

We asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly. Each month we will post a new contribution on the Starters for Sunday website.

We hope that this resource will assist you to ‘fan into flame the gift of God that is in you...’ 2 Timothy 1:6

We are very grateful to **The Very Reverend David Lunan**, Moderator to the Church of Scotland General Assembly of 2008-2009 for this month’s contribution.

Thoughts on preparing to lead worship

The minister, or conductor of worship, sets the tone for the service. (For simplicity I will use the term ‘minister’ throughout to refer to all worship-leaders.)

If you create the right atmosphere, all things are possible. You will do this by your demeanour, appearance, style, the content of your material, the choice of music, your engagement with the congregation, and your own praying as you prepare.

But do not underestimate the contribution the congregation makes to the mood, the context and the sense of occasion. I always felt that if people came with a feeling of expectation, of drawing near to God; hoping to hear something that will help them to live, to pray, to become who God wants them to be, to be part of a community that has a divine genesis and a divine destiny; coming to a place, where love is experienced, believed, heard, practised, preached, and felt.

It is the most important part of a minister’s duties week by week. ‘I will not offer to the Lord worship that costs me nothing.’ If you don’t take it seriously, nor will the parish.

You are at your most visible (and audible) in conducting worship. People know whether we are in role, or being ourselves; people see through us, and our only prayer is that we might, by the grace of God alone, be transparent enough for someone to catch a glimpse of Christ.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

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... we are displaying the good news – that everyone matters to God.

The Very Rev David Lunan

We are messengers of a heavenly word; we draw no attention to ourselves, we are always like John the Baptist, pointing beyond ourselves. 'Behold the Lamb of God.' We are not trying to display our cleverness, or holiness, we are displaying the good news – that everyone matters to God.

Ministers have only two stories to tell, the story of Jesus, and their own story. If we speak about ourselves, it should not be too often, and always out of our weakness and brokenness (see Luke 18). We do not preach our doubts, but we have to be honest with ourselves, and with God, and with a soul-friend, when we find ourselves struggling. We are not promised a rose garden. St Paul writes of his trials (2 Cor 12;10) 'but when we are weak, then are we strong', for that's when God can use us.

So we're creating an atmosphere where people are comfortable, open, relaxed but attentive, seeking and expectant; where there may be that 'numinous' moment, and peoples' hearts are touched, minds are transformed, and souls are nourished. We are for a moment aware that there is another realm, that I am loved, I am forgiven, God could perhaps use me. This is a work of the Spirit; we can only set the context.

Prayers

For prayers, I recommend careful preparation, and if not written, given much thought beforehand. Otherwise favourite themes and expressions tend to recur inadvertently; you will not notice them, but the congregation will. And if they are written, don't just read them, pray them. I was given the advice that for every minute the prayer lasts we should spend an hour preparing.

Never forget that you are addressing the Lord God Almighty – whose name we are not fit to utter - and you are doing so on behalf of the people of God. It is not an additional sermon, it is not an explanation to God of the latest news, it is not chatty.

Use the psalms as a guide, especially in prayers of adoration. Use ancient prayers of the church; and contemporary ones. But mostly try to use your own words, which can be just a little more formal than private prayer; but they come from your heart and not just your mind.

In confession you cannot afford to be too specific, but nor can you be so general that no-one understands what you're trying to say. You want your words to strike a chord with people, so they can relate to the prayer; and to God.



My main advice is to have in your mind that you are speaking to God; not just 'saying prayers ...

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Use a scriptural sentence that declares God's forgiveness. And include a sentence in which we forgive those who have wronged us in any way. 'We should never rise from our prayers still wondering if God has forgiven us.' (George Macleod)

Don't pray for too long (I think I did) – people drift away, even the disciples fell asleep. Keep your sentences short. My main advice is to have in your mind (and heart and soul) that you are speaking to God; not just 'saying prayers', not just presenting beautifully turned phrases, not teaching, not being pious, but leading the congregation to the throne of grace.

Don't put on a voice; trust the voice God has given you. Speak audibly of course, but not pretentiously. Pray humbly. 'You can tell a person's spirituality by the tone of their voice.' Watchman Nee. Prayer is the one thing we do that distinguishes us from those with no faith, who can be as loving and moral and self-sacrificing as anyone can; it's just we have discovered we need help.

