

A Preachers' Picnic!



Preface

The *Preachers' Picnic* was developed around the preaching workshop concept that has been used to such benefit for some time by Dick Lucas and the Proclamation Trust.

Several groups of ministers have been meeting monthly in Glasgow over several years, for fellowship, prayer and to share the Word of God together. They have found it to be a great benefit in the often isolating and sometimes discouraging experience of Parish ministry.

From this experience, the model described here as *A Preachers' Picnic* has been put together.

It is offered to the Church in the hope that those who minister the Word among her might be encouraged and strengthened together, for the good of their congregations and the blessing of the hard-pressed preachers!

Nigel Barge
Torrance
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Introduction

The practice of ministers meeting together round the Word to sharpen their preaching and to enjoy fellowship together is not new. It has been used to good effect in times of reformation in the church in the past.

In Geneva, Calvin used to meet regularly on Fridays with those who were leaders in the ministry of the Word. One of them would, by prior arrangement, give an exposition of a passage of the Bible. The floor would then be open to the company to contribute questions, observations and remarks, with discussion and dialogue following.

In the 17th Century, the Puritans had what were known as ‘Prophecyings’ (*sic*) or ‘Exercises’. They used to take the opportunity of market days, since people from all over the area would gather in the market town. The ministers agreed to meet there too. About noon a senior minister, by arrangement, would give an open-air sermon to the public. The other ministers and their apprentices would join the crowd. At its conclusion they would meet together in small groups, have a meal and discuss the sermon they had just heard.

Such meetings where preachers gather round the Word of God are rare today. As we struggle together to address the problems facing the church, such fellowship may be crucial, for the Word of God will reform the church not through its structures, but through relationships.

The Need

The early church devoted itself ‘to the Apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread/eating together and to prayer’ (Acts 2:42). These, one might conclude, are the essential ingredients of a healthy diet for members of any church. It is one of the main tasks of the church leader to ensure that the life of their church is so ordered that their congregation is well fed, with a balanced diet of these basic activities. Ironically, the very church leaders who work to ensure their *people’s* needs are met often go without *themselves*.

Encouraging fellowship and mutual support amongst the church is one of the leader’s prime tasks. The hope is that as fellowship develops between individuals, they will minister to one another through prayer and practical expressions of help. However, despite teaching this, leaders themselves may often be isolated, labouring on in the absence of any meaningful personal support and encouragement. Fraternals or conferences can help, but they are often too impersonal to do much to enable the close fellowship and friendship that everyone needs.

As far as the ministry of the Word is concerned the situation is similar. The preaching of the Word to others is at the heart of the leaders’ work. However, opportunities to be fed and taught by others on a regular basis may be few and far between: the odd conference, the occasional tape and ‘pot luck’ on Sundays during vacation, is often the extent of it.

Furthermore there is little accountability in what the leader actually preaches. Feedback is usually restricted to a passing comment at the door on the way out. At best the preacher may receive a pleasant remark about enjoyment derived from the service. At worst it may be a disgruntled broadside about the tune of the last hymn! Seldom is there objective, constructive

input about what has been drawn from the Word and about how it has been applied to the lives of today's hearers.

Any possible opportunities that might help meet these needs are usually either time consuming, costly or both (!) and are often ignored for fear that they themselves might be the 'straw that breaks the camel's back'.

The Preachers' Picnic is a means of addressing some of these issues. It is a model for a gathering of ministers of the Word with the intention of:

- 1) encouraging one another in the ministry of the Word
 - 2) enjoying fellowship together
 - 3) providing prayerful support for one another
- *without adding to busy schedules!*

The Model

A Preachers' Picnic involves 2-4 people and generally takes place on a Friday from 1: 00 - 2:45 pm. The format is: -

1.00 – 1.30 Lunch

A light meal and a chance to catch up. Each participant might be asked in turn to share what is happening at home and in the church.

1.30 – 1.45 Prayer

An opportunity to pray for one another concerning the issues raised.

Coffee might be served at this point

1.45 – 2.45 Preaching workshop

A time to share the outline of a sermon and receive input and encouragement from others.

2.45 Disperse

The formal part finishes punctually, allowing those with appointments to leave. Others may choose to linger and talk.

If there are too many people for a single group, it helps:

to have a central time keeper. (Keeping preachers in order is like trying to herd cats!)

to sit in the same groups to eat lunch as will go on to pray and discuss together.

Prayer

Our human insecurities as ministers of the Gospel mean that, as we share together, when it is:

1) *Our turn* . . . we tend to share our ‘successes’, such as they may be(!) for we don’t want our colleagues to think ill of us. This shows fundamental flaws in our thinking! We imagine that *we* determine where God is at work; His work depends on *us*.

