

LISTENING TO LISTENERS

Five Years Later

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Abstract: *This article describes one of the first large qualitative studies of people who listen to sermons (“Listening to Listeners”), summarizes the major publications that have come from that study, reflects on the effects of the study in the larger preaching community, meditates on criticism of the study, and reports on efforts to bring listeners and preachers into dialogue about preaching.*

Since the nineteen-sixties, scholarship in preaching has spoken about taking a “turn to the listener,” that is, a shift from focusing on what the preacher wants to say to taking into account how congregations listen to the sermon. Scholars and preachers have encouraged preachers to imagine that listeners are in the study as the preacher prepares the sermon. “What would Elder Jane think about this idea?” Scholars and preachers have written about and instituted feed forward groups in which laity meet with the preacher to offer lay perspectives on biblical texts, theological themes, and personal and social situations that relate to upcoming sermons. Theoreticians have sometimes drawn from communication theory which relies on empirical data. Ironically, however, authorities in the field of preaching have paid little attention to what listeners themselves report regarding how they listen to sermons.¹

At the beginning of the new millennium, the Lilly Endowment through Christian Theological Seminary funded the first large scale qualitative study of people who listen to sermons. This article describes the study, summarizes some of the publications of findings that have come from it, reflects on the effects of the study in the larger preaching community, and reports on how the study has prompted some efforts to bring listeners and preachers into dialogue about preaching.

Description of the Study

The Lilly Endowment funded the study in 2000 with the primary initiative taking place in 2000-2004 with additional formal work extending through 2006. Ron Allen directed with Mary Alice Mulligan as Associate Director. It was supervised by a board: Dale Andrews, Susan Bond, Jon Berquist, John McClure, Dan Moseley, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, Lee Ramsey, Jr., and Diane Turner-Sharazz. Nancy Eiesland served as consultant.²

¹ Many of these efforts are chronicled in Ronald J. Allen, “The Turn to the Listener: A Selective Review of a Recent Trend in Preaching,” *Encounter* 64 (2003), pp. 167-196. For a much more comprehensive examination, see Clifton F. Guthrie, “Quantitative Empirical Studies in Preaching: A Review of Methods and Findings,” *Journal of Communication and Religion*, vol. 30 (2007), pp. 65-117.

² For a more extensive description see John S. McClure, Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews, L. Susan Bond, Dan P. Moseley, and G. Lee Ramsey, Jr., *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), pp. 183-185.

The board was very much a working one as members not only helped design the study but conducted interviews, read transcripts of the interviews and worked individually and in teams analyzing them, and joined in writing the four major books to come from the study. Interviews were also conducted by people who were not on the board. All interviewers were trained in interviewing techniques. Although not planned as part of the project, the board members' working together turned into a remarkable experience of scholars-in-community.

The study focused on two kinds of interviews: (1) interviews with individuals that lasted about an hour and (2) those with a small group of different interviews with different persons that lasted about two hours. The hour-long interviews were designed to collect the primary data. Since the board hoped that these interviewees would be representative of the congregation, the small-group interviews were intended to serve as a barometer on the degree to which the individual interviews appeared to be consistent with larger patterns of listening in the congregation.

We sought to identify qualities in preaching that listeners say they find most engaging or disengaging. The board formulated the questions used in the interviews along the lines of three major categories from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: logos, ethos, and pathos. How do listeners find ideas engaging (logos)? How does the congregation's perception of the character of the preacher affect their hearing of the message (ethos)? How do feelings generated by the sermon play into the ways listeners receive messages (pathos)? Because it usually appears as a distinct topic in discussions about preaching, the board also identified embodiment (delivery) as a separate category for analysis.³

One of the major discoveries of the study is that these categories do not simply provide the preacher with tacks to take in the sermon – making a good argument, establishing the preacher's credibility, and generating feeling. Using the analogy of a mixing board in a sound system, each category can be understood as a setting through which a member tends to process the sermon. About 40% of the interviewees in the study group listen to the sermon primarily through its content. For them, the actual theological content of the sermon is paramount. About 40% of the interviewees listen to the sermon through ethos. However, for these people ethos is more than the perception that the preacher is a trustworthy person and source. For them, ethos also includes a sense of relationship with the preacher. About 20% of the interviewees listen to the sermon through pathos. They need to feel the sermon. Indeed, for these listeners pathos is not just an emotion but is a realm of trans-verbal awareness.

