

Radical Preacher Training

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There is an urgent need for ongoing formation of preachers both lay and ordained at the local level. Hayes explores a collaborative model grounded in the spirituality of the preacher that seeks to respond to the needs of local churches with limited resources.

The primary concern of this article is radical preaching training—ongoing training in local churches. The ground of this pedagogy is a blend of necessity and reaction. The necessity springs from the lack of manageable ongoing formation for preachers in a rural region of Iowa, which lacks educational institutions related to preaching. The reaction is the fruit of my denominational context, Catholic, which remains confused about who should be preaching, when he or she should preach, and how he or she should be trained. The inherent relationship of spirituality and preaching underlie the investigation not only for the preachers themselves, but for the people they serve.

Social Context

We begin with the question of local necessity. Local churches and denominations vary in their expectations of the ongoing formation of preachers. The default model allows the individual preacher or congregation to choose how he or she might best improve his or her preaching skills. Typically, ordained preachers

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interested in deepening their appreciation of the art of preaching and refining the craft participate in the occasional workshop. I have personally taken part in many such workshops and learned plenty. Through personal experiences I have consistently noticed that time constraints impede practical application of the theories presented. The inspirational thoughts of facilitators, reminder notes for future projects, and intentions to implement the ideas discussed are placed in files entitled “Preaching,” often never to be seen again. Such impediments limit the transformational quality of the educational experience of those who attend. There are also overconfident or lethargic preachers who feel they have no need for improvement! In Iowa, geographical challenges further hinder preachers desirous of improved skill. There are few graduate theological schools in Iowa, even fewer that deal specifically with pastoral theology and specialties such as preaching and the spirituality of the preacher. This lack of resources renders difficult the ongoing formation for ordained preachers, to say nothing of the dearth of responsible initial training programs for the nonordained. Some preachers seek improvement by traveling to educational institutions or programs, but most lack the desire or financial resources to pursue such methods. There is a strong need for radical preacher training that will spring from the roots of the local community and is both accessible and serious.

The second challenge of preacher identity springs from my Catholic context. The bishops of the United States have studied and made comment on the status and training of lay ecclesial ministers (USCCB, 2001). The explosion of ministries in the postconciliar church includes lay preaching in various forms. The renewal of this charism has resulted in the need for theological clarity in the area of lay ministry and its relationship to the sacrament of holy orders. Recent Vatican documents reflect the concerns of the hierarchy for sharper distinctions between clergy and laity (see *Ecclesia de Mystero*). There is concern that the various roles and ministries of the church have become confused. In my opinion this concern has led to mistrust and division. As church, we are called to collaborate in the ministry of the Word, regardless of particular vocation. One goal of my consulting and teaching is that in the context of small groups touched by time-tested trust, the members will recognize the gifts they have to offer one another vis-à-vis their growth as preachers and ministers of the Word. Perhaps through a renewed focus on the shared life of the spirit to which we are all called will help the church to bridge the often painful divide.

My interest in the above challenges and proposal of radical preacher training as an appropriate solution is personal, professional, and prophetic. Personally, I have been passionate about preaching for some time, which led to my pursuit of doctoral studies in the discipline. Professionally, I am anxious to put my passion and study of preaching research to good use in the local churches, teaching and facilitating skill development for preachers—ordained or lay. On the prophetic level, my project includes subversive interests. Lay preachers in the Catholic tradition, particularly laywomen, have often lacked ready acceptance from various

quarters. My hope is that the pedagogy discussed in this article will affect preaching at its roots, helping those who often find themselves marginalized or invisible to the larger church to excel locally as preachers with a strong sense of identity and self-assurance. With the Word of God burning in their hearts, these healthy radicals—like the prophets of old—cannot keep silent.

Importance of Local Formation

My awareness of the above social context and challenges results from time I have spent with preachers around the country accumulating qualitative data through recent focus groups. The rich experience of gathering with lay preachers provided me with insights related not only to my research, but to the nature of preaching and ministry. I offer the following conclusions.

In one Midwestern city I noticed the need to acknowledge the dynamic of power in working with church groups. The lay preachers were well aware of the differences that exist between them and ordained preachers, especially on the level of required ongoing formation. From them I learned that if there is to be an expectation of growth on the part of lay preachers, it must be a value for all preachers in order to be effective. The insight of these preachers regarding their unique voice also contributes to our study. The people in the pew mention to them that their insights and credibility are treasured. This means that not only are they in need of mentoring in some kind of an ongoing formation model, but that they also have insights to offer to ordained preachers. Though many members of the church value the concept of ongoing formation, it is not something that can be forced. If preachers are truly to grow from the experience, they must be motivated. If the church expects quality on the part of ministers, they must be supported by the resources of the community as they seek to improve in carrying out their call.

