

Preaching in the Town or Country Church

by Ron Klassen

One of our passions at RHMA is to encourage town and country churches to be intentional about discovering their strengths and allowing those strengths to enhance their churches' ministries. A corollary to this is that small-town churches will not try to emulate what big churches do, not because the way big churches do things is bad but because small-town churches are a different "animal" (see the introductory illustration below). If small-town churches play to their strengths, it is quite possible that big-church observers will wistfully think, I wish my church could do ministry that way! (Wouldn't this be a switch!)



INTRODUCTION: A SWIMMING OR RUNNING CHURCH?

In the *SmallTalk* article **Youth Ministry in the Town or Country Church** I began with a story told by David Ray in *The Big Small Church Book*.¹ It bears repeating for what follows.

A duck hunter got a new retriever that, when commanded to fetch a stick thrown out on a pond, *ran* across the water.

Wanting to show off his remarkable dog, the hunter took his partner, George, out for a demonstration. He threw the stick, gave the command, and his dog *ran* across the water and retrieved the stick. The hunter glanced proudly at George, who returned a noncommittal look. The stick was thrown again and retrieved, but still George didn't seem impressed.

Suppressing disappointment and irritation, the hunter asked, "What do you think of my new dog?" With a rather disinterested tone George answered, "Your dog can't swim very well, can he?"

As was also said in the article, many today believe there is a "problem" with the town or country church: it doesn't "swim" very well. Some think that in order to be a good church it has to be a good swimmer. City churches swim—they're good. Small-town churches don't swim—they're not as good.

Could it be that the small-town church is a different dog, but not an inferior dog? Small-town churches may not swim well, but what if they can run? And what if by running they get the job done just as well as churches that swim, though in a different way?

This could be applied to a number of facets of church life, from youth ministry to worship to evangelism. In this article we'd like to apply it to preaching.

APPLICATION: PREACHING

Think about the last sermon you heard in a large church. Was the preacher elevated considerably on a platform? Was he some distance from the congregation? What "voice" did he use—formal, "preachy"-sounding? Was the delivery strictly one-way communication? While none of these are "wrong" ways to preach in either big- or small-church settings, think about the following as it relates to the small-town church:

- One of the strengths of a healthy small-town church is its relational intimacy. Might a platform that is significantly raised and some distance from the congregation work against this strength?
- Other strengths of a healthy small-town church are its informality, spontaneity, and a high level of participation. Might one-way

preaching not take advantage of these strengths?

- What if the small-town preacher doesn't have the talent of a big-name preacher? (Let's face the facts: few of us have "large" preaching gifts!) If we try to emulate the preaching in a large church, but with less giftedness, won't the preaching in our small-town church then be inferior? If a church within an hour's drive of one's home features "dynamic" preaching, and dynamic preaching is what some folks are looking for, why shouldn't they drive by your small-town church and go there?

Might there be preaching methods employed in small-town churches that are uniquely different and that play to their strengths, with the result that the preaching in small-town churches just as effectively impacts the congregation as preaching in big churches? One gets there by running, the other by swimming.

Most of us were taught one preaching method in school—a method that, if we stop to think about it, might be more fitting for a large-church context. Perhaps we've never considered the possibility of adjusting our preaching style in accordance to the size of our congregation.

Much of Jesus' communication was with smaller numbers of people. In such contexts, do you envision Him preaching from an elevated platform or do you think people gathered around Him as He spoke? Do you think His voice sounded "preachy" or that He was more conversational in tone? Did He only use one-way communication or was there some dialogue back and forth?

Often our Lord's method of communication was highly interactive. His message on faith in Matthew 18 began with a question from the audience, to which He responded by sitting a child on His lap and then using the child as an object lesson. His teaching on divorce in Matthew 19 was in response to several questions from the crowd. Christ told

stories. He knelt and wrote in the sand while everyone gathered around to watch. He asked questions.

Those of us in small-town contexts would do well to consider how we might adjust our preaching style to fit our more intimate context. Let me share some possible ways you might preach by "running" instead of "swimming."

Ask a question and invite responses. In 1 Samuel 16:1-2 God encouraged Samuel to tell a lie. Is lying sometimes acceptable?

Colossians 3:20 says children should obey their parents in everything. Does "everything" really mean everything? Are there exceptions?

Hebrews 10:10 says a believer's sins are forgiven "once for all"—past, present, and future. Why then does 1 John 1:9 seem to say that sins have to be confessed before they are forgiven? After discussing this in my former church, several expressed considerable relief—they had been struggling to remember every sin they had committed so they could confess each one and be forgiven.

Allow time for the congregation to ask questions. When I was pastoring a country church, I often did this at the end of my messages.

After I preached a sermon from a text that talked about wives submitting to their husbands, a wife asked me if—quoting Genesis 3:16—submission within marriage is a part of the curse. Together we looked at Genesis 2:18 and 1 Timothy 2:12-13, and from these texts saw that submission was a creation principle. It was God's design, not a result of the curse. Then we looked again at Genesis 3:16 and saw that the curse was not submission itself, but a longing to rule and a refusal to submit. We further discussed that the curse included the rise of male chauvinism, as evidenced in husbands who suppress their wives.

You may not always have the answers for every question that is asked. But often someone else in the congregation will help out. Or you can always promise to work on the question during the week and be prepared to talk about it the following Sunday.

