

LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY
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Let me begin this afternoon's presentation by repeating the single dominant thought of this lectureship. Can you remember the key idea that I shared with you this morning? Reverent listening is essential for powerful biblical preaching. In our first lecture we noted that we must always begin by reverently listening to the Word.

In this presentation, I want to emphasize the importance of listening to the community. I intend to make my case by sharing with you the findings of my research with the leadership teams of two key Christians churches: All Souls Church, London, and Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Illinois. I invite you to note specific strategies that these leadership teams have implemented to listen to the community.

All Souls Church

At the head of Regent Street in downtown London is a thriving and vibrant evangelical Church of England congregation called All Souls Church. For more than fifty years, under the leadership and influence of John R. W. Stott, this congregation has been nourished and edified by relevant biblical preaching.¹

¹Timothy Dudley-Smith, "John Stott: An Introduction," in *The Gospel in the Modern World: A Tribute to John Stott*, eds. Martyn Eden and David F. Wells (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 11-26. In November, 1945, John Stott joined the All Souls leadership team as a junior curate. In April, 1950, he was appointed as rector. In 1975, he became Rector Emeritus, a

John Stott has demonstrated a consistent commitment to listening humbly and attentively, both to God and to the community. Stott notes that “we are called to double listening, listening both to the Word and to the world.”² While we do not listen with the same degree of reverence or deference to each, yet we still must listen to both. Stott emphasizes:

We listen to the Word with humble reverence, anxious to understand it, and resolved to believe and obey what we come to understand. We listen to the world with critical alertness, anxious to understand it too, and resolved not necessarily to believe and obey it, but to sympathize with it and to seek grace to discover how the gospel relates to it. . . .

These voices will often contradict one another, but our purpose in listening to them both is to discover how they relate to each other. Double listening is indispensable to Christian discipleship and Christian mission.³

In this lecture I will focus specifically on ways in which John Stott, and the leadership team at All Souls Church, have sought to practice double listening, particularly when approaching the task of preaching relevant biblical sermons.

Stott introduces his book on preaching, *Between Two Worlds*, with the following exhortation: “In nearly every church closer and more cordial relations between pastors and people, preachers and listeners, would be beneficial. There is need for more cooperation

position he continues to hold.

²John R. W. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: An Urgent Plea for Double Listening* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 27. This volume was published in the United States under the title *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God’s Word to Today’s World*. In my opinion, the original title more accurately reflects Stott’s emphasis and appeal.

³Ibid., 28-29.

between them in the preparing of sermons, and more candour in evaluating them.”⁴ Early in his ministry at All Souls Church, Stott began to put this conviction into practice. He chose two “lay critics” to provide listener feedback in response to his sermons.⁵ Regarding the selection of individuals to provide post-sermon feedback, Stott notes:

You have to choose them carefully. I chose the medical students deliberately. I think they are trained in unbiased observation and I thought they would be in a position to be objective and detached in their evaluation. Of course, I made sure they were evangelical believers so that we should have the same gospel. But apart from that, I wanted them to be trained in their critical faculties.⁶

Stott gave these “lay critics” full permission to offer regular post-sermon feedback on any aspect of the preaching event and he asked them to put it in writing.⁷ In addition to providing practical insights about gestures, voice, and demeanor in the pulpit, Stott encouraged these “lay critics” to “comment on how I handled the text, and whether they thought my hermeneutical principles were sound, and whether they agreed with the interpretation of the text.”⁸

The post-sermon feedback that Stott received was not always complimentary, but the

⁴Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 11.

⁵Dr. Tony Waterson and Dr. David Trapnell.

⁶John R. W. Stott, interview by author, 12 August 1996, tape recording, Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

process was helpful.⁹ In his book, *Between Two Worlds*, he recalls: “Although I remember being devastated by some of the letters they wrote me, their criticisms were always salutary.”¹⁰ Stott looks back on his interaction with his “lay critics” as a positive, growing, experience. He emphasizes that “a sympathetic listener and critic” is especially important for one who is beginning a preaching ministry.¹¹

As his ministry progressed, Stott continued the process listening to the community by means of post-sermon dialogue with the leadership team at All Souls Church. He demonstrated a willingness to listen to his listeners as a resource for relevant biblical preaching, and he encouraged his colleagues to do the same. He notes:

A preacher who belongs to a team ministry should certainly ask his colleagues for their comments. Indeed, an occasional group evaluation, either by the staff team or by a specially convened group which includes lay people, has proved immensely valuable to preachers. The evaluation will then go beyond speech and gesture, manner and mannerisms, to the content of the sermon, including our use of Scripture, our dominant thought and aim, our structure, words and illustrations, and our introduction and conclusion.¹²

As part of an ongoing commitment to listening to his community, Stott also engaged resource groups in pre-sermon dialogue. When preaching a series of sermons entitled “Issues

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 272.

