

## STUDENT PREACHING MINISTRIES

Virgil Warren, PhD

For many years a number of congregations have used upper division students as preachers. The churches are small (30-75 in attendance) and rural or small town with memberships that reflect their surroundings. They are spread out across the northeastern sector of the state. Student ministries can be Sunday-only, weekend, or living at the church in a parsonage and commuting to school. The arrangements you enter into depend on your age, marital status, the financial condition of the particular church, and the kind of mix you want between practical experience and academic preparation. If a student takes a ministry in one of these situations, he needs to view his work as a learning experience of service in the church more than a leadership position. There are a number of benefits that such an opportunity can give him. For one thing, he can develop his skill at preaching. In fact, preaching is his main job and other responsibilities fill in around it. Attached to preaching is the discipline of preparing messages on a regular basis, which entails finding topics for sermons, organizing thoughts so they can be presented understandably, and gaining experience at actually making the public oral presentation. Since most of you have not done much like this before, developing preaching skill will probably take quite a bit of emotional energy the first few times until you gain some confidence and sense some acceptance by the congregation. You will probably feel “out of place” for a while since a good number of the people will be old enough to be your parents and grandparents. So the best course is to approach this task as sharing a message addressed to yourself that you are letting them overhear. You will not be “telling them what to do”; you are too young for that—if indeed you ever get old enough to look at preaching that way.

In a good number of these churches you will get experience at presiding over an entire church service. Developing poise comes in the process of that responsibility. That means getting rid of distracting mannerisms, keeping the service appropriately focused and moving forward.

Most churches have a general pattern of worship they have been using. Within that loose structure you will often end up structuring the worship service. That means perhaps being involved in choosing the songs. It is best to do this in collaboration with the musician(s) because they may want to know the songs ahead of time. That gives them a chance to play through them or learn them—or at least tell you if they and the congregation do not know them. Additionally in some churches you may be called on for giving a communion meditation and prayer as well as any offering meditation and prayer that is customary. You will get acquainted with passages of scripture that can be used for calls to worship, benedictions, communion time, offering time, and so on. You will find yourself assembling resources to give variety to what you can discover on your own. There will be opportunities for taking people’s confessions and performing baptisms from time to time as well.

Before and after services you get practice simply in interacting with people. You will develop a repertoire of questions to ask, approaches to use, comments to make in just talking to people in a natural way, including strangers.

Depending on the agreement you enter into, you may be teaching a class during the Sunday school hour. If so, you can work on the teaching skills and methods as distinguished from your preaching techniques. In place of Sunday school teaching you may get some experience working with youth.

Working with these churches also develops skills not associated with the gathered community. Calling in hospitals and senior citizen homes and calling on shut-ins is another set of activities you learn to do. You will become familiar with passages of scripture that encourage and lift people up. You will get some experience also at social calling on members of the community as well as evangelistic calls from time to time. Whatever you can accomplish in these areas will be good, but often the congregations are worship, fellowship, and education units more than they are outreach units.

Since a larger proportion of rural churches are older people, you will be called on for conducting funerals. If you have not had a Ministries Seminar that deals with funerals, you should get with one of the teachers or staff members at your school or with another minister in the area to find out some things about funeral customs and procedures. The funeral director can be helpful too.

Mostly what you get is a chance to grow in your ability at relating to people in a positive way and in a number of different settings and roles. Do not go into such a ministry expecting to lead the congregation. That is seldom going to happen; so you should not create expectancies for yourself that will most likely be frustrated. You are not about to lead an intergenerational church at age twenty or twenty-three; you are there to work among them and to shed whatever natural influence you can for your age and experience in that place. It is not likely that you will succeed at stirring these small churches into lively, growing ones.

When you begin a student ministry, take on one thing at a time and add new ones as you get a feel for earlier ones. Most of the time the people will give you a chance to work your way into the fuller range of activities that a student ministry can realistically involve.

You do need to watch that you do not overload yourself timewise and emotionally. People in the churches frequently do not have a very clear idea how much goes into sermon preparation, getting ready for youth meetings, and the like. They only know what they would like to see done and automatically equate that with what you should be doing. Usually there is nothing malicious in this overexpectancy; so you need not react to it; just graciously ask them to be patient with you in this learning experience. Be aware that attending school five days a week and being at the church from perhaps Friday evening to Sunday night means that you may not have a break in your schedule in order to recharge yourself. Under such conditions you must keep your number of hours reasonable and your involvement at the church reasonable as well.

Asking for Sundays off before examinations, mid-terms, or major assignments are due will not be appreciated even if it is tolerated. It makes the people feel like they come after everything else in your agenda, and they may wonder whether you are preaching there for any other reason than the money they are paying you for it. The same goes for trying to take off Sundays near important holidays, which are "high days" in the church calendar. This is especially the case in rural areas where children and grandchildren come home to grandpa and grandma's house for the holiday weekend. The local residents want to be able to bring their families to church with them to meet their preacher and

experience a typical church service with them. If you are going to take a church, avoid asking one of your “buddies” to fill in for you when you see something else you want to do more—including going home to visit the folks or a girlfriend, or to attend an athletic event or a concert somewhere. If you are going to be a minister, be a minister. Ministers do not do minister only when it fits with the rest of what they want to do. Give that congregation the kind of priority that you would want if it were the church where you had grown up and attended all your life. Your being there on a continuing basis gives the people a sense of stability and continuity, and makes them feel like their church holds some importance in their lives and yours.

In closing we can note that besides (a) weekend preaching ministries there is (b) supply preaching available from time to time. The regular preacher may be ill, on vacation, attending a conference, dealing with an emergency somewhere else, etc. You may be able to work in (c) an interim ministry while the church searches for a permanent minister. Finally, there is a growing number of (d) internships available part-time on weekends for a semester, full-time for a summer, and full-time for a whole year. They are supervised by local personnel, and in consultation with your advisor can be credited academically for different amounts depending on their length and degree of involvement. Credits from such work can be used to fulfill ministries elective slots, and/or under present policy they can replace the course in church administration. Generally students have to finish sixty hours in their degree program before internships can be taken for credit. Some congregations are now making a really fine contribution to ministry preparation by budgeting full-time, post-graduate internships that provide living requirements for a year in order to help young men and women phase into ministry.