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**a forum for people struggling with faith and church issues**

**values being real  
supports faith stage transition  
respects and validates the journeys of others  
allows questions and doubts  
lets God defend God**

## Preaching

**Does preaching still have a place? Jonny Baker, a master blogger, and a mover and shaker in the alternative worship scene in the UK as well as being national co-ordinator for CMS and chairperson of the group developing Spirited Exchanges in the UK explores this topic in a chapter he wrote for a book.**

### **something has got to change ...**

I was asked to write a chapter on preaching so I asked a number of people when the last sermon was that really inspired or challenged or changed them. The responses were interesting. A lot of people pulled a face and laughed as if to say “are you serious?” others remembered a transforming preach but a typical answer was that it was one or two years ago. From the preacher’s end of things it is often frustrating as well. We chew over the theme or biblical text, crafting a sermon to bring God’s word to the congregation, and yet when we stand up to preach, eyes gradually glaze over and we can see minds almost drifting out of the room. What’s particularly frustrating about this is that we as the preacher have got fired up about the passage and have a sense of God wanting to speak but still people are not getting it. There seems to be a kind of disconnect, a communication breakdown.

Something has got to change. Maybe it’s time to think the unthinkable. For too long we have behaved like the “well adjusted” courtiers in the famous story of the Emperor’s New Clothes saying nothing, propping up the status quo, smiling politely with our vested interests intact (whether as preachers or listeners), or simply too embarrassed to say anything. Allow me to be the antisocial brat (as Marshall McLuhan puts it in his retelling of the story) – the Emperor “ain’t got nothing on!” Preaching is invariably dull. It is boring. People are sick of three point sermons beginning with P. People aren’t listening. People don’t want to be preached at. They don’t want to be told what to think. Like so many other areas of church life we’re stuck in a time warp. It isn’t working. Maybe it’s time to rethink.

### **Thinking creatively about preaching**

We need some creative thinking. There are several myths and several blockages to creative thinking. These are a couple of each.

**Myth one** is that creative thinking is a mystical gift that some people have and others don’t. This is simply untrue. We are all made in the image of God and we all have this gift. It can lie dormant particularly if we don’t exercise it, but step one to being creative will be recovering the belief that we are all creative.

**Myth two** has been called the logic of hindsight by Edward de Bono – whenever anyone comes up with an idea very little attention is paid to how they came up with it because it look obvious in hindsight. The problem is that whilst an idea may be logical in hindsight it is invisible in foresight. So we need to pay attention to the processes of coming up with creative ideas.

Block one is “the right way”. When it comes to preaching there is no right way – there are lots of ways. Part of the skill of learning to think creatively is learning to detach your ego from the process. You don’t have to be right.

Block two is the habit our brains have for thinking along familiar tracks. We think in patterns and it can be hard for us to think along different routes. We need to be provoked.

People often come up with creative ideas when they are provoked. So if we want to be creative we need to deliberately come up with provocations or interruptions into our routine to knock us off track and into a different way of thinking. One method for this is to look at some feature that you normally take for granted

in a situation, and then to drop or cancel it. If we want to think creatively about the church then it might be worth trying this. The point isn't that you have to get rid of that thing forever – but it will force you to think in different directions even if you reintroduce what you have dropped out. I want to apply this to thinking about preaching – let's drop sermons. Preaching is a sacred cow let's slay it.

### **Route one – slaying the sacred cow**

Ok – so no preaching! This immediately raises several questions. What is preaching for? What other ways can we achieve that? What are we going to do instead? What about preaching is good that we need to find other ways to do? What about preaching is it that we'll be glad to see the back of and never have back?

Mike Ridell suggests that “The purpose of the sermon is to unleash to power of scripture in a way that leads to personal and corporate encounter with God” I like that. I'd add that it should open up the possibility of transformation which may be implicit in his definition. One other goal is education – enabling people to learn. There are actually stacks of ways we can do those things that don't involve preaching. I am involved in an alternative worship community, Grace, in West London. Alternative worship has lots of insights and clues to offer the wider church on creative approaches to liturgy and worship. One is in treating the whole worship service as the text rather than just the sermon and another is in involving the wider community in engaging with that text from planning through to the service. We recently had a couple of services looking at Psalms. Planning is generally quite chaotic, anyone is welcome to come and contribute. We tend to start with brainstorming ideas, letting the theme or text inspire and challenge us. Random tangents are explored with often the craziest ideas leading to some wonderful things. The end result of this wrestling with the scriptures was a series of two services. The first identified different themes such as praise, lament, anger, despair, story-telling and the psalms were printed out at different places in the church along with activities or small rituals related to that psalm. For instance, an online confession, post it notes of thanks, wrapping your self in a duvet to read psalm 91. Corporate reading of psalms was sandwiched between time to interact with these stations. In the second service people were invited to create their own psalm and these were read/shown/performed. The results were stunning.

