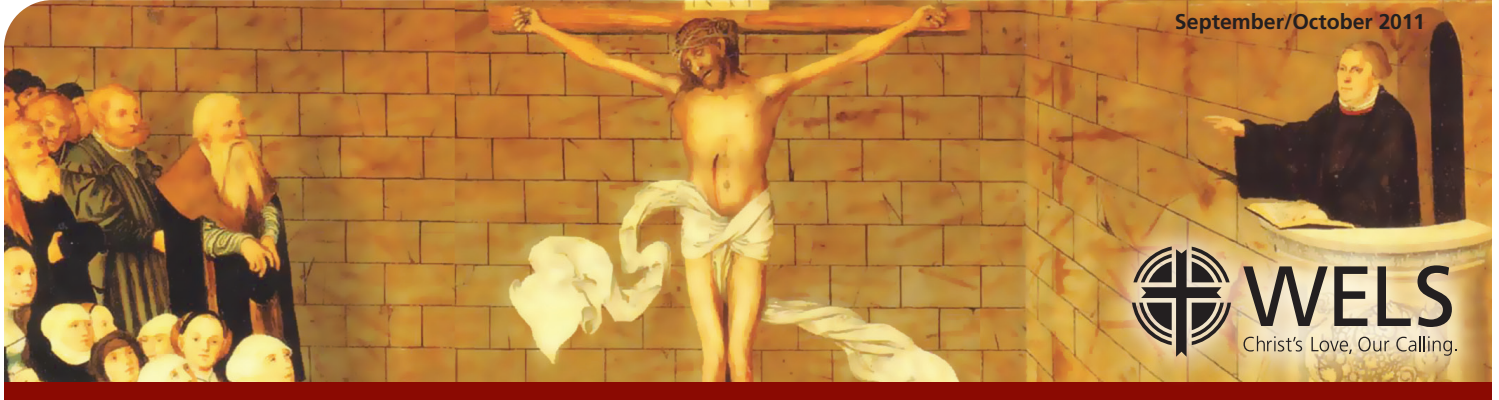


Preach the Word

Vol. 15 No. 1

September/October 2011



Partnering with Peers

Proclaim Grace! Key Issue #6

By Richard Gurgel

Does our little corner of the church militant need a homiletics faculty numbering in the hundreds?

It's not unusual for my phone to ring and on the other end is a pastor who wants to discuss a challenging text. A lively back and forth ensues as we share ideas for how to grasp that text's beauty and communicate it simply and clearly to his hearers. As a child of God, preacher, and trainer of preachers, I grow from wrestling with the Word with a peer.

But with five homiletics professors, starting a 1-800-prof-n-yu hotline is unworkable. But the answer isn't a few hundred homiletics profs. We have something better. Surrounding each of us, as close as our phone or the local Denny's breakfast table, are brothers wrestling with similar preaching challenges, often on the same text. Those brothers would benefit from the insights we share. Even our struggles could encourage them, as they learn that no homiletical temptation has seized them except what is common to preachers.

But we can be slow to seek such support. In research for Concordia, Fort Wayne, retired LCMS pastor Richard Koehneke states this as the top pressing need among pastors:

Pastors need to know that asking for help is not a sign of weakness and illness, but strength and health. . . . We encourage others to ask for help, and often we are the ones to give it, but we are reluctant to ask for help ourselves. There is sometimes a critical and competitive spirit between and among pastors that makes it difficult to ask a brother pastor for help with personal problems and needs. (*"Pastoral Notes,"* November 2010, www.doxology.us)

While Koehneke's focus is much broader than finding support for preaching, the barriers he identifies apply here as well. We can mimic the apostles' favorite argument as we wrestle with who's #1. Especially in geographical areas where many WELS congregations make "preacher shopping" a spectator sport, a subtle—or not so subtle—competitive spirit among us can override body of Christ cooperation.