¹¹Stott, Interview. Stott suggests that the preacher’s spouse may serve as an excellent lay critic.

¹²Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 272.

Facing Britain Today,” Stott met for pre-sermon discussions with groups of specialists.¹³ He recognized that each participant brought different gifts and perspectives to the group:

I felt that I probably knew the Word more thoroughly and deeply than the congregation did because it is obviously my study, but I felt that the areas in which I was relating the Word to the world were in many cases areas in which I was ignorant and that there were professional members in the congregation who were much more knowledgeable than I. And that therefore to have an ad hoc group of experts in their field would be very valuable.¹⁴

In describing the impact of pre-sermon dialogue with the resource group discussing the topic of work and unemployment, Stott notes: “They helped me to feel what they felt--the shock, the rejection, the hurt, the humiliation and the sense of helplessness, which are all caused by unemployment.”¹⁵

I experimented with this process some years ago in a series of sermons entitled “Christianity in the Marketplace.” Perhaps some of you read the article in September, 2003, issue of MINISTRY magazine. The article was entitled “Start a Sermon Resource Group: Unleash Your Congregations’s Creativity.” If you are interested in reviewing that series, you can download sermon manuscripts and listen to the four sermons at www.calimesasda.com.

Some of you might think that such a process for listening to the community could only

¹³Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 197. Topics included “The Multi-Racial Dream,” “Work and Unemployment,” “Industrial Relations,” “The Arms Race,” and “The New International Economic Order.”

¹⁴Stott, Interview.

¹⁵Ibid., 199.

work in a larger congregation. But in reflecting upon this listening experience, Stott is convinced that a similar process could be implemented by preachers in other settings. He rejects the notion that the use of resource groups for pre-sermon dialogue can only function in large congregations:

I am very reluctant to concede that even the small inner city church and its hard-pressed pastor can manage nothing. If a carefully considered sermon on a current issue is impossible quarterly, is it really impossible annually? And if a congregation cannot produce from its own membership mature Christians who are specialists in their field, there must surely be some within reach who belong to other churches, but who would be willing to contribute their expertise to an occasional discussion group, and would even be surprised and gratified to be asked to do so?

In addition to ad-hoc resource groups, Stott also developed a reading group as a means of listening attentively to his listeners and to the culture in which they found themselves.¹⁶ He notes: “I think wide reading is essential. We need to listen to modern men and women and read what they are writing.”¹⁷ Stott explains that it was a desire for relevance that motivated him to form the reading group:

Well, it really was that in this business of relevance, I felt that I myself . . . studied the Word and theological books that helped them to understand the Word enough because I had been reading for years. My major weakness was in a lack of understanding of modernity, of what was going on around me. So the purpose of starting the reading group was very deliberately to oblige us to listen more attentively and intelligibly to the

¹⁶Stott organized this reading group in 1974 and, though its composition and frequency of meeting has modified through the years, it still continues to this day.

¹⁷John R. W. Stott, “Creating the Bridge: An Interview with John R. W. Stott,” interview by R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Preaching* 4, no. 5 (March-April 1989): 3.

modern world.¹⁸

The original reading group was comprised of about a dozen young graduates and professional people, “all of whom were evangelical, all of whom were committed to the gospel, and all of whom were modern young men and women anxious to relate the gospel to the modern world.”¹⁹

The group would agree on a book to read prior to each session.²⁰ According to Stott, the reading group “tried to concentrate on secular rather than religious books, because the main purpose of our group is to help us understand the secular mind of the post-Christian West, in order to combat it with a Christian mind.”²¹ For example, when considering the selection of a book on the New Age, Stott recalls: “We might go into the University book shop and study a number of New Age books. These are not Christian books about the New Age. These are actual New Age

¹⁸Stott, Interview.

¹⁹Ibid. The original reading group included doctors, lawyers, teachers, a housing officer, an architect, a personnel manager, a BBC person, and some graduate students.

²⁰This discussion generally happens at the conclusion of each reading group session.

