

Sermon Feedback: How Listeners Can Improve Preaching and Connection

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COMPELLING PREACHING *Coordination Program*

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When preachers receive sermon input through structured feedback practices, both clergy and congregants benefit. Grantees share what they're learning.

Who's best suited to offer pastors sermon input and feedback: Is it congregants? Lay leaders? Other clergy? What methods are working, and why? This post presents highlights from a March 2026 panel featuring grantees who are exploring feedback practices for the sake of clergy and listeners. For each panelist, we're presenting condensed comments about:

- what's working well as they experiment with sermon feedback and
- what they're discovering in the process.



Panelists from left to right: Thomas Dailey, Aida Yemaneberhan, Kathy Webb, and Ken Jones

Thomas Dailey, Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary, 2023 grantee

What's working well?

Our [preaching institute](#) ran a ten-month cohort-based mentoring program. Each cohort included a preacher who wanted to improve, an experienced clergy mentor, and three or four

parishioners who served as lay advisors. Before and after the program, we surveyed the people in the parishes where those priests preach.

We purposely didn't give the cohorts detailed guidance on how to critique because we wanted each group to have the freedom to develop their own methodology. This worked well. The drawback was that at the end of the program, when I asked the groups to identify two or three features of compelling preaching, I got dozens of answers. But we still think that giving the cohorts freedom served them well and served the preachers well. Each group focused on different things, and all of them together contribute to compelling preaching.

In general, our cohort participants came to understand how important it was to speak to the experience of their people. And they began to learn about that not only in preparation for their preaching, but in the life of the parish.

What are you discovering?

Our priests were very hesitant to get feedback at first because they had no experience with this. But once the cohorts started meeting, the priests came to realize that the feedback they were receiving was very helpful. They understood pretty quickly that it was given in charity. At the end of the program, the priests commented on how helpful the lay advisors were, how their critiques were both insightful and charitable, and how the coordination between the clergy and the parishioners was beautiful to behold.

Aida Yemaneberhan, Mahibere Kidusan Coordinating Center in North America, 2024 grantee

What's working well?

I represent an [association of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians](#) in the U.S. Our audience has three categories: Ethiopians who were born and raised in Ethiopia and migrated to the U.S.; our children, who were born and raised in an Ethiopian community within the U.S.; and those who are not Ethiopians but who come to our church. So do we preach in Amharic? Do we preach in English? How do we contextualize for each category? That has always been a challenge. But our experiments with listener feedback have given us a couple of insights:

- Listeners are more interested in the sermon when it's related to their lived experience. We are now trying to restructure our preaching mechanisms with this in mind.
- Intergenerational discussion forums help to bridge the cultural differences between those who are being raised in the U.S. and those who grew up in Ethiopia, so that the church community is not dispersed.

What are you discovering?

It's been tough figuring out how to provide feedback in a way that the preachers will accept it. For now, instead of having the laypeople give feedback, preachers give feedback to each other in cohorts. We've found this very helpful. It seems almost like experience-sharing because it's preacher to preacher.

Now we have selected topics we want them to focus on to improve their skill, and we teach that in our Boot Camp for preachers. When these preachers go back to their parish, they have become used to receiving feedback and they initiate receiving feedback from two or three people in their audience. This is not systematic yet, but it's starting to happen, and we're happy with the experience so far.

Kathy Webb, Virginia Theological Seminary, 2023 grantee

What's working well?

Our [Preaching Congregations initiative](#) (PCi) program is a year-long cohort of Episcopalian preachers and laity. The program provides sermon feedback to preachers and encourages lay members to gain confidence in listening to and providing feedback on sermons—and then in crafting and preaching sermons of their own.

I participated as a lay member, and during our cohort year, we met monthly. Our ninety-minute meetings had two parts: topical discussions based on the PCi curriculum and individual responses to a sermon. Our PCi faculty developed a listening process for the lay members to use, reminding us that just as we co-create our lives with God, so we also co-create sermons with sermon writers. At the end of the year, the lay members co-created a sermon and delivered it during a Sunday service.

On the curriculum side, we examined the role of sermons in our faith, how to write sermons for our cultural context, and how good sermons incorporate elements beyond the written word. Overall, the cohort was an amazing growth opportunity.

What are you discovering?

On the sermon-response side, we learned that sermons aren't a one-way street. The listening process provided a consistent structure for offering meaningful sermon feedback. The conversations that resulted were filled with curiosity, respect, and mutual growth for clergy and laity.

As the year progressed, we began to listen to sermons differently. We began hearing scripture and sermons as invitations to enter into conversation. Sermons became less about prescriptions for action ("What am I being told to do?") and more about possibilities of being ("What is the Spirit stirring in me?").

By the end of the year, we found ourselves better equipped to engage in conversation about spiritual matters that deeply impact us and the world. The sermon shifted from a solitary experience—for both the writer and the listener—to a collaborative exploration. We found that it leveled the playing field between clergy and lay members as co-creators.

Ken Jones, Grand View University, 2023 grantee

What's working well?

What has been successful for us in the [Iowa Preachers Project](#) is forming congregational feedback groups in our participants' congregations. Each of our preaching fellows puts together a team of congregants that we call sermon whisperers. Because everyone has a different understanding of what makes a truly good sermon, we've developed categories for them to talk about.

We start with delivery—their rate of speech, whether they're varying their voice, those kinds of things. We talk about whether this is a biblical sermon, clearly based on a text and not the preacher's internal wisdom. We talk about structure and rhetoric—does it hold together? Does it go somewhere from beginning to end? We talk about theology—what's undergirding it. And the final question is, Was this sermon for you, and why was it for you? What exactly was it that got you? One of the reasons this works is that the feedback comes from people the preachers know and trust.

What are you discovering?

Our experience is that those who are all in on receiving sermon feedback benefited so much, and those who were reluctant at first wound up being incredibly surprised by what happened. All of a sudden they had a cadre of people who understood what their calling was as a preacher and what preachers face week in and week out. Our preaching fellows have allies in the pews who now can begin to think about the intricacies of crafting the proclamation of the gospel in the assembly of believers. They have people who understand that preaching is a different kind of speech act than other kinds of speech, and they can breathe a sigh of relief. There's wind at their backs now.

This process isn't just about making sermons better; it's about how the body of Christ actually works when the gospel is proclaimed and the Holy Spirit is working among people who tend to the word and believe that it doesn't return empty.

Our thanks to these grantees for sharing their experiences and insights.