

PREACH

the Word

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CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR PREACHERS: MOVING BEYOND COMFORTABLE COMPETENCY

It is a temptation and a problem in virtually every profession: after professionals reach a basic level of skill required in their chosen field, many fail to move beyond competence toward excellence. If ever there was a profession to challenge this paradigm, one would hope it would be the preaching ministry. When it comes to proclaiming God's law and gospel, no faithful preacher would ever argue that "good enough" ought to be our highest goal.

We want to improve our preaching skills. Really, we do! Yet pastors face challenges and questions in doing so:

- In what areas do I need to improve my preaching?
- What resources are available to help me?
- How can I find the time to do it?

Professor Richard Gurgel of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary's Worship Department is currently developing a doctoral project which will provide a comprehensive program of continuing education for WELS pastors. This project aims to be a "preacher's toolbox," offering something for every pastor in our synod, from courses for credit to online resources.

The following is based on an interview of Prof. Gurgel.

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Q: You conducted an extensive survey with pastors who are at various stages in their ministries. What results of this survey did you find the most surprising?

A: I was pleasantly surprised at the wide variety of things many WELS pastors are currently doing to improve their preaching. I was also happy with the amount of time which pastors report they put into their sermons, with the vast majority reporting that they spend well over ten hours each week in preparing their sermons.

On the other hand, I was surprised by the growing disuse of the original languages in preparing sermons over the years of ministry. While I expected this to be the case a bit more with Hebrew, 50% of the pastors I surveyed who have been out for 25 years reported that they use the Greek less than half the time when preparing sermons based on New Testament texts.

Q: What opportunities for continuing education in preaching are currently available to WELS pastors?

A: Many pastors equate the term "continuing education" with formal classroom study with a course syllabus, taken for credit. But that need not be the case. Opportunities for growth in this digital age are almost limitless. Pastors need to realize that in many cases, they are already doing many things in the area of continuing education, probably much more than they are aware of. The most important thing that any pastor can do in the area of continuing education is to keep his nose in the Scriptures, including the original languages.

Q: How can preachers make better use of their members to help improve their preaching?

A: I'm finding that pastors use members to help improve their preaching in two different ways. Some make use of their members before they preach, as part of their sermon preparation. For example, I encountered pastors who regularly meet with members

and present the sermon text to them as part of an informal Bible study, eliciting their reactions, questions, and observations. One layman who takes part in these sessions reported, "It's the best Bible class I've ever been a part of."

Another way pastors make use of their members to improve their preaching is by soliciting feedback from them after the sermon. Some do this by randomly inserting sermon questionnaires into bulletins. Other pastors single out



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trusted individuals within their congregation or their elders and ask them specific questions about their sermons. Still others have their confirmation class students write sermon summaries. These can have a double benefit: helping the kids listen more closely and helping the preacher determine if he communicated the gospel clearly or not.

I think the real key to involving lay people in helping preachers improve their skills is to educate the members. Preaching requires good listening, not just good speaking. Teach them what goes into writing a sermon, and what they should be hearing in a good sermon. They may well gain a greater appreciation for what goes into a sermon.

Ultimately, preachers need to learn not to be afraid of feedback. I simply must know if I'm not communicating effectively. One or two things happen if I don't get feedback – and both of them are bad! Either my hearers have some encouraging words I could be thankful to receive about the Word hitting home. Or I am missing my target and I don't even know it.

Resources to assist with constructive critique of sermons are available at wels.net/jump/ptw. One by Joel Gerlach was published in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* in 1994. A newer option by Richard Gurgel is used in homiletics classes. Either could be adapted and used by pastors in study clubs or given to members trained to critique sermons. A resource to help equip those who offer critiques is an article by Daron Lindemann in the January 2009 issue of *Forward in Christ* (available in online archives).

The one being critiqued needs to recognize that those giving him feedback are allies, not enemies. And those giving feedback can certainly learn how better to offer criticism that builds up rather than chews up. Ultimately, we need to work on our campus to do a much better job of teaching students how to offer specific and helpful critique to each other.

For those who live in outlying districts, distance is no longer a factor in learning with others. Electronic communication makes distance largely irrelevant. Even simply sharing sermons with each other via e-mail can be beneficial, not so that we can copy them, but so that we can learn from our brothers.