In the spirit of contextualism so prominent in theological discourse these days, the interviewers attempted to identify leading dimensions in the context in which each congregation was located as well as seminal dynamics of congregational culture, and how such factors affected listening. In addition to conducting the individual and small group interviews with laity, researchers interviewed the ministers of the congregations and spent two Sunday mornings in the congregations as participant observers.⁴

The interview questions asked congregants to reflect generally on qualities in preaching that they found engaging and not specifically on the preaching of the minister serving the congregation in which the interviews took place. Of course, the interviewees sometimes illustrated their comments with reference to their current pastor's sermons.

³ The questions asked in the interviews are listed in *Listening to Listeners*, pp. 181-82, and in *Hearing the Sermon: Relationship, Content, Feeling* by Ronald J. Allen, (St. Louis Chalice Press, 2004), pp. 135-136.

⁴ Of course, the interviewers were in the congregations for too short a time to achieve in-depth knowledge of the context and culture.

Interviews took place in 28 congregations: African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, American Baptist Church, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, Church of the Brethren, non-denominational churches, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Mennonite Church, National Baptist Church, Presbyterian Church U.S.A., and United Methodist Church. Nine congregations were primarily African American in make-up. Sixteen congregations were largely made up of people of European origin with three congregations being mixed.

Interviews were conducted in the summer and fall of 2001 and in the spring and summer of 2002. The World Trade Center was destroyed in the middle of the study (September 11, 2001); not surprisingly, several interviewees commented on sermons related to that event.

Books Published from the Study

The study has published four books under the series title “Channels of Listening” through Chalice Press. The four books and their contents follow.

- *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies* by John S. McClure, Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews, L. Susan Bond, Dan P. Moseley, and G. Lee Ramsey, Jr., (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004). This book presents six case studies in which the authors analyze five complete interviews with individuals and one interview with a small group. Some teachers of preaching use this volume in D.Min. courses.
- *Hearing the Sermon: Relationship, Content, Feeling* by Ronald J. Allen, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004). This book sets out the discovery that each listener tends to enter the sermon through one setting: perception of relationship with the preacher (ethos), the content of the sermon (logos), and the feelings aroused by the message (pathos). A listener is not persuaded simply by a combination of respect for the preacher, argument, and emotion. Rather, a person receives the sermon through one of those settings. Thus for one person, a sense of relationship with the preacher is primary, while for another the content of the sermon is essential, while still another needs to be moved at the level of feeling in order to sense that she or he has truly heard a sermon. This work is especially suited to advanced classes in preaching and to workshops with clergy.
- *Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons*, Mary Alice Mulligan, Diane Turner-Sharazz, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, and Ronald J. Allen, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005). This book describes eleven diverse clusters of how listeners perceive the purpose of the sermon, the role of the Bible in preaching, how preachers should handle controversial subjects, what kinds of embodiment listeners find engaging, etc. While this book is well suited to advanced classes in preaching on both the M.Div. and D.Min. levels, it can also be used in basic classes.
- *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity* by Mary Alice Mulligan and Ronald J. Allen, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006). This book identifies the twelve most frequently mentioned qualities that listeners say engage them in sermons. These categories are enumerated below. The authors view it as the basic “advice book” to come from the study. They have found that this volume works very well in basic courses in

preaching and they also notice that lay people often pass this book to their pastors when lay people want to help their preachers become acquainted with the findings of the study. This volume is easily accessible to those who do not have a seminary education.

The study has also self-published a three-volume work that contains the transcripts of the individual interviews: Ronald J. Allen, Editor, *Transcripts of Listening to Listeners: Interviews Conducted In Connection With A Study of People who Listen to Sermons: A Self-Published Book* (Christian Theological Seminary, 2006). The materials in this book are available to scholars doing responsible research in preaching.

In addition, members of the study team have published about 20 articles and chapters in books that attempt to bring to light discoveries, implications, and possibilities for further research not developed in the four books. Bibliographical information concerning these articles is listed in Appendix 1.

