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Listening to Your Listeners: A Preaching Preparation Process that Changes...Everything!

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Lori Carrell

Calvin Symposium on Worship 2014

C7: Listening to Your Listeners: A Preaching Preparation Process That Changes...Everything!

Preaching That Matters

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE JOURNAL FOR PREACHERS & LISTENING ENHANCEMENT RESOURCES FOR PARISHIONERS

Selected Reflective Practice Challenges

These selected Reflective Practice Challenges (RPCs) provide opportunities for self-analysis, spiritual introspection, conversation with a trusted other, or implementation of research-based preaching recommendations. You'll find even more RPCs in the book!

For maximum benefit, complete the reading that precedes each RPC before you begin the activity and finish the RPC before continuing your reading of *Preaching That Matters*.

- Brainstorming Barriers
- Sermon Preparation Log
- Spiritual Transformation and Preaching: Pushing Your Buttons
- Transformative Sermon Response Goals
- Pick a Pathway
- Supportive Material Development

Remember, these activities have been used by hundreds of other pastors, and each RPC has been carefully selected for its potential contribution to the process of transforming sermon communication.

Listening Enhancement Parishioner Resources

Most adults have never had instruction in listening. Consider adding a new Listener Resources section to the church website or library. You might begin to raise listener awareness by distributing these two reproducible resources:

- Preaching Partners: How to Be a More Powerful Listener
- How to Talk with Your Pastor about Preaching-Related Concerns

Because these handouts cite *Preaching That Matters* as the source of the information, listeners will not perceive that these ideas are a directive from you; instead, your sharing of these materials can warmly invite further interaction about sermon communication. If your congregation is like most, this topic has previously been taboo.

See the "Listening to Your Listeners" chapter in *Preaching That Matters* for more practical listening enhancement ideas.



Listening to Listeners: What's Up in My Church?

Pastor, as you work to incorporate listeners into the preaching preparation process and to equip parishioners with resources that may enhance their listening, you are shifting established patterns of congregational communication. In most congregations, no matter how approachable and friendly the pastor, listeners do not engage in authentic dialogue about preaching with their minister. This perpetual avoidance of interaction about sermons may cause preachers to remain unaware of listeners' perspectives, diminishing the potential for sermons that are spiritually transformative.

1. As you consider the possibilities for changing established interaction patterns, raise your awareness about how things are right now by responding to the following statements with 1 (no); 2 (not sure at this time); or 3 (yes).
2. Then, discuss your responses to these statements with your accountability partner, together considering practices you could implement to lead change in this arena.
 - a. ___ I am satisfied with the quality of sermon feedback I receive.
 - b. ___ I am satisfied with the quantity of sermon feedback I receive.
 - c. ___ I am able to discern through listener response that sermon communication regularly results in spiritual transformation.
 - d. ___ In our congregation, listeners have ways to regularly contribute to my sermon preparation.
 - e. ___ During sermon communication my listeners are more active than passive.
 - f. ___ I regularly choose sermon response methods to engage listeners' thinking.
 - g. ___ In our congregation, open discussion of the sermon in my presence is common.
 - h. ___ A majority of my listeners are mentally engaged during sermon communication.
 - i. ___ In our congregation, small groups or classes have focused on sermon communication or sermon listening enhancement.
 - j. ___ In our congregation, listening enhancement suggestions are made available (in preaching, in print, online, or through other means).

Preaching Partners: How to Be a More Powerful Listener

In the United States, millions of people listen to sermons every week. What difference does all that preaching and listening—that sermon communication—make for individuals, congregations, communities, and culture? A major research endeavor with hundreds of preachers and more than thirty thousand listeners has been exploring how preachers and their listeners can maximize the transformative power of sermon communication.

Have you ever talked to your pastor about a sermon?

Seventy-eight percent of churchgoing Americans have *never* done that!

Can you remember the sermon you heard two weeks ago?

Most listeners cannot.

Do you come to church hoping the sermon will help you grow spiritually?

A vast majority of us *want* that to happen!

Though millions of people listen to sermons hoping for spiritual transformation, often memories fail and impact is minimal. The most commonly reported sermon response is, “I was reminded of something I already knew.” Are the preachers, and the preachers alone, responsible for this situation? Is the impact of each sermon completely up to the minister who stands before you speaking each week? Sermon communication research says “No!” Listeners, you are not passive *receivers* of spoken words being *sent* at or to you. You are not empty containers waiting to be filled. You are responsible for making meaning as the preacher speaks. You are a partner in the preaching process. Sermon communication is something you and your preacher do together. As you listen to sermons, your minds are already highly active, bursting with relevant past experiences, abilities that enable you to pay attention and remember, unique thoughts and emotions, decision-making skills, openness to hearing God’s voice, a desire to follow Christ, and creative possibilities for allowing God to bring change in and through your actions after the sermon. What amazing potential and power reside with each listener during every sermon!

