of a congregation, offer private pastoral counseling or lead a committee meeting. “Paying attention to tone and cadence, rhythm and tempo, body language and facial expression are all part of communicating the gospel.” And coming from a profession in which seconds of dead air time can mean death for a broadcast, Kocher can say with authority that the Sunday liturgy should be seamless and well timed.

Kocher thinks ministers have much to learn from sportscasters, but notes that the learning can go both ways. “Most interviews with sports stars tend to stay at the clinical or superficial level. ‘What did it feel like to win the game?’ Most clergy are good at asking the kinds of questions that lead to connection—hopes, dreams, fears, wounds, passions.”

Like Kocher, Carol Madalin has a commanding presence. The 52-year-old with soft gray eyes looks at you intently and with confidence—friendly enough, but certainly authoritative. If you visit her at Grace United Methodist Church in Naperville, Illinois, you notice her singing voice. It lifts a whole room. And well it should—Madalin was an opera singer, even making a recording with the English Chamber Orchestra in London before her call to ministry as a deacon in the UMC.

While Anderson and Kocher could not keep their past work as performers secret if they had tried, Madalin did for a while. “I didn’t want to be known as the singing deacon,” she explains. She even turned down a request to join Grace’s choir, choosing instead to concentrate on leading small groups and engaging in pastoral care. “It was only after many years here that I chose to come out again and participate in music,” she says. When she performs now, “The main difference is that I sing for free!”

Madalin sees no chasm between her previous vocation and her present one. As a singer, she says, “I wanted to do the best that I could every time I got up in front of a crowd—whether it was three people or 3,000. When I was well prepared and confident, I could just let the music and the words speak for themselves.” Now, she says, “It is especially fulfilling when the words are from the Bible and the message is about God’s grace.”

Madalin sees nothing phony about doing one’s utmost to practice and prepare: “Warm up your voice. Practice in a mirror. Listen to yourself by taping the sermon. Watch for places to pick up the pace or slow down for emphasis. Make eye contact. Avoid filler words like ‘um’ or ‘and’ or ‘just.’”

Her advice extends down to the most practical of details. “Avoid smoking and drinking. When you are sick, take time off; the church will still exist! I recommend hot water and honey. Don’t yell at sporting events. Do sit ups or crunches. Humming is very helpful to warming up the vocal cords.” One can see the payoff of this attention to detail in Madalin as she leads worship.

For Madalin, the work of ministry includes preparing laypeople who may not be natural performers: “It is crucial to have their part well rehearsed: where they stand, where they go, how long they speak. The pastor needs to be the encourager.” And the pastor needs to be a nonanxious presence: “Nervousness is contagious!”

Like Kocher, Madalin emphasizes professional-quality timing in liturgy. Those paid to agonize so that a performance seems effortless cannot understand why liturgy leaders can’t make the transition from praying to reading scripture more fluidly. “Practice! Practice! Practice!” Madalin thunders, like a vocal master getting tough with her pupils. “It is important to think of the movements, the spaces in between the liturgy, to get a smooth and flowing worship service.”

For Madalin, the parallels between serving the church and performing range from the large-scale down to the details. Those in the audience who are new to opera need an introduction to unfamiliar practices so as to be able to love the music. So too, church material needs to be “translated—for those who don’t speak the language.”

Bil (one /) Lepp shares none of Madalin’s emphasis on practice. “I don’t believe in any of that stuff,” he says. The 38-year-old five-time winner of the West Virginia State Liars Contest contrasts the warm-up styles of singers Robert Plant and Neil

Young. Young would harmonize with the band for half an hour, while Plant would smoke a cigarette and drink a cup of coffee. “I’m with Plant,” he says. But then, with a champion liar, who can be sure?

The Liar’s event is really a storytelling contest, and Lepp refers to himself as a “teller.” He’s been a professional teller for about five years. Before that he was a United Methodist pastor for four years. He attended Duke Divinity School and had planned to be an Old Testament scholar, but “the C- and B+ in Hebrew sort of put the kibosh on that. ”

Lepp went into the ministry and loved it—especially the preaching. “But I was bad at committee meetings and politics.” As he gained national recognition for his storytelling (one critic called him “Jeff Foxworthy with the comedic patience of Bill Cosby”), he decided to go into it full-time.