I prefer to include the Lord's Prayer (in the contemporary version – otherwise we're showing we've got stuck) in the second prayer of dedication, thanksgiving and intercession. This prayer should come after the sermon, as it expresses our response to the Word, the Christ, the cross, to God. We want to give ourselves to God, dedicate ourselves as disciples, and let the Holy Spirit take up residences within our bodies.

And so we give thanks - and the list should ring the changes from week to week, but always include our thanks for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

The Christian life is always a response, to what God has done in creation, in Christ, through his life and teaching, his death and resurrection, to what he is doing now by his Holy Spirit. It is always a response, and the only appropriate attitude is gratitude. Gratitude and grace are related; we don't understand the Christian life if we don't understand grace.

We make our prayers of intercession, because we want the entire world to know the love of God, the healing of Christ, the blessings of faith. We want there to be good news to the poor; release for captives, sight for the blind, we want justice to roll down like a mighty stream, we want the angels' song of Peace on Earth to be reality. We are praying for the Kingdom to come, where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

This may be the most important thing that we do. 'History belongs to the intercessors.' (Walter Wink). Prayers are shaping the future. 'God does nothing except in answer to prayer.' (John Wesley) Or as Ian Cowie once chided me, 'When you pray, do you expect nothing to happen?'

I always included prayers for the blessed departed. Sometimes at worship the community of saints can seem strangely close. We are the church 'militant' on earth, in 'mystic sweet communion' with the church 'triumphant' in heaven. If our faith is for this life alone, then we are the most wretched of people. But thanks be to God, it is not.



The Bible...has the capacity to convert us, to turn us round to awaken us to the love of God ...

The Very Rev David Lunan

Readings

For reading I usually followed the lectionary, certainly in the second half of my ministry. It prevents us banging on about our hobby horses. But it wasn't a slavish adherence, I felt free to react to current issues, or local issues, seeking the guidance of Scripture. I used different versions over the years, mostly the GNB, sometimes the NRSV or NIV, and latterly more often, The Message. I usually invited different people to read the lessons, for which readers sometimes welcomed some training.

Sermon

In reformed worship this is the heart of our worship, and much of a minister's training is in preparing us to teach the Scriptures, for as one Catholic priest said at a seminar I attended 'We call this the Book of Life, and that is what it is. For there is a word in this book, which if we hear, we will live.' That's what we believe. The Bible contains the word of God (the cradle in which we find the Christ, as Martin Luther said). It has the capacity to convert, to turn us around, to awaken us to the love of God, to put us in touch with Christ, to transform our lives, to shape our destiny.

Therefore we do not enter into the business of preaching lightly. This same priest said 'The devil wants preachers to be good at anything except preaching.' We can easily be side-tracked, distracted, and get involved in something else.

It is important that we recover an appreciation of the Bible, and this has been a good year to revisit its central role in shaping not just the lives of millions of individuals, but our language, our thinking, our culture, our nation, our world.

But having said that, I also think that some sermons have become too 'wordy', too academic or intellectual, too long. While doctrine is very important we are not saved by good doctrine any more than we are saved by good works. Christ came to bring us not more religion, but more life. The important commandments are not about getting it right, but about increasing love for God and love for neighbour in the world. It's not our words that will draw people to Christ (though they help and are necessary), it is lives. Only transformed lives will transform others; only as we model our faith in our lifestyle, only as we witness by our love for one another will the world know we are disciples of Jesus; only if the good we do can be seen by others will they believe and give glory to God. All our preaching and all our living should be to the glory of God, and should be helping others to live lives that glorify God.

Eugene Peterson quotes; 'Ministers think that people come to church to listen to sermons. They don't. They come to church to pray and to learn to pray.' I think he's right. We go to church because we want a satisfactory relationship with God, and prayer is an essential part of that; just as obedience is. Sermons help to understand better what God offers, what he requires, and how we can relate to him. Sermons of course are simply explanations and applications of the lessons of scripture. Therefore they begin usually with the text which is to be opened up, the bread of life broken and shared. George MacLeod used to say the every sermon should begin in Jerusalem and end in New York, or begin in New York and end in Jerusalem. Leslie Weatherhead said, 'Preaching is making God real, and changing peoples' lives. Every sermon should be a question – do I go along with this, or not? is this how I am going to live my life, or not?