But a larger barrier is my unwillingness to admit the need for brotherly assistance. We invite Christians to seek spiritual encouragement from us, yet we resist our need to follow that same advice!

In the survey which helped build this series, one pastor offered this as a partial explanation for why he didn't have any plans to work with others. "One of our system's strengths is that we try to equip men to work independently in the original languages."

If working with others is a substitute for individual exegetical work, we inhibit preaching growth rather than promote it. But no matter how strong our training is, I turn that strength into weakness if it becomes a convenient excuse to ignore the blessing of working with others. Hiding behind my theological defense can be a proud refusal to show myself weak or incomplete in anything.

How different was Paul's approach! Read 2 Timothy as if asking Paul this question: "How important is the support of fellow called workers?" Just note how often in this brief epistle he mentions the impact of their support (Timothy, Onesiphorus, Luke, Mark) or lack thereof (Phygelus, Hermogenes, Hymenaeus, Philetus, Demas).

Most remarkable is Paul's pleading with Timothy to take a leave of absence from Ephesus to hasten to Rome (4:9). Yes Paul knew Christ could enable him to stand alone (4:17), but Paul also knew God's normal way of strengthening us with the gospel is through human messengers.

If God's inspired apostle longs for Timothy's support, where does that leave me? I realize being pressed hard in the court of next Sunday's epistle lesson doesn't compare with standing on trial before Caesar's court, but Paul's encouragement still stands.

As you read the ideas for peer partnering in this newsletter, think concretely: "Who is my Timothy I could call to my side?" The blessing can be greater courage and wisdom to witness to the gospel.



Pre-Sermon Peer Partnering

It bears repeating: if working together before the sermon means we cease doing our own thorough text study, we could be undoing years of training that sought to make us capable exegetes of Scripture. However, the challenge is developing “both/and” thinking. Working hard on independent text study is not an alternative to working with others. Individual wrestling with the text is a key factor in making joint work even more profitable!

So what makes joint study profitable? Listen to two brothers:
Just talking it out with someone else seems to help so much. What one guy doesn't say, the other guy does. It's been a great blessing for my personal ministry. You share ideas back and forth, sometimes so many ideas that you spend half an hour trying to figure out theme and parts just because you want to narrow it down.

Two heads, or three, are better than one. I think you get a lot of insights that you aren't going to get, necessarily, out of a commentary or one of those canned illustration books.

Younger pastors especially seem to thrive on this brotherly interaction. In an interview, a mission counselor, nearing retirement, commented on this culture shift. “In my age, everyone was kind of, ‘You're on your own.’ The mindset of younger people is that they like to interact with others.”

Survey responses confirm his observation. Among the oldest pastors surveyed (25 years in ministry), positive and negative responses about working with others were perfectly balanced. For the middle group of pastors (15 years), 78 percent of responses were positive. For the youngest group (5 years), positive responses increased to 82 percent. That sword-sharpening sound you hear is “iron sharpening iron” (Proverbs 27:17) echoing from pulpit to pew!

There is great variety in format for pre-sermon work among pastors. Groups can be of almost any size, with most pastors who participate reporting that they meet with one, two, or three others in their area. Others work together in slightly larger groups such as pastoral circuits. Even geographical proximity is no longer a necessity as some have begun to gather online.

The variety is not only in size, but also in the frequency with which groups gather. In general, the smaller the group, the more likely that they meet every week or every other week. Larger groups tended to meet once a month or less. Still others agreed to work together weekly but only for a limited time as they worked on a sermon series.

That smaller groups meet more frequently appears to hinge on two factors. Coordinating schedules for meetings becomes more problematic as the group gets larger. Also, coordinating common texts for preaching becomes more challenging when worship plans of more congregations are involved.

In addition to pastors gathering to work on text studies, another related form of joint study is reading and discussing a preaching book. The interviews and survey indicate that monthly circuit meetings are the most common venue for this. The usual pattern is that the circuit selects a book to read and then spends part of their meeting for several months discussing individual chapters or sections.

