

The Preacher's CRAFT

Engle Institute of Preaching Receives Rave Reviews

by Barbara A. Chaapel

English author Samuel Johnson once said, according to his biographer and traveling companion James Boswell, that “a woman’s preaching is like a dog’s walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.”

Thankfully, most of the church is beyond such bigotry regarding women preachers. But people in the pews who hear preaching from man or woman week after week might agree that it is not done well.

Joe R. Engle, (a Presbyterian layman for whom the institute is named), while he applauds the sermons he hears from the pulpit of his church, the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, bemoans the state of preaching in general.

“Preachers put too little effort into composing their sermons,” he says. “Too many do not focus on the text. Too many do not work at their sermons as if their ministry depended on it.”

Because he thinks ministry, and the growth of the church, *does* depend on good preaching, he has put his money where both his mouth and his heart are. In a generous gift to Princeton Seminary, he has envisioned and made possible the Joe. R. Engle Institute of Preaching, a weeklong summer conference to nurture and strengthen the craft of those who preach.

Forty PTS alums from the Classes of 1996 and 1997 attended the inaugural Engle Institute this past June. They worshipped together, attended practical workshops taught by PTS preaching and speech faculty (Charles Bartow, Randy Nichols, Sally Brown, Cleo LaRue, Jim Kay, and Nancy Lammers Gross), and talked together and with faculty about their calling as preachers.

Mary McKey, a pastor in North Carolina, called it one of the best educational events she’s ever been to. “There was a theological excitement that undergirded the practical application,” she said. “Theological insights shaped the practice of preaching and both were valued.”

Dr. Nancy Gross’s workshop on exegesis was a highlight for McKey. “She gave me a new exegetical method, where the text you’re preaching on is shaped by your whole ministry,” McKey explained. “She urged us to ask those we meet in the daily practice of ministry—our secretaries, our sextons, people we visit in the hospital, committee members—what the text for our sermon means to them. Using this method, sermon preparation begins at the breakfast meeting,” McKey couldn’t wait to get home to try it.

Ken Locke, from Nashville, Tennessee, signed up for workshops with Professors Charles Bartow and Randy Nichols. He appreciated how practical they were. “Bartow ripped apart my elocution, and then put it back together,” he said, laughing. And Locke valued Nichols’s explication of how different Jungian personality types favored different preaching styles, sometimes without realizing the limitations of each. “For example, some of us preachers are intuitive, and we think our congregants can intuit what we mean. But maybe we have artists in the pews who need images.”

Kristin Saldine, Princeton Seminary’s minister of the chapel and the coordinator of the institute, called the event a new model in preaching conferences.

“The Engle Institute wasn’t built around ‘experts,’ but around practicing preachers,” she said. In the old model, faculty and speakers come, present their expertise to the participants (called Engle “fellows”) through lectures, and leave. In the new model, according to Saldine, faculty stay around, share meals with the fellows, worship with them, become involved in informal conversation around the coffeepot.

“Our institute is not star-based,” she explained. “In other words, we don’t choose participants who are the ‘best’ preachers. We invite them to self-select, based on their PTS class [the Classes of 1996 and 1997 were chosen because they are the classes that would have been invited to go to Israel had the Seminary still sponsored that alumni/ae trip] and whether they actually preach. Engle fellows are preachers of many types—pastors, associates, chaplains, presbytery staff—and many denominations.”

Another component in the new model was inviting a practicing preacher/pastor to preach the institute sermons each evening. This year’s preacher was Dr. Tom Tewell, Joe Engle’s pastor at Fifth Avenue. In addition to preaching four sermons, Tewell led a lively conversation about his craft.

“The most important tasks in the church are preaching and worship,” he said.

“They are the center from which all else comes. They are how the church will be nourished, whether the church is large or small.”

Tewell had a lot to say about preparation, his key to effective preaching. He spends between 15 and 20 hours a week in sermon preparation, with the blessing of his session and personnel committee.

