

## From Jim's Desk: Improving our preaching

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It seems as if we all fall into comfortable patterns by doing things the same way week after week. Unless something like construction or an accident blocks my route, I will follow the same roadway to work every day even though there are several options open to me. It is comfortable and requires little effort to do "the same old, same old." But sometimes the old patterns can begin to feel monotonous and we start to long for a change in the old routine. Several months ago I decided to try something new in preparing my sermons. After pastoring and preaching at least once a week for over 25 years I certainly had a comfortable pattern down pat. But a couple of factors were nudging me to make a change.

First of all, I had received a complimentary copy of a cd that was advertising a subscription to a preaching resource. The offer was to regularly supply me with a CD that contained a recorded sermon followed by a panel discussion. The preacher and a few friends proceeded to talk about the sermon and discuss pertinent questions about the content and the direction of the sermon. I found this very interesting and thought provoking as the preacher and the other participants candidly discussed the process of how the sermon was shaped and how it was presented. It allowed some fresh insight into how others go about this mysterious process of allowing the Word and the Spirit to shape us and our delivery. The question came to me: "Why can't we be more intentional in doing this as a staff at our church?" After all, then I could avoid the temptation of subscribing to another ministry helps offer only to later find I'm too busy to make use of yet another good idea. Not only that, our discussions as a staff would be more in keeping with the culture of our congregation.

We have been doing something similar for several years during our staff meetings on Monday mornings. Each week we review our Sunday Service, which we call our Main Gathering, including its various elements: the announcements, music and the sermon. We discuss what came across well and what didn't and we make suggestions for improvements. While this may seem to be a rather awkward and sensitive exercise, we have always found it encouraging and rewarding. Since I preach the majority of sermons in our main gatherings it requires some vulnerability on my part. However, since all of us have the opportunity to have our sermons reviewed, as you can imagine, we are all fair and careful in how we phrase our comments and observations. Our discussions have been open and honest with the understanding that we are all looking to improve our communication skills. The insight stimulated by the sample CD was that if we could have this kind of discussion before the sermon was preached it could certainly add to the effectiveness of the message. This would be a good way for the preacher assigned to preach that week to test out the sermon's content and have opportunities to make improvements before Sunday.

A second factor in nudging me to make this kind of change was that we usually have a couple of pastoral interns or young pastors around the office who are very interested in improving their preaching skills. In fact, public speaking can set even the most mature expositor's knees to rattling. It is no wonder, given the challenges of postmodern communication and the rather jaundiced view of preachers prevalent in our culture. What better way to help them than to let them in on the formation process of a sermon.

We call this exercise a "Preaching Forum." It usually takes place for an hour or so on Wednesday or Thursday afternoons. It is scheduled by the one who is delivering the sermon that week. Generally, it occurs after the research preparation is done but before the finished sermon takes shape. But sometimes impromptu Preaching Forums are called when the preacher is "stuck" in a text. I think nearly every preacher would know what I am referring to. It is that time when no matter how many commentaries and helps we use or how hard we pray, we just can't seem to

grasp the meaning or the implications of the text. We find that a Preaching Forum is a good way to break the impasse and move ahead on the sermon.

Our Preaching Forums help me in a number of ways. Since we have quite a few students in our congregation I am very concerned that my sermons are relevant to young people and during our Forums our younger staff members make suggestions that help me to use illustrations and metaphors that relate to their peers. For example, instead of saying: "The Gospel has to be lived out in the everyday world." I could say: "The Gospel has to be lived out next to your locker."

I am also challenged during our Preaching Forums to explain clearly and concisely the main idea of my sermon. One of my former professors used to talk about the 3 am sermon test. (If your wife wakes you up at 3 am on Saturday night and asks you what your sermon is about and you can't tell her in one concise sentence, your sermon is not yet ready to be delivered.) Explaining your sermon to others helps to clarify whether or not you have a sufficient grasp of the material so that you can present it with clarity and conviction. I have found that if it is unclear in my mind, it will be unclear when it comes out of my mouth.

Another advantage of these Preaching Forums is that they have proved to be a wonderful source of illustrations. Participants in the discussions often suggest quotes or stories that help to add colour and life to the sermon.

I am also convinced that younger preachers can learn some valuable lessons from this kind of exercise. Our younger preachers are enthusiastic participants when it is their turn to preach. They learn how to shape sermon material into a coherent message. So often, novice preachers present sermons which sound as if they need some guidance in putting their sermon together so it comes across as more than a jumble of truths discovered in a biblical text. During our Forums our staff receives important mentoring as they discuss their sermons and this certainly increases their competence and confidence during delivery. They have the unique opportunity to "get into the head" so to speak of more mature preachers as they "ruminate out loud" on texts and wrestle with the truths discovered there. This kind of learning takes them well beyond what they could learn from textbooks and classroom instruction.

Preaching Forums create sermons in which all of those who participate have an investment. This creates at least one group in the congregation who will be paying very careful attention to the sermon. They are anxious to hear how their input enhances the sermon's delivery and impact.

It is always a rewarding and enriching experience to sit around a table with Bibles open with fellow students and expositors of the Word. I am grateful for this kind of opportunity to work on my preaching skills. Please feel free to link to our church [yotuh](#) page where you can listen to some of the sermons that were the fruit of this forum. [clcc webpage](#)

Blessings, Jim