²¹Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 195. Some books have included James Sire’s *The Universe Next Door*, R. M. Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motor-cycle Maintenance*, Charles Reich’s *The Greening of America*, Alvin Toffler’s *Future Shock*, the *Koran*, Will Hutton’s *The State We’re In*, and Richard Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene*. The reading group has also evaluated several films and plays.

books so as to understand what New Age is really saying and thinking.”²²

Jay Adams affirms the importance of listening to the community, illustrating from the preaching ministry of the Apostle Paul:

Paul’s knowledge and use of Greek poetry exhibits a principle that cannot be stressed too strongly. Christian preachers must study the literature and learning of the “other side,” not only to stay abreast of changing currents of thought in their audiences, but also to enable them to communicate with contemporary society in terms of the literature that they are reading and the concepts they understand.²³

Stott describes the group process at the reading group sessions as follows: “We tend to begin by going around the room and everybody is given maybe under 30 seconds to identify, pinpoint, the major issue they felt the book raises for Christian people. And then at the end of the evening, we ask ourselves the question, “What has the gospel to say to people who think like this? How does the gospel relate to people who think like this?”²⁴

As with the resource groups, Stott is convinced that the reading group is also a valuable resource for relevant biblical preaching that can be implemented by other preachers. He notes: “There can hardly be a congregation in any culture, however small, which could not supply a few thoughtful people to meet with their pastor to discuss the engagement of the church with the

²²Stott, Interview.

²³Adams, *Audience Adaptations in the Sermons and Speeches of Paul*, 69.

²⁴Stott, Interview. Stott observes that those questions are addressed more effectively at some of the reading group sessions than at others, but that is the stated purpose.

world, the Christian mind with the secular mind, Jesus Christ with his rivals.”²⁵ Stott makes the following suggestion to preachers: “If you haven’t got enough professional people or sufficient numbers in your congregation, then why don’t you share with two or three other congregations and that would include two or three ministers probably. I think it could be done almost anywhere.”²⁶

Stott reflects on the value of a reading group in these words: “The experience of the reading group . . . has not only increased our understanding of the modern world, but excited our compassion for human beings in their lostness and despair, confirmed our Christian faith, and rekindled our sense of Christian mission.”²⁷ Would he have listened as carefully to the culture without the encouragement of the reading group? Probably not. Stott asserts:

The London group has given me the necessary stimulus to read at least some of the books I ought to be reading and has provided me with some sharp-witted, warm-hearted young people as a congenial context in which to discuss the issues raised. They have helped to drag me into the modern world and have planted my feet on the soil of contemporary reality; I am very grateful to them.²⁸

The leadership team at All Souls Church has not only sought to involve listeners in the preparation and evaluation of sermons, but has also actively solicited input in the planning of the sermon calendar. The staff plans a retreat and invites several leading lay members of the

²⁵Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 196-97.

²⁶Stott, Interview.

²⁷Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 196.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 197.

congregation to attend. A key topic for discussion is this: “Where are we as a congregation in terms of spiritual development and pilgrimage and what is it that we need next?” Stott emphasizes the importance of lay involvement in this planning process. He suggests that the lay representatives help the staff to keep in touch with the needs of the congregation. In an attempt to solicit additional listener feedback in the planning of the sermon calendar, the staff has also placed a box at the back of the church, asking for sermon suggestions on various topics or books.

Following the development of the sermon calendar, those in attendance at All Souls Church are provided with a “Sermon Card” which notifies them of the sermon topics for the next four months. According to Stott, this sermon planning process sends a message to the congregation that “we are taking trouble to prepare and thinking about it and not going about it in a haphazard way.”²⁹

It is apparent that the leadership team at All Souls Church has made a deliberate and consistent effort to listen to the community. Lay critics, resource groups, reading groups, and sermon calendar planning groups all involve the listeners in dialogue and provide a valuable resource for relevant biblical preaching.

Stott’s appeal for relevant biblical preaching should serve as a challenge to anyone who senses a call to proclaim of the Word of God:

We should be praying that God will raise up a new generation of Christian communicators who are determined to bridge the chasm; who struggle to relate God’s unchanging Word to our ever-changing world; who refuse to sacrifice truth to relevance or relevance to truth; but who resolve instead in equal measure to be faithful to Scripture

²⁹Stott, Interview.

and pertinent to today.³⁰

Stott would undoubtedly agree that reverent listening, both to the Word and to the community, is essential for powerful Biblical preaching.

Willow Creek Community Church

I also learned some important lessons about listening to the community from my research at Willow Creek Community Church. Located in South Barrington, Illinois, on the outskirts of Chicago, Willow Creek Community Church is making an impact for Jesus Christ not only in the Chicago area, but throughout North America and around the world. At their first official meeting on October 12, 1975, approximately 125 people gathered in the Willow Creek Theater in Palatine, Illinois, for Sunday morning worship.³¹ Twenty years later, on October 14, 1995, 20,000 people who consider Willow Creek Community Church to be their church home gathered in downtown Chicago at the United Center to praise God and celebrate all that God had done.³²

Throughout the history of Willow Creek Community Church, the leadership team, under

³⁰Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 144.

