

One Covenant pastor's journey back
from a devastating stroke

God's Sustaining

Anne Weihsmann

In April 1999, Don Peres, pastor of Lakeview Covenant Church in Duluth, Minnesota, went to see his doctor for a routine appointment. Peres, then fifty-eight, was being treated for high blood pressure by Niles Batdorf, his family physician (and a member of Lakeview Covenant Church.)

Dr. Batdorf checked Don's left carotid artery, one of two arteries that supplies blood to the brain, while monitoring his blood pressure. He discovered an 80 to 85 percent blockage. Unless the artery was scraped, Dr. Batdorf told Don, a stroke was a certainty.

Surgery was scheduled for June 7. William Himango, the surgeon, told Don that he had performed over 1,000 carotid artery surgeries—this was just a normal procedure. Don and his wife, Patty, told their five children not to bother coming to Duluth for the surgery. "This is not a big deal," Patty said to them. "You don't need to come."

After a two-hour surgery, Peres was told that everything went well, and he would be preaching again in about two months. The following morning, a nurse pulled Don into a sitting position, and asked how he was doing.

"Well, I'm feeling kind of tired," Don said. "I think I'll rest now."

Then the lights went out.

A blood clot had formed inside of Don's carotid artery, at the site of the surgery. When he sat up, the clot shifted, closing off the artery.

The nurse ran for Dr. Himango, who performed a second emergency procedure to remove the clot. During this surgery, a piece of the clot broke



Don Peres working at his desk while serving Lakeview Covenant Church in Duluth

off and traveled to Don's brain, destroying much of the left side. The result was a massive stroke, which left him in a coma.

Don remained in a coma for two days. When he emerged, he had both aphasia (inability to think of words), and apraxia (inability to say words).

"I started to say something, and it wouldn't come out," says Don. "I motioned to my wife, who tried to tell me what had happened, but I couldn't

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understand her words. I was a prisoner in my own castle."

"It was like being in a foreign country," Patty says. "Don couldn't talk to us, and we couldn't talk to him."

Matthew Harrison, a physiatrist (a doctor specializing in physical medicine) was assigned to oversee Don's rehabilitation. He told Patty that Don would never communicate again, nor would he ever navigate stairs again. His advice to Patty was to sell their home and buy a one-level house. Patty trusted that God would heal Don, and dismissed the initial prognosis.

"I didn't break down and cry," she says. "I figured God wouldn't allow something to happen that would keep Don from preaching." But as Patty started to understand the severity of Don's stroke and its aftereffects, she realized: "Yes, God is going to allow this to happen."

A clear voice

Don had first heard a call to preach on the morning of March 23, 1960, when he was twenty and living in his parents' home in Iola, Kansas. One morning, he heard a voice saying, "Don, I want you to preach." When Don told his pastor about the incident, the pastor told him to spend a week in prayer, seeking God's direction.

Don's father was less than thrilled. "If you become a preacher," he said, "I never want to see you in this house again." After that encounter, Don stormed into his room, pitched his

Bible into a corner, and said, "God, if this is going to cause this much trouble, I don't want to have anything to do with preaching."

The next day, however, Don picked up his Bible, and started making plans to become a preacher. He sold off his 1950 Harley Davidson motorcycle, Studebaker Bearcat, and speedboat to pay for school. Don also owned a gas station with his father—he sold his half back to his father. While Don's father never supported his decision, he never kicked his son out of the house.

After attending Southwest Baptist

PROMISE



College, Don served churches in Missouri before being called to the Covenant church in Savonburg, Kansas, in 1973. He went on to the Covenant church in Thief River Falls, Minnesota, before coming to Lakeview Covenant in 1987. For more than thirty years, Don also preached at revival meetings across the Midwest. Now, almost forty years after hearing the call to preach, Don's voice was silenced.

The long road back

Four days after the stroke, a nurse strapped Don into a wheelchair, his

head supported between pillows. The medical staff wondered whether he would regain any mobility. He eventually was able to get up and take a few shuffling steps. Afterwards, he overheard his nurse say to a colleague: "It's pretty bad. Don will never walk or preach again."

Dr. Harrison predicted that Don would eventually walk with a walker. The paralysis was a result of swelling around the brain at the site of the blood clot. After a week, the swelling began to decrease, as did the paralysis. Three weeks after Don's stroke, he slowly

began walking unassisted.

As Don was starting his rehabilitation, Patty talked with Dr. Batdorf, trying to find out what kind of chance he had for recovery. "How many people come back from this kind of stroke?" she asked. Rather than offering a percentage, Dr. Batdorf said that many variables—including persistence, attitude, a strong network of support, and the hand of God—would contribute to Don's healing.