Q: *Lack of time would seem to be a huge barrier for many pastors in continuing their preaching education. What practical advice would you give a typical busy WELS pastor in making use of his precious time to grow as a preacher?*

A: Perhaps we need to start by asking ourselves, "Is it really a lack of time, or have I just failed to budget my time?" I know it's a question I have to ask myself again and again. Many pastors would benefit from doing a time analysis. Start by writing down exactly how you're spending your time over a period of several weeks, and analyze it. You may be surprised by time wasters you don't recognize. There is great freedom as well as temptation in the fact that few know our daily schedule besides God and us.

We also need to recognize when the press of the urgent is getting in the way of doing the important. Talk to your council members and elders. Many have no clue of the time it takes to prepare a sermon that isn't just thrown together. Make them your allies who will help to guard your schedule carefully in order to allow you more time with your sermon. The apostles recognized that they needed to be in the Word. Like them, we can train and equip laymen to do many of the tasks that keep us from being in the Word as much as possible. What are we doing that God has equipped others to do? They may have gifts for those tasks that we don't have!

Another thing pastors can do that wouldn't demand a great deal of time would be to set a goal of reading one book on preaching each year. Find one other guy to do it with you, and read it together, communicating by e-mail, if nothing else.

Finally, when it comes to how pastors spend their time, recognize that whatever gets more of the Word to more people more often deserves the best of our time. And for most pastors, that comes down to the sermon.

Q: *All of us develop habits over the years when it comes to writing and preaching sermons. What are some good habits you would encourage younger pastors to develop? What are some bad habits you've observed in experienced pastors? How would you counsel them to break those habits?*

A: Good preaching habits include:

- Planning ahead. Look at the following weeks' lessons so that you're not tromping all over next week's text! Plan your texts months, if not a year, ahead. Use the summer to plan where you will feed God's flock in the months ahead.
- Don't give up the habit of writing out your sermon manuscript. This not only helps in memorization, it can keep us from falling into pet sayings and formulaic phrases.
- Continue with faithful exegesis of the text in the original languages. Our training has handed us a unique gift with which to mine the treasures of the Word. This is critical to keep us from going stale in our preaching. (The preacher is typically the first one bored!) As we wrestle with the Word, as Jesus promised, we will be like those bringing out of our storerooms new treasures as well as old!
- Don't neglect text analysis. This helps keep sermons from wandering, so that they are rifles, rather than shotguns.

Bad habits include:

- Taking a cliché approach to preaching law and gospel. People's ears shut when they've heard the same phrases over

and over. Remember: the sermon is part of the proper, not the ordinary. Speak the language of your text!

- Seeing law and gospel proclamation as mere faithfulness to a Lutheran rubric rather than, as it is, Scripture's own key to understanding how God communicates with us. Let the unique nature of each Sunday's text come through. Law and gospel are always there. If you are seeing the text in its context of salvation history, you won't have to force it to proclaim law and gospel. There is freshness and variety in Scripture lessons; don't hide that by hammering them to fit into some predetermined law/gospel templates.

Q: To one degree or another, every preacher feels discouraged at times. What advice would you give to a pastor who is feeling particularly discouraged in his preaching ministry?

A: I would start by asking myself, Why am I discouraged? Is it due to a bad conscience because I haven't given my preaching its due? Then repent and drink for myself from the water of life that first of all wants to refresh me.

But if my discouragement is, "I preach faithfully, but I often wonder if it does any good," then rely on the Word. Preaching will always be hard. Some have called it the "joyful agony." But 1 Corinthians 15:58 assures us, "Your labor in the Lord is not in vain." It's not in vain, brother!

I DON'T WRITE OUT MY SERMONS (ANY MORE) By Rolfe Westendorf

I came out of the Seminary firmly convinced that a good pastor writes out his sermons and memorizes them. Genetics may have been involved. Both my father and my uncle told the same story about preaching their first sermon. They sat with their father in the sacristy until the last hymn verse. When they grabbed their manuscript to enter the pulpit, Grandpa snatched it out of their hand. "Lass das liegen!" There was no time to argue. They had to enter the pulpit and preach without their manuscript.

My father didn't have to pull the same one on me. I was determined to uphold family tradition and pride and preach without my manuscript. Some of my classmates didn't agree. We argued about it in the dining hall. But I was convinced that a good preacher didn't use a manuscript, and I never did. It was always in the sacristy. If I got completely stuck, I could swallow my pride and go get it. I almost did once. But when I thought of the impossibility of finding my place and starting up again, I gave it up and struggled with my words until I got back on track. No one seemed to notice (whatever that means).