³¹Prior to the founding of Willow Creek Community Church, Bill Hybels was involved in a progressive youth ministry in Chicago called Son City.

³²For a detailed account of the history of Willow Creek Community Church see Lynne and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995).

the direction of Senior Pastor Bill Hybels, has demonstrated an intentional and ongoing commitment to communicating the gospel in a relevant way. They demonstrate a marked commitment to listen to the community.

According to Lee Strobel, one of the teaching pastors at Willow Creek Community Church, feedback and evaluation is “part of the fabric of Willow Creek.”³³ Russ Robinson, another member of the leadership team, agrees that feedback and evaluation is “one of our stated values.”³⁴ Feedback is not viewed as an end in itself, but rather is recognized as an essential resource in the pursuit of excellence. Robinson emphasizes this point: “Excellence honors God and inspires people. . . . It is achieved by critiquing, evaluating people who are part of the team.”³⁵

In the context of preaching, Bill Hybels maintains that evaluation happens whether a preacher likes it or not. “Every preacher is evaluated, one way or another, by every listener.”³⁶

³³Lee Strobel, interviewed by author, 17 May 1996, South Barrington, Illinois, tape recording, Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee.

³⁴Russ Robinson, interviewed by author, 17 May 1996, South Barrington, Illinois, tape recording, Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee. Russ Robinson is an attorney who has served for many years as an elder at Willow Creek Community Church and is currently part of the management team as Director of Small Groups.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Bill Hybels, “Keeping Ourselves on Target,” in *Mastering Contemporary Preaching*,

However, not all evaluation is helpful. Hybels states: “I want to get evaluation that will help me be most effective in reaching people with God’s truth. I consider getting accurate evaluation part of my job.”³⁷

According to Hybels, a preacher must give careful attention to the source of post-sermon feedback. He notes:

Most of the reaction we get from our messages is unsolicited. We get people who stand in line to talk to us or who write us letters and I know from experience, some people can be devastating with their remarks after messages that you or I or other people give. And other people can be way too flattering. “Oh, that is the best message I have ever heard.” “Oh, you talk about a grand slam home run. That should be on the radio!” “I’m going to send that to my congressmen,” and all this kind of stuff. Well, what you learn over the years is that if you just listen to those who stand in line to tell you what they think about your preaching, you put yourself at risk because you might get worse feedback than is really warranted or more flattery, better feedback than is actually warranted.³⁸

Strobel expresses a similar caution: “I would be suspicious of somebody that enthusiastically volunteers to critique your messages, because you wonder why.”³⁹

How, then, does a preacher receive the kind of evaluation that will be helpful in the development and delivery of relevant biblical sermons? According to Hybels, “Constructive evaluation won’t happen, . . . no matter how willing I am to receive it, unless I’m asking the right

Bill Hybels, Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon Robinson (Portland, Ore: Multnomah, 1989), 154.

³⁷Ibid., 154-155

³⁸Bill Hybels, *Preaching for Life-Change* (Grand Rapids: Willow Creek Resources, 1996), sound cassette.

³⁹Strobel, Interview.

people the right questions at the right time.”⁴⁰ The right people are defined by Hybels as “people with great discernment whom I have learned to trust. It will only distract, confuse, or harm me to get input from everyone. Instead, I want to go to wise counselors.”⁴¹ According to Hybels, accurate evaluation given by the right people “has been the most formative part of my development as a teacher.”⁴²

Hybels describes the process of identifying wise counselors who can provide constructive sermon evaluation on the cassette tape, *Preaching for Life-Change*:

What I have done over the years, with great thought and with some trial and error, I might add, is that I have identified about a half a dozen people in our congregation who I know to be very mature and very wise, very discerning, very balanced, astute in matters of Scripture and astute in matters of preaching, and astute in understanding who our congregation really is and what they need to hear. And I have invited them, that's key, I have asked them if they would serve me by giving me coaching every time I preach.⁴³

Those individuals invited to be a part of the feedback loop include Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian, a charter elder at Willow Creek Community Church, who has provided sound theological feedback. Hybels notes: “When he is out of town, or when he is not there, I miss it because he has theological insights that are very impressive.”⁴⁴ Another significant member of the feedback

⁴⁰Hybels, “Keeping Ourselves on Target,” 155.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Hybels, *Preaching for Life-Change*.

⁴³Hybels, *Preaching for Life-Change*.