The gathering of a focus group on the East Coast impressed upon me the importance of the support of the bishop and priests for any program of preacher formation to be truly effective. That support allows for contagious energy on the part of all persons involved in the preaching ministry. It also provides sustenance for a spirit of collaboration, which builds trust among the preachers and renders them better able to hear honest criticism so that they might grow in their abilities. I learned, too, that a curriculum for ongoing formation based only on theoretical experience is not sufficient. If you want to know what the preachers need in order to improve in their preaching, ask them, and then provide them with the necessary resources to grow in the areas expressed. Any program of ongoing formation must also take into account the importance of individual needs and experience. The areas for growth in preachers are as myriad as the number of preachers themselves. Thus, any model of ongoing formation must leave some decisions at the local level where the respective preachers understand their needs best. A blanket

curriculum proposed by diocesan or seminary leaders might not understand the local requisites for improvement.

By the time I interviewed a final group in another part of the country, it dawned on me that women represented the majority of each focus group. Any proposal for ongoing formation of lay preachers requires input and critique from women of the local church. If the church is to truly respect the ministry of the Word, we must acknowledge that preaching on the part of laypeople is widespread. We must do our best to assure that the preachers ministering are qualified and competent and that they have dependable structures to support them in their ministry.

Time spent with these preachers has led me to a deeper conviction of the importance of local and adaptable models to continue the formation of spiritually enlivened preachers. The conviction is not only mine. The bishops of Canada have also noticed the social context of the preaching ministry of the church, and as early as 1981 they recognized the necessity of regulating the selection, training, and ongoing formation of all preachers (CCCB). Though their opinions were motivated by the inability of a diminished number of priests to minister to the local communities, their insights gaze far beyond the pragmatic. In the area of lay leadership they called for a process of discernment of spirits in order to find pastoral leaders from within the local community, including preachers. Preachers needed when priests are not

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available or “morally competent” should be chosen from the community. The persons chosen to carry on the preaching ministry should be either those already in roles of leadership or those who “are capable of becoming adequate leaders” (CCCB, 103). The *National Bulletin on the Liturgy* also mentions what the diocese is obliged to provide these new lay leaders: formation, so that they are able to think according to the mind of Christ and his church, which takes time, effort, and prayer; training in the manner of preparing and leading, including how to use the liturgical books; and occasional renewal—the piece that seems to be missing from many formation programs (CCCB, 103). The same document calls on dioceses to assess their current programs and add to programming and training where necessary in order to provide the required help to the lay ministers while maintaining a long-range view regarding vocations.

These directives, in my estimation, are not limited to the scarcity of ordained ministers, but to a charismatic church that feeds a world hungry for the Word of God. William Skudlarek agrees with the sentiment: “The opening up of preaching to the non-ordained makes possible a wider, and therefore more creative, intersection between the Word of God and human experience” (Skudlarek, 500).

The questions thus become: How can a diocese, professor of preaching, or local church establish and maintain a program that speaks to all the insights we have gained through this investigation of social context? What model of preacher training and ongoing formation could possibly respond to the breadth of needs to which the ministry of the Word must speak in the contemporary church?

To respond to the above challenges and questions, I first describe what I have learned about establishing a consulting resource for ongoing formation of preachers on the local level. Then I offer critical reflection in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the pedagogy as it actually occurred in a local church. I conclude with some hopes for the future to address the urgent need of preacher formation in the local churches.

Collaborative Preaching Consulting

To understand the necessity of establishing a local consulting resource for preachers requires a closer look at who is preaching, particularly in the Catholic context. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) released a study in 2002 on the effects of lay preaching in the Diocese of Great Falls/Billings, Montana. The training program for these preachers was administered by diocesan officials and Partners in Preaching of Eden Prairie, Minnesota, whose founder, Patricia Hughes Baumer, provided both direction and inspiration to my research. The CARA study is extensive, soliciting data from clergy, laity, and the preachers themselves. Some of the data is of direct consequence to the assertions of this article. The overall findings of the research point to satisfaction among the people of the diocese regarding the implementation of lay preachers. In general the data show that the people are more concerned about the quality of the preaching than the nature of the preacher.

