

Report on Team Preaching for Vacant Churches

Summary

In the Christian Reformed Church, vacant churches have used different preachers each week as pulpit supply. This means a new preacher almost every Sunday and can make the preaching feel disconnected from week to week for the congregation. A few churches have used a team preaching approach while vacant, where a consistent rotation of pastors who coordinate together fill the pulpit. While this approach adds to the work of the preacher, it can provide a better experience for the congregation.

This document is meant to explain how this preaching team approach has worked in some churches, and provides some things to consider from past experiences. Thanks to Lesli VanMilligen and Syd Hielema for sharing with me about their experiences with team preaching.

Conventional Pulpit Supply

Usually when a church is vacant, they make a blank schedule, contact available preachers in the area, and start filling in Sundays as they get responses. There is a different preacher each Sunday, and no coordination between preachers doing pulpit supply. They are expected to bring a sermon which has already been written. Because this requires less preparation than for a new sermon, preachers are given whatever the church has decided on as the pulpit supply rate (around \$150). (Note: rates in this report are suggestions only and will vary from congregation to congregation and year to year. They are meant to help compare the relative work required by different approaches).

A Preaching Team

A preaching team is an idea that came about at Willowdale CRC around 2008. A team is a group of preachers (anywhere from 3-6) who fill the pulpit of a vacant church among themselves and coordinate their preaching with one another. This coordination is an essential part of a preaching team.

When a team works together, they meet once a quarter to plan the preaching for upcoming months. In this time, they brainstorm, plan sermon topics, and determine who is preaching on which Sundays. In between these meetings, preachers share some information about their sermons to help create continuity. In one team preachers were asked to share a three-sentence summary of the message of the sermon, and then three sentences about the preacher's experience in worship. These summaries would go into a Google Doc that each member could access and refer to for their own preparation between meetings. One preacher is usually chosen as the "quarterback" and helps send emails, schedule meetings, and take any communications from the church.

In its original form at Willowdale, sermons were expected to be brand new. In another version, older sermons were adapted and used. In both cases it was expected that the contents of the sermon would reflect the coordination between the preachers and their knowledge of the congregation. For teams doing new sermons, the rate for a sermon should be higher because of the added work preparation requires (\$400 or higher per Sunday). For teams that are reusing sermons, there is still extra work required in coordination, but it can be lower than the rate for brand new sermons because of less preparation (\$200-\$300 depending on the level of adaptation expected).

The length of time a preaching team works for depends on the length of the vacancy in a church. Given how unpredictable vacancies can be, it is wise to define a specific term of commitment (perhaps one year) and then review the function of the team and its members after every term. Councils need to remain in touch with the preaching team throughout their time serving to provide feedback on the arrangement.

Advantages

The team preaching approach seems to work well for the congregations that were described to me. It provides consistency and stability in preaching, which is especially helpful for a church during a long search process. It can involve preachers who normally wouldn't be able to commit to interim work, but might be able to preach once a month or once every two months. The collaboration between members of the preaching team seems to give some very tangible benefits to the congregation for the added work it requires. Syd said in our conversation "Intentional visible continuity is helpful to a congregation." This is an essential element of what might make this format worth pursuing.

Disadvantages

There are some things to consider in this approach. The first is that the experience can be so good for a church that the call process is prolonged. Second, the success of a team can vary depending on the personalities on a team. Preachers need to have a degree of humility and flexibility in order to work in this model. Preachers also need to be able to plan ahead and be reliably available on their scheduled Sundays. Third, congregations can unknowingly compare members of a preaching team and either play favourites or inadvertently pit them against one another. Collaboration is important for mitigating this. Finally, a preaching team does not fill the pastoral care needs of a congregation. A church Council still needs to consider who will perform weddings, funerals, and be present for significant pastoral events. They could hire a member of the preaching team part time to do this, but this is a separate set of responsibilities.

Other thoughts

It was suggested a number of vacant churches in a Classis might share a preaching team. This would save team members some preparation because they could use the same sermon in multiple congregations. This might work, but it would require forming one committee for the team to work with because talking to three or four different councils could become confusing and add a lot of administrative work to the team's "quarterback".

There was also a comment in the interviews about worship planning (selecting the songs, call to worship, confession and assurance, other readings and prayers). This responsibility is not normally included in the expectations of pulpit supply. It should not be included as an expectation of a preaching team either. Preachers may do some planning or make requests about things to include, but churches need to find a way to do this work in hours or get support from Thrive or other resources.

-Ben Gresik