⁴⁴Ibid.

loop is Russ Robinson, J.D., an attorney who has served both as an elder and as a member of the leadership team. According to Hybels, Robinson’s feedback “brings logic and balance and, I would say, a common-sense overview to whether or not it had integrity from a thought standpoint.”⁴⁵

Hybels describes the functioning of the sermon feedback process at Willow Creek as follows:

It changes a little bit from year to year and I've been doing this for twenty years, but usually the way that it happens now is after my Saturday evening service or Wednesday night, the first time that I'm up, whenever it is in a multiple service context, I will get the feedback of about a half a dozen different people. They will do it on the front of our bulletin. Some people say, "Do you have a form, do you have a, you know, some kind of fancy piece of paper, with triplicate, carbon copies so that the elders get the yellow form?" It is not that formal! There is a lot of blank space on the front of our bulletins, so most of the time the people who evaluate my sermons just use the front of the bulletin, or a piece of paper that they've brought.⁴⁶

According to Strobel, the post-sermon feedback may involve something as minor as a word, a movement, a gesture. He recalls a specific incident where post-sermon feedback was a valuable resource: “Once somebody noticed that when I made a point, I would step backwards

⁴⁵Ibid. In addition to these two key individuals, Hybels has requested feedback from a cross-section of the church elders.

⁴⁶Ibid.

from the podium instead of stepping forwards, which is more powerful. I'm not trained as a speaker so I didn't know that. That was great feedback!"⁴⁷

Feedback may vary from sermon to sermon. Hybels offers the following example:

Sometimes people who evaluate my messages say, "Bill, we needed more personal illustrations from you on that message. We needed to know how you put that into action in your own life. . . . So sometimes I'm asked by those who evaluate me to use more illustrations. Sometimes I'm warned not to use as many. So it's a matter of discernment on my part and the evaluations of those who are making discerning observations from the outside."⁴⁸

When receiving post-sermon feedback and evaluation, Hybels cautions that "one thing pastors and preachers have to be very careful about is how the response to their message affects them both personally and professionally."⁴⁹ He freely admits, "I am extremely vulnerable about these evaluations in the first four minutes after I get down from the pulpit."⁵⁰ He found it overwhelming to hear feedback from seven or eight people. He observed that "the seven pats on the back when I preach well are nice, but the seven slaps when I blow it are excruciating."⁵¹ Learning from experience, the decision was made to filter all the evaluations through one

⁴⁷Strobel, Interview.

⁴⁸Hybels, *Preaching for Life-Change*.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Hybels, "Keeping Ourselves on Target," 157.

⁵¹Hybels, "Keeping Ourselves on Target," 157.

person.⁵² Hybels made the following request to the one delivering post-sermon evaluation: “ I would appreciate very much if whoever’s doing the evaluating would put a lot of time into thinking about how to present constructive criticisms to me.”⁵³

Russ Robinson has discovered several important lessons about delivering post-sermon evaluation: “the only way accountability works is when it is invited. Accountability that is not invited turns into judgmentalism, legalism. Critiquing of messages that is not invited can get very dangerous . . . If it is not invited by the communicator, I don’t think it is going to happen effectively.”⁵⁴ Hybels noticed that the elders at Willow Creek Community Church were sensitive to this issue: “The elders at Willow Creek would always respond truthfully when I asked them about the accuracy or relevancy of my preaching. But unless I asked, they wouldn’t say anything. So over the course of time, we have formalized the process.”⁵⁵ In other words, Hybels has made himself accountable and invited certain individuals to provide accurate feedback on a regular basis.

Strobel has also consistently invited feedback and evaluation: “I’ve found that whatever

⁵²Ibid., 156.

⁵³Ibid., 157.

⁵⁴Robinson, Interview.

⁵⁵Hybels, “Keeping Ourselves on Target,” 156.

growth I've had as a speaker, that has been the source of it.”⁵⁶ He emphasizes the value of feedback as a resource for relevant biblical preaching as follows:

I want the feedback because I know that is the only way I am going to grow. I think through the years if you are in an environment where for some reason the people feel the speaker is too fragile in his ego, or too insecure, or there is something wrong with the community that people feel reluctant to provide feedback, it doesn't mean they still don't have those opinions. People are walking around thinking “If only he would be more concise.” I want to know that stuff. Tell me!⁵⁷

When feedback is invited in this way, dialogue can be an effective and valuable resource in the preparation and delivery of relevant biblical sermons.