That sword-sharpening sound you hear is “iron sharpening iron” echoing from pulpit to pew!

Here it would be useful to take note why studying a book together is often more beneficial than simply reading alone. A seminary professor from another denomination expressed it this way:

I don't think I've ever seen somebody making significant strides in their preaching merely on the basis of individual reading and study. I know there are exceptional cases, people who just learn well, but real transformation comes when the reading of the book is tied to conversation and discussion with other pastors.

Where are your Luke and Timothy with whom you could grow together in the task of proclaiming the gospel? No dangerous sea crossings will be necessary!



Post-Sermon Peer Partnering

As we move to working together with peers post-sermon, there are again many options that pastors pursue. In interviews and survey, pastors mentioned their monthly circuit meetings as a venue for this kind of joint work. Several reported that this would be tied directly to work that was done previously in joint text study. One pastor would preach—or bring a video of a sermon—that they previously studied together. After viewing/hearing the sermon, the other pastors in the circuit would give feedback to that pastor on sermon content and delivery.

The next most common post-sermon partnering ideas listed by pastors included two or more pastors agreeing to watch or read one another's sermons. One pastor noted in an interview that he and his father and brother (all WELS pastors) often share their sermons with each other in order to learn from one another how to handle similar texts. To their credit, almost everyone who noted this sharing of sermons stressed that they share sermons after all involved have completed that round of preaching. They did not want to grow accustomed to borrowing others' ideas and preaching them as their own.

I would add how encouraged I was to note that concern. Even though the *logos* of the sermon might be great, severe problems arise in the *pathos* and *ethos* of preaching if we pass off as our own handiwork that which was the fruit of another's hard work.

Several pastors reported what we might call "stealth" partnering. Pastors subscribed to sermon mailing lists of preachers they admire. They also mentioned frequently downloading sermons that congregational Web sites make available online. One pastor shared this as his frequent custom: "There are days I just take two or three hours and I will go to their Web site and download a few sermons and lie on a raft in the pool and read." While nothing can take the place of hearing a sermon live in the original context of worship, a barrier of the past (that pastors who preach Sunday after Sunday cannot hear the sermons of others) is rapidly being dismantled in a digital age.

Is there a brother useful to your ministry—and you to his—waiting to be asked to partner in one of these ways?

The last post-sermon partnership mentioned by several in survey and interviews was the feedback that can be received from associate pastors serving in the same congregation. Here the advantage is that the sermon is heard live in a setting that is familiar to both the preacher and the one offering feedback. While several mentioned that the feedback tends to remain on the surface (see the back page for more on this), there were also those who gave evidence of having moved past that barrier.

Several could not speak highly enough of the regular feedback they receive from an associate pastor. One surveyed pastor offered these glowing words of praise for his associate. "My greatest benefit in ministry has been an associate who I have been able to watch and also who has given me valuable insight and advice." In an interview another made this comment:

I'm just blessed with an associate pastor and a seminary professor around here too. They are not afraid to say stuff. And rarely does the professor have much to say, unless you hit the nail on the head that day and Jesus stood out clearly. Then he'll say something that's kind of nice and that makes you feel good. But my associate is not afraid to say, "Ah, you ended with a hymn stanza again, you wimp! You kind of chickened out on the conclusion because your brain is tired from writing so, 'I'll just throw a hymn stanza in.'" That's cheating in his mind. We hold each other accountable. We have a very open relationship, and he's just been the greatest help.

While such blunt directness will never be every ministry team's forte, the sharing of open and honest feedback could prove beneficial to each pastor in a ministry team when he steps into the pulpit.

Paul learned—belatedly—that Mark was indeed useful for his ministry (2 Timothy 4:11). Is there a brother useful to your ministry—and you to his—waiting to be asked to partner in one of these ways?



Are We Building Each Other Up?