One week after the stroke, the medical staff discussed the probability of Don regaining any speech. Given the effects of the stroke, they didn't believe that he would, no matter how much speech therapy he had. Still, they arranged two weeks of in-patient speech therapy, which would give Don a chance to try, and them a chance to evaluate their prognosis. Dr. Harrison thought Don might regain a ten-to-fifteen-word vocabulary over the course of his lifetime—although he couldn't predict how many years might pass before he spoke even one word.

Don began his speech therapy with four one-hour sessions per day, five days each week.

Glenda Johnson, the therapist, had three simple words chosen for Don to repeat: "pen, ball, cup." That was the entire goal of therapy.

During those two weeks, Don could say "pen, ball, cup" by the end of a one-hour session. However, he could not remember those words at the beginning of the next session (there was a one-hour break between sessions). This pattern was repeated over and over.

At the beginning of the final session, Don was able to say "pen, ball, cup"—

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he had retained those words from the end of the previous session. Glenda was ecstatic. She surmised that because Don is ambidextrous, the right side of his brain had taken over speech function from the deadened left side.

Don came home from the hospital on July 12, 1999. He sat at the kitchen table with his Bible, knowing that he could not read it, and that even if someone else were to read it to him, he would not be able to comprehend the words. When he saw a pencil and paper lying on the table, he felt compelled by the Holy Spirit to begin writing out the Bible. He started with John 1:1—“In the beginning was the word . . .”

Don labored over one letter at a time, word upon word, verse upon verse; he clung to this task for the next eighteen months until he had finished copying the entire New Testament.



Don now preaches three times a month at Immanuel Baptist Church in Duluth.

A church that cares

During this time, Lakeview Covenant Church was enormously supportive of Patty and Don. First, they decided to keep Don on the payroll, with full benefits, from the day of his stroke in June until the end of December 1999.

Even though Don was disabled, it would be twenty-nine months before he would be eligible for Medicare. So the church paid \$10,000 to continue

ed spiritual and emotional support for Don and Patty. A month after the stroke, the church held a special healing and wholeness service for Don. He sat in the middle of a circle, while groups of fifteen people took turns surrounding him with prayer. Don believed he would be healed, but he wondered what kind of a future evangelistic career he would have with his extensive vocabulary of “pen, ball, cup.”

Many people were also praying for Don at the Feast 1999, a Covenant prayer and worship gathering held before the Annual Meeting that year. Patty believes that the power of those prayers began the healing work in Don. As he travels around the Covenant, he often meets people who tell him, “I remember praying for you at the Feast.”

In June 2000, the Lakeview church held a party for Don’s sixtieth birth-

“After his stroke he couldn’t even count—he had to relearn everything. He sees every step forward as a miracle.”

In January 2000, after seven months of grueling speech therapy, Don had something to tell Patty—something he had been waiting to tell her since the first few days after his stroke—and now he finally had the words. Don told Patty that while he was sitting by himself in the hospital, unable to speak, he had a conversation in his head with God.

“God,” Don asked, “what happened?”

“You will be healed,” Don says he heard God promise. “You will be a preacher, teacher, and evangelist again. You will preach better than you ever did before.” That promise helped to sustain him through the long rehabilitation process.

Along with his speech therapy, Don needed to relearn almost everything. Patty worked with him steadfastly, spending hours upon hours helping Don relearn such elementary concepts as colors, shapes, numbers, telling time, and counting change.

Don’s health insurance for 2000, and then took an offering to pay for the \$10,000 owed for 2001.

Because Lakeview covered Don’s health insurance premiums for 2000, he only had to pay the \$2,000 deductible for his medical care—his speech therapy alone totaled over \$30,000.

Don’s experience helped lead to a change in policy for Bethany Benefits, the Covenant Church’s denominational insurance plan. Patty wrote a letter to the Board of Pensions, explaining the financial hardship for ministers who have to wait more than two years before their Medicare insurance begins.

Beginning this January, the Covenant Church will cover twenty-four months of insurance premiums for any minister on the plan who becomes permanently disabled. The church will also contribute to the minister’s pension plan while they are disabled up to age sixty-five, says Elliott Johnson, who oversees Bethany Benefits.

The Lakeview church also provid-

day. Patty and the church’s parish nurses wanted to seat Don at a corner table, hoping the separation would decrease his confusion—small groups of people would be allowed to visit him at his table. Before long, Don got up and waded into the thick of the crowd. “We couldn’t keep him set apart,” Patty says. “He is a people person.”

Harry Michalicek, a friend of Don and chairperson of the church at that time, recalls that Don just wanted to be with people. “Don couldn’t remember names,” Michalicek says, “sometimes not even his wife’s name. But he could express himself by saying, ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you,’ and by giving many hugs.”

Michalicek and a group of men from the church had taught Don to play cribbage several years before the stroke. Nine months after Don’s stroke, they resumed their regular cribbage games. Don needed help counting points, but he was able to play, says Michalicek.

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