

George Lovell and Neil G. Richardson. *Sustaining Preachers and Preaching: A Practical Guide*. London: T and T Clark International, 2011. 248 pages. \$34.95.

In *Sustaining Preaching*, a minister (Lovell) and a New Testament scholar (Richardson), both British Methodists, pair up to equip preachers for the challenge of preaching in a time when many believe it has been made obsolete by new technologies in communication and far reaching cultural changes as formerly state churches in Europe struggle to compete for people's allegiance in a secular societies. Their work is built on a conviction of theologian John Cobb that there will be no renewal of the Church without the renewal of preaching (xi). They commend a way of preaching that is dialogical, not an "authoritarian, stentorian monologue" (ix). The kind of preaching they speak of throughout the book is "grounded in the scriptures and prayer," and "inspired by the Holy Spirit." It "increases the faith, renews the hope and replenishes the love of those who hear it" (ix).

The book is based on the authors' own experience of preaching, but also their involvement in leading local in-service training programs for preachers in the Leeds North-East Methodist Circuit from 2000 to 2010. The authors cast a wide net with regard to their intended audience. It includes preachers, ordained and lay, of all Christian traditions and at all stages of ministry. It draws on biblical and theological insights as well as methods and processes from the behavioral sciences.

In Part One, "Preachers and Preaching," (Chapters One and Two) the authors cite Phillips Brooks' definition of preaching as "truth through personality," and emphasize their understanding of preaching not as information, but as life giving communication whose source is God. The impetus for the book is the authors' conviction that such a unique form of communication cannot be left behind in the electronic revolution in communication, but must be revived by attention to the Scriptures, the prayer life of the preacher and the context of the congregation. At the heart of all of this is a change in our understanding of the purpose of preaching. It is not to change the congregation's mind about a particular controversial issue or to persuade them that the preacher's understanding of the stilling of the storm is the correct one. It is, rather, to bring the congregation with them into the presence of God to hear afresh the Word of God. If preaching is to be renewed it will be because preachers have claimed this understanding of its purpose.

In Part Two, "Working Dynamics and Relationships," (Chapters Three, Four, and Five), Lovell and Richardson focus on the vocational calling and cultivation of professional abilities of the preacher. The authors offer practical insights into the need for the balance among solitude, relationships (dialogue), and prayer (listening to God). Perhaps most helpful in this section is their realistic depiction of the life cycle of the preacher, how passion and enthusiasm ebb and flow throughout our preaching lives and need to be sustained by prayer. In that context they discuss the private and public domains of the preacher's life, the need for balance between introspection and public involvement, the need to "maintain one's proper privacy in public," and to take the concerns of the community and congregation into account in one's preparation to preach. "Preachers need humility, courage and discipline to open and close the doors between the public and private as appropriate and to go through them" (50).

Chapter Four describes what Lovell and Richardson call "the preaching circle," the movement among four basic sequences in relation to each preaching appointment: preparation, preaching, feedback, and reflection. These processes are common to people in politics and the media, the difference being that they have teams of researchers and producers to help them. The

authors in this chapter offer advice for helping preachers through these sequences through in-service training and various forms of interpersonal support such as coaching, consulting, and spiritual direction (54). Chapter Five equips preachers to analyze the makeup and expectations of their particular congregations as they discern the focus and vision for their preaching.

Part Three, “Making a Sermon,” deals with the challenges facing contemporary preachers in a culture where biblical knowledge is blurry at best and in which people are barraged with conflicting information on controversial issues from many sources. The authors offer sound counsel on developing a clear working understanding of the authority and role of Scripture and communicating it to the congregation, not avoiding controversial issues, but offering well informed theological reflection on them.

Part Four, “Sustaining Developmental Support Cultures, Services and Networks,” focuses on developing a plan of support for preachers through coaching and “local developmental programs.” It offers a helpful, repeatable model for those seeking to develop groups for enhancing preaching excellence.

Part Five “Sustaining Preachers in a Fast Changing World,” (Chapters Twelve and Thirteen) concludes with reflections on the need for both continuity and change if preaching is to be renewed for our time. In Chapter Twelve, aptly called “For Such a Time as This,” Lovell and Richardson offer an eloquent plea for preaching that is committed to doctrinal and biblical depth. At the same time, they commend a change in how we understand preaching, not as monological, but as dialogical, not as informational but as invitational. Preaching to a world that is spiritually diverse but uniformly hungry means respecting the insights of other faiths and focusing on the kind of humble, repentant lives the gospel intends to shape among Christians.

*Sustaining Preachers* lives up to its authors’ intentions of speaking to a broad audience. The insights that come from its British context translate well into American settings. The authors are particularly helpful in their realistic depiction of the inner lives of preachers and the support systems needed to sustain a passion for preaching across the decades of the preaching life. *Sustaining Preaching* covers the usual suspects that homiletical textbooks always cover: congregational analysis, methods of support for the preaching task, the purpose of preaching, the dynamics of biblical interpretation, sermon construction and delivery, and recipes for the renewal of preaching. It goes further than most in the depth and specificity of its recommendations for sustaining the preacher’s passion for his/her vocation. And when its advice has a familiar ring, it is also a clear one, both practical and inspiring for preaching “in such a time as this.”

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