Research consistently revealed an embarrassing secret about large-group sermon feedback. It sounds good in theory, but those who attempted feedback at circuits or conferences consistently reported that they either no longer follow this practice, or, if they do, it leaves much to be desired.

The challenge repeatedly identified is the difficulty of giving substantive feedback.

In our circuit, we say, “Oh, that was good,” and that’s about it. I know hearers have comments, because I’ll talk to guys later, and they will say, “I wanted to say something, but . . . you know.” I think we feel comfortable with one another, I just don’t know why we don’t.

The solution is not merely finding more useful procedures. The heart of the solution is not procedural but inter-personal.

When we *offer* feedback, we cannot be so paralyzed by fear of hurting the preacher’s feelings that we cave in to dishonesty—refusing to clue in a preacher about evident weaknesses (thereby sentencing his hearers to continued preaching purgatory). Yet we must also avoid loveless criticizing that dares a brother to raise defenses. “Wounds from a friend can be trusted” (Proverbs 27:6), but the operative word is *friend*!

And when it’s my turn to *receive* feedback, I must remind myself that something more important is at stake than ego protection. One patient NPH editor knows what a prickly pear cactus I often was as we worked together on a book. Too often I was so busy defending myself that I failed to consider his wise suggestions. His goal was communicating. Often my goal was saving face.

I am painfully aware of what a know-it-all gray-colored-beast-of-burden I can be. Thereby I hinder the reception of any critique I bray at others while also keeping at an unsafe distance those who have feedback for me. Since such actions are an occupational hazard for those in leadership positions, please pause briefly to consider whether that braying sound you hear might just be coming from you!

Only large doses of God’s mercy open donkey ears and tame donkey tongues. Only the security of Jesus’ dying and rising love gives us the courage to accept with grace a critique offered us. Only our incomparable status as children of God and heirs of heaven—and knowing that we share that as brothers in Christ—helps us offer comments without the sharp edge that comes from trying to show ourselves doctrinally or homiletically superior. “Boasting of orthodoxy” (about which J. P. Koehler warned) retreats. “Speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) advances.

What does that look like? Here’s an example from the first online class I led. There was written feedback on sermon writing being given back and forth by all participants. In one post, the most experienced pastor received some fitting suggestions for improvement by a much younger brother. That younger brother went out of his way not to show any disrespect for his older brother. I will not soon forget the senior brother’s gospel-focused reply.

I did not take your comments as disrespectful. I thought your version of my paragraph was so much better. It was clearer. It got the point across so well. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I should have promoted the idea of Jesus as King much better than what I did. I really appreciated your comments and rewrite. You have helped me. In fact, all you young brothers have helped this old guy. After all these years in the ministry, I need to be refreshed and sharpened and that is what I am experiencing from this class. All of you have been a wonderful blessing to me. And thank you for your kind words.

No. Thank *you*, my brother, for showing us the way!



Please share ideas for key issue #8

Use the ideas link at *Grow in Grace* (wlsce.net) to submit resources or ideas related to key issue #8: *Preaching sanctification flowing from and empowered by the gospel*. What challenges you when preaching sanctification? What resources have you found helpful in approaching this preaching task from a gospel-centered biblical perspective? Share sermons you’ve heard that handled this challenge well.

Online Resources for Partnering with Peers

On WLS’ preaching Web site *Proclaim Grace!* (preaching.wlsce.net) are these resources for individuals, study groups, or circuits:

- Suggested questions to aid discussion of this issue.
- A section on *Better Preaching: Evaluating the Sermon* by Lowell Erdahl that focuses on partnering with ministry peers. (Note: this book review, and the PDF containing the whole book—permission granted by author—can be found under *key issue #6*.)
- A “preaching partners” concept developed by a multi-pastor congregation in Milwaukee.
- Several different evaluation forms that could be used in offering sermon feedback with encouragement for the one being evaluated and the ones doing the evaluating.