

Giving Voice to the Gospel

An Interview with PTS Speech Communication Professor Nancy Lammers Gross

When did you first become intrigued by public speaking of the gospel?

As a child I enjoyed reading aloud, but I was never interested in public speaking *per se*. It was during 8th grade (around 13-years-old) that I was thoroughly taken by the gospel through the preaching of the Word. I found the good news of Jesus Christ—and the way it made sense of my world—so important that I couldn't imagine focusing my life on anything else that would be remotely as significant. About this time I also saw the movie *A Man Called Peter* and read the book *Christy*, written by Catherine Marshall, Peter Marshall's widow. This led me to the collection of Peter Marshall's sermons, *Mr. Jones, Meet the Master*. Marshall, a prominent Presbyterian minister in the mid-twentieth century who became chaplain to the U.S. Senate, formatted his sermons on the page the way we recommend in our speech communication work here at Princeton, and I found when I read his sermons they leapt off the page. I couldn't help but hear them when I read them. I used to sneak the book to my junior high school and preach the sermons aloud to the open playing fields. Of course, in the late '60s, girls had virtually no women pastoral ministry role models in the church. So this was rather unusual, I should think. I didn't have sermons of my own to preach, so I got my first taste of hearing my own physical preaching voice by preaching Peter Marshall's sermons. Not an altogether bad way to start!

What do you most enjoy about teaching speech?

I love watching students discover their own voices. It's a joy to see them make the connection between their passion—the heart of their calls to ministry—and their public presence and physical voice. Watching September timidity gain mid-year skills and turn to April conviction is a large part of what keeps speech professors coming back every year to do this job. This is not the

work I set out to do when I was ordained, but I certainly feel I am fulfilling my call to ministry when I am doing this work.

What (if anything) is unique about speech communication for women?

Women typically have special issues in coming to terms with their physical bodies and voices. The voice is a full body instrument, not just a larynx. Many women cannot embrace their bodies as good. Some other women can embrace their own bodies as good, but their subcultures suggest that *the good woman's* body is not allowed to speak in public. So it is the body itself that is incoherent with the call to preach or lead public worship. I have found in both my preaching and speech classes that many women apologize with their voices when they preach. The written sermon may be a beautiful piece, full of strength and conviction, but the delivery is often meek and apologetic. The challenge for the women is literally to find, to develop, to embody the public dimension of their voices. A woman should not be encouraged to "preach like a man," but to embody the unique voice given her by God.

Should laypeople be part of a congregation's worship leadership? And should there be any training involved?

I wholeheartedly affirm the trend toward lay leadership in worship. It doesn't simply "send the right message" about the ministry of the whole people; it actually embodies the priesthood of all believers. In the Presbyterian and Reformed traditions, worship leadership is not a sacerdotal function. It ought to belong to the whole people, and the whole people ought to have a voice. Why then don't we train our congregations in this ministry so that it can be done well? I have been to churches with well-prepared and synchronized clergy leadership and professional quality choirs that then dismiss the Scripture reading as a nod to congregational involvement by having entirely untrained



Photo: Erin Dunigan

and unprepared people read the word of God. Training and enabling so-inclined members of our congregations to lead in corporate worship liturgies—prayers and Scripture readings—is no less important than preparing our ordained leadership.

"By whose authority do you speak?" has been asked before. How can a pastor answer that as he or she stands in the pulpit on Sunday morning when the culture is saturated by uncertainty and cynicism?

If we are to believe that modernity is dead—and not everyone thinks it is—and that we live in a time of postmodern realities, then our preaching today cannot rely on former assumptions. Tried and true answers and formulations ring empty. People neither automatically invest the church with authority nor rely upon its wisdom to see them through these confusing days. Laying claim to the promises of God is where the power and the authority of the pulpit is still to be found. The word of God does not go out and come back empty (Isaiah 55:11). Everyone of God's promises is "yes!" in Christ Jesus (II Cor. 1:20). ■

Nancy Lammers Gross was appointed associate professor of speech communication in ministry in July 2001. She earned her Ph.D. from Princeton Seminary in 1992 and previously taught at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. She is an ordained Presbyterian minister.