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Preaching preparation changes, Holy Spirit remains the same

By E. F. Michael Morgan, October 23, 2009

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[Episcopal News Service] When I accepted the position as the executive director of the [Episcopal Preaching Foundation](#), initially I felt overwhelmed with the ambitious goal implicit in the organization's mission statement: "to support and improve the quality of preaching in the Episcopal Church." So I set out to listen as carefully as I could to a wide array and cross section of "preachers" to ascertain their views on sermons. I spoke with bishops, seminary deans, rectors of large churches, clergy in struggling parishes, the ordained in non-parochial settings, men, women, young, old ..."all sorts and conditions" of Episcopal clergy.

The results were surprising. I came away from those conversations sobered and sometimes depressed as well as energized and just as often inspired. The Episcopal Church is changing rapidly, as is its preaching -- some would even say changing radically -- particularly in regard to the content of what is being proclaimed. There are many things happening in homiletics generally, and contemporary preaching is not quite so easy to define as it may have once been. That's probably good news, though it makes us uneasy. Even though there are vast differences in approach, maybe even chasms separating various schools of thought, for the most part preachers like to preach, and they work hard at it. Across the board I noted that preachers are vitally engaged in the worthy privilege they have been given: "telling the greatest story ever told." Covering the spectrum from right to left, conservative to liberal, everyone it seems is sincere in seeking to proclaim God's Good News in Jesus Christ.

At the same time, I found clergy are going through a period of adjustment and transition. Old forms are giving way to new configurations while the more traditional methods are being rediscovered and refurbished. How events in the life of our church, indeed, how larger events in the wider Anglican Communion affect us, may be having a more profound impact than we realize; those forces will inevitably influence the way we preach in the years ahead.

The "methodology" of my survey was decidedly low-tech, depending entirely on the value of relaxed and anecdotal conversation. Following a simple and straightforward outline of open-ended questions I asked clergy, for example, how much time and effort went into sermon preparation (answer: roughly 3-15 hours/week). One bishop told me he always sings at least once in his sermons. Some clergy welcome pets into the pulpit, and others insist on using "props" and visual aids. Still others adamantly refuse to use the pulpit at all, claiming it is a huge impediment and distraction. On balance, most clergy seem to enjoy preaching, but are burdened by other parochial responsibilities clamoring for their time (i.e., visiting the sick, encouraging newcomers, attending community events, etc). In general, the happiest time for preaching occurred during the early years of ministry just after graduation from seminary. Later the demands of professional and personal life encroached increasingly on sermon preparation time, and at worst, turned preaching into a chore. I also discovered that almost 100% of clergy felt their most trusted critic who gave fair and honest feedback was their spouse or partner.

Not surprisingly, many clergy use published materials and standard commentaries as aids to preparation. Newspapers are still mined for nuggets of information (factoids), magazines are read for illustrations, and books and journals are referred to for deeper referencing. Others completely ignore print media. The digital revolution and technology has made its way into the world of proclamation. For instance, I asked clergy whether they used a computer, wrote out manuscripts longhand, or took index cards into the pulpit as prompts. The responses varied depending to a great extent on age. Older clergy liked the slower yet more thoughtful method of writing down thoughts and thinking about them as words were penned to paper. Some

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continue to write out sermons longhand.

In contrast, younger clergy handle their laptops and notebooks at warp speed with ease. They cut and paste paragraphs from different blogs, check emails, quote their friends on Facebook, and then check to see what's posted on Twitter. Neither group seemed completely satisfied with the procedures being used in sermon development. Comments proliferated regarding the need for more "Holy Spirit" to be present in the preparation phase. I was told if the Spirit isn't "working" the preparation is a disaster. Many painful moments were recalled -- indeed moments of utter horror -- e.g., being in the pulpit Sunday morning all set to preach with absolutely nothing to say. The emotional investment and energy that clergy bring to delivering a sermon is both commendable and scary; it tends to elicit the best and the worst of heightened emotional moments, and these can be extremely volatile at times. Still, clergy persist: and their faith commitments endure.

My conversations have also led to some unanticipated surprises; for example, men and women seem to preach very differently. There is undoubtedly more to this than first meets the eye. Obviously men and women are different, and as we have learned from scholars such as Carol Gilligan, who authored "In a Different Voice," and Belenky et al. authors of "Women's Ways of Knowing," there are key gender differences that reflect basic approaches to life. Sermons are not exempt from these different understandings and approaches.

Men consistently have described their preaching in very logical and linear terms. "The sermon has three or four points, 1,2,3,4, and a convincing conclusion. Which point didn't you get?" Women, on the other hand seem to be "preaching" the moment the service begins, and keep it up even at the coffee hour. They are more "relational" in their proclamation, and seem comfortable getting out of the pulpit, engaging in dialogue with the congregation in the aisle, or with kids on the floor during children's sermons (which more adults than children seem to adore). This difference in styles of course has immense implications when architecture and space are factored in, and raises the uncomfortable question regarding "where" preaching is optimally done? Always in pulpits, in worship services, in churches, on Sundays?

And lastly, I discovered that Anglican preaching is difficult if not impossible to describe or define. In asking, "What makes a sermon Anglican?" I was met with several "aw, hmm, duh, let me see, gosh, I don't know..." The truth is Anglican preaching is all over the charts and the best responses seemed to cluster around the concept of via media, our generic response to anything remotely Anglican. Related to this is some fuzziness regarding who is authorized or "licensed" to preach; and what role the laity should have in proclaiming Good News out of their own baptismal commitments.

Three references from our prayer book speak to our present condition. In the Letter of Institution of a Minister read at celebrations of new ministries, the bishop states clearly, "By your words, and in your life, proclaim the Gospel." And then the prayer of the new minister said in the midst of the gathered people of God follows: "O Lord my God... Be always with me in carrying out the duties of my ministry... in preaching, give me readiness of thought and expression." And in the Collect for Whitsunday, The Day of Pentecost, we pray, "Shed abroad this gift (the Holy Spirit) throughout the world by the preaching of the Gospel, that it may reach to the ends of the earth."

A basic postulate in homiletics states, "The task of the preacher on any occasion is to proclaim the Good News." In my conversations with clergy I have been impressed that Episcopal preachers today remain open to new forms, new settings, and new approaches in order to do just that -- proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ -- wherever it may be heard.

This lends credence to the mission of the Episcopal Preaching Foundation mentioned at the outset; "to support and improve the quality of preaching of the Episcopal Church." It's an exciting time to go to church these days...

-- *The Rev. Dr. E. F. Michael Morgan is executive director of the Episcopal Preaching Foundation.*

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