

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 48 - OCTOBER 1996



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A surprising response

When in the August *Connections* I said that use of the lectionary might be contributing to dull worship, I had no idea I was stirring up a hornets' nest. However, that statement has brought the most responses I've ever received about any issue of *Connections*.

Most responders have been pastors vigorously defending the use of the lectionary, which makes me uneasy. It reminds me of an old saying—"The louder he declared his innocence, the more carefully we counted the silverware." When someone reacts defensively in a way that seems out of proportion to the statement that triggered the reaction, the statement starts looking even more likely to be true.

Something isn't working

If participation in our traditional worship services were increasing or even holding steady, no defense of our present pattern would be necessary. The results would speak for themselves. But participation is declining in far too many of our churches. Many members and potential members evidently aren't finding our worship services helpful. I worry, therefore, when church leaders insist that our present methods are the best ones. Some of them obviously aren't working.

Dull worship drives churchgoers away

Using the lectionary has definite advantages, and other methods of choosing sermon topics and worship themes also have drawbacks, but dullness seems to me to be a special danger of the lectionary method and I believe dullness is what most quickly drives today's churchgoers away. That's why I think we must at least consider the possibility that basing our worship on the lectionary may not be the best method.



What makes worship effective?

Effective worship, it seems to me, makes God's presence, power, authority, justice, and love apparent to worshipers. It inspires and helps them to respond with gratitude, self-awareness, and commitment.



Concrete evidence that God is real

A sermon is effective only if it serves this purpose. Like the other parts of a worship service, the sermon needs to present clear, concrete, convincing evidence that God really exists and that God is currently acting in individual people's lives and in the wider world. A sermon needs to show concretely how being a Christian makes a real difference in coping with the real problems that the worshipers face. Some of this evidence will come from scripture, but to be convincing, some must come from the lives of contemporary people who have much in common with the worshipers.

Reminders of God's love, beauty, and justice

Some worshipers see God best through people, and especially through the fun, talk, and touches and hugs that express love. To experience God's presence they need to touch and talk with their fellow worshipers. Other churchgoers see God best through efforts to promote justice. They want worship that reminds participants of their need to combat social evils. Still others see



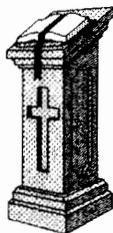
God through hearing or participating in performances of great music, or being in a beautiful sanctuary. Other worshipers, however, are turned off by all these avenues to God, and they need different ones in order to recognize God's presence.

Responses of praise and commitment

Besides helping us see God and feel God's presence, our worship services must also help us respond to what we've seen and felt, by expressing praise and making commitments to God. But just as we don't all see God in the same way, we can't all express our praise in the same way and we aren't all called to make the same commitments. That's why we can't expect any one style of worship to help everyone experience God and respond. "One size fits all" doesn't apply to worship.



Because lectionary-based preaching can so easily become mere delivery of information, it is especially likely to be dry and dull. Also, because so much lectionary-based sermon-preparation material is available, using the lectionary brings a special temptation to use content that is quick and easy to use but doesn't match the hearers' interests or the preacher's abilities. Our declining membership and participation make me suspect that too few of our preachers are avoiding these dangers.



Good preaching—qualification #1?

For most pastors, preaching is only one of many roles they're expected to fill, yet many church members refer to their pastor as "the preacher." Some address him or her as "preacher" instead of by name, and many speak of being "called to preach," instead of being called to the ordained ministry.



I suspect that this reflects the feeling of many lay churchgoers that the number-one qualification for pastors should be preaching ability. It's not surprising if members feel that way, because some of them never come in contact with the pastor in her/his other roles but everyone who participates at all hears the pastor preach. Besides, lay people can do other church jobs, but only pastors are permitted to do the preaching. So preaching may be the skill that pastors need most. How does the choice of topics influence its effectiveness?



Many sources of sermon topics

Some preachers choose their sermon topics only a week at a time. They preach on whatever they feel the Holy Spirit is currently bringing most strongly to their attention. It may be a problem that confronts their congregation, their local community, the nation, or the world. It may be an insight triggered by a book, article, or scripture they have read, or by a new development in their personal spiritual journey.



Other preachers who choose their own topics plan them in advance, often using a group of related topics. They may schedule a series of sermons about

the Apostles Creed, for example, or the Ten Commandments. A series may be a study of a section of the Bible—the Gospel of Mark perhaps, or the stories of the Old Testament prophets.



The Common Lectionary

Many pastors, however, use the Common Lectionary for providing the scripture texts on which their sermons and other parts of the worship services are based. The Common Lectionary is a schedule of scripture texts that has been adopted by several denominations. For each Sunday in a three-year period, four scriptures (or three in some versions of the lectionary) are scheduled. One is a Psalm, one is from some other part of the Old Testament, one is from one of the Gospels, and one is from some other part of the New Testament.



In general, the subjects of these scriptures follow the church year. The prophecies of the Messiah's coming and the stories of Jesus' birth, for example, come during the Christmas season, and those about the last days of Jesus' life at Lent and Easter. However, the relation of the four listed scriptures to each other isn't always obvious.



Benefits can also be obstacles

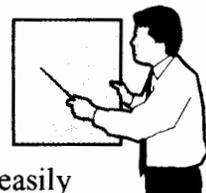
Let's look at some advantages and disadvantages of using the lectionary.