The same material could have been approached by asking one person to preach on Psalms for us, but so much more was gained by everyone wrestling with the text. It's very easy for people to come to worship to consume God. As leaders we can get trapped in a provider-client relationship with the congregations. One of the keys to breaking this is looking for ways to

empower people to move from being consumers to producers – i.e. creative involvement, using their gifts to contribute and create.

The client-provider perception is further problematised by the idea of priest/teacher/leader as expert and/or the mediator of God's word to the people. We should look to move this to viewing the congregation as co-authors.. Expertise is important, but the way that the gift is bought to bear could shift. An expert theological take on things can be bought as one of many gifts to the community, who then need to work out how they might be communicated or discovered by the congregation in the worship, liturgy, group discussion, ritual, artistic interpretation and so on. It can sometimes feel a risk to open up who can contribute in this way, we're immediately losing some control! But in the gospels it is actually often those with no power or those who are outside of the “religious” community who have the most profound insights about the nature of the kingdom (e.g. the Samaritan woman in John 4). There is an implicit belief that God is at work in the world beyond the boundaries that the religious community has constructed, where the Spirit leads people to creative discoveries and encounters with God and other people. If we took this seriously we could let go of some of our fear and experience some of the energy and creativity that the Spirit brings to the community.

There is plenty of research that shows that a talking head is actually a very ineffective means of communication. Education has changed a lot over the last twenty years and the current way of thinking is captured in the old proverb “give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day, teach him how to fish and he'll eat forever”. Preaching it seems is stuck in the old school. I realised several years ago that a lot of my friends who had been Christians for a while were drifting out of churches and sermons were the thing they most complained about. For me one of the times I got the most out of the bible was when I had to prepare a sermon because it made me study in depth. Therefore, I started a group called “nuggets”. We met in a pub and everyone had to deliver a “nugget” (as well as drink plenty of beer). Now a nugget was an insight on a passage in the bible – it could be anything. Being a competitive bunch, people wanted to deliver impressive nuggets - the more original and surprising the better. This was the most fantastic time of learning for the whole learning for the whole group – the group had shifted from being passive bored listeners to active producers – learning and making discoveries in the process.

Someone recently said to me that in their church they always preached for a response, by which they meant that the conclusion to the sermon always created space for people to respond to God. I know these situations can be manipulated, but at heart this expectation is a good one and in line with the goal that preaching should unleash an encounter with God. One of the

most wonderful discoveries I have made in the last ten years is the power of ritual to open up encounter with God. In Grace we create some sort of ritual for people to respond to the theme or the text we have explored in the service. The rituals are generally inclusive and can be taken on a number of levels which creates space for people to respond to God and for the Spirit to touch them where they are at. The rituals might be old ones such as lighting a candle, burning incense, anointing with oil, eating bread and drinking wine, or new ones such as putting a footprint in sand, writing a pledge, walking a labyrinth. These embodied responses seem to open up a window for transformation and encounter AND you can facilitate the responses and encounter even if you have dropped the sermon!

I recently came across the web site for a café church in Australia. On the web site they described how they have employed various artists over the last few years, and refer back to the days when churches might have employed someone to sculpt or create pictures in stained glass. They see what they are doing as the equivalent. One of the kinds of art they have created is digital art. Rick Foulds was employed to create a flash animation that linked in with the theme of the lectionary for a whole year. Members and others can subscribe to an email list to receive one animation a week. I love the imagination of that community – the willingness to invest in artists and creative communication. Maybe dropping preaching could give us a chance to let the artists in our midst loose? Art can do so many things. It can be pleasurable, beautiful and challenging, but it also has the ability to shatter settled reality, evoke grief, make things visible, and open up new imaginative possibilities and worlds. In times of change the gift of the artist/prophet is invaluable to the Christian community.

Our journey to “drop/cancel preaching” has led us to discover new ideas, broken the passivity engendered by preaching, moved from the cult of the expert to the gifts of the people, moved from the preacher as interpreter to the congregation as the interpreters engaging with the bible, let loose the artists in our midst, rediscovered ritual, remembered that the goals are learning, encounter with God and transformation and that preaching may be one gift or art among many that can lead us to that place.