Lepp is often asked how he can justify being a pastor and a liar at the same time. “Well, Jesus’ disciples were fishermen,” he quips. But it’s important to be clear about what sort of liar Lepp is. His tales start out reasonably enough—he’s at a fishing hole, for example, or making trouble with a childhood friend in the fictional town of Half Dollar, West Virginia, or preaching (“on the postexilic, predeluvian monarchy of Tiglat Pilesia III”). Then something funny happens, then something absurd, then something even more absurd—and soon he’s hooked a DC-6 airplane with his “monster stick” and reeling himself up into the air to avoid hitting bridges throughout greater Charleston.

After he heard a tall tale from an old codger coming out of church one Sunday, Lepp, as the preacher, asked the man, “Is that true?” The man replied, “Son, both of us said something that was true this morning. One of us said something that was true . . . *and interesting.*”

That’s Lepp’s primary advice for his erstwhile fellow preachers: make it interesting. And practice is the way to do that. Lepp worked on sermons beginning on Wednesday, and by Friday he was working on oral delivery. He marked places to pause and other stage directions, figuring out how to get from A to B to C in his sermon and where he wanted certain reactions. “Some people might be gifted enough to do that in church on the spot, but honestly, not very many,” he says.

A pastor in the same town looked down on Lepp for practicing so hard, telling people that Lepp was “inhibiting the Spirit,” and that he should just show up on Sunday and

allow the Spirit to do the work. “God knew better,” Lepp says. “The Spirit needed a week to keep my stupidity from overcoming the message,” he jokes.

Lepp the preacher was a bit hesitant to let Lepp the storyteller into the pulpit. “I stuck to the text pretty much,” he says, and worried that “time spent entertaining might take away from theological value.” Illustrations, for example, had to make the exact point the sermon was aiming for and not serve as mere filler or humorous asides. And he is firmly set against preacherly gimmicks. “Multimedia and movies drive me crazy. As a public speaker I know you can use just one medium for 20 minutes and keep the audience interested.” Whatever people claim about attention spans, he says, “if you have something interesting to say, attention spans are as long as they need to be.” Lepp doesn’t move around on stage much as a teller—he stands still, using only his arms and his voice. “We tellers have a saying: If you feel like you need to walk around, you’ve stopped telling and started acting.”

His vocation as a teller has affected his theology. “I’m less of a literalist than I used to be,” he says. Scripture stories “show their teller’s hand” in complicated ways. They were first oral stories, then written, and in preaching they have to become oral again. “And that’s hard to do with mere words,” he says. Lepp also thinks regional particularity can help rather than hinder the work of a teller or preacher. “Just as I was emerging onto the national scene, someone told me I wouldn’t go very far because my stories were too West Virginia-centered. That person was incorrect. I’ve been in 35 states telling tales and can count on one hand how many times someone in the audience hasn’t approached me afterward to tell me they or their relatives are from West Virginia. And just to forestall any West Virginia jokes: I can, in fact, count on one hand. Sometimes both hands.”

Lepp’s regional particularity gives him a slant on some favorite Bible passages. He points to John 21, in which Jesus appears to the disciples after they’ve fished all night without success. “Imagine a stranger coming to your favorite fishing hole that no one else knows. You caught nothing all night, but at his word you catch a trophy load. Wouldn’t you love that guy?”

For all their differences, these four performers highlight some characteristic failings of preachers and worship leaders. They don’t practice enough. They don’t smooth out the wrinkles in the service. They don’t realize that professionals practice in order to be more spontaneous. They don’t make their presentations interesting enough.

Performance has been a significant metaphor in postliberal theological circles since Nicholas Lash used it in his essay “Performing the Scriptures” in the mid-1980s. For Lash, historical criticism is insufficient as an approach to the Bible because the book is more akin to the script of a play—it needs to be bodily performed—than to an archaeological site, which is burrowed through and destroyed for the sake of historicist reconstruction. Sam Wells takes this metaphor further in his book *Improvisation*, in which he argues that Christian living is like improvisational acting rather than script-based acting. Players practice intensely in order to be able to react to the unexpected on stage. No two acts of improvisation are ever alike, just as no two acts of Christian faithfulness are. Preparation allows for improvisation, and so for faithfulness. These performers demonstrate that truth—and provide entertainment along the way.