

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Sermons—a pro's view

“The best preaching happens in congregations in which people love the pastor and the pastor loves them.” That’s the view of John C. Holbert, a dynamic preacher who has spent many years teaching pastors how to preach. He teaches at the United Methodist Church’s Perkins School of Theology, where he is the Lois Craddock Perkins Professor of Homiletics. (That means preaching—one more example of how in the church we avoid using a familiar, conversational word when we can use an unfamiliar, churchy one.) Holbert has also been pastor of a fast-growing church and interim pastor of a huge church that had been split by crisis, in addition to holding other pastorates and teaching positions and appearing as a guest preacher at many churches.



I talked with him recently because writing last month’s *Connections* had revived some of my frequent thoughts about sermons and made me wonder how the subject looked to someone whose perspective was different from mine. With his permission I’m reporting some of the views he expressed.

Liking the pastor can affect our hearing

“Much preaching difficulty can be overcome by being well liked,” Holbert finds. “This profoundly affects what people hear.” That’s a factor I find a bit baffling because it plays such a small part in my evaluation of sermons, yet I continually see its great importance for other churchgoers. Holbert also mentioned another reaction that baffles me but that I see constantly. “For many people,” he finds, “if they leave weeping they consider the sermon a great success.”



How could we improve preaching?

I asked homiletics professor John Holbert what he’d get the church to do if by some stroke of magic he were put in charge. Here’s his answer.



- See that all pastors (not just new ones or those who know they need help) get continuing education in preaching. Holbert thinks bishops could require this or least strongly recommend it. And the help shouldn’t come just from other clergy. It should also come from speech and drama experts and lay church members.



- Require every congregation to have three to five members meet with the pastor monthly or bimonthly, to suggest how he or she could improve sermons’ interest and effectiveness.

- Include opportunities for preaching in other seminary classes, not just in homiletics classes, in order to show students how to relate their preaching to all that they are learning.

What would you do if you were in charge?

Should preachers use a lectionary?

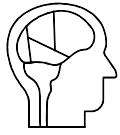
A lectionary (a schedule of scriptures for covering the Bible over a period of time) can be a good tool for preachers, says John Holbert, if they use it effectively. It helps them move through the whole Bible and Christian tradition instead of just “riding their own horses” all the time—sticking only with their pet subjects. Preachers can either use the Common Lectionary or put together their own, Holbert suggests.

The biggest advantage, he finds, is that using some kind of lectionary lets congregation members prepare ahead of time. As an example, Holbert tells about a pastor who each week attends one of his 500-600-member church’s weekly lectionary study groups (a different group every week). He doesn’t teach. He only listens, to learn what the members find most relevant to their lives in the week’s scripture, so he can focus on that aspect of the scripture in his sermon.



Heart people and head people

The weight different churchgoers give to these factors evidently depends a lot on innate personality differences. People evaluate information and experiences in two different ways. About half of the people in the U.S. are what the most widely used description of personality types calls “feeling types.” Although they are quite capable of thinking, in evaluating what they see and hear they give top priority to how they feel about the people involved. And when they make a decision their main concern is how it will affect people. In contrast, “thinking types” base their decisions and evaluations mainly on what they consider reasonable and logical, even though they consider feelings too. Considering both rational and emotional aspects of issues is essential for getting an accurate view and making good decisions, but we all tend to see our own favorite way as the right way.



You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.
—Matthew 22:37

These two personality types are about evenly distributed in the U.S. population, but not in most churches. There, “feeling types” are much more plentiful than “thinking types.” This means that in the church we often overemphasize avoiding conflict, pleasing everyone, and loving God with our hearts. We tend to ignore being efficient, facing controversy, and loving God with our minds.

I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also. I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also.
—1 Corinthians 14:15

The disproportionate presence of “feeling types” in the church, in both the laity and the clergy, also means that we often fail to appreciate and use the much-needed insights and talents of our members who are “thinking types.” It means, too, that we often design sermons, worship services, and other church activities to appeal only to “feeling types.” As a result, we miss a lot of the people God wants us to reach.



I’m a “thinking type,” which puts me in the minority in the church and leads me to evaluate sermons (and several other features of the church, as you’ve probably noticed if you’ve read *Connections* for very long) differently from many other members. To me, liking the pastor has almost nothing to do with whether I consider a sermon good. I like plenty of people who aren’t good speakers, but liking them doesn’t mean I want to hear them preach. For me, good preaching must have good composition, good delivery, and challenging, though-provoking content, and liking my pastor depends partly on whether his or her preaching has these qualities, rather than the other way around.



What’s happening matters a lot



“Good preaching,” says John Holbert, “also has a lot to do with what is going on in the week when the sermon is preached.” If a crisis in the congregation, the local community, or the wider world is consuming churchgoers’ attention, the sermon’s effectiveness can depend a lot on whether it helps listeners understand and cope with the crisis.

