

Listen to Your Listeners

Getting feedback *before* you preach

by LORI CARRELL

If you're preparing your sermons based on only assumptions about your listeners, you're missing an opportunity to connect with what's truly meaningful in their spiritual lives. In our ongoing research with clergy at the Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership, we've found that high-impact preachers are listening to their listeners as a regular part of sermon preparation.

How does a preacher become intentional about this kind of listening? What does it look like? Here's how one pre-sermon listener dialogue unfolded:

Eight people are present including a teenager, an elderly widow, and a middle-aged man new to the church. After a parishioner's opening prayer, Pastor Ron thanks everyone for coming and assumes his role as listener. The facilitator he's chosen, Juanita, is skilled and prepared. She reviews the ground rules regarding confidentiality, time limits, content focus, and authenticity. Then she tells the group that the pastor's going to be preaching a series on worry next month. She and Pastor Ron have planned the open-ended process. First, a short brainstorming time begins with the question "What have you worried about

in the last week?" The list on the white board grows long. Pastor Ron jots down a thought as the teenager explains his worries about the potential for another terrorist attack. Then listeners are asked to disclose a specific worry, describing their thinking and feelings in detail. Discussion about the difference between anxiety and worry unfolds, as someone reveals a need for anxiety medication. A news program about the "culture of fear" promoted in the media is mentioned by two of the participants. Finally, Juanita reads Matthew 6:25-34, asking group members to record questions the passage raises. After a few minutes of quiet journaling, participants are invited to share. A question about lilies and an-

other about prayer as worry are among the many voiced. Most common is the refrain, "I know I'm not supposed to worry as a Christian, but I don't know how to stop." With five minutes remaining, the facilitator brings the conversation to a close and invites Pastor Ron to move his chair to the center of the group. These listeners lay hands on him, praying for his preparation of this series, asking God to speak through him for the spiritual transformation of the listeners who will be present.

GETTING STARTED

A pre-sermon dialogue group can take a variety of shapes, but those who've listened to listeners as part of sermon preparation provide these suggestions:

Group members—The group should be small, with five to eight people, who are invited based on their diverse spiritual journeys and life stages. Using the worship planning team or another key leadership group may be convenient, providing supportive and creative thinkers, but such a group may undermine the goal of the process, which is to learn from your congregation.

Group facilitation—Have a skilled and trusted church member facilitate. If you're busy with the responsibility of group facilitation, intense listening for the purpose of sermon preparation will



be difficult. Multi-tasking will short-change the potential benefit.

Group dialogue—Select meeting times and lengths that intersect well with your current preparation process. One pastor says, “After I’ve studied the text thoroughly—as I’m shaping the spiritual growth goal, I’m ready to listen to my listeners. During the dialogue, I listen, pray, take notes. I try to work for an hour

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or two after the dialogue, after they pray for me.” The dialogue usually catapults preachers’ thoughts in new directions, refreshing and reshaping rather than providing specific illustrative material.

While the participants should be assured of confidentiality, occasionally a pastor may ask for permission to use a specific story in the sermon.

Here’s how listening to his listeners affected Pastor Ron: “First, I realized the examples I was planning trivialized the kinds of things teens were worrying about, like wearing name-brand clothing. Then I started thinking about how pervasive worry and fear are in our lives—everybody in the group thought worrying was inevitable, so I wondered for just a moment if the sermon were pointless. But the image of the lily seemed to connect in a practical way, counter to the ‘culture of fear’ they described. Like that lily we’re not in control, we’re dependent—yet we can reflect God’s beauty in the present moment... that thought changed my direction.”

In this nationwide research listeners report that sermons from preachers who are using a pre-sermon listener dialogue group are more transformative. In addition, the preachers claim that this process of listening to listeners during sermon preparation (1) generates fresh sermon ideas, (2) increases specificity and depth of informal feedback, and (3) energizes them personally and professionally.

Are there challenges with such a process? Indeed. Yet pursuing an on-going exegesis of the spiritual lives of your listeners as a component of your sermon preparation is a challenge with incredible potential for extraordinary results. 🌱

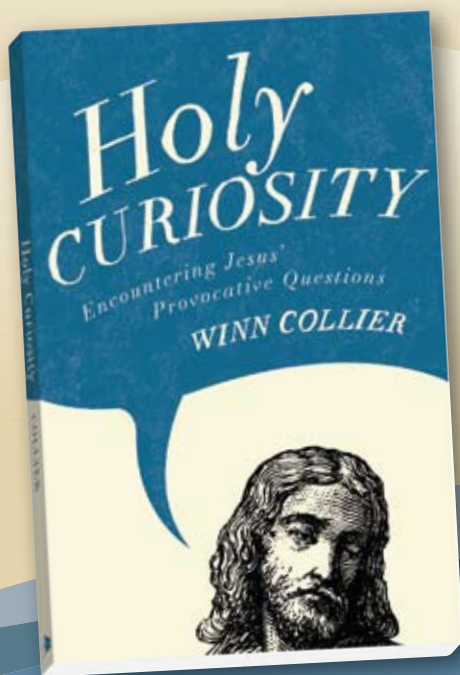


LORI CARRELL is professor of communication at the University of Wisconsin. This article is sixth in a series revealing results from the Lily-Endowed Center

for Excellence in Congregational Leadership study. Rev! subscribers can access the previous articles in the back issue library at Rev.org.

ENCOUNTERING JESUS’ PROVOCATIVE QUESTIONS

In *Holy Curiosity*, popular author and columnist Winn Collier invites readers to hear Jesus’s persistent questions, and allow them to penetrate the soul, and to be called to the untamed life that Jesus offers. He challenges readers to see Jesus in fresh ways, discarding sterile caricatures for a Jesus that is real, strong, and absolutely relentless in his pursuit of us.



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