“When I came to Fifth Avenue, I told the session I needed this time if they wanted strong preaching and worship, and I enlisted them to help me protect the time.” Tewell urged institute fellows to go home and do the same. “It’s essential to carve out time every day from all the other tasks of ministry that beckon loudly,” he said. “I spend at least one hour each day, plus one half day and one full day each week on sermon preparation.”

Tewell also offered practical preparation tips: “Read widely, and read writers who agree with you and those who don’t; read about communications theory, which tells us we only have 30-to-60 seconds to grab the hearer’s attention; collect quotes and stories and sayings, and develop a way to organize them—I have piles that I file once a year, which may not be the best way, but it works for me!” He also carries a small notepad as he travels around New York City by subway, at hand to write down what he calls “slice-of-life” moments.

“Once I saw four hands grasping the same subway pole when the train suddenly jerked to a stop. The hands were African American, Asian, Hispanic, and Caucasian. I used that illustration a year later on World Communion Sunday.” He urges all preachers to see and use the “slices of life” in their own contexts.

And to use titles that get people’s attention. “People often don’t know the biblical stories, but they do know the common culture,” Tewell explained.

“When we get into the pulpit, we can assume that the people in the pew will know about the war in Iraq, and Tommy Hilfiger slacks, and reality TV. Choose titles that hook that knowledge and intrigue people about its connection to faith and the biblical text.”

He practices what he preaches. Institute fellows heard him preach “If NBC News Covered the Feeding of the 5,000” and “Sorry, Mr. President, I Don’t Dance.” One sermon title printed in a New York newspaper—“The Power of a Tommy Hilfiger Image”—garnered calls both from the fashion firm offering to help Tewell research the topic and from a reporter who wanted to write a story about the church. “I remember the reporter asking me how to spell Colossians,” Tewell laughed. “You never know what the outreach of a sermon title can be!”

Joe Engle appreciates preaching that connects the biblical witness and contemporary culture. “Preachers must convey to listeners a sense of what the gospel is saying to our human experience today,” he said. “It’s hard work, but it has the potential to change and enrich lives every Sunday.”

By all counts, the Engle fellows were changed and enriched by the institute. “It’s been great,” said Krista Henning-Ferka, who pastors four small Lutheran churches in South Dakota and preaches twice each Sunday. “I came with sermons and got helpful feedback and direct application that I can use as soon as I get home.”

Enriching, too, was the chance to be back on the Seminary campus. “They loved being back,” Saldine said. “They savored every bench, every table in Mackay, even their old dorm rooms. It was a chance to talk about preaching, to chat with faculty, and to reconnect with their seminary experience, to remember what was good and to rethink and reclaim what might have been bad. Instead of seeing ‘what PTS didn’t do for me,’ they were able to see their seminary experience in light of the complexities of ministry.”

The fellows echoed her thoughts. At the evaluation session ending the week, they listed words that summed up their experience: “Affirming, heartening, rediscovery, energized, challenging, broadening” were just a few.

Saldine hopes the Engle fellows will “reconnect virtually,” making use of the Seminary web site to share resources and stay in touch. “We all want to come back next year,” said Henning-Ferka. “We know we can’t, but we sure wish we could. I’d recommend this institute to anyone who preaches.”

Another group of fellows will have that chance next summer at the second Engle Institute, including members of the Classes of 1998 and 1999.

Princeton Seminary and Joe Engle hope the institute will become an annual event. Their goals are grand: “With this institute I am hoping to improve the quality of preaching in our nation’s pulpits,” said Engle. “The main purpose of a seminary is to educate people for the parish ministry, and in the Presbyterian tradition, preaching should be one of the highest priorities. When preaching is good and effective in the local church, then that church is usually thriving.” ■



Tom Tewell talking with Engle Institute fellows

Photo: Beth Godfrey



Nancy Lammers Gross shares a lighthearted moment during an institute coffee break.

Photo: Beth Godfrey



Cleo LaRue makes a point during his workshop on “Imagination and the Sermonic Idea.”

Photo: Beth Godfrey