

## A Guide for Discussion

You may of course read the books in this series on your own, but because they focus on the transformation of the Episcopal Church in the twenty-first century, the books are especially useful as a basis for discussion and reflection within a congregation or community. The questions below are intended to generate fruitful discussion about the congregations with which members of the group are familiar.

Each group will identify its own needs and will be shaped by the interests of the participants and their comfort in sharing personal life stories. Discussion leaders will wish to focus on particular areas that address the concerns and goals of the group, using the questions and themes provided here simply as suggestions for a place to start the conversation.

chapter one

Why Is It Frightening to Preach?

In this chapter Ruthanna Hooke notes that fear of preaching is a common—and perhaps realistic and healthy—response from those who attempt to preach.

- ♦ What is your experience of preaching? When do you look forward to hearing or preaching the sermon? When do you dread it? Why?
- ♦ How do the feelings of the preacher toward preaching manifest themselves during a sermon? How do they affect the ability of the listeners to hear?
- ♦ What are some of the signs of authenticity you look for in a preacher?



The author asks the question: “If preaching is part of God’s self-revelation and a transforming encounter with God’s own Word, what is the role of the preacher in this event?” (p. 8).

- ♦ How would you answer her question?
- ♦ Describe some of the preachers you have known throughout your life whose sermons or way of preaching have informed your sense of what the role of the preacher can be (or should not be).
- ♦ How would you describe the role of the hearers in the event of preaching?

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 chapter two
 

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## “Is There a Word from the Lord?”

In this chapter the author states: “Although all aspects of life can be occasions for encountering God, preaching is believed to be privileged, just as the sacraments are. This is why, in some churches, listeners approach the sermon not so much with the question, ‘What does the preacher have to say today?’ but rather with the question, ‘Is there a Word from the Lord?’” (p. 24).

- ◆ Do you come to sermons, either as a preacher or a hearer, expecting a Word from the Lord? Why or why not? What would it sound like? How would you know it is “from the Lord”?
- ◆ With what other questions do you and others in your congregation approach the sermon? What are you seeking?
- ◆ When have you heard or given a sermon that you thought was truly “inspired,” or filled with the Holy Spirit? What was different about that preaching experience?



In speaking about the physical dimension of preaching, the author notes, “Both the doctrine of the Incarnation and the metaphor of performance urge us to be present in our full humanity when we preach. This means being present in body as well as in mind and spirit” (p. 37).

- ◆ How would you respond to the questions on pages 37 and 39–40 about the embodiment of preaching in your congregation?
- ◆ Now consider the questions on pages 40–41 about the way preaching reflects—or does not reflect—our

beliefs about God and the church. How would preaching need to change in your congregation to be more in alignment with your experience of God?

♦ What do you think are the foundations of authenticity and authority in preaching?

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chapter three

Profiles of Preachers

In this chapter Ruthanna Hooke explores the preaching practices of eight experienced preachers in the Episcopal Church.

♦ What common themes in philosophy and practices of preaching do you see in these eight preachers?

♦ What strikes you as the most helpful insights they share about how they approach the preaching task?



For the author these profiles raise three essential questions about preaching the church today:

♦ What tools can preachers use to help them engage more deeply and powerfully in their relationships with Scripture, God, congregation, and self?

♦ How can preachers make themselves more open to God and the congregation so that preaching becomes a conversation among these three parties?

♦ What practices can help preachers discover the appropriate balance between self and role, between private self and public *persona*? (pp. 46–47)

With these three questions in mind, develop a written profile of yourself as a preacher. If possible, share your profile with a trusted colleague or in a small group, as appropriate.

If you are not a preacher, develop a profile of the relationship of preacher and hearers in your congregation, from the perspective of the congregation as an active participant in the preaching event.

#### chapter four

### Engaging the Body in Preaching

In this chapter the author explores four concrete practices involving the body as a way of “bringing the whole self more fully to the preaching moment, finding the presence of God in the preaching moment, feeling the truth of the text in our bodies and voices, and connecting to the congregation” (p. 97).

- ♦ Reflect on the importance of the voice in preaching in your congregation. When have you been aware of the preacher’s voice as conveying a sense of authenticity?
- ♦ Try the exercise the author does with her students, described on page 102. (If a pulpit is not available, use another suitable space in the room.) What did you learn from this exercise?



- ♦ Reflect on what is (or is not) communicated by the preacher’s body and the bodies of listeners during the preaching event in your congregation.

♦ Try one of the two acting exercises—“Group Sculptures” and “The Dance of the Text”—described on pages 108–109. What did you learn?



♦ What is your experience of seeing Scripture performed? How was it different from simply hearing the passage read aloud?

♦ Choose a passage from Scripture and try performing it, either alone or in small groups.



♦ When is room provided for improvisation in your congregation’s worship or preaching? How comfortable is the congregation with the need to improvise when the unexpected happens?

♦ Try the “Building the Story” or “Group Sermon” exercises described on pages 117–118. What did you learn from that experience?

chapter five

The Adventure of the  
Word Made Flesh

In this chapter the author offers a “fantasy scenario of transformed and transformational preaching” (p. 127) at the Church of the Holy Spirit.

♦ Would you like to become a member of the Church of the Holy Spirit? Why or why not?

♦ In what ways does the Church of the Holy Spirit resemble your own congregation? How does it differ?

- ◆ Who are the individuals who function as “Preaching Leaveners” in your congregation now? In other words, who helps to guide the preacher(s) in what concerns need to be raised, what information needs to be shared, what interpretations need to be offered, what voices need to be heard?
- ◆ What are some of the concrete steps you could take to introduce these or other transformational practices of preaching in your congregation?
- ◆ Are there other transformational practices of preaching you could imagine introducing in your congregation? What would they be? How would you begin?