

This is a brief excerpt from Reuel Howe's book *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue*

The Importance of Feedback

The preacher may invite a group of at least six people to meet after church and react to the service and the sermon in order that he may have a response from the congregation to his communication. The easiest way to make this feedback available to the preacher is to provide the discussion group with a tape recorder that will record its discussion to which he can listen sometime later. Some clergy have tried to get this feedback by meeting with the discussants personally. Our experience indicates that no matter how mature a relationship a preacher has, his presence inevitably inhibits the group's discussion of their response to his message. On the other hand, people quickly get used to a tape recorder, especially if only the microphone is visible, so that discussion is not blocked. It is not necessary for the group to have a leader, as is commonly thought by overanxious ministers. We find that the most effective leadership is the leadership of some well-thought-out questions. The group need have only a moderator, a responsibility which a member may assume.

Examples of questions that the preacher may give such a group are:

What did the preacher say to you? (Do not try to reproduce what the preacher said; this question asks for what you heard.)

What difference do you think the sermon will make in your life, or was it of only passing and theoretical interest?

Did his style and method, language, manner of delivery, and illustrations help or hinder the hearing of his message? Explain.

Do you think the preacher received any assistance from the congregation in the preparation and delivery of his sermon? If so, describe; if not, why not?

And, finally, ask the members of the group to communicate through the tape anything that over the years they have wanted to tell the clergy about their communication.

These or any other questions carefully formulated are the best means I know of to evoke an honest discussion. Usually, much more is discussed than what the questions ask for. Forty-five minutes allows ample time for productive discussion.

I cannot emphasize too much that the best discussions by laymen, and, therefore, the best feedback, come from groups that meet without the preacher being present. If he is there, the discussion will be inhibited no matter how good a relationship he may have with the participants. Furthermore, members of the group will tend to address themselves to him, and that easily results in a question-and-answer type of discussion. When the preacher is not present the people will discuss the sermon with each other, thus giving him a more honest recording of how laymen think and respond not only to him but to one another.

A group of six or eight people seems to be most satisfactory for this purpose. They should be invited during the week in order that they make babysitting and other arrangements. The discussion should take place immediately after the service in order to save the time of the participants. Effort should be made to select a cross section of people from the congregation; people who are outside the church may also participate, as well as individuals who are alienated from the church, provided they can be persuaded to come and listen to a sermon for this purpose. Young people make excellent discussants because of their frankness. Preachers should find out how effective their communication is with young people and accept the help of young listeners to increase their effectiveness. Before initiating this kind of feedback, it is advisable, as well as desirable, to inform the whole congregation that the group (or groups) have been invited to discuss the sermon. Incidentally, a minister who offers himself for honest dialogue with his congregation increases their respect and inspires their trust.

When such discussions on a sermon take place, it is imperative that the preacher listen to these discussions and let his congregation know through his subsequent preaching that he has heard them. The feedback will often indicate to him what he needs to do in the way of correcting and completing his people's understandings. He will also discover what are the crucial issues his people face, and he will receive countless leads to areas of interest and need that he might otherwise never learn about. Such discussions regularly held not only help the preacher know the response to sermons he has preached, but also serve to guide him in preparing future sermons. In a word, the feedback process can begin to change the quality of a congregation's listening which, in turn, inevitably changes the quality of preaching. We have found also that as people are helped to discuss what they hear, they hear more; and the more they hear, the more they take with them into their living; and the more reflectively they live, the more they hear the Word that is preached; and, therefore, the more assistance does the preacher have from his people in the preaching of the Word. (96-99)