Ask someone to share an application from the main principle that is in the text.

One Sunday my message focused on how God sustains us through the trials of life. At that time we had a young man in our congregation who had just gone through a series of cancer treatments. I asked his wife to, in the middle of my sermon, share how God had sustained them during their trial. (I didn't put her on the spot; I had asked her to do this several days earlier.) Her testimony was far more powerful than any abstract examples I might have given.

Invite spontaneous sharing in response to the sermon. One Sunday, after I had preached a message on marriage, I opened it up for discussion. A middle-aged divorced man said, "Had I known 20 years ago some of the things that were shared in the message this morning, my marriage wouldn't have failed. I hope the teenagers here are listening and that younger couples will heed these principles so your marriages won't end like mine did." A hush fell over the congregation. Everyone's eyes were moist. One wonders how likely it is that I, in my preaching, could have that kind of impact!

One Sunday assurance of salvation was the topic of my message. Afterwards someone who had struggled for years with assurance said, "This issue is important. I know I didn't start growing as a Christian until I settled it. I kept looking back at my salvation instead of looking forward to my need for growth." Later that week another woman in the congregation sent a card to me, thanking me for the message which she said had been a significant help to her. However, I

suspect that her greatest help came not from the message but from the insight provided at the end of the sermon by one of her friends.

This is also a time when the pastor gets taught. People in the congregation will glean things from the text or have a personal application to share that you never thought of while preparing the sermon.

Use object lessons that involve the congregation. Matthew 5:39 says, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

Ask, "Have you ever wondered why Jesus said 'right cheek?' Why not 'left cheek?' Or just 'cheek?'" Ask a child to come up. (Jesus did this kind of thing too!) Ask the child which is his or her right cheek. Then show how a right-handed person (which all parents in those days required their kids to be) would slap a person on the right cheek: backhanded. What Christ is doing here is teaching us how to respond to an insult.

"PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT"

Unless you are highly unusual, it will take some time to adjust to this kind of interactive preaching. But if you think back to your early days in the pastorate, you'll undoubtedly recall that it took awhile for you to develop your present style of preaching.

Don't give up if your first attempts at changing your style do not go as smoothly as you'd like. If you keep at it, the day will come when you will feel as comfortable with your new way of preaching as you did with the old.

Your congregation may also need some time to adjust. Rather than make a dramatic change in your preaching style all at once, you may want to slowly ease your way toward change. You may want to first give interactive preaching a try at a time other than Sunday morning. You may want to start

out just doing it occasionally rather than in every sermon. And, it is quite likely (probable even) that you will never come to the point where interactive preaching is your exclusive method.

It is possible that you are in a cultural con-text where the kind of preaching proposed in this article would not be accepted. If so, it would not be wise for you to try to “force” it on your church.

THE SMALL-TOWN CHURCH ADVANTAGE

If your preaching style is really no different than that of a big-church preacher’s, people in your congregation might view it as inferior. After all, as I said earlier, most of us don’t have the large preaching gifts that are often found in larger churches.

But if we change our method to something distinctly different from the large church’s— from swimming to running—then people are likely to think, *This kind of preaching can’t happen in a big church. It makes our small-town church unique!*

Furthermore, they will see distinct advantages to the small-church preaching method. Why? Because the small-town church pastor isn’t trying to emulate what happens in big churches, but rather is employing a method that capitalizes on the strengths of a small-church context. The end result: Big-church people might wish they could have that kind of preaching in their church!

¹ David Ray, *The Big Small Church Book* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1992), p. 5.

Another example of an interactive teaching moment

There are other teaching opportunities, besides the sermon, that can be carried out in a way that capitalizes on the strengths of the small-town church. Steve Burt relates how baptisms happen in one church.¹ Do you think what follows could happen in a large church?

The pastor invites everyone “who wants to see what’s going on” to gather by the baptistry. What follows is quite a picture: children, a mother holding a baby, friends, aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandparents all gathering around.

The pastor asks if the children know what is going on. Several of them aren’t sure. Then one of the older girls chimes in, “We’re going to baptize Joe!” (Notice the theology: “*We’re*”—not “*You’re*.”) The whole congregation laughs together. They are obviously enjoying the occasion.

“That’s right,” the pastor says. “And what will we baptize Joe with?”

The children look at each other, wondering if this is some kind of trick question. Finally someone says, “Water!” Everyone laughs again. “And do you think there’s anything special about this water?” he asks.

There’s a long silence. It is obvious the children are thinking, as are the adults. Finally one young boy says, “Looks like regular water to me.” The other children and adults wait to see if the boy will be corrected by the pastor.

“That’s right, Seth,” says the pastor. “It’s not magic water, it’s just regular old tap water that came out of the faucet today. Go ahead and touch it if you like.” Several of them dip their fingers in the water.

“Ooh, it’s cold!” one girl exclaims.

“It’s wet!” says a little boy with a lisp.

“Of course it’s wet! It’s water!” says another boy, and the congregation all laugh together. Everyone is enjoying watching the children discover what baptism is all about.

“We don’t have special water for baptisms,” continues the pastor, “because it’s not needed.” And he goes on to explain. Then he baptizes. And with each baptism, the people clap.

A baptism, like a barn-raising, provides another shared experience for this small-town community of believers, both adults and children.

¹ This story was adapted and condensed from: Steve Burt, *Activating Leadership in the Small Church* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1988), p. 17-19.