For this reason, in Holbert’s view, the days of so-called great preachers traveling around to preach in different churches may be mostly past. An outsider who doesn’t know the congregation members and their local situation isn’t likely to be able to speak effectively to their greatest current concerns.

Can effective preaching be taught?

Yes and no, Holbert finds. In his view, personality and certain physical characteristics are very important, and to a large extent those are built-in, not learned. In Holbert’s experience, it’s hard to take a naturally shy, reticent person and teach him or her how to preach well. A rich, powerful voice also contributes a lot to preaching ability, and for the most part that’s built-in rather than learnable.



Still, says John Holbert, some preachers learn to compensate for shortcomings in voice quality and personality. Introverts can learn to extravert even though extraverting isn’t their most comfortable way



of functioning. Also, training, practice, and preparation can improve public-speaking ability, even for a person whose natural voice qualities aren't wonderful. Holbert finds that some pastors become better preachers by participating in programs like Toastmasters or Dale Carnegie courses, which provide practice and pointers not only on good speaking techniques but also on being more outgoing in interactions with people.

In addition, being well-liked can lessen the effect of shortcomings in a preacher's voice and personality. In a church whose pastor had been there for several years, Holbert immediately noticed that the pastor had a severe vocal-chord problem, causing him to speak very hoarsely. However, Holbert asked several church members if their pastor was hard to listen to. They said "No. He is a lovely man." Two unrelated subjects? Not for these members!



How can pastors learn to preach better?

Although experience and practice can help pastors improve their preaching, Holbert finds that some merely practice the same bad habits over and over. Without becoming aware of the need to practice better ways of preaching, practice doesn't help.

Holbert therefore tries to increase his students' awareness of how their preaching needs improvement and how they can improve it. He urges them to acquire as many skills as possible, and not to preach in the same way every week. He recommends that



they adapt their sermon style and format to what different scripture texts call for. This can mean using a different style for a sermon based on a Bible story,

for example, from the style used to deal with a scripture about a social-justice issue.



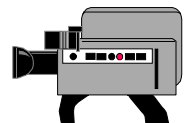
Holbert says he also warns students to wear their erudition lightly rather than deluging listeners with everything they know about the Bible or theology. He urges students, too, to pare the amount of theological lingo they use, without demeaning listeners



by acting as if they aren't capable of understanding difficult concepts. "Words that are tossed around regularly in seminary," Holbert reminds his students, "don't mean much to people outside of it." (And I say "Amen!" to that.)

Continuing to learn is hard but essential

Unfortunately, John Holbert observes, seminary students get very little preaching experience in their seminary courses, and they get little of the kind of evaluation that would help them most. Many students are required to take only a one-semester course in preaching. Holbert's classes each have ten or fewer students, each of whom preaches three sermons during the semester. Their fellow students and Holbert are the audience for these. One of the three sermons is videotaped, and Holbert and the student look at the tape together and discuss it privately in his office. Not surprisingly, Holbert finds that students are very reluctant to point out the shortcomings of each others' sermons in class, even though they're asked to.



After students leave seminary, Holbert observes, they unfortunately get little evaluation and help in preaching. He urges them to be in a clergy group that meets regularly, and to videotape some of their sermons and discuss the tape with this group, but he

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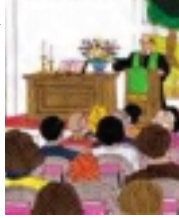


I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

finds that for most clergy, busy schedules and reluctance to criticize each other makes this hard.

Evaluation should come from the laity

The best way to get evaluation, in Holbert's view (and in mine), is to have lay church members regularly evaluate their pastor's sermons. However, this takes courage and can be painful for both pastor and members, especially those who are "feeling types."



Lay members' evaluation serves three important purposes, Holbert finds.

√ It attunes the pastor to what members are actually hearing.

√ It binds the pastor to the members more closely, establishing a connection that helps the pastor minister more effectively.

√ It helps the pastor recognize and eliminate distracting mannerisms that are part of his or her preaching style.

I wish more of our pastors and church members had the courage such evaluation requires.

Barbara

Spiritual Family Trees: Finding Your Faith Community's Roots

by Barbara Wendland and Larry W. Easterling

Available in October from the Alban Institute

In the July and August 2000 *Connections* I told about my Sunday School class members' experience of sharing spiritual histories by using genograms, as suggested by our class member Larry Easterling, a UMC clergyman. In our new book, Larry and I show how this exciting method can build community in church groups and can aid personal spiritual growth. You can order our book now at www.alban.org.

More information about it in next month's *Connections* . . .

