

## Do Sermons Have Any Impact?

By Bob Young

**A**lthough the survey was conducted in the United Kingdom, the results are interesting. In a world that uses more written communication than ever, what is the place of the sermon? Preachers want to know what can give sermons greater impact. Church leaders wonder if sermons are a thing of the past. Church members have mixed attitudes toward the sermon.

The survey, released from St. Johns College in Durham, U.K. in late January 2010, said, "Nearly 100% of churchgoers look forward to sermons, but only 17% think preaching changes the way they live." The report is based on a relatively small sampling (193 persons, 16 different churches representing four religious traditions).

The research also discovered that:

- Anglicans want the sermon to last less than 10 minutes, but up to 20 minutes is fine if there was no "waffle."
- Baptists are happy to sit through a 75-minute sermon.
- Catholics want the sermon to be completed within 10 minutes.
- Sermons are seen as being very good at teaching about God, the Bible and "being comforting," but need to do more to "motivate and challenge" people to look at the world differently.
- Sermons seem to encourage Christian reflection, but not Christian action. Preachers need to consider how to include contemporary issues and applications.

What do sermons do? What should sermons accomplish? Can sermons do more than educate and share information? Can sermons change how people view the world? Are sermons intellectual, emotional, social, or some combination? To what extent is the sermon "motivational communication"? Those of us who preach regularly struggle with these and a host of other questions. What is the purpose of preaching? How does one vary sermon styles and organization to remain fresh and meet the many expectations that have developed around preaching? With many suggesting the day of the sermon is past, it is encouraging to see that churchgoers see sermons as helpful, inspiring, and capable of doing something significant in the life and outreach of the church.

Researchers found that 60% of churchgoers feel sermons give them a sense of God's love. According to the research, evangelical Christians most look forward to sermons. Members of new, independent evangelical churches want sermons to be challenging and encouraging. Roman Catholics want to be educated, Baptists want to be converted, and Anglicans want to be entertained. Catholics and Baptists are more enthusiastic about mentioning the Bible in sermons than Anglicans and Methodists.

What lessons can we who preach take from this research?

- Preaching can be done in a way that some have described as "spiritually abusive". Preachers may be able to understand this concept in the often-heard accusation, "He

preached at me.” Preaching must be seen as a shared, participatory aspect of worship.  
How can preaching become two-way communication rather than a one-way lecture?

- People want preaching to speak to the interior of their lives, and not to remain superficial. Preaching must be spiritual.
- An overwhelming majority of churchgoers (83%) do not see the sermon as motivating change in the way they live. Preaching must touch contemporary life and contain applications.

[Incidentally, a 2006 survey found that only 15% of adults in the U.K. described themselves as regular churchgoers.]