### **Route two – remixing the sermon**

For route two of our rethink about preaching I want to reintroduce it and suggest a few ideas for remixing. Sampling changed the way music was made. A sampler enables you to take a sample of music from a track (a drum beat or riff say) and weave it together with various other samples to make a track on a computer. DJs and producers create and remix music in this way – referencing the old but also completely reinventing it and giving it their own unique twist. This

provides one of the best metaphors for me for thinking about the art of preaching. We have a history of over 2000 years of the Christian faith, the scriptures, the resources of theology and biblical studies, insights from the world church, sermons preached, the arts, as well as access to what is happening in contemporary culture in music, literature, film, blogs and the media. Where preaching is stuck in a rut let’s take a leaf out of the DJs book and sample and remix the tradition fusing it with contemporary culture to come up with some fresh inspiring original sermons. As well as the negative experiences I began the chapter with I have also been built up, challenged, moved to encounter God, to repent, laughed and wept, had the rug pulled out from under my feet, and made new discoveries about God and what it means to follow Jesus all through listening to people who have crafted the art of preaching in this way.

Maybe a starting point for remixing is to let go of the old fixed ways of doing things. I want to end up with a few ideas for preaching – these are not solutions, just some things I have discovered that you can add to your mix.

- Creativity – learn to think outside the box, come at things sideways, surprise people.
- Teams of people who want to communicate, and dream ideas and creative ways of communicating.
- Start where people are at and from that life experience or illustration take them on a journey to where you want to lead them, when you get there the conclusion is obvious. A classic example of this kind of communication is where Nathan the prophet is tasked with confronting David about his adultery – he starts with a story about someone stealing a sheep. David is drawn right into the story and Nathan turns it on its head when he says – it’s you!
- Storytelling, people love a good story. Weave them into your sermons or make the whole sermon a story.
- Good communicators/comedians. A while ago I saw Eddie Izzard, he spoke without notes for nearly two hours, came back for a half hour encore and people still wanted more!
- Arouse curiosity. The old school of preaching is very much about telling people what to think, rather try to get people to think. Ask questions instead of giving answers. Jesus was a master at this. He spoke in parables and did not explain them.
- Space for artists to communicate - not just as illustration for your sermons. Use contemporary as well as classic art forms.
- Space for dialogue and interaction. One of the Greek words for preaching is actually our equivalent of dialogue. Get people into small

groups to discuss and feedback, at the end of every sermon create a space for questions, disagreement and comment, rather than one talking head have two people present different takes on the same material.

- Preach for a response but don't control it. I think preaching should open up the possibility of encounter with God but combine it with ritual that is open – let God do what God want to do.
- Accept that some people don't need to hear sermons. Many of the people who enjoy sermons are those who have been Christians a short while, they are keen to learn and grow. On the other hand there are others who have heard literally hundreds of sermons and probably don't need or want to hear any more for a while. Instead of worrying about how to please them try and think how to nudge them into doing more with their faith. Maybe they should start a new expression of church at the coffee shop on a Sunday morning for people who don't like sermons?
- Don't have sermons every week. Preaching is not sacrosanct. It's only one way of communicating do something different for a change.

- Cultural signposts. Jesus used metaphors and symbols from the culture, for instance salt, yeast and shepherds. His stories were agricultural. The equivalent for us is using the stuff of culture and life – films, songs, media, art, and so on. To do this you need to be immersed in “the real world” rather than the Christian subculture.
- Short sermons – it's surprising what you can say. I was once asked to preach three sixty second sermons for the BBC. At first I thought it was a joke, but by the time I had done it I was thinking why do people need thirty minutes?

I explained my approach for this chapter on preaching to a friend on the phone and it made him laugh. He said it sounded like I was putting a hand grenade in the fruit bowl – the chapter's not meant to be that destructive! I do hope that it might at least have provoked or sparked you towards a new way forward.

Used with permission

*A good sermon should be like a woman's skirt: short enough to arouse interest but long enough to cover the essentials.*

*Ronald Knox*

Us.....

- A big **THANK YOU** to everyone who has sent donations to Spirited Exchanges in the last few months.
- And yep it's that time of year again.....we ask for a yearly subscription of \$10 for the Spirited Exchanges newsletter. UK people might like to consider a donation to Spirited Exchanges UK instead. We will publish further details regarding this in the next newsletter
- The quote by Sheila Pritchard in the previous issue of the newsletter should have included "published in Reality [www.reality.org.nz](http://www.reality.org.nz)"
- It has been brought to our attention that Jim Consedine, writer of the abridged article “**There for the long haul a spirituality for today**” published in Issue 38, stood down as Lyttleton Catholic parish priest after admitting to sexual misconduct complaints from four women in 2002. We did not know of this history at the time of publication and apologise for any offence or hurt it has caused.
- Information about Spirited Exchanges groups can be found on the net: [www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz](http://www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz) Watch for further details about a group beginning in Christchurch or contact Jenny: [spiritex@central.org.nz](mailto:spiritex@central.org.nz).
- Spirited Exchanges went to Parachute for the third year running last weekend – wow was it hot and muggy in that tent. Jenny, Alan and Adrienne drove up on the Thursday and Donia joined them on Friday. Our being there again was very worthwhile, even if we are a little on the margins!

