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The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

Brought to you this month
by Robert L. Richardson



Bridging the gulf between pulpit and pew

In Herman Melville's classic novel, *Moby Dick*, Father Mapple's pulpit is located in a high "lofty position" on the side wall of Whaleman's Chapel. The only access to the pulpit is a rope ladder, which symbolizes a climb to the crow's nest of the ship to provide better vision for the voyage.

On Sunday, Father Mapple approaches the ladder and "mount(s) the steps as if ascending the main-top of his vessel." Once in the pulpit, he slowly pulls up the rope ladder, carefully deposits it on the pulpit floor and quietly shuts the railing door. He is ready to preach.

This glimpse of an "elevated, isolated, and somewhat distant" pulpit is a rather accurate description of many churches where there is a "great gulf affixed" between pastor and congregation. Sermon content, preaching demeanor, vocabulary and points of emphasis can be like the passing of two ships in the night — neither pastor nor parishioners aware of the other except for occasional glimpses of a few, small, flickering lights.

But there are steps the pastor and the congregation can take to keep a healthy "gap" from becoming an unhealthy "gulf."

Pastor:

Start with language the congregation understands. Most people in the pews do not have a clue what the pastor means when he or she uses words such as "omnipotent, ecclesiastical, atonement, canon, predestination and synoptic." Even more common words such as "salvation, Trinity, sin, and incarnation" are not as well understood as many pastors think.

Martin Luther was known for "practicing" his sermons on his unschooled housemaid. She was to inform him if he used a word she did not understand.

Put the pulpit on the floor. Focus the preaching where the people are. Place it right in the middle of the congregation's hopes and

Recommended resources

- Craddock, Fred. *Overhearing the Gospel*. Abingdon Press. 1978.
- Farris, Stephen. *Preaching That Matters*. Westminster: John Knox Press. 1998.
- Luccock, Halford E. *In the Minister's Workshop*. Abingdon Press. 1944. Chs. 6-7.
- Willimon, William H. *Integrative Preaching*. Abingdon Press. 1981.

disillusionment, dreams and nightmares, successes and tragedies. When the pastor is close enough to the people to understand what they experience, this identification will be reflected in the pulpit.

Leave the rope ladder stretched among the pews. This is an invitation for the members to find their way to the pulpit. It signals that it is OK to listen seriously, to read carefully some of the sources the pastor may use, and think through the implications of the messages.

Leave the door to the pulpit open. Unlock the door to inquiry, affirmation, challenge and the real questions of life.

Members:

Most members do not want the pastor in the pews. They are more comfortable if the pulpit is at a distance. Maybe this is why many members choose to sit on the pews in the back of the church.

If the pulpit gets too close to the ego, arrogance, prejudices, pettiness and exclusiveness of some members of the congregation, they may become restless. Many had rather the pastor stay on a raised pedestal some distance away. That way they can hold the pastor more responsible to God, project and identify their religious experience with the minister, and not feel compelled to examine their own shortcomings.

Use the rope ladders that lead to the pulpit. Begin by asking the pastor about books

you have read that were referenced in sermons. Ask for clarification about terms, concepts and issues you do not understand.

When appropriate, engage the pastor in a discussion of aspects of the sermon. Ask about meaning, relevance and implications. Suggest topics that may be of interest to a majority of the congregation. And learn how to constructively convey a difference of opinion or optional perspectives.

Pastor and Members Together:

Appoint a pastor support committee. Select representatives of the congregation who are objective, fair-minded and not easily threatened. Establish scheduled times for dialogue about the pulpit and pew. Discuss the hopes, dreams, frustrations and concerns of both pastor and people. And when necessary, courageously stand between the pastor and members of the congregation.

Find different settings for the pastor to share ideas. Get the pastor out of the pulpit into other arenas so that the congregation can learn more about what the pastor knows and believes. Inquire about biblical interpretation, theological perspectives and ethical foundations. Also, ask the pastor to assist the congregation in understanding issues that are usually "off limits" in the pulpit, but may be hot topics in the pews.

Build an orchestra of diversity. Begin with two premises: First, it is OK for members of the congregation to believe differently from one another on subjects related to theology and the church. Second, it is OK for the pastor to take differing perspectives from members of the congregation.

For some churches, reducing an unhealthy "gulf" between pulpit and pew to a healthier "gap" is a significant challenge. Nonetheless, may pastors and congregations together muster the courage to try. **BT**

THE RESOURCE PAGE is provided by the Congregational Life office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in partnership with *Baptists Today* and for those dedicated lay leaders working in the educational ministries of local churches. This month's page was written by Robert Richardson is a retired Baptist minister and Professor Emeritus of the College of Education of Mercer University.