

Getting Sermons to Stick



Co-missioners,

Fourteen months ago we published an essay by Pr. Paul Theiss (ELCA, retired) about the [potential of small group ministry](#) to help churches rebound from the pandemic. Today Paul reflects on an older and perennial plague that continues to afflict the Church. The prison camp warden of “Cool Hand Luke,” the old Paul Newman movie, would call it “a failure to communicate.” Good preachers preach to no apparent effect. Good hearers hear with next to no retention. Here too, Paul counsels, give small groups a try.

Two quick notes before we send you Paul’s way.

First, another reminder of [next January's Crossings seminar](#), an exploration of "the Promising Community" led by the likes of Mary Hinkle Shore (Rector and Dean, Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary). Kit Kleinhans (Dean, Trinity Lutheran Seminary) and Rev. Robin Lütjohann (Pastor of Faith Lutheran Church, Cambridge, MA) from January 23-25 at Our Lady of the Snows, Belleville, Illinois. We would love to see you. Pass the word to others. Registration opens soon.

Second, Professor Matthew Becker of Valparaiso University sent us word recently that Robert Bertram's papers are now available for study at the Valpo library. To learn more about this, see [Matt's post of September 3, 2021](#) in Transverse Markings, his personal blog.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

For Sermons that Stick, Try Small Group Follow-Up

by Paul G. Theiss

The other day over lunch a preacher friend and I commiserated about the ineffectiveness of our sermons. As hard as we try to be Gospel-centered, appealing, and relevant, they sometimes go in one ear and out the other.

Why? This is a great time to be a preacher. We have spellbinding material, the Greatest Story Ever Told, proclaimed in these times of peril. Preachers receive an awesome gift: sharing the Word of Life with the faithful. An ocean of resources is just a click away. Besides, sermons haven't gone out of style. From TED talks to political stump oratory, speechifying still attracts hearers.

So why don't sermons make more of a difference to those who hear them? I once sweated over a sermon series on forgiveness, only to find that the congregation was just as vengeful as before. Four homilies in a row didn't move the dial.

Then I realized that my sermons would probably have been better received if my hearers had discussed them afterward with people they trust in a small group setting.



Remember the D.A.R.E. program of drug education in the schools? After twenty years and millions of dollars, this lecture-based program was a failure. A forty-five minute discourse by an authority figure lacked relevance for kids facing pressure to

drink or use drugs. Then schools in Clark County, Indiana switched the format to peer-led small groups. They pared the lecture down to eight minutes, followed by structured discussions among the students, centered on problem solving and practicing tough decisions with their friends. The kids loved it. Follow-up studies show diminished drug and alcohol use lasting for years. The new program is "Keepin' It REAL" [1]. Small groups change lives.

A passage from Luther's *German Mass and the Order of the Liturgy* [2] highlights another problem with sermons. Luther knew what every good preacher knows: a typical congregation includes people in different stages of faith and nonbelief. To reach his local townsfolk he outlined a Latin Mass, like our formal Communion liturgy, and a German Mass with popular tunes, a precursor of our "contemporary" services. But he was aware of the limitations of these formats. "Such orders are needed for those who are still becoming Christians or need to be strengthened," he said. Luther knew that Gospel preaching to a mixed group in a public setting is generalized and evokes different reactions or no reaction, as in the Parable of the Sower. I get that.

For the message to have a deeper impact, Luther suggests small groups. "The third kind of service should be a truly Evangelical order and should not happen publicly on the town square for all sorts of people. But those who seriously want to be Christians and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth should sign-in with their names and meet alone in a house to pray, to read... and to do other Christian works." For Luther, small groups are places to internalize and contextualize the Gospel, and also are springboards for community action. They not only change the lives of participants: they can change the world around them.

In the late 1600s Luther's followers picked up his idea, which

caught fire across Germany and Scandinavia. They called their groups *collegia pietatis*, or “devotional fellowships,” often led by laypeople, including women [3]. They lived the promise of our present-day Crossings movement, “Where the Gospel meets our daily lives.” The ripple effects were huge. Pietism became a powerful reform movement which shaped early Methodism, inspired the first Protestant foreign missions, undermined slavery [4], and presaged the social welfare system of Northern Europe [5]. Pioneers of American Lutheranism like Muhlenberg, the Haugeans, Walther, and Löhe were touched by Pietism.

Of course, as in every aspect of church life, there were the inevitable flies in the ointment. Some pietistic circles became known for rigid legalism and holier-than-thou sectarianism. They morphed into parachurches that split some congregations and even church bodies. By the early 20th century, “pietistic” had become a swear word and a reaction set in. Many denominations, particularly those with state church roots, deemphasized lay-led groups and elevated the ordained clergy as the authorized providers of spiritual services. By the late 20th century pastors were advised to be not only preachers, liturgists and teachers but also administrators, community organizers, and counselors. The workload of pastors expanded while their influence shrank. The Gallup Poll reports that since 1990, public trust in clergy dropped from 55% to 39% [6]. Anti-intellectualism is rampant [7]. No wonder we have problems with sermons.