While of course our faithfulness is vital, we believe that the Spirit ‘blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going’ (John 3:8)

2) *Others turn* . . . their successes make us feel inadequate. While we know we should rejoice with others, what they share often makes us feel inadequate; far from inspiring us, we allow it to condemn us.

Therefore, in a Preachers’ Picnic, when we are sharing with one another prior to prayer, we don’t share our successes. (For these, all we need is prayer to minimise our misplaced pride!) Rather it is more helpful if we share the places where it’s sore, or where we feel *genuinely* (!) inadequate.

So, when we prepare to pray, we might share along the lines of:

a) Personal

How you are doing? eg physically, mentally, emotionally etc

b) Family

The stresses and strains of ‘normal family life’

c) Ministry

The hopes and concerns for church life

Once all have had an opportunity to share with others what is on their hearts, the group might pray for one another.

The Preaching Workshop

At the centre of the time together is a ‘preaching workshop’: -

The Format

- a) Each person in the group gives an outline of a sermon they are yet to preach. These would each last about *five minutes* and focus on the text – what we understand the Bible is saying and how we will encourage our church to apply it.
- b) Following each presentation of a passage, a general discussion takes place asking questions, offering some input, and giving constructive criticism. This might last for about *ten minutes*.

The Benefit

Though at first this has seemed a daunting prospect to everyone, it has proved both enjoyable and of great benefit to all who participate. It gives the preachers the opportunity to sharpen their handling of the Word, making them accountable for their conclusions. At the same time it enables the others who listen to receive the ministry of the Word from another.

Guidelines for the Workshop

Time is short but much can be achieved if we approach the sharing round the Word together in a disciplined way.

To do this, we want to concentrate on :

- 1) the meaning of the text (the source of our authority) and
- 2) its impact on our lives (the application).

The following may be helpful to make best use of the time:

A. The Preparation

It is good to keep in mind before the workshop that the goal is to convey the *main lesson* of the passage and ‘show the working’ behind the sermon. To do this, it may be helpful to extract and write down the following information from the sermon.

1) The Context

Explain the relevant situation of the text in the surrounding passages and in the wider story of the Bible.

2) The Lesson

In a short sentence give the main thrust / lesson of the passage:

“Here God shows us that ”

Explain from the passage how you are led to this conclusion.

3) The Heart

Identify a ‘text’ - a key verse (or verses) in the passage - the part of the text round which the rest might be said to hinge and which encapsulates the message of the passage.

Explain your reasoning for choosing it and show, briefly, how it relates to the rest of the passage.

4) The Application /

4) The Application

Give an indication of what the passage shows about:

a) God

- i) His nature and character
- ii) His grace
- iii) Jesus and his salvation

b) The people then

How did God want the people then to respond?

c) Us today

Give some examples of what you hope your hearers of today might do or think in response.

B. The Presentation

- 1) *5 mins* – three or four in turn can give an outline exposition of their text, simply working through the four issues listed in ‘preparation’, p9.
- 2) *10 mins* - for others present to share observations, questions, encouragements, illustrations etc.

C. Do's and don'ts.

1) *Do*

- a) State briefly the context in which the word will be given:
 - i) the people who will hear it
 - ii) the situation they are in
 - iii) the place, if in a sequence of sermons
- b) Read the passage, if short, or key excerpts, if longer.
- c) Work through the above order of - context, lesson, heart and application.

2) *Don't*

- a) Give a mini / précised sermon.
- b) Include introduction or illustrations (unless time allows)
- c) Take more than 5 minutes in total.
- d) Waffle unless you have to !

The Practical Reasoning

1 The Timing of a Preachers' Picnic

- a) Fridays (i.e. late in the week) –
Needs less preparation; a Sunday sermon or at least the outline will generally be ready by the end of the week.
- b) Lunchtime –
Picnics need not be at the expense of other things. The meeting is restricted to lunchtime, when work will stop anyway. This leaves the afternoon free for other things.
- c) Two hours –
If it is well structured, and the time is used in a disciplined manner, much can be achieved.

2 The Size of a Preachers' Picnic

- a) Participation
Within the time allocated, only 3 or 4 people will get the opportunity to bring their word.
- b) Sharing
With a small number in the group, people are generally more willing to offer their opinions during discussions and are also more open to sharing personal concerns when it comes to prayer for one another.
- c) Larger group
Though the optimum size may be 3 or 4 people, it may be that 2 or more groups might like to meet at the same time. If so, it improves the sharing and prayer if they eat, pray and discuss sitting in their groups.