Robinson has also noticed that when some people offer a critique, their comments are limited to “you did this wrong,” and “you did that wrong.” In contrast, Robinson states: “I will rarely give a negative feedback without giving a positive suggestion on how to make it change.”⁵⁸ He continues: “It's easy to spot problems; the hard part is to say, ‘And here is how you change this.’”⁵⁹ In offering suggestions, Robinson notes that it is important to be specific, offering “constructive criticism that gives them a path to walk that is different than the path they did walk.”⁶⁰ Strobel adds that it is not helpful to suggest radical changes that cannot possibly be

⁵⁶Hybels, *Preaching for Life-Change*.

⁵⁷Strobel, Interview.

⁵⁸Robinson, Interview.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid.

implemented in the brief time available between services. He notes:

If you come in on Saturday night (after the evening service) and say, “You know what I would have done,” and you give a whole different structure, there is no way that I could implement that overnight. It wouldn’t work for me. It is nice to get the ideas, but it doesn’t help me. Don’t tell me about a radical rewrite but tell me how I can work with what I have to make it better.⁶¹

How then should one deliver post-sermon evaluation if a solution to the problem is not apparent? Robinson shares his response to that question: “Most of the time I will withhold the criticism. Once in a while I will say, ‘I am really sorry; I don’t know what to tell you to do about this, but I think this is an important enough issue that you should think about it.’ . . . I try to be really careful to do that on a very selective basis.”⁶²

Robinson emphasizes that in post-sermon feedback, it is also important to “catch people doing it right.”⁶³ With this in mind, when selecting an individual through whom to filter the post-sermon feedback, the leadership team at Willow Creek Community Church chose someone “who has a rare ability to affirm that which should be affirmed.”⁶⁴ Strobel agrees that accurate feedback also needs to include positive affirmations and not simply problems or suggestions for change. He recalls the encouragement he felt when one of the elders gave him a post-sermon

⁶¹Strobel, Interview.

⁶²Robinson, Interview.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Hybels, “Keeping Ourselves on Target,” 157.

evaluation note that simply said “Waverly Avenue.”⁶⁵

According to Robinson, effective post-sermon evaluation can only happen “because we have a very community-based ministry.”⁶⁶ Gilbert Bilezikian, a founding elder of Willow Creek Community Church, defines community as “the kind of oneness that is exemplified in the very being of God, because God is community.”⁶⁷ He suggests that “the pattern for the oneness among the disciples comes from the oneness that exists within the Trinity.”⁶⁸ According to Robinson, community is evident at Willow Creek Community Church in that “there is a lot of grace in the relationships around here.”⁶⁹ People are “open to hearing constructive criticism from others who build places of safety for them.”⁷⁰ Hybels agrees: “I confess that the primary reason this system of accountability and evaluation works in our setting is because of the

⁶⁵If the Chicago Cubs hit a home run out of the ball park at Wrigley Field, it lands on Waverly Avenue.

⁶⁶Robinson, Interview.

⁶⁷Gilbert Bilezikian, *The Church as a Community* (Grand Rapids: Willow Creek Resources, 1994), sound cassette.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Robinson, Interview.

⁷⁰Ibid.

enormous trust and love that has been built between my elders and me.”⁷¹

Lee Strobel shares a specific situation, early in his preaching ministry, when he sensed the importance of community as a setting for receiving feedback and evaluation. He had just preached a sermon, and he “blew it big time.”⁷² Strobel recognized that something was wrong with the sermon, but he couldn’t identify the problem. He describes his interaction with Hybels following that sermon:

Bill pulled me aside and talked to me for about two and a half hours after that message. . . . If I wasn’t in community with Bill, if I didn’t know that Bill really loved me and valued me, and if I wasn’t sure that Bill’s motivations were his love for me and for the congregation, for both of us, it would have been a devastating encounter. So I think it has to be in the context of community; to me, that is a really important element.⁷³

Where community is absent, individuals do not feel free to engage in dialogue. According to Strobel, “It is almost a poisoned environment where people are going around with strongly held opinions but don’t feel free enough to express them in a positive way to help that person. They don’t enjoy a level of community where there is trust and love and a feeling of security.”⁷⁴

In addition to post-sermon feedback, soliciting pre-sermon feedback is a regular practice

⁷¹Hybels, “Keeping Ourselves on Target,” 157.