Meanwhile, small group life flourished in the global church, often in trying times. As in early Christianity, Chinese house churches and Latin American *comunidades de base* kept the faith under intense persecution. Twenty years ago small groups became a thing for a while even here in North America.



In those days, while serving a church with a healthy small group ministry, I remember Kelli (not her real name), a young mother with a houseful of kids whose husband worked on an offshore oil rig. Sunday mornings she'd trudge up the front walkway of the church building, kids in tow, utterly spent, running on empty. I'd pray that this one precious hour of Gospel Word and Sacrament would refill her spiritual gas tank. More often than not, by God's grace, it did. But by the next Sunday morning, she was back in the same stressed place again. One hour on Sunday wasn't enough to sustain her in her ministry.

Then a group of younger women invited Kelli to a weekly structured small group with trained leadership. Childcare was provided without a fuss. It was a safe space to "profess the gospel with hand and mouth," as Luther said. The group searched the Scriptures, prayed from the heart, had fun, cared pastorally

for one another, and reached out beyond their circle. They enjoyed an open relationship with the pastor, sharing helpful suggestions for future sermons. They told me what flew from the pulpit and what fell flat. After a few weeks, I noticed a change in Kelli. Now she entered the sanctuary with a spring in her step! When Sunday rolled around, her spiritual gas tank was already half full. Her small group was responsible. Members like her had energy to spare for others, during the service and afterwards. Visitors to our church told me that our assembly had a lively, attractive energy, hard to define but unmistakable.

These experiences are common in churches with healthy small group ministries. Then why aren't they more widespread? Perhaps because of bad experiences with small groups. Some groups show all the faults of pietism, and more. Troubled congregations have added small groups only to see their problems metastasize. But with shared spiritual intention [8], proper structure, and training, the problems of divisiveness and legalism can be restrained.

Gospel-centered small groups are worth the effort and risk because they change lives.

Several years ago, Larry Osborne, the pastor of a San Diego church faced a problem with member retention. Newcomers would join, stay awhile, and then slip out the back door. His response was "Sticky Church" [9]: the attraction of structured small groups. Learning from previous mistakes, Osborne curbed the small group goblins of fragmentation and cliques. Each group discussed the sermon from the previous Sunday, following a prepared outline with talking points.

The process of sharing a weekly theme kept the church together through the preached word, while fostering personal application in a more intimate setting. Cliques were further constrained by

restarting the groups two or three times a year. Periodic restarts allowed newcomers to join more easily. Joining a small group for just a few months is more appealing for busy people than signing on indefinitely. Small group leadership in that church is a precious trust, not open to everyone but to those trained and commissioned by the pastor and congregation. “Sticky Church” is one way that small group practice evolves to bring the Gospel into daily life.

By the time we finished our lunch, my friend and I were encouraged to return to the challenge of preaching. There’s still a place for nourishing sermons. Many hearers, though, would benefit from a space to digest them—together in a small group. Not every church member will be attracted to such groups. Not every pastor or congregation is ready for them. But for those who are, the rewards are great.

Endnotes:

[1]

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-new-d-a-r-e-program-this-one-works/>. Research findings at <https://real-prevention.com/wp-content/uploads/Abstracts-and-citations-.pdf>

[2] “The German Mass and the Order of the Liturgy”, in *The Annotated Luther, Vol. 3, Church and Sacraments*, Paul W. Robinson, ed., (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016), 139ff.

[3] “Johanna Eleonora Petersen in the Context of Women’s and Gender Studies”, Ruth Albrecht, in Jonathan Strom, et al., eds., *Pietism in Germany and North America 1680–1820* (New York: Routledge, 2016, Kindle Edition) 69ff.

[4] “‘Don’t Teach My Negroes to Be Pietists:’ Pietism and the Roots of the Black Protestant Church”, Jon Sensbach, in Strom, op. cit., 183ff.

[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nordic_model

[6] "Honesty/Ethics in Professions," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1654/Honesty-Ethics-Professions.aspx> See also "The 7 People Christians Trust More Than Their Pastors", *Christianity Today*, January 4, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/january/gallup-pastor-clergy-trust-professions-poll.html>

[7] <https://blogs.iu.edu/civicliteracy/2015/05/22/anti-intellectualism-and-the-dumbing-down-of-america/>

[8] Church Innovations offers a congregational renewal program starting with a small group relational process, "Dwelling in the Word." <https://www.churchinnovations.org/Dwelling-in-the-Word>

[9] *Sticky Church*, Larry Osborne, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008)

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