Of course, several of the board members have given lectures and led day-long or weekend workshops with clergy that focus on particular aspects of the study. These scholars have also made use of insights from the study in one-on-one consultations on preaching with individual clergy and when meeting with clergy colleague groups.

In an unusual move, the board has publicly evaluated aspects of its own work. They indicate what they perceive as strengths and weaknesses of the study, including things they might have done differently.⁵ This critical reflection in public could prompt other scholars, ministers, and research groups towards similar public self-evaluation. The latter is supposed to be a hallmark of the field of practical theology as that field has been redefined over the past twenty-five years.

The Study in the Wider Preaching Community

The study has not shot like a bolt of lightning through the preaching community, transfixing scholars and preachers. At this point, the presence of the study in the world of preaching is more like that of a Van de Graaff generator in a physics class room. Moving parts inside a silver ball create electricity. The generator can be simply in the room and working but creating no effects. However, when a student passes a piece of metal near the silver ball, static electricity visibly jumps from the ball to the metal. The patterns and strength of the electrical charge are quite different depending upon the size of the metal piece, how close it comes to the ball, etc. Under certain conditions, the generator can power light bulbs and small engines. When students get close to the generator, electricity can also surprise them by jumping from the ball to belt buckles, rings, and other metal objects on the person. This listener study is part of a larger force-field within the world of preaching (the larger field being empirical studies of preaching) and creates spark and energy (sometimes surprisingly).

The Study, the Practice of Preaching and Learning to Preach

⁵ Ronald J. Allen "Listening to Listeners: The Board Reflects Critically on the Study, *Encounter*, vol. 68, no. 3 (2007), pp. 69-84.

To be candid, with respect to the practice of preaching, many of the themes that emerged from the study were already in the literature of preaching. For instance, many ideas summarized in *Make the Word Come Alive* are also found in standard introductions to preaching.

- The sermon should deal in a foundational way with what God offers and asks
- Preacher should live in a manner consistent with the church's deepest theological convictions
- Preachers should speak from their own experience
- The sermon should center in the Bible and make the biblical material come alive for the listener
- The message needs to relate in a practical way to the lives of the listening communities
- The sermon should be short (although the meaning of "short" varies from congregation to congregation)
- Preachers need to be clear and easy to understand
- Congregations are eager for sermons to help them make theological and ethical sense of the range of life's issues
- Listeners do not want the preacher to "dumb down" the sermon; rather, they want to wrestle meaningfully with important issues
- Ministers ought to be specific in helping congregations draw out the implications of the Bible and their deepest theological convictions
- Preachers need to be lively when they embody the sermon, talking expressively as well as loudly enough to be heard, connecting with the congregation through eye contact, and speaking with appropriate movements of the hands, arms, and body.
- Pastors need also to keep in mind other things that help the sermon engage the congregation, such as remembering to put your false teeth in your mouth before leaving home on Sunday morning. (Yes, one preacher forgot to do so, and preached *sans* teeth).

Nevertheless, while many of these ideas are already present in the field of preaching, they come to expression here with a fresh force: The listeners themselves testify to these approaches. These are not simply the expostulations of preaching professors inflicting their prejudices on students. These are the actual words of people who are likely to be similar to those to whom students will soon encounter in preaching contexts every week or whom they are already encountering (in the case of students who are already preaching regularly). That gives these words exceptional authority. This finding is quite important as it reassures preachers and scholars of preaching that many people in the pews yearn to hear what the sermon offers. We frequently report the following. The following was an interview question: "What would be missing from worship if there were no sermon?" Many interviewees responded with one word: "Me."

Furthermore, there are significant surprises in the data. None of the surprises caught the research team more off guard than the fact that many listeners *want the preacher to speak more frequently and with more honesty and directness about controversial issues.*⁶ Listener after

⁶ Lee Ramsey, one of the advisory board members reports, "I encounter numerous preachers who simply do not accept this as true. They refuse to listen to the listeners for a range of reasons—fear of conflict unwillingness to

listener insists “We *need* guidance from our pastors in how to think theologically about such matters.” “If you can’t talk about something in church, where can you talk about it?” To be sure, many listeners want the preacher to move into such territory gently. And a few interviewees say that some such topics should simply be off limits. Nevertheless, the study suggests that many listeners are more ready than preachers realize for sermons to address red-button issues, albeit in ways that are appropriate to each congregation’s context.⁷

While many of these ideas may be familiar to seasoned preachers, we offer our own testimony, after using *Make the Word Come Alive* in preaching classes for three years, that many students find some of these prescriptions to be quite surprising. For example, a student who was accustomed to preaching about forty-five minutes in a student congregation took exception to the suggestion that people prefer “short” sermons. When challenged to check out that perception with the congregation, the student returned to class the next week dumbfounded to have been told by several elders, “Thirty minutes is enough.”