The most common setting for lay preaching for the study was the ritual *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* (SCAP). The majority of the lay preachers in the study were women, 62 percent of whom were married. Specific to the purposes of our study, the research opines that though “[l]ay preachers are sufficiently prepared, most would like more training in preaching” (Gautier, 2). A radical training and ongoing formation model speaks directly to this desire for more training. “Nine in ten agree that every lay preacher could benefit from mentoring after initial training” (Gautier, 2). Twenty-eight percent believe lay preachers are not sufficiently prepared. Ninety-three percent of the priests surmise that the lay preachers would benefit from mentoring, though there is no mention of what percentage might find it personally beneficial for the priests themselves.

The study is of particular interest for the purposes of this article because of the demographics of those questioned, including three publics: the lay preachers, priests and pastoral administrators, and parishioners. The CARA study shows

that priests, pastoral administrators, and the people of the assembly—though they are pleased with the quality and experience of lay preaching—also recognize the need for substantial initial training and continuing formation. This recognition implies that the initial training be supported by ongoing training and formation.

The new model of training and formation that I developed to respond to this need is especially attentive to the needs of rural locales for whom schedule or lack of resources represent insurmountable challenges to standard academy-based programs. This is true not only for the ordained, but especially for lay preachers who might need substantive initial training.

I established and designed Collaborative Preaching Consulting in order to evaluate, consult, and strategize follow-up with local congregations. The resources include workshops and retreats on the nature of the ministry of the Word, resources that help the local community and preacher(s) identify the most important electronic and bibliographic literature relative to their needs, tools for structuring sermon preparation and critique groups, and individual training and critique for preachers seeking to improve in their ministry. The hope of this enterprise is that it remains adaptable to local needs in a way that complements the existing structures of continuing education provided by more organized seminary and distance-learning programs through affordability, accessibility, and adjustable programming tailored to the needs expressed by the community.

A Prototype

One local church recently engaged in the program provides evaluative insights vis-à-vis the usefulness and necessity of ongoing preacher formation on the local level. The pastor, who has three parishes in his charge, sensed a dull inadequacy as a preacher and was not convinced that paying deeper attention to his preaching would improve the life of the local church. His language of spirituality in his self-assessment is worth noting. In spite of his skepticism, he was interested in any program that might intensify the church's love of God and sense of discipleship. His concern as a preacher was not only for his own spiritual identity as a pastor and preacher, but also for the faith formation of the entire church. In addition to his duties as pastor of the three churches, he is also a spiritual and retreat director at a nearby retreat center. Personally stretched in terms of how to best offer his time and talent to the church, he regularly invites his parishioners to deepen their commitment in order to advance the mission of the church.

These are small, rural churches with little access to professional spiritual and faith formation. The lack of resources should not be misconstrued as a lack of desire of the people to grow in their faith. Their invitation to develop a workshop demonstrates the depth of their spiritual commitment. I have selected these churches as the example of my proposed model for preacher training and ongoing

formation because they represent what is happening in the Catholic Church in Iowa and many other areas in the United States.

The planning process started with a private meeting through which the pastor made clear his agenda and expectations. He hoped that, in our working together, the community would gain a deeper understanding of the transformative nature of preaching, rather than approach the sessions as a basic Bible study class. This pastor had a deep concern and regard for the Word of God as the foundation of the preacher's spirituality, as well as the mandate to go forth and preach that Word to others. He explained:

I hope we will think/pray/participate in the sessions, and Sunday liturgy, not just to gain information (about the scriptures, or the life/teachings of the church, or even God), nor improve our conformation (to the laws and rules and regulations and expectations of . . . whomever, even God), but that we open more and more to the transformation that it's all about.

After the initial invitation from the pastor, I proposed the following model for working with the churches. First, I wanted to take advantage of the local assets. They already had a faith-sharing group in place that met weekly to study the Lectionary readings. In other churches, establishment of such a group has been the first stage of my design. The pastor wanted the faith-sharing group to have individual attention on how they might reflect, not only on how the weekly Scriptures related to their lives, but how their time together related to the preaching process, particularly since the pastor/preacher was a member of their group. In addition, we hoped to invite the parish in general to consider their role in the preaching ministry. The pastor assumed that an effective way for this to occur would be to invite the entire parish to attend an adult education opportunity in order to reflect on how the proclamation of the Word impacts their daily lives. Thus, the initial commitment was to facilitate two workshops, one for the committed weekly group and one for the parish in general. In this instance there was no need to train lay preachers to help carry out the preaching mission. The idea was to evaluate what the parish would need after the workshops if they were to commit to an ongoing formation model that dealt specifically with preaching.

