

# TO FORM A Pastoral Community

*Preachers wrestle with a recurring problem: care. Odd as it seems, we often find preaching difficult because we care. We preach among people who call us to proclaim God's word and who need God's care. We know in some detail the personal needs of those within the congregation—from the fear of a parishioner facing cancer to the frustration of an overburdened Sunday school teacher. The weekly sermon surely has some bearing on these pastoral needs.*

*But how?*

Thoughtful pastors intuitively understand the link between preaching and pastoral care. These two areas of ministry cannot be separated. As Phillips Brooks said over a hundred years ago, “The preacher who is not a pastor grows remote. The pastor who is not a preacher grows petty.”<sup>1</sup> Rigid separation of ministry into the prophetic (preaching) and the pastoral (caring) leaves us in the awkward position of the specialist who dashes back and forth between pulpit and counseling room feverishly changing ministerial hats.

The problem is, we're not quite sure how pastoral care actually occurs through the sermon. How does the sermon deliver pastoral freight without sidetracking the gospel? How can our daily pastoral care inform preaching without shoving gospel proclamation right out of the pulpit?

## Unsatisfactory Solutions

A couple of less than satisfactory solutions come to mind. We could say that pastoral preaching directly addresses the psychological and emotional needs of the individuals in the pews. Pastoral preaching is akin to Harry Emerson Fosdick's personal counseling on a group scale. This frequently results in sermons that suggest ways for the hearer to “overcome anxiety,”

“cope with grief,” or “understand the teenager.” All of the topics may be important for the pastor to tackle in other settings. But a steady diet of such psychologically-based preaching leaves the congregation starved for real gospel food. Such preaching shrinks the awesome mystery of God-with-us down to the miniature size of the individual psyche and slights the theological and biblical basis of Christian pastoral preaching.

Another approach claims that pastoral preaching is based upon the pastoral relationship between the preacher and congregational members. A caring relationship creates awareness and trust.

This helps the preacher speak a timely word in the sermon and prepares the hearer to receive it. Listeners know that their preacher truly cares about them, so they listen for her care as she preaches. This linking has some merit. Obviously pastors who show compassion in the hospital room on Saturday will be more readily heard in worship on Sunday.

Nevertheless, there are some pitfalls to this approach. Kept in the background on Sunday mornings, the pastoral relationship does provide specificity to the weekly proclamation of the gospel. But, let loose out of the sacristy, and invited to sit front and center in the sanctuary, the pastoral relationship can overwhelm the congrega-

tion. Preachers who build their sermons by relying too heavily upon their pastoral relationships wind up with lopsided sermons. Such sermons display a lot of relational planks, but they are skimpy on theology, biblical understanding, and insight born of sweat and reason. Even worse, such sermons sometimes devolve into a “personal” approach. Through story and anecdote, the personal life of the pastor becomes the text of the sermon. This is a serious misunderstanding of pastoral preaching that risks reducing God's grace to the shape of the preacher's personality.

## Creating A Community of Care

Pastoral preaching promises something else. Sermons are pastoral because the preacher intends something concrete to happen within the congregation. Pastoral preaching forms the congregation into a pastoral community. Over time and by the power of the Holy Spirit, God brings a pastoral people to life through the sermon. Pastoral preachers don't need to worry so much about the psychological dynamics of their listeners or constantly check the pulse of their relationships within the congregation. Pastoral preaching aims to create a community of care.

The pastoral preacher understands the communal nature of Christian care. He or

she preaches in a way that strengthens care within the congregation as a whole. Pastoral care flows freely among these people, the church. As a pastoral community, the congregation takes up the ministry of pastoral care, serving as a priesthood (or pastorate) of all believers. Care circulates throughout the congregation and on into the wider world that desperately needs the sustaining and reconciling love of God. The preacher's responsibility is to think theologically, prepare creatively, and pray mightily that his or her sermons will be care-full.

## Making Sermons Care-full

So how can we preach in this way? What can the busy pastor and preacher do to make sermons more care-full? First, we can reclaim the power of words preached within a Christian congregation. When we preach forty or fifty times a year, every year, we can easily forget the dynamism of words. Imagine—God actually uses our frail, often hasty words to help form a caring congregation. The language of preaching is one of the deepest, most constant streams feeding into the pool of the pastoral community. Over time, sermonic language slowly, almost imperceptibly, carves out the shape of a people who care. We can ignore the effects if we wish. But like water flowing over rocks, the words of the preacher will alter the substance of the congregation even as the congregation channels the words. As Walter Brueggeman says “The purpose of the sermon is to provide a world in which the congregation can live.”<sup>2</sup> Through words expressing the Word, pastoral preaching helps provide a world of congregational pastoral care.