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Preachers will develop their own style, but what they say must be based on Scripture, usually the exposition of a text, or passage, or theme. It has to be listenable. Martin Luther said the first duty of a preacher is to entertain; not in the frothy sense of entertainment, but engage, interest, hold, inspire. If we lack preparation, life, enthusiasm, if we lack sympathy, compassion, love, we are sounding gongs or clanging symbols. My colleague and mentor Leith Fisher used to say, 'If people come week by week to hear the Word of God, woe betide us if we are not well prepared.' And woe betide us if we make the gospel dull; or are flippant in our proclamation. I like David Watson's observation; 'All word and no spirit and we dry up; all spirit and no word and we blow up; word and spirit and we grow up.'

Music

Music is important is helping to create an atmosphere in which the Spirit can work. Sometimes unaccompanied music is best. CH4 is a hymn book that does justice to the tradition and the contemporary, to the witness and the stance of the church.

Many hymns are simply prayers set to music (Archbishop Carey described the choir as a prayer group that helps to lead the praise). They express our worship, our longing, our devotion, our praise, our commitment. They express different aspects of what we believe and who we are; and who God, Father, Son, and Spirit is; exhorting and encouraging one another on the way. - the journey inward and the journey outward.

Hymns from the world church and other denominations can be used, but beware songs that have little theological substance, or reference to reality. Songs from the Taizé community enrich our worship. If there are five hymns, three could be well known, one new, and one recently learned. I used to keep a note of the dates I used each hymn – it prevented singing the same ones all the time.





Order of Service

Welcome to worship. 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all'

Praise	God the Father	Life (as it is)
Prayer of adoration, confession and petition		
Praise	God the Son (The Word)	Life (as it can be)
Readings <i>Old Testament</i> <i>Epistle</i> <i>Gospel</i>		
Sermon		
Praise	God the Holy Spirit	My Life/The Life of the World (as it will be)
Offering (of ourselves)		
Prayer of dedication, thanksgiving intercession, thanksgiving for the community of saints, the Lord's Prayer		
Praise		

Dismissal 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord' with the Blessing of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit



Structure

Every minister should know that a service of worship is in the form of a conversation. Sometimes he/she is in priestly role addressing God on behalf of the people, and sometimes is in prophetic role, addressing the people on behalf of God.

Therefore the order follows a pattern beginning, after an appropriate welcome, with opening praise, and prayers of adoration, confession and supplication. ie We are addressing God, praising him for the beauty of creation, but acknowledging its brokenness, and ours, and admitting our contribution to this unhappy state.

In this part we are focusing on God the Father; Maker, Creator, the source of all life. (see the diagram I have found useful. It is Trinitarian, it holds the structure of all worship, it relates to life, and illustrates that there is a progression in worship – as in the Christian life – from where we are to where God wants us to be)

Then in the second, central, section of the service, God speaks to us, through the scriptures, and through the sermon. This is where we hear again the good news. Into our confused and sorry situation a Saviour has come. The world doesn't need to be this way; nor do we. There is another way. We preach Christ crucified. He took the sin of the world and nailed it to the cross, as St Paul puts it. We preach Christ risen. We can be free, we can be forgiven. We can be reconciled. We are loved. We can love. There is another way, this has to be good news. This is the gospel. If the first part is about life as it is, this is about new life, life as it can – will be - in Christ. He comes to bring us life in all its fullness. This section focuses on the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Son of Man, the friend of sinners, the Saviour of the world, the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth. Some pulpits in Scotland have the text carved into them 'Sir, we would see Jesus.'

The third part of the service is, how am I going to respond? Will we let the Spirit of Christ direct our lives? Will we offer ourselves in service, in mission, in ministry? Will we seek first the Kingdom of God, will we endeavour to spread abroad the love of God, the healing of Christ, the freedom of the Spirit? This is about what I will do with my life to glorify God, and our prayers (following the offering which is of course an expression of our response to God's love) will bring all creation before God asking that everyone may know in some way the blessing of God.

Then we are dismissed – the church now in diaspora – dispersed , with our own particular calling, with our own special gifts and experience to be used for the benefit of those around us and those beyond us. Now we go and do it, live it. St Francis used to dispatch his followers, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel, using words only when necessary.'

We go with the blessing of Almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Blessing

I use a blessing from scripture, and don't try to expand or improve on it. The blessing is real, and for some it is the most important part of the whole service, the benediction, God speaking well of you, because he loves you. You are indeed blessed – now share the blessing with everyone.

Deo Gloria

This resource is an initiative of the Church of Scotland, Mission and Discipleship Council, Resourcing Worship Team. Any queries or suggestions should be directed to the Resourcing Worship Team via email: mandd@cofscotland.org.uk

