

# Form for offering sermon critique

*The material below is the final section of "Revitalizing Our Preaching," a presentation by Joel Gerlach to the WELS Board for Parish Services in January 1994. At that time Pastor Gerlach (now retired) served St. John's, Wauwatosa, WI. He formerly taught homiletics at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The full presentation is in Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Fall 1994, pages 273-295. Used by permission.*

## Getting feedback

An important element in any effort to revitalize preaching is feedback. The usual feedback we get at the door while shaking hands after the service will do little, if anything, to revitalize preaching. If we want to improve our preaching, we need something more substantial than a few people to say, "Good sermon, pastor."

How do we get substantive feedback—even at the risk of exposing ourselves to pot shots by chronic complainers? During the last years that I served at King of Kings in Garden Grove, California, I told the Board of Elders that I expected them as part of their responsibility to offer constructive criticism of my preaching. We periodically set aside time for it on the agenda. I made it clear that I expected straightforward criticism for the good of the kingdom, and that if that created problems for my ego, so be it. Perhaps they could help me with an ego adjustment as well.

Unstructured though they were, those brief sessions were profitable and appreciated. One man, a technical writer for McDonnell Douglas, continued to share worthwhile comments when he was no longer an elder. Another former elder, who is still a close friend, does not hesitate to offer his evaluation of a sermon he occasionally hears me preach after all the intervening years.

At the seminary during the 70s, I became acquainted with Reuel Howe's *Partners in Preaching* (Seabury, 1967). We used it as a supplemental textbook in a summer quarter course to encourage preachers to provide a structured way to solicit feedback from the congregation. One of Howe's suggestions was to select a small group of members to meet with the pastor after a Sunday service to provide feedback. After several months a different group took its turn.

More recently William Willimon, dean of the chapel at Duke University, addressed the subject of getting helpful feedback in an article in the 1992 spring quarter of *Leadership*. He refined a sermon reaction questionnaire developed in the 1970s by Boyd Stokes as part of his doctoral work at Emory University. The questionnaire is attached as an appendix. (Perhaps some of its negative points could better be expressed positively.)

As preachers we want to be faithful to our Lord. And that means we are accountable first of all to his Word and then also to a confessional Lutheran tradition. But in a secondary sense we are also accountable to the people who sit in the pews on Sunday morning. One way we can give evidence of our accountability to the people is by soliciting substantive feedback from them. If that can contribute to the revitalization of our preaching, as well as to the well-being of the church, it is something we ought seriously to consider doing.

I am delighted—more than that—I am thankful to the Lord of the church that the BPS has undertaken this study. I am grateful for the opportunity to have had my say. May God prosper whatever you decide to do to revitalize preaching in our church, and may he open the minds and hearts of our pastors to make them receptive to the encouragement and help offered to them. For it is still true that "Nothing attaches people to the church as does good preaching" (Apology, Art XXIV, 51).

## Sermon reaction questionnaire

Do not sign your name.

Supply the following information:

Sex: male \_\_\_\_; female \_\_\_\_

Age: under 20 \_\_\_\_ 20-29 \_\_\_\_ 30-39 \_\_\_\_  
40-49 \_\_\_\_ 50-59 \_\_\_\_ over 59 \_\_\_\_

Regarding the sermon you just heard, indicate whether you agree or disagree with these statements. Circle 1 if you strongly agree, 2 if you agree, 3 if you're uncertain, 4 if you disagree, 5 if you strongly disagree.

Your honesty and frankness will be appreciated.

- |                                                                                          |           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1. My interest was maintained.                                                           | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 2. The sermon was integrated into the service of worship.                                | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 3. I was not inspired.                                                                   | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 4. The preacher's personality came through.                                              | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 5. The scripture text was not used or illumined.                                         | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 6. The preacher used contemporary language.                                              | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 7. The preacher did not evidence a personal faith.                                       | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 8. The sermon was too long.                                                              | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 9. I did not understand the sermon well.                                                 | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 10. The preacher referred to notes too often.                                            | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 11. The preacher sounded like he loved us.                                               | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 12. The sermon spoke to some of my personal needs.                                       | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 13. The sermon did not sufficiently emphasize the greatness of Christ.                   | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 14. The preacher showed self-confidence.                                                 | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 15. The sermon did not make me eager to serve God any more than I'm already serving him. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 16. I identified with the preacher.                                                      | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 17. The preacher spoke down to us.                                                       | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 18. The sermon did not have a sufficiently forceful conclusion.                          | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 19. The sermon did not help me encounter God.                                            | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 20. I can remember most or all of the sermon's points.                                   | 1 2 3 4 5 |

[The Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly article ends with this questionnaire.]

Joel Gerlach suggested that the questionnaire above could be improved. The Commission on Worship office has chosen not to offer an improved version through the Internet for several reasons.

- Some language and categories above might not represent an ideal confessional Lutheran perspective.
- A questionnaire is best used in conjunction with some training for those who will fill out the questionnaire. Note this suggestion in the article above.
- Revisions and improvements should reflect the particular goals of those using a questionnaire.