⁷²Strobel, Interview.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

for Lee Strobel.⁷⁵ Strobel describes the process as follows:

I finish the first draft of my manuscript . . . by Thursday night. Usually by Friday morning, I will give it to one person, sometimes two. He reads it Friday morning, critiques it, we have lunch together and discuss it. . . . The pre-delivery evaluation is really important to me. . . . Mark Middleberg goes through and he feels the freedom to be very honest. Sometimes it is great! He just scrawls at the end, “This is tremendous and God is going to use this!” Other times he says, “I would make this change or that change.”⁷⁶

Strobel does not implement every suggestion that is given in pre-sermon feedback. Like Hybels, he believes that in order for the evaluation process to be effective, there must be give and take.⁷⁷

He implements about 80% of the suggestions given during pre-sermon dialogue, but reserves the right to say, “Thanks for the input, but I don’t agree with that.”⁷⁸ My most valuable resource for pre-sermon feedback is my beloved companion, Bodil. She is not a trained communicator. Bodil is a gifted nurse practitioner. But she knows what works. And she knows that “boring is bad!” So I give her my manuscript and let her give me pre-sermon feedback. In order to do that,

⁷⁵Occasionally, if Bill Hybels has a question about the appropriateness of a certain point, particularly a theological issue, he may talk it over with someone in the feedback loop prior to preaching the sermon.

⁷⁶Strobel, Interview. Early in his preaching ministry, Strobel would give his manuscript to more than one individual for pre-sermon feedback. He tried to look for individuals who could give him feedback in different areas.

⁷⁷Hybels, “Keeping Ourselves on Target,” 158.

⁷⁸Strobel, Interview.

I can't start my sermon on Friday evening! I start on Sunday morning. I study on Monday and Tuesday. My goal is to have the sermon birthed by Wednesday. That means that I have completed a rough draft of the sermon manuscript. The manuscript typically goes through 4-6 revisions, and somewhere in that process, my wife gets to read the manuscript and provide pre-sermon feedback.

The leadership team at Willow Creek Community Church has also involved the listeners to varying degrees in the planning of the sermon calendar for the up-coming ministry season. This intentional planning of a sermon calendar is an attempt to avoid “direction-less preaching”. Hybels defines “direction-less preaching” or “hit-and-miss preaching” as follows:

Week after week, there is no real logic for why he (the preacher) is preaching a certain kind of message. There is no graduated flow from week one to week two, to week three, to week four. The congregation feels like it's getting a smorgasbord of input from the Scriptures but not like they're a group of people being led from one place of a spiritual journey to a next place . . .⁷⁹

In contrast, “directional preaching” involves “the establishment in the pastor's mind of where the congregation is currently and where, if there were some purposeful thought given to a preaching schedule, the congregation could go between now and three months from now, between now and six months from now, or from now through the rest of the year.”⁸⁰

In regards to involving members in the planning of the sermon calendar, Hybels notes: “I've moved in and out of that over the years, and a lot of that depends on how my own antenna are working and how my own sense of diagnosing the needs of the church would be

⁷⁹Hybels, *Preaching for Life-Change*.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

functioning.”⁸¹ At certain times during his preaching ministry, listener input in the planning process has not only been helpful but essential. Hybels asserts: “Without the input of some congregational members that I sort of drafted for the purpose of helping me do sermon planning, sermon praying, sermon scheduling, sermon research, I never would have been able to continue to preach at the level that I was.”⁸²

I took the lessons I learned at Willow Creek and implemented a sermon planning process at my churches in Calimesa, CA, and now at Forest Lake Church. I have spelled out that process in an article in the September, 2004, issue of MINISTRY magazine. The article, which some of you may have read, is entitled “From Panic to Purpose: the process and benefits of planning a preaching calendar.” There are 4 basic steps in the strategy for listening to the community:

Step #1:

Personally select a group of 12-15 members from your congregation to serve on a Sermon Planning Group. Look for individuals representative of the diversity of your congregation (age, gender, ethnicity, and religious heritage). Give this Sermon Planning Group a 30-day assignment. Ask each member to solicit feedback from family members, neighbors, and friends about topics that would interest them in the coming year. Encourage group members to develop specific recommendations of sermon series that would connect with the individuals that they have contacted. You will be surprised how seriously individuals take hold of this assignment!

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

Begin this process four months prior to the beginning of your preaching calendar. This allows adequate time to work through the process and still provide some lead time for the worship teams to plan services at the beginning of the preaching calendar.

It is helpful to change the composition of the Sermon Planning Group annually. This provides opportunity for a broad cross-section of the congregation to participate. It also avoids the criticism that a handful of members are controlling the preaching calendar of the church.

Step #2:

Bring your Sermon Planning Group together for a brainstorming session. During this session, listen to reports from your Sermon Planning Group members. Take notes. Writing suggestions on a whiteboard or large notepad helps group members to see emerging patterns.

Several individuals may suggest a series of sermons on a similar theme, or on a particular book of the Bible. Decide together the best format and length for each series. Solicit group feedback regarding titles. By the end of this brainstorming session, you should have a collection of sermon series.

