



## 2025 Program Report

The Catholic Preaching Institute (CPI) created the **“DISCIPLES OF THE WORD”** program as a *mentoring and coaching experience* for archdiocesan clergy in Philadelphia who seek to improve their homiletic craft.

From January through November 2025, that experience happened through cohort-learning. Each cohort comprised a Preaching Fellow, a Clergy Mentor, and two-to-four Lay Advisors. All cohorts met monthly to review each fellow’s homilies, provide constructive feedback, and suggest helpful recommendations for improvement. Additionally, all participants came together for two meetings during the year, to launch and conclude the program.

The report that follows is based on the assessment provided by all participants by way of multiple surveys specific to the role that each played in the program.

### ***It began as a novel experiment!***

The idea was new. In fact, to anyone’s knowledge, a program like this had never been attempted in this archdiocese. The challenge quickly became apparent.

For three months at the end of 2024, CPI recruited potential participants for the inaugural edition of this mentoring program.

- General information was communicated through the Clergy Office’s monthly newsletter.
- Email messages were sent directly to individual clergy and laity inviting them to participate.
- Of the 79 priests who were invited, less than half (36) expressed interest (45.6%).
- Of the 52 lay faithful who were invited, the majority (46) expressed interest (88.5%).

From those who did express an interest, 12 cohorts were formed, based primarily on geographic proximity of the participants. Just prior to the launch of the program, one of the Preaching Fellows bowed out. Another who had committed to the program was a no-show and remained uncommunicative.

As a result, the 2025 program was launched in January with only **10 cohorts, totaling 52 participants**. These included:

- Preaching Fellows ordained as priests less than 15 years (=6) and more than 25 years (=4).
- Clergy Mentors highly-respected in the archdiocese who averaged more than 30 years of preaching experience.
- Lay Advisors that included 20 teachers in Catholic high schools.



Participants would end up traveling from 22 to 820 miles to participate in the cohort and program meetings!

At the launch meeting, all participants were presented with the “**protocols**” for the program, which included:

- an explanation of the concept of, and reason for, the program
- a listing of all the participants in the program
- a specification of what was expected from the collaborations and what CPI would provide
- a calendar for scheduling meetings
- a guide to the review process to be undertaken during the program
- an explanation of the assessment process that would follow the program
- a set of additional resources useful for approaching the work of preaching.

During the launch meeting, cohorts created a monthly schedule of their meetings and discussed how they would conduct their business. Concerning the plans they devised ...



One Mentor commented at the beginning: “I liked the flexibility given to each cohort regarding the structure of their meetings. It was really impressive to see the whole program gathered together today. Very excited to be a part of this.”

One Advisor followed up at the end: “Because our cohort functioned in an organized and open setting, there was no reservation in discussing our observations or opinions, and all points were evaluated and considered.”

Throughout the year, CPI staff visited with each of the cohorts. Two general take-aways stood out:

First, we heard that **the power of preaching depends greatly on attentiveness**. From the preacher’s perspective, this requires getting the assembly’s attention early on, using listener-oriented rather than speaker-oriented language, and speaking in short “blocks” of time due to decreased attention spans. From the congregant’s perspective, it entails intentionality and deliberateness in listening, rather than just passing the time while being talked to/at from the pulpit.

Second, we discovered a **wide variety of viewpoints** on what forms, approaches, styles, or methods impact preaching. In sum, there is no one good recipe, or at least not one that would appeal to everyone! From the various interactions, we wonder if, in some sense, participants have a clear conception of what “compelling” preaching is, or any experience with it. As one Mentor suggested along the way, there seems to be a rather “low bar” for people’s appreciation of the preaching they typically hear.

Nevertheless, this novel approach **seemed to have worked!**

On the one hand, Fellows overcame their initial trepidation at being critiqued on what they do every week; as one stated, “At first ‘being evaluated’ was daunting, but the blessing of the cohort’s relationship made this go away quickly.”

On the other hand, Mentors and Advisors engaged actively in the coaching; as one Fellow noted, “Members [of the cohort] heard different things that resonated with them in the homilies, and it gave the Fellow a better understanding of the far-reaching nature of the homily. Overall, the entire process was well thought out, and the monthly meeting structure was sufficient.”

Even more than that ...

***It proved to be beneficial for all.***

The **Preaching Fellows** acknowledged in one of the concluding surveys that they **all reached the goals** they had articulated at the outset of the program (3 “entirely” + 6 “a lot” + 1 “a little”). The cohorts offered a similar estimation, each noting multiple areas in which their Fellow adopted what he had learned.