Information

How shall they hear without a preacher?
—Romans 10:14

Pastors find that few of today's younger people have learned the Bible's contents at home, in church, or from the culture in the way that people formerly did. Many pastors therefore see sermons as their only opportunity to inform today's churchgoers about what the Bible says. Using the lectionary is a good way of doing that, because the lectionary systematically covers a cross-section of the Bible's contents.

To get this benefit, however, members must attend more regularly than most of our members do. And when giving information becomes the main goal, a sermon can easily



turn into a lecture, which for many people isn't worship.



▪ **Uniformity**

Congregations whose worship is based on the lectionary are using the same scriptures at the same time. This uniformity lets people attend worship in different places without missing any part of the sequence, and it reminds churchgoers that they are all one in Christ.



In addition, this uniformity allows publication of many lectionary-based study materials and sermon-preparation helps. Pastors who use the lectionary can also get help by meeting with other pastors to talk together about the scriptures they are all using. This process can provide valuable new insights and inspiration, and can reveal aspects of the topic that wouldn't have occurred to a pastor preparing alone.

Having so many available materials can also be a disadvantage, however. They make it dangerously easy for a preacher to merely grab sermon illustrations or even a ready-made sermon from a book at the last minute, or to adopt someone else's sermon plan. The result can easily be a sermon that the preacher can't deliver effectively, or one that doesn't relate to the hearers' experience, their main concerns, or the most urgent current issues.

▪ **Faithfulness**

Using the lectionary can keep a preacher from preaching only on personal favorite topics and ignoring others that are equally or more important. It encourages addressing tough topics that might otherwise be avoided.

Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage ...
—2 Timothy 4:2

▪ **Discipline**

Throughout history many people have found that using a prescribed framework for personal prayer and meditation is helpful even though it is restrictive. Such practices may in fact be helpful *because* they are restrictive. Using repeated groups of words as part of the worship liturgy and seeing the furnishings of a familiar sanctuary each Sunday also works this way for many Christians. The fact that such practices don't change, don't allow too much leeway, and don't



require constant thought or choice removes distraction and aids concentration.



So does using the lectionary. It's a discipline that can be helpful. It provides structure, consistency, and predictability that many people find valuable for both personal prayer and corporate worship.

Such restrictions are deadening to other people, however. For some preachers, using the lectionary dampens their enthusiasm, discourages them from saying what they feel called to say, and keeps them from most effectively using their greatest abilities.

▪ **Focus**

Music, the sermon, and all other parts of worship can all focus on the same topic when worship is based on the lectionary. For many worshipers, a unified focus makes the worship service much more effective than if its parts were unrelated.

However, the resulting variety in music, creeds, and prayers turns off other worshipers. They care more about having words and music be familiar than about having their content reflect a theme. Worship that uses only a small number of old-time hymns, gospel songs, or contemporary praise songs meets these worshipers' needs best.

▪ **Congregational involvement**

When sermons are based on the lectionary, each Sunday's scriptures can be announced in advance so that congregation members can read and reflect on them before coming to worship. This can help members be better informed and more involved. Also, some pastors lead a weekly study of the coming Sunday's scriptures. This not only gives congregation members helpful preparation. It also helps the preacher find an approach to the sermon text that will help and interest hearers. But getting these benefits requires commitment and discipline that many members lack.



Real feelings and real life

Effective sermons are usually concrete, localized, and personal. They include stories of contemporary people whose interests and experience are

similar to those of the hearers. They communicate the preacher's feelings, experience, personality, and spirituality. They stir the hearers' feelings, relate directly to their experience, speak their language, and address their real concerns.



Effective sermons also communicate enthusiasm, caring, and hope. They help hearers to experience God's presence and God's love during the worship service, and inspire them to work for justice and to show God's love to the world when they leave.

Lectionary-based preaching and worship can do all these things, but only if they deliberately avoid some pitfalls that I'm afraid we're too often failing to avoid.

Barbara

Next month (or maybe the next—my travel schedule may keep me from publishing an issue next month) . . .

New ways of being the church



Connections 10-96
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What makes worship effective?

Connections readers say . . .

"My two favorite preachers use the lectionary and preach with passion, spirit, and immediacy. Both come down among the congregation to talk without notes about what the scripture means to them. The greatest power comes when discipline and passion come together." (a layman)

"I no longer use the lectionary. I've started preaching from what is going on in my own spiritual life and in my congregation. I feel much more alive and authentic, and my members say my sermons are much better." (a clergywoman)



"The depth and timeliness of lectionary preaching, and prayerful preparation and delivery, has much more effect on whether it speaks to people's heart and souls ... and that affects both lectionary and non-lectionary preachers." (a clergyman)



"Though clergy were once laity, they become so immersed in the demands of being clergy that they forget what laity perceive and experience." (a clergyman)

"A lack of passion and spirit in preaching is a spiritual dilemma of the preacher's soul." (a clergyman)

"I have found it remarkable how the lectionary scriptures speak to the issues facing the congregation. In fact, on a couple of occasions it was almost eerie." (a clergywoman)



"In my first march for civil rights I was scared, hot, thirsty, and transformed. I have had other such church-related experiences. But none have been within the confines of a worship service. For such experiences to occur, we may have move beyond these confines." (a layman)