One of the most useful educational aspects of the study is the use of interviewing as a model for students. Several of us have had students doing the D. Min. in preaching who have used qualitative interviews similar to those in the study as part of their course work as well as part of their final projects. One member of the study team now invites laity to visit her preaching classes and to talk about what engages them in the sermon (and what does not). Class members interview the laity.

The Study and a Fresh Taxonomy of the Listening Community

The study also produced a fresh taxonomy of listeners in *Hearing the Sermon*. As indicated already, relationship (ethos), content (logos), and feeling (pathos) are each a setting through which a listener receives the sermon. Although scholars of preaching have given little attention to this phenomenon, we note that preachers in local congregations often find these categories very helpful.

Many ministers (rightly) note that a listener is almost never a pure example of any one setting. Each person combines all three modes, though one mode typically predominates. Even allowing for the complexity of individual congregants, ministers can immediately provide examples of people in their congregations who receive the sermon through one or another setting.

Alert pastors also note that these categories have implications that go far beyond preaching. They can help ministers frame all church communications from the congregation’s website through the pastor’s blog, the ad the church places on the radio, the material inviting people to participate in the congregation’s financial campaign, the call to solidarity with the poor, to helping understand people in counseling. In a continuing education event, a pastor even analyzed a congregational conflict in terms of these categories.

The Study and Scholarship in Preaching

engage broader controversial concerns from the pulpit, the desire to be liked.” Personal Correspondence, August 1, 2009

⁷ The frequency and strength of these comments in the interviews may suggest that many preachers are not doing following the advice given to them in preaching classes and in preaching textbooks to grapple with difficult theological and ethical issues, to talk theologically about the relevance of the gospel to all phases of every day life. This study underlines the ability and desire of the congregation to engage the Bible and life issues in theologically significant ways.

Our impression is that, to this point, the most important contribution of the study to scholarship and research in preaching is methodological. Clifton H. Guthrie notices that the listener study has made three “valuable contributions.”

First, it has grounded the theoretical turn towards a more nuanced understanding of preaching as something created in the alchemy of listener, setting, occasion, and preacher. Second, as Webb notes [see below], it has yielded a large amount of interview data that can be investigated by others. Third, and most important in my view, perhaps more than any moment since the 1970s and early 1980s, when communication theory’s influence over preaching reached a high water mark, we have an opportunity to consider what kinds of empirical approaches may best further the field.⁸

Guthrie continues, “There is a need to review the empirical work that has been done [in the listener study and in the field as a whole] and plot a course for a productive future.”⁹ According to Guthrie, then, the study has opened the door to a discussion of the relationship of empirical investigation to the preaching enterprise.

However, this discussion has been slow to start among scholars of preaching. Some scholars and preachers resist the notion of empirical investigation on theological grounds. Some theological positions so emphasize preaching as originating and empowered by God (even flatly calling the sermon, “God’s word”) that they are inherently theologically disposed against investigating how people listen to sermons. As such a person said to me in conversation, “All I have to do as a preacher is speak the Word that God gives. The Holy Spirit will bring it to fruit.”

Other scholars and preachers are reluctant to approach empirical investigation for practical reasons. Most interpreters of the preaching event have been trained in Bible, church history, theology, and ethics. Only a few teachers of preaching or preachers are really conversant with empirical methods. Consequently, such folk may be hesitant to enter the world of interviews and analysis. In addition, many preachers and scholars of preaching may be hesitant to open themselves to hearing what congregants have to say. Such vulnerability about one’s preaching and about one’s theories of preaching (even when the listeners’ remarks are not directly aimed at the current minister or at a particular approach to preaching) can be unsettling, even threatening.¹⁰

Nevertheless a small number of Ph.D. dissertations in the field of preaching are underway that make use of data gathered in the study or that use interviewing methods as primary source of

⁸ Guthrie, “Quantitative Empirical Studies in Preaching: A Review of Methods and Findings,” p. 66.