One comment characterized the lot, noting how the preacher “became more intentional and disciplined in his overall preparation and delivery.”

Of happy note, an unforeseen outcome of the program was the tremendous **benefit the Lay Advisors derived** from it. They came to a newfound appreciation for the preacher’s task. They noted how this process enhanced their own experience of worship. They valued the connections they made as a result of having participated in this program.

One exclaimed, “I loved being a part of this! I feel that I got so much out of participating. Listening helped me reflect on my own life and challenged me to be a better person.”

Another summed it up this way: “I am grateful for having had the chance to participate. I feel like we started as a cohort and wound up as friends.”



Overall, **both clergy and laity assessed the inaugural program in positive terms**. In a survey asking all participants to rate their experience, 39 said it was “totally positive” (75%), while another 11 described it as “more positive than negative.” Only 2 participants rated the experience as “more negative than positive.”

Lay Advisors described **value-added benefits** beyond helping the Fellows to improve.



One commented on the personal benefit: “Participation in this program was a source of pride for me because it enabled me to play a part, albeit a small one, in helping fellow Catholics (through enriching homilies they hear) and the Archdiocese in general.”

Another described the communal benefit: “(this was) truly important work wherein we were given an opportunity to serve our pastors and to grow in holiness as a community ... and have a connection in a shared mission to inspire our brothers and sisters with the love of God and of neighbor that we are all called to.”

Experienced clergy who served as Mentors also described the **power and potential of this program** for the archdiocese.

About his own contribution, one said, “I never saw it as a task but a blessing and would share that with other priests interested in becoming mentors or fellows.”



Another delighted in the ecclesial interaction: “Faith-filled people reflecting on the word of God, (along with) effective messaging and support of their clergy, was encouraging and energizing.”

And one witnessed the program’s ministerial impact, confirming that “Our people really do listen to us. They are looking for SOMETHING from us” and proclaiming, “This program was overwhelmingly positive and a beautiful experience of the church drawing out the best from a young priest.”

**We learned about “compelling” preaching.**

Beyond affording a beneficial experience to *all* the participants, the program also provided insights into what compelling preaching is and how it happens.

Specifically, CPI invited input from the Lay Advisors about what they think makes for preaching compelling. They were asked to describe “features” of compelling preaching in terms of **what is said** from the pulpit and to suggest tips that could assist congregants to experience more compelling preaching through **what is heard** in the pews.

CPI aggregated the responses to both questions in the tables below:

“Disciples of the Word” FEATURES OF COMPELLING PREACHING	
in what is SAID ...	
<u>C</u> lear message	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• has/makes a point</li> <li>• in a structured way</li> </ul>
<u>C</u> entered on Gospel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to enlighten (mind)</li> <li>• to inspire (heart)</li> </ul>
from <u>C</u> onviction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• need to own message</li> <li>• and desire to share it</li> </ul>
for <u>C</u> onnection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• with engaging delivery</li> <li>• in a relatable message</li> </ul>
kept <u>C</u> oncise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• due to attention span</li> <li>• to be remember-able</li> </ul>

“Disciples of the Word” FEATURES OF COMPELLING PREACHING	
in what is HEARD ...	
be Prepared ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• read ahead of time</li> <li>• minimize distractions</li> </ul>
attend to Speaker ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>it’s about God’s Word</i></li> <li>• show human courtesy</li> </ul>
<b>L</b> isten to learn ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• active / intentional</li> <li>• <i>like it matters!</i></li> </ul>
<b>L</b> earn to listen ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• make own connection</li> <li>• listen to ask/discuss</li> </ul>
Share the message ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• be able to tell others</li> <li>• give feedback that helps</li> </ul>

To learn whether more compelling preaching will occur as a result of this program, CPI also assessed the experience of people in each parish in which the Fellows preach.

CPI first administered a **pre-survey** (January 2025) in which parishioners rated the Preaching Fellow on their experience of 15 characteristics of compelling preaching. (This survey mirrored the initial research study conducted by CPI throughout the archdiocese in January 2024.)



CPI then administered a **post-survey** (January 2026) in the same parishes and using the same rating system. In addition, parishioners were also asked (1) to rate the difference they may have noticed in their priest's preaching as a result of his participation in this program, and (2) to comment on what they think makes someone a "compelling" preacher.