- The gospel is life changing.
- The spoken word is powerful.
- Preachers *and* listeners are responsible for the results of sermon communication.

You choose the degree of listening energy you bring to sermon communication. Imagine that a prize of ten thousand dollars is offered for any person who can remember the entire sermon. Could you listen differently? Though a cash reward is unlikely, the potential prize available as a result of high-energy listening during the sermon is priceless!

Sermon communication can regularly result in positive impact, with visible and lasting changes in lives, congregations, communities, and culture.

Your preacher is prayerfully reflecting on practices that can positively affect the spiritual impact of sermon communication in your congregation. Now, how can you increase the transformative results of preaching in your life, your church, and your community?

Before the Sermon

- Request that sermon topics or texts be publicized at least a week in advance.
- Read the text prior to the sermon. Think about the topic. Converse with family or friends about the topic or passage as you prepare for sermon communication.
- Get ready to listen physically and mentally. Be as well rested as possible for your weekly sermon listening experience.
- Suggest a Sermon Support Box to your preacher. If such a mechanism is used, regularly write a comment or question.
- If you are invited to attend a pre-sermon dialogue group, participate if at all possible.
- Share your reaction to these listening resources with your preacher through e-mail or conversation.
- Share sermon ideas, comments, questions, or related printed material with the preacher.
- Ask the preacher if the congregation functions in a way that provides enough sermon preparation time; seek to change the system if necessary.
- Respect your preacher's sermon preparation time as a congregational priority. So often, hospital visits or other pressing needs for pastoral care conflict with sermon preparation time. Perhaps you can organize a Stephen Ministry. This kind of group can assist the preacher in meeting needs of the congregation that emerge unexpectedly each week, so that preaching preparation time can be maintained.
- Begin to use a sermon notebook or journal that you bring with you to the service each week.
- Be conscious of your own expectations (inspiration? comfort? life application?). Listen for what you need, but be aware of other possibilities as well. Think too about the congregation and the broader community.
- Start a rotational sermon support prayer group, or designate a time each week when listeners will pray for the preacher's sermon preparation.

During the Sermon

- Sit toward the front, especially if those seats are usually empty. Eliminate other distractions as possible.
- Display a high degree of attentiveness with whatever verbal and nonverbal behaviors are appropriate in your church tradition or cultural background. Your energy affects the preacher's energy.

- Know that your preacher speaks much slower than you can think, so the words of the sermon cannot fill your mind. Work to relate your thoughts to the sermon, recalling prior knowledge and experience, speculating, applying, synthesizing, planning, and praying.
- Don't listen to grade or score the preacher's "performance" in the partnership. God is speaking through a flawed human being; we are all flawed and yet God calls us to our various roles in the world. God has called your preacher. Listening to evaluate the preacher can impede listening for spiritual growth, although critical thinking about the content is imperative.
- Make connections to your prior knowledge and experience.
- Pay attention to how you are creating meaning during the sermon. Be mindful of the potential for valuable, positive transformation.
- Ask yourself questions. Provoke yourself to think about things you don't often consider. Write down at least one of these questions to reflect upon later.
- Focus on the purpose of your listening during the sermon. Most listeners report that they listen to sermons for the purpose of spiritual growth. Is that what you are doing? If not, why not? If you want to grow spiritually, how can you change the way you listen?
- If you begin to simply nod in agreement, challenge yourself to think about the potential for change in your life, the congregation, or the community. Be creative, connecting sermon content to local and global as well as personal issues.
- Use a sermon response journal to increase your mindfulness and document your responses during sermon communication. Be careful not to merely outline content; instead, with the goal of growth, ponder potential action.