Memorization was serious business. I needed to finish writing by Friday night, because I needed all day Saturday for memorization. I envied those veteran pastors who found time for yard work on Saturday. Of course, that's not for everyone. Each preacher has to figure out what works best for him, and some read their manuscripts so well that only God knows that they're reading.

But sometimes you can tell, no matter how skillfully the reading is covered up. I have heard some rather disjointed sermons and wondered how anyone could memorize such disconnected thought patterns. Either he has photographic memory or he's reading. Usually it's the latter.

But I kept on writing out my sermons and memorizing them, word for word, as much as possible, for nearly forty years. Then for three months I left the country to serve a small mission. I decided to preach from notes and found I could do it. But when I got back to my own congregation again, I went back to the old routine: writing out my sermons (by hand, by the way) and memorizing them, word for word.

I don't write out my sermons any more. In retirement I am satisfied to prepare my notes and study them until I am comfortable with what I want to say. With the Spirit's help I am able to give God's people a message from God's Word. But I did not come out of the Seminary with that skill. Years of hard work forced me to write logical sermons that could be memorized, and, more importantly, understood by the people who were trusting me to feed their souls with God's Word.

Every preacher must do the best he can with the talents God has given him. But my advice to young pastors, for whatever it's worth is this: write out your sermons. Line up those thoughts in a logical way so you can memorize them, and your people can follow your line of thought. After years of hard work you also may be able to skip the tedious work of writing out your sermons word for word and be able to preach from your heart the truths that will be a blessing to your people. But don't try the short cuts, lest your people go home wondering what you were trying to say.

As we have often heard, the Spirit works through the Word, no matter how poorly it may be preached. But let's not get in the Spirit's way.

— Rolfe Westendorf, a retired WELS pastor, lives in Dalton, Wisconsin.

SUMMER SERMON SERIES

Ah, summer.

The days are long and warm. School is out. Vacations are in. And the Church enters the non-festival half of the liturgical year. The lack of major events in the life of Christ on which to focus worshipers combined with inconsistent worship attendance leads some preachers, who otherwise follow the lectionary, to preach on a series of free texts united under a theme.

If you're among those preachers, here are some thematic series to consider as you gear up for the coming summer.

Portraits of the Apostles

- Matthew: God's Gift (Matthew 9:9-13)
- Peter: The Shaky Rock (Matthew 16:13-18)
- John: The Disciple of Love (1 John 14:7-11)
- Judas: The Forgiven Betrayer (Matthew 26:47-50; 27:3-5) (*N.B.: forgiven in the sense of objective justification*)
- Paul: The Unexpected Apostle (1 Corinthians 15:7-10a)
- (*One could obviously extend this list beyond these five*)

The Names of our God

- LORD (Exodus 3:13,14)
- Messiah/Christ (John 1:41)
- Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6)
- Lamb of God (John 1:29)
- Alpha and Omega (Revelation 1:8)
- Jesus (Matthew 1:20,21)

The Body of Christ

- His Hands (Hebrews 2:14)
- His Feet (Luke 24:13-15)
- His Eyes (Luke 22:55-61a)
- His Ears (Psalm 34:15)
- His Blood (1 John 1:7)
- We Are the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 25-27)

The Liturgy: Our Path of Worship

- Invocation: We Remember Our Baptism (Genesis 28:17; Matthew 28:19)¹
- Confession and Absolution: God Accepts Us (1 John 1:8,9)
- Word: God Speaks to Us² (Luke 10:16)
- Sacraments: God Comes to Us (Galatians 3:27; 1 Corinthians 10:16)
- Prayers and Praise: We Speak to God and Each Other² (1 Kings 8:29,30; Ephesians 5:19)
- Offering: We Give to God (1 Corinthians 16:2)
- Blessing: We Leave God's House (Numbers 6:22-26)

¹ Baptism as the forgiveness and identity that allows us to worship, not merely "We make our beginning...." If this Sunday is the Festival of the Holy Trinity, the standard lessons work well.

² For both "God speaks" and "We speak" explain how God speaks to us also through our speaking to each other (example: hymns that praise and proclaim) and how proclamation is also praise (example: the sermon praises God as well as proclaiming his truth).



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