⁹ Guthrie himself provides a nearly exhaustive review of such methods to date, including attention to the following questions: “What are preachers actually preaching? How often do preachers preach on social issues? Do sermons persuade? How do individual differences in hearers matter for preaching? What qualities in sermons make it more effective? Does feedback and training help?” Guthrie notes, “Studies show that at least some aspects of the preaching event can be quantified and studied. However, they also point to the need for better theories about the effectiveness of preaching, especially in expressing and building communal religious identity” (p. 65).

¹⁰ In the early stages of the study, when we were recruiting congregations to participate, our strategy was to approach the minister with the initial invitation. Many preachers immediately said “No thanks” to the possibility of participating in the preaching. Some of those who said “No thanks” also said, in essence, “I am not ready to face what might come out.” The vulnerability required of the clergy was too much for some. We wonder about the extent of this factor in influencing decisions not to participate in the project.

gathering their own data. The studies should help us get a better sense of the degree to which (a) the Listening to Listener data is itself promising for further research and (b) empirical methods are useful for learning more about what happens in the moment of preaching and how preachers can make optimum use of that moment. We hope the study will encourage scholars to pick up the tape recorder and go to work.

One of Lee Ramsey's former students who came to the United States from Liberia has done a study using the interview method in three congregations made up largely of people who immigrated to this country from Africa. The attempt is to extend the study beyond the European-African American categories in the study.

Criticisms of the Study

Several scholars have criticized aspects of both the methods of the study and its conclusions.¹¹ While expressing appreciation for (a) the shift towards the listener in the literature and practice of preaching confirmed by the first volume to be published (*Listening to Listeners*), and while regarding the transcripts that it contains to be valuable for independent analysis, Joseph M. Webb, who has great appreciation for the fact of the study and for the body of data that it collected, does object to the use of the Aristotelian categories. According to Webb, these categories “were designed to generally delineate the three large dimensions of the public speaking process—the intellect, the emotions or passions, and the actual context/situation of public address itself.” Webb then says, “The categories were never meant to serve as delicate tools for analyzing words and sentences. It is like trying to study a strand of hair through a telescope. It doesn't work. The instrument is wrong. Everything is blurry.”¹² Webb finds that the interpretive comments found alongside the transcripts in *Listening to Listeners* are often forced to fit the Aristotelian categories and occasionally even misrepresent what the listeners intended to say.

To be sure, Aristotle did not foresee the notions of ethos, logos and pathos as categories for research. We think that the authors of the study simply have a different perspective from that of Webb on the degree to which the categories prove useful both for gathering data and for interpreting it. In any event, to our knowledge, Webb has not published public reflections on the other books in the series: *Hearing the Sermon*, *Believing in Preaching* or *Make the Word Come Alive*. It seems to us that *Hearing the Sermon* makes the kind of respectful, nuanced use of the categories that Webb seeks even while moving the categories themselves in a direction entirely unimagined by Aristotle. The latter two books—*Believing in Preaching* and *Make the Word Come Alive*—hardly use the Aristotelian concepts.

With respect to the taxonomy of listening set out in *Hearing the Sermon*, someone said to Ron in correspondence, “I suppose the conclusions were pre-ordained by the methodology, the questions, and the categories.” Would another set of questions have generated another set of settings (so to speak)? Moreover, work is still to be done comparing and contrasting the approaches to understanding perception in *Hearing the Sermon* and in other empirically based

¹¹ Additional criticism are summarized in Allen “Listening to Listeners: The Board Reflects Critically on the Study,” pp. 73-78.