Critique from the Roots

Once the training sessions and adult education opportunities with the three churches were completed, I was interested in how the time we spent together related to the expectations of the participants. I had hoped that the consulting would lead to a sense of empowerment and appreciation that the preacher and people both share in a common spirituality and mandate to proclaim God's Word

and that there would be a deeper sense of commitment and understanding that all its members share an identity as ministers of the Word.

To evaluate the process, I asked the pastor and two members of the group to provide comments on the significance of the experience and on how the ministry would be continued in the future.

What follows are some of the suggestions and comments of the three:

The Pastor

- . . . I really liked the idea/explanation that people could experience better preaching by bettering their own side/role in the conversation that a homily is, even though the preacher's preaching may not change at all.
- And . . . I utterly loved the identification of the word used in description of the Emmaus disciples' conversation/discussing as the same word for homily.
- I have long been familiar with the process of preparing and participating in a homily preparation group such as ours . . . so the particulars of that were not really new to me, but the follow-up and follow-through possibility was, though no one here has picked up on that.

Rose

- I find the weekly question, "What would your sermon be this Sunday?" particularly challenging. It really puts us on the spot.
- I have deepened my love for and study of the Bible.
- I know that what we do helps to deepen the insights of the homilies.
- We get more out of the preaching because we've participated in the work.
- You're not going to get the entire parish to these meetings, but it really benefits those who come.

Shannon

- When you pointed out to the people that what they brought to Mass was very much linked to what they would get out of Mass, this placed the responsibility squarely in the laps of each parishioner. I believe that is where the responsibility lies in faith growth—in our own laps. After working with priests for a number of years, I recognized the need for ALL people to share in the ministry of helping those in need—whether that be spiritually, physically, or emotionally in need. Really, we are ALL in need of spiritual growth and renewal, but as I already mentioned, that growth has to come from within, not from someone else.

- At first, I was very excited about the opportunity to give input about the homilies. Yet, as the weeks progressed, I found it challenging to work in the time to set aside for that input. “Not having time” is probably the biggest reason or excuse most folks will make, but indeed, it would take a sincere effort to come up with a perfect time for a small group of people to meet for this reflection. There are days that I find it very difficult to get through the study notes and readings that are sent to us for our Scripture reflections, let alone try to come up with ideas for a homily as [the pastor] often asks. If there are times when I “reach out” to people, I feel I do so more outside of church than within its walls.

A Plentiful Harvest

This article has explored the notion of radical preacher formation and offered further reflection on the ongoing formation of lay and ordained preachers in the local churches today. I drew on comments by the participants in the consultative session because those comments focus the questions that have been raised throughout:

- Does small group faith-sharing and ministry of the Word respond to the need for ongoing preacher formation in geographical areas that lack seminaries and graduate schools of theology?
- Does participation in such groups prepare non-seminary-trained persons to responsibly share in the preaching ministry?
- Do such groups further blur the lines of identity between clergy and lay-people in the Catholic tradition?
- Does participation in such groups lead people to establish similar groups in future parishes?

The questions currently evade response because the quality of the harvest is yet to spring forth. However, a preliminary forecast is possible based on my ministerial experience and my motivations to be personal, professional, and prophetic.

My personal passion for the power of preaching to touch people’s lives has been confirmed. I was most touched by Shannon’s comment: “If there are times when I ‘reach out’ to people, I feel I do so more outside of church than within its walls.” If participation in the preaching process and ministry leads to similar spiritual insights, I see great potential in such programming.

There is rich soil to be tilled with this pedagogy. The social context described at the beginning of this article reveals the need for preacher training and ongoing formation at the local level. Such radical preacher formation requires the attention

of the church, specifically of those trained in the teaching of preaching. Moreover, formation ought to be affordable, accessible, and adaptable. Ongoing guidance is needed as well in order that local faith-sharing groups are able to appropriately critique preaching in their communities.

I sense in my soul that there are roots ready to burst into the light of my faith tradition; there is urgent need to tend carefully to this budding life. Ultimately, such care is also rooted in the spirituality of the preacher. Edward Schillebeeckx captures the essence of this spirituality and the ministry we all share:

The real norm and justification for competent proclamation of the gospel message is the praxis of Jesus himself embodied in the life of the preacher. The Christian who is really competent to preach today is one who, in his or her faith, is able to enter into the *sequela Jesu* (imitation or following of the life of Jesus) fully. The competent preacher is one who can be totally concerned with human situations, one who can set in motion the processes of admiration, joy and liberation that Jesus himself set in motion and continues to initiate today. (Schillebeeckx, 37)

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