Allow a minimum of four hours for this brainstorming session. You may decide to take the Sermon Planning Group to a retreat center for the day or even for a weekend together. Either way, if you spend a minimum of a full day with your Sermon Planning Group, you should be able to complete a rough draft of your preaching calendar. Adequate time spent doing Step #2 will save time later in the process.

Step #3:

Solicit feedback from other pastors on your staff or from key lay leaders. While these individuals may not have participated directly in the group work mentioned above, they are sensitive to the needs of the church family.

Give them an opportunity to review the rough draft of the calendar. Encourage them to make suggestions, either adding to, deleting, or modifying the recommendations of the Sermon Planning Group. During this third step, you may also determine who will be responsible for each preaching assignment.

Step #4:

Go to the mountain. This is a time for you to prayerfully reflect on your proposed preaching assignments. Take the revised draft of the preaching calendar with you, along with any notes from the brainstorming session. Consider the flow from one sermon series to another.

As you look at the bigger picture, you will begin to see what needs have not been addressed.¹ Make additions, deletions, and modifications, fitting into any liturgical or denominational plans you may need to observe. Then, take a calendar and assign a specific weekend for each sermon.

As part of the preaching calendar, include a proposed sermon title, preaching passage, and preaching idea.

The benefits

Planning a preaching calendar takes time but the benefits far exceed the cost.

First, as mentioned, having a preaching calendar helps you to avoid the weekly panic attack that comes from last-minute sermon planning. Beginning the sermon preparation process weeks or even months ahead provides incubation time for you to process ideas. Once your preaching

calendar is complete, you can create a file for each sermon. As you find relevant resources or ideas, drop them into the appropriate file. Then, as you begin your sermon preparation, you will not only know your basic direction but you will also have resources to work with.

Second, a carefully planned preaching calendar helps to ensure balance in the spiritual diet of your congregation, and more life in the delivery of the sermon. The apostle Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that, during his extended time of ministry in Ephesus, he had declared to them “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27, NKJV). A balanced preaching calendar will include both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and will cover the broad themes of the Bible as well as issues of practical concern for everyday Christian living.

The one-sermon pastor who preaches the same sermon every week with a few minor variations bores the congregation and leaves them spiritually malnourished. A lack of prayerful, intentional planning can also result in myopic preaching preoccupied with chasing after immediate concerns while failing to declare the whole counsel of God. This unplanned preaching is often at the bottom of much of the mediocre preaching that we hear about.

Third, a preaching calendar also enables your worship teams to plan ahead. You may not actually begin to write a specific sermon until the first part of the week, but the worship team assigned to that weekend can plan weeks or even months ahead, designing a worship service around your preaching passage and preaching idea. Even though your preaching idea may be modified, the basic theme will remain the same.

Fourth, with advance notice regarding upcoming sermons, your communications team can provide articles for local newspapers and make postings on your church Web site. You can also encourage church members to plan ahead and invite family members, neighbors, and friends

to an upcoming sermon series.

There will inevitably be a few times during the year when your preaching calendar will need to be modified. Events like September 11, 2001, cannot be ignored. Unexpected transitions in the congregation might also necessitate the addition of a sermon not originally scheduled. At times like these, make prayerful adjustments to your preaching calendar. Such changes create a certain amount of disequilibrium, but they are the exception rather than the rule.

If you are experiencing weekly panic attacks as a result of last-minute sermon preparation, try planning a preaching calendar. It's a valuable tool which will help you to move from panic to purpose in your preaching.

Hybels admits that sometimes he is tempted to forget about the evaluation process. Why listen so attentively to the community? Why involve the listeners in pre-sermon, post-sermon, and sermon planning dialogue? This process requires a significant amount of time and energy. Hybels suggests two reasons: "Having elders or other trusted people evaluate each sermon sounds like work. It is. But this evaluation has saved me so many times from saying something I would regret later, that I have reached the point where I wouldn't want to preach without it."⁸³ But there is a second reason why Hybels, and the leadership team at Willow Creek Community Church, listens attentively: "It's because I preach, as every pastor does, before a righteous and holy God, and I know *he* evaluates my work."⁸⁴

If we would be powerful Biblical preachers, we must remember that reverent listening is

⁸³Hybels, "Keeping Ourselves on Target," 160.

⁸⁴Ibid., 166.

essential for powerful Biblical preaching. We must first listen to the Word, but we must also listen to the community. May God help us to develop this art of double-listening.

I am open to answer any questions about the process of reverently listening to the community.