¹² Joseph M. Webb, “What Does It Mean to Listen to Listeners?” *Book of Papers of the Academy of Homiletics* (2002), p. 223. www.homiletics.org.

modes of interpreting such matters, especially the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, and the other approaches to human development and learning.¹³

A number of people have lamented that the sample was so limited: It focused only two cultural groups (people of European origin and people of African origin), on only one geographical area (the middle west, and a small part of that), on only long-established denominations, on only Protestants, largely (though not exclusively) on congregations that do not use electronic media extensively in worship. Most especially, the study did not look closely and distinctively at how younger listeners process sermons. As Guerric DeBona says, “These listeners have a lot to teach us, too.”¹⁴

One reviewer expresses a concern that we have often heard when pastors approach the study the first time. “At first I was skeptical of this entire project. As a preacher of the gospel, am I not beholden to what God would have me say, as opposed to ‘tickling the ears’ of the congregation? Listening to the listeners might get me a hearing, but am I compromising the gospel by giving the people what they want?”¹⁵ The reviewer concludes, “Thankfully, these questions are met frankly in several ways in this study. The authors stress that the preacher is not giving away theological integrity by listening to the listeners. What this study offers is just one—albeit comprehensive—way of listening to what people are hearing when they hear the sermon.”¹⁶

Bringing Listeners and Preachers into Dialogue

One of the most fruitful outcomes of study has been face-to-face dialogue between preachers and members of their congregations regarding what they find to enhance (or frustrate) communication in the preaching moment. Because preaching is an act that is at the same time so intensively personal and public, preachers are often hesitant to enter into such interactions. Hesitant pastors are often willing to participate when assured that such events are not referendums on their own preaching.

Some of the board members have led day-long or longer-term events that have brought preachers and lay listener into face to face dialogue about preaching. John S. McClure coordinated an event for the North Alabama Presbytery that convened ministers together on a Friday night to name their presuppositions regarding the characteristics of preaching that listeners find most engaging and then brought lay listeners together for a Saturday morning in which they articulated their own perceptions of qualities that draw them into (or push they away from) sermons. McClure has led a similar event for the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee.

In each Introduction to Preaching class at Bethany Theological Seminary, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm invites a, “Listeners' Panel” of laity to her Introduction to Preaching course and has students interview the laity, using questions from the study and raising their own questions as well. Dawn reports, “Students have typically enjoyed this session and share that the experience of raising specific questions of congregants is ‘stretching’ and informative for them.”

¹³ A review of approaches is found in Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. and Ronald J. Allen, *One Gospel, Many Ears: Preaching for Different Listeners in the Congregation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), pp. 49-78.

¹⁴ Guerric DeBona, review of *Hearing the Sermon, Listening to Listeners, Believing in Preaching, Make the Word Come Alive*, in *Worship* 81 (2007), p. 351.

¹⁵ Allan Rudy-Froese, review of *Hearing the Sermon, Listening to Listeners, Believing in Preaching, and Make the Word Come Alive* in *Conrad Grebel Review*, <http://grebel.uwaterloo.ca/academic/cgreview/reviews/06-08rudy-froese.shtml>. Several board members expressed a similar concern at an early meeting of the project team.

¹⁶ Rudy-Froese.

Lee Ramsey has generated a M.Div. course at Memphis Theological Seminary entitled, “Preaching from the Pews.” The goals of the course are to become familiar with the emerging body of research on the listener, to become familiar with classical and contemporary understandings of rhetoric, to learn and apply a research method for listening to listeners that helps preachers bring together the listening patterns of the congregation and the resources of rhetoric, and to do so in an atmosphere infused by critical theological reflection. The class includes reading materials from the study and from other sources that attend to diversity in listening communities. A key component comes when the students themselves interview people who listen to sermons. In subsequent presentations and papers, the students reflect upon the observations of the laity. The instructor observes, “When they report back to the class, I usually have to limit their presentations because they are so enthused about what they have heard, what it might mean, and how it can helpfully transform the method and content of their own preaching.” Ramsey adds, “Recall that many of our students are already preaching full-time.”¹⁷

Ramsey has also presented themes from this material at a United Methodist Church Pastor’s School for the Memphis Annual Conference in both a major lecture and in a follow-up workshop that introduced ministers to the study to the interview method and to the primary categories and questions. The workshop included mock interviews in which the participants interviewed one another. The hope was to encourage ministers to engage in listening to listeners in their own communities by partnering with another pastor.¹⁸

In the fall-winter-spring of 2008-09, the Center for Congregations in Indianapolis sponsored sessions with the two of us that brought preachers and groups of listeners from six congregations together for four day-long sessions—two in the fall and two in the spring. A similar event is occurring in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, during the fall-winter-spring of 2009-2010. The events are called “Better Preaching/Better Listening” and aim to help both ministers and congregants to deepen their capacities as preachers and listeners.