3 Adaptations

a) Team ministry

In 'Team ministry' situations, if the team meets weekly, the model might be adapted and used as a basis for the gathering.

In this case, it might be appropriate if only one person contributed in the preaching workshop each week; that would leave more time for the discussion of necessary other business, but still involve everyone in the ministry of the Word monthly.

b) Ministry of those retired from the parish

In many cases ministers work flat out up to the moment they retire from the parish. At a stroke, they move house, the phone stops, and there is no pressure to prepare a word for Sunday!

In days gone by we put on our slippers, lit our pipe and 'fell off our perch' at 70. The situation is very different at the moment. Ministers may indeed retire at 65, but while they may not want the burden of being in charge of a parish, there is a wealth of ministry experience to be used for the benefit of the church for 15 or 20 years!

It would be hugely beneficial to many who retire from front line pressure to be included in a fellowship of parish ministers as they seek God for ways he might use them in the future.

While not all are in a position or would like to share the Word in a workshop, they would surely benefit from the ministry of others and the opportunity for prayer, both given and received.

The Potential

As well as being an encouragement to those involved, the Preachers' Picnic provides a way of including others and so broadening the fellowship. It thus looks *inward*, ministering to the needs of those involved, and *outward* to others who might also share the benefit of the fellowship together. It may also provide an opportunity to learn from others with different views and to share with those who might not have our own interests or background.

If a group grows beyond 5 people, it will become too large. At this point, fewer will be able to bring a word, so changing the dynamics of the group. The logical solution is then to divide and leave space for others to come in. Obviously, such a move needs to be done in a sensitive way. The same tension will exist here between building strong relationships and making room for others, as exists for groups in the church at all levels.

The 'cost' to the participant of including others in the group is the prospect of disrupting what is comfortable and familiar. However, the 'blessing' of it would be that promised by Jesus to all those who forgo things for the sake of the Kingdom (Luke 18:29). If we so look outward to the needs of others, God will meet our own.

In the past, the reviving power of God has been transmitted in the church through the medium of relationships. Perhaps such prayerful, outward-looking fellowship around God's Word, as is encouraged in a Preachers' Picnic, might be a vital ingredient of means that God uses in reforming His Church today.

Starting a Preachers' Picnic

The following are some practical thoughts that may be of help if you are considering starting one: -

The First Meeting

- 1 Start small and build. Identify one or two who may be interested in the idea and meet for lunch.
- 2 After lunch, try out the workshop format. The initiator reads a passage and demonstrates the question and answer process.
- 3 Take time to share and pray together.
- 4 If people are willing to continue, agree a time to meet again.

A Co-Ordinator

If you continue, then decide on a co-ordinator. Even in a very small group it is helpful if one person is designated to be responsible for making arrangements. If not, the danger is everyone holds back and nothing is done. Their role might be: -

- 1 To arrange Meetings.
- 2 To be a Time-keeper! Time is short and unless someone is responsible for proceedings and keeps an eye on the clock, all things will not be done in an orderly manner!
- 3 To Initiate. To guard against introspection, it may be good if someone is willing to raise regularly the issue of who else might be included in the fellowship.

The Material

We are glad for anyone to use this model.

This booklet is copyright but may be downloaded for personal use, see below. Printed copies of it are also available.

If you are going to start a Preachers' Picnic please let us know in Torrance for our mutual encouragement. If you would like help, please contact us.

The addresses of the Church Office are on the back cover.

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Torrance Parish Church website <http://www.torranceparishchurch.org.uk> has a range of material to help people read the Bible for themselves. Click on 'Word of God' in the menu bar.

Meristems – The Rationale Nigel Barge 40pp, paper, £1.50. A way of helping Christians invite others to read the Bible with them.

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Hearing the Word, a tool for church leaders to teach their members how to read the Bible for themselves. The series includes a Manual, a Workbook for the introductory course, and Leader's Guides and Workbooks on several Bible books, covering the range of Biblical writing: Law, Letters, Narrative, Parable, Poetry, Prophecy, Vision.

A Preachers' Picnic This booklet, 16pp paper, may be downloaded for personal use.

Bible reading notes by Rev George Philip. May be downloaded free for personal use and adapted for your church use by substituting your own logo on the front page.

*“The Word of God
will reform the church
not through its structures
but through relationships”*



Torrance Parish Church Office
1 School Road, Torrance, Glasgow, G64 4BZ
Tel 01360 620970
Email: office@tpc.org.uk
Website: <http://www.torranceparishchurch.org.uk>