## Open dialogue – a space for reader response

this is an opportunity for open conversation from readers about previous articles. You may offer your own story; a broadening or different view of the subject; or point to other resources. We ask you to respect the same guidelines that are followed in Spirited Exchanges groups:

- We're not trying to produce one answer. There is freedom for differing views and opinions.
- Anyone is free to share his/her own view even if it's different or 'heretical' from some people's perspective.
- We ask for respect for each person's opinions
- We let God defend God

“In response to the article by two contemporary widows. Thank you for raising and exploring singleness, especially mentioning the raw side which is often put in the category of “unmentionable topics”. Your article will hopefully raise awareness of how singles are treated as second class citizens, especially in the church. (Funny isn't it, considering Jesus' marital status). Let this be a challenge to us readers to explore how we as individuals and/or as members of faith communities view, respond and care for those who happen to be single at this point in their lives. Bearing in mind, of course, that it will be a state many of us at some point in our lives will experience. Singleness is often like the elephant in the room that is not talked about, but here, of course, is where Spirited Exchanges provides a place to do so. Thank you merry?! widows for being courageous enough to bring this topic to light.” Sue

### Ten Years On

Robbie Titchener

Once upon a decade ago  
Dream were dreams  
and hopes were reality  
Thoughts and wishes  
- wife and kids  
a woman to have and to hold  
happiness  
(a fantasy to rival reality)  
Dreams and plans  
- ministry, motivation  
a mission to save the world  
fulfilment  
(a burning desire to be counted)

But ten years ago  
Dreams were dreams  
and hopes were wishful thinkings  
Happiness stays single  
makes a movie  
sees the world  
Ministry becomes bitter  
falls by the wayside  
starts another journey  
Ten years on  
Hopes and dreams  
still unfulfilled  
still searching  
still dreaming

“Thanks for the interesting and informative topic on singleness in the last newsletter.

I was amazed to learn that singles/widowed could be regarded as a threat to some couples, but a recently divorced friend assured me it is definitely true.

It was helpful for me in thinking about how I respond to people in similar situations.

Another type of "singleness" that exists in churches is perhaps less obvious, but is still as painful. That is the married person, or person with children, who attends church alone. As mentioned, churches are so family orientated that if part of your family isn't part of the church you can feel very lonely and overlooked, particularly with functions where you are not participating/serving in some way. As a married woman attending church alone, I can feel very awkward in certain situations too, and there has been many a time I have struggled to go into church alone, yet again.” Val

**Future topics for the newsletter include Sexuality, and Prayer**, we would really love to hear from you if you'd like to contribute to these topics ☺ - this can be in the form of articles, poems, personal story, or quotes.

**Dear Fury**  
**- a single cry**

Though I may stand outside your door  
I will weep with you for the child that is gone,  
For the empty cradle, the swollen breasts,  
a wind-up lullaby's final tune  
bereft of any song;  
for the tiny coffin, blood-white roses  
the nights no longer broken  
by the urgent cries of life,  
and for the grief that blinds your eyes.

I will ache for you  
for the partner far away;  
for the seedless bed, the desolate days,  
the wretched, restless wandering  
from room to silent room.  
I will hold your head against my heart  
when loneliness devours your bowels  
and the trust in promises once made  
reincarnates as Judas fears  
to name you Field of Blood

Life is for learning how on earth to love,  
and if you hurt, I will hold you  
while waves foam around the rocks  
and thunder deafens sound;  
and the eye of your storm will strengthen my sight.

But will anyone ache with me  
for the child that may never be  
the bleeding infertility,  
cycle of futility,  
the torn, but unopened womb.  
Will anyone stand with me  
at the edge of all the nights  
of hopeless wandering  
between Mother and the silent Moon  
with life and love and fire unshared.

Probably not.  
In the formless hierarchy of sanctioned suffering  
single people are less than serfs.

**Catherine Wood**  
Reflections on being a single woman  
Published by Women's Resource Centre  
Newmarket, Auckland 1992



For any contributions to, or comments you would like to make about the newsletter or if you would like to come off the mailing list please write to the Editor: **Jenny McIntosh** at **P.O. Box 11551, Wellington** or on email: [spiritex@central.org.nz](mailto:spiritex@central.org.nz) or [jenny@central.org.nz](mailto:jenny@central.org.nz) For Alan Jamieson: [alan@central.org.nz](mailto:alan@central.org.nz) or [aj@paradise.net.nz](mailto:aj@paradise.net.nz)  
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