- At the first session, clergy and laity expressed their hopes and fears regarding the prospect of active dialogue about face-to-face interaction regarding preaching. The clergy committed to being receptive to hearing the lay perspectives and the laity agreed to be honest and straightforward (while also being pastoral). The group looked at the process described in *Listening to Listeners* as an orientation to the kind of things they could expect over the next weeks. Both groups identified the assumptions with which they began regarding what makes a communicative sermon. The lay people were trained to interview other people in their congregations.
- Between sessions, the members of the group interviewed other members of the congregation regarding their perceptions of preaching using a reduced number of questions from the study. The interviewers met and compiled a report on what they heard, focusing especially on qualities in

¹⁷ Personal correspondence, August 1, 2009. Ramsey observes, “An added benefit of the class is the self-discovery of the pastor as he/she thinks about his/her own listening modes and preferences. There have many ah-ha moments as students begin to see the complexity of communication in the congregation and the possibilities that *Listening to Listeners* opens up for them.” Ramsey’s frustration is that students often gravitate to rhetoric and communication theory to the neglect of theological analysis. Thus, his

¹⁸ Personal correspondence, August 1, 2009. A copy of Ramsey’s address, “Preaching from the Pews: Preaching and Controversy,” is available from the author at lramsey@memphisseminary.edu

preaching that listeners say help them attend to the sermon, and discussed the report with the minister.

- At the second session, in a fishbowl environment the groups summarized their reports. Ministers had a chance to respond, especially noting points at which the lay reports confirmed what they perceived themselves to be doing in preaching and points that they found surprising. The group compared and contrasted their congregation's perceptions with those in *Make the Word Come Alive*. Discussion ensued, comparing and contrasting clergy concerns as well as perceptions from congregation to congregation.
- Advent and Christmas occurred between the second and third sessions. During this time, all the members of the lay group listened together to three of the preacher's sermons, then reflected with the minister on how they perceived the preacher to manifest the qualities that they had identified as engaging, and pondering things that the preacher might do differently.
- At the third session, participants reflected on what they discovered when they listened to their preachers' sermons since the last meeting. Preachers responded. The group considered how different people listen to sermons differently through the settings of ethos, logos, and pathos from the perspective of *Hearing the Sermon*. This session concluded by describing the assignment for the next meeting, namely to meet as a feed-forward group using John S. McClure, *The Round-Table Pulpit* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) as a guide, and incorporating attention to ethos, logos, and pathos in the text and prompted by the text.
- Between the third and fourth sessions, the group met with the preacher for three feed-forward sessions. The preacher developed sermons informed by the feed-forward process, and the group talked with the preacher afterwards about how the preacher used their insights and the degree to which they were affected.
- At the fourth session, each lay group reported on its experience with the feed-forward experience. Lay people reflected on how their listening had deepened as a result of participating in the project. Preachers reflected on the degree to which they had attempted to respond to insights gleaned from the readings and generated by interaction with their parishioners and with the larger project group. Clergy and laity worked together on ideas for the upcoming Easter sermon. The event concluded with an extensive evaluation session.

Both clergy and laity offered positive evaluations about participating. Nearly every congregation plans to continue some form of (a) feed forward in the process of sermon

preparation and (b) small group conversation with the minister about preaching, often on an annual or semi-annual basis.

As Director and Associate Director of the project, we continue to think the study was worthwhile both in the content of its discoveries about preaching and as an exploration in empirical methodology. It continues to generate interest. Most importantly, it continues to provoke conversation between preachers and listeners, and to be a seed bed for scholarship in preaching. The outcome, we hope, is better preaching which means more congregations alive to the presence and leading of the living God.

Appendix 1

Articles about the Study Listed in Order of Publication

(Except as noted, articles were written by Ron Allen)

“The Preacher’s Story as a Resource for Preaching in Seasons of Transition,” in David Mosser, Editor, *Ministry for Seasons of Transition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, forthcoming).

“Preaching on Tithing Encourages the Practice,” *Giving* (2009, forthcoming)

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