CPI collated and analyzed the results of the parish post-survey for seven of the ten Preaching Fellows. (Two Fellows had their parish assignment changed mid-year, thus precluding any pre-/post-assessment. One Fellow's parish provided insufficient data for a reliable comparison.) Among the findings, two stand out:

1. All the Fellows improved their preaching! On average, more than two-thirds of the respondents (67%) stated that the Fellow had improved "a lot" or "entirely" during the course of the program.
2. As a group, the Fellows raised the bar on every characteristic of compelling preaching, with an overall growth rate of 5.8%. The table below shows the rate at which parishioner satisfaction increased for each of the characteristics.

<i>AVERAGE ratings for "compelling" characteristics ...</i>		<b>2025</b>	<b>2026</b>	<i>change</i>
organized	seems prepared and is easy to follow	4.37	4.62	5.7%
language	is simple, clear, understandable	4.38	4.74	8.2%
conviction	shows enthusiasm for sharing message	4.56	4.73	3.7%
insight	to understand the Word, to help interpret life	4.30	4.61	7.2%
imagination	helps us to see things in new light	4.23	4.54	7.3%
positive	emphasizes God's Good News	4.55	4.70	3.3%
spiritual	directed more to heart & soul than head & hands	4.26	4.56	7.0%
relationship	invited to grow with the Lord	4.55	4.71	3.5%
conversion	summons me to deeper spiritual life	4.34	4.62	6.5%
relevant	to my life, in today's world	4.29	4.55	6.1%
closeness	felt in delivery (tone of voice, eye contact, etc.)	4.31	4.58	6.3%
connected	to the celebration of Mass	4.43	4.59	3.6%
enduring	message remains with me after Mass ends	4.10	4.42	7.8%
conversational	in manner and pacing	4.31	4.59	6.5%
length	appropriate to the celebration	4.34	4.54	4.6%
<b>AVERAGE</b>	<b>ALL 15 CHARACTERISTICS</b>	<b>4.35</b>	<b>4.61</b>	<b>5.8%</b>

**Rating Scale:**  
 1 = strongly disagree  
 2 = disagree  
 3 = neither disagree nor agree  
 4 = agree  
 5 = strongly agree

Based on this assessment of the 2025 program and the experience of the cohort members ...

***We'll do it again ... with a few changes!***

Following the 2026 clergy ordinations and school graduations, CPI will use the summer months to recruit participants for the **second edition of “Disciples of the Word”** with the goal of forming 12-15 cohorts.

Based on suggestions received from participants in the first edition, we anticipate making changes to the program, among which are these:

- We will create a new schedule for the program. It will take place over the course of nine months and during the span of an academic year (September to May).
- We will draft additional protocols for the program that will ...
  - suggest other types of preaching for the cohorts to review (e.g., weddings/funerals),
  - provide means to enhance the video-review process (e.g., transcripts, group chats),
  - and facilitate in greater detail the conduct of the cohort meetings.
- We will look to include a session at the launch of the program, guided by an expert facilitator, to form all participants in the art of the “critique” (i.e., giving and getting feedback).
- We will urge cohort members to visit the parish of the Preaching Fellow at one or more points during the program so as to get a fuller experience of the environment in which he preaches.
- We will undertake assessment of the program with the additional goal of creating a way to sustain it into the future.

By way of this revised second edition, CPI hopes to inspire clergy to view this program as worthwhile continuing education in their ministry. As one Preaching Fellow puts it, the program

“offers a great opportunity to interact with the lay faithful and build relationships. It was encouraging to see lay faithful who not only believe their faith but also desire to help improve the delivery of it for all the faithful. Since we have given our lives in service to the Word, we owe it to our vocation and the people we serve to strive to be the most effective preachers we can be.”

So, too, CPI hopes to extend the benefits of this program throughout the archdiocese. As two members of the same cohort commented:

“The program was faith-enriching and provided a safe space for Catholic conversation in an increasingly caustic, anti-Christian world. Everyone benefitted, not just the preaching fellow.”

“This pilot edition has the potential to continue to grow and bless many priests, deacons and lay people in the future!”

Indeed, our vision and our work at CPI is to help preachers and parishioners alike to become more faithful **“DISCIPLES OF THE WORD.”**

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***“DISCIPLES OF THE WORD” (2025)***

**<https://www.scs.edu/preaching/programs/mentoring/>**