I've found it helpful to critique my own sermons and ask myself, how do these words, images, stories, and uses of scripture actually communicate pastoral care? I have a hunch that other preachers could benefit from the same. For example, some of us understand care as sanctuary, shelter, and ark, while others think of care as broken bread or poured chalice. Some understand pastoral care primarily as individual counsel while others see it as mutual sharing of burdens. Perhaps we hold a combination of such images of care. Whatever they are, over time these notions of care come through in the words and stories of our sermons. Congregations really do get it. They know after awhile whether the preacher

wants to hog the pastoral care or share it with others. They hear, even if the preacher doesn't, whether she or he trusts

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in the pastoral care of all believers. Look intentionally at the way your sermons bring out the meaning of pastoral care for the congregation, and ask yourself if this is what you really want to communicate.

Next, give some thought to the pastoral theology of your sermons. What kind of pastoral theology does a year of your sermons express to the congregation? Leonora Tubbs Tisdale's book, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, offers excellent help here.<sup>3</sup> (Take a look at the explicit theological and biblical interpretations within your sermons, but also review the kinds of stories, examples, groups of people, and images that dwell in your sermons.)

Begin by focusing upon the church as it appears in your sermons. Does the pastoral community that you hope to nurture actually show up in the stories and images of your sermons? Can the people (the church) who hear your sermons see themselves as a hospitable, compassionate people committed to mutual care? Or does the church frequently appear as care-less and remote? Are the examples of pastoral care in your sermons homegrown, or do they often come from some other congregation?

Pastoral sermons should regularly paint pictures of the church engaged in pastoral care. For instance, a children's Sunday School class makes and delivers cards to the congregation's homebound

members. Someone prepares a meal for a bereaved family. The youth group walks down the side of the highway collecting trash (care of the earth is certainly pastoral.) A group from the church stands vigil for persons who have died with AIDS. A women's group volunteers at a halfway home for battered women. These and similar acts of pastoral care occur every day in Christian congregations.

The amazing thing many preachers discover upon self reflection is how little the actual pastoral care of the congregation shows up in the stories, examples, and allusions of their sermons. These “routine” acts of pastoral care seem so obvious that we forget to shine the spotlight on them in our sermons. The point is to frequently name these acts within our sermons and bring the church into focus as a pastoral congregation. I am not talking about pastoral boasting or cheer-leading from the pulpit. I am talking about the importance of helping the hearers claim their own ministry of pastoral care. The more concretely we can present the church as a caring people in our sermons, the more likelihood that such care will take root within the congregation.

Finally, consider yourself a resident pastoral theologian. The pastoral care of the congregation grows out of the theological soil that you are tending. Tend it carefully and thoughtfully in your weekly sermon, and you may find yourself surrounded by a pastoral community whose members eagerly join you in pastoral care of one another and the wider world. □

1 Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1877), 77.

2 Walter Brueggeman, “The Social Nature of the Biblical Text,” in *Preaching as a Social Act*, ed. Arthur Van Seters (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 143.

3 Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1997).

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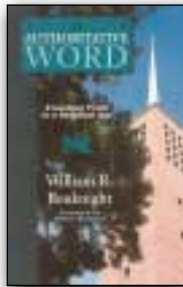


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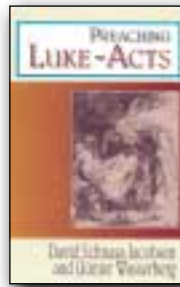
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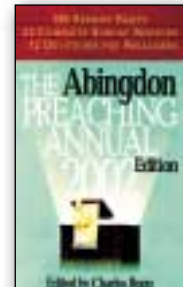
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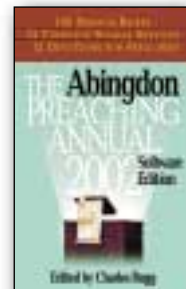
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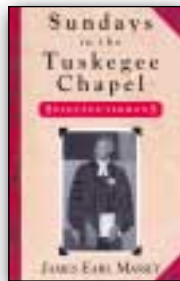
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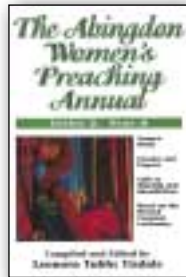
**Preaching Without Notes,** by Joseph M. Webb. The author asserts that preaching without a manuscript is not a matter of talent as much as it is a matter of preparation. Preachers can learn the practices and disciplines that make it possible to deliver articulate sermons, not from a written page, but as a natural, spontaneous act of oral communication. The payoff of learning to preach without a manuscript, he says, is nothing less than sermons that more effectively and engagingly give witness to the good news.

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