After the Sermon

- Reflect on the meaning you and your preacher have cocreated. Pray a response to God.
- Plan a comment for your preacher. Be sure your remark is focused on content whenever possible. Avoid post-sermon evaluative remarks like "good" or "confusing" or the intended neutral, interpreted negatively "Have a nice day" that doesn't even acknowledge sermon communication has just occurred. An easy and appreciated technique? Paraphrase the key point, and ask the preacher if you are on target.
- As soon as possible after the sermon, converse with another listener about the meaning of the sermon. Again, this conversation will be most helpful if it focuses upon the way the sermon communication may affect your spiritual journey, rather than the scoring of the preacher, which suggests the preacher is entirely responsible for your spiritual growth.
- Share your thinking about the sermon with someone who was not present. The task of crafting meaning with another person will help move ideas from your short- to long-term memory and may provoke additional thought or action.
- Organize a note-writing campaign so that your preacher receives several notes each week with expanded content-based comments. Use e-mail or respond to your preacher's blog, as appropriate. This idea is especially important for churches in which not many parishioners

have the opportunity to speak with the preacher after the sermon. The goal is not to provide preachers with continuous affirmation but to engage with your preacher in the creation of meaning, to focus on the way sermon communication affects us.

- Consider creating a small group that focuses on congregational or community implementation of sermon communication. Though personal spiritual growth is important, that inward focus is a limited one. For example, ask what the sermon series on the beatitudes means for congregational policy, or ask how a sermon challenge to love our neighbors could motivate further intersection of the congregation with its physical neighborhood. Some congregations connect to community efforts already in progress (for example, taking overnight shifts at a warming shelter) while others initiate specific ministries (for example, an aging church that began an afterschool grandparent program through which to live out the gospel).

How to Talk with Your Pastor about Preaching-Related Concerns

Listeners, if you are working to accept your powerful responsibility as a partner in sermon communication, the need for dialogue with the preacher about problematic issues may emerge. Discussing a preaching-related concern with your pastor can be difficult; if such a conversation is the first you've ever had with the preacher about a sermon, then the difficulty will be magnified. Know that these direct conversations are counter to the way the church generally operates, and yet pastors express great longing for authentic feedback if that feedback is provided constructively.

Plan a way to begin the conversation, plan to listen to the responses before you react, and plan to interact rather than vent. Be specific about your concern when you offer your input, saying, for example, "I've noticed that it's important to you that we agree with your creationism perspective," or "I feel left out when you choose illustrations based almost exclusively in male experiences." Consider these general guidelines for discussing difficult issues with your preacher:

- *Speak for yourself*, don't say "we" or "lots of people" unless you are representing a group of people who are willing to be identified by name.
- *Speak in private, face to face*. Such dialogue should not take place on e-mail or the phone.
- Reserve this kind of conversation for *issues of significance*.
- Be aware that the preacher's job is not to please listeners but to provide spiritual leadership. Ultimately, *the goal of spiritual transformation* should guide decisions about preaching.
- *Be concise and specific*, sharing examples to support your perception.
- *Explain your perception* and how it was derived.
- *Identify and claim your emotional reaction* (frustrated, angry, confused, and so forth).
- *Don't exaggerate* to make your point. For example, don't say, "I am really irate!" when "I feel irritated" is more accurate.
- *Be ready to repeat your perspective*; you may need to rephrase your thoughts as many as three times before you are heard.
- Be sure your *voice reflects your partnership attitude*. How you speak will communicate emotional and relational meanings that dramatically affect the outcome of the conversation.
- *Don't threaten*. "If you don't do what I want you to do, then I'm leaving this church (or going to the board)."
- *Expect a meaningful dialogue*, rather than a time for you to scold or be scolded.
- *Listen carefully to the response* of the preacher.
- Have an empathetic listening goal: to understand the preacher's perspective on this issue. Try to *rephrase the preacher's response to communicate you are listening*; for example, "So you believe your views on creationism are central to the Christian experience, and you repeat them frequently because you know there are people in the parish who hold a different

belief?” or “So because you don’t consciously intend to demonstrate a male bias, you believe that I should overlook your language choices.”

- *Metacommunicate*. Talk about the situation; for example, “I know this is uncomfortable; I feel awkward approaching you, but the issue is important to me; I want to share my viewpoint—do you want to hear it?” or “I feel frustrated that you do not seem to understand what I’m trying to say. I want to understand what you are saying. Now, will you let me explain my perspective once more, and then perhaps you could paraphrase what you think I’m saying?”
- *Suggest solutions* if appropriate; for example, “I am wishing for sermons that are more connected to my daily life. Because you preach at three small churches every Sunday, we don’t get to talk with you before or after the sermon. It must be hard for you to get to know us. Could I help you conduct a survey of the listeners? You could use the specific information about our families, work, and spiritual journeys to personalize your sermons.”
- *Pray* about your preacher’s impact on the spiritual growth of listeners before and after the conversation. If possible, ask to close the session with prayer, thanking God for calling this person to preach.