

Becoming one of Mr Wesley's Preachers - of the Local Variety!

Harry is facing the demon of discouragement. He began his studies in Faith and Worship two years ago with great enthusiasm but now finds he is floundering under the weight of a growing number of uncompleted assignments. He knows that he has the support and backing of his church family but sometimes this can be a pressure as much as an encouragement. The best times are when he is given the opportunity to lead parts of the Sunday worship. On three occasions he has been allowed to preach and each time he felt that God had used his message to speak into people's lives. He asks.....

How do you know that you've got a genuine call to preach?

First of all, Harry, you're right to take the idea of a call very seriously. Let's face it, we're all called to be witnesses but preaching is not for everyone. I like the story of the crusty old gent who bemoaned the fact that in all his years in the church no one had ever invited him to preach. This was answered by his friend who observed that he too had been in that church for many years and to his certain knowledge no one had ever invited him to play the organ! The point, of course, is that we are all different; we have different gifts and abilities and our job is to discover what God particularly wants us to do for Him.

That's what you're doing in undertaking this training as a local preacher. You're exploring what it means to be a preacher and as you do that you're asking God to confirm one way or the other whether this is what He wants from you. Remember that guidance isn't rocket science! It's not even something you do – it's God's activity and He is perfectly capable of making His way clear to us. Our role is simply to listen and to be obedient.

Confirmation of a call to preach can come in many different ways. Sometimes it is something we read in the Bible which comes to us as God speaking directly to us. It can also come in the encouragement that we receive from those who hear us (though we have to subtract quite a lot to allow for the fact that people can say nice things just to please us). Sometimes the call is confirmed in the study and preparation before a service as we find our heart gripped by the truths we are handling and long to share them with others. For some it is the experience of standing in the pulpit, knowing the anointing of God on what they say and sensing that, right then, there is nowhere else they want to be and nothing else they want to be doing.

The great thing is that there is no one "type" of person that God calls. You might think that it's only extroverts who make good preachers but that's just not so. Many preachers are shy and reserved by nature yet in the pulpit they can speak with authority and energy. Some preachers can do humour to great advantage while others have learnt to avoid it at all costs. What is important is authenticity – realising that God wants you to be yourself, not some ghastly clone of what you think a proper preacher should be. If God is calling you to be a preacher then He's looking for the contribution and ministry that only you, with your unique personality and life experience, can bring to the role. This frees you to be natural and to be yourself. After all, one of the strongest suits a local preacher

possesses is that he or she inhabits the world of work outside the parameters of normal church life and can thus help relate the gospel message to the life experience of other lay people.

I guess what I'm trying to do here is to encourage you. You've been obedient; you've embarked on the daunting task of tackling the Faith and Worship course; you've had a few goes at leading worship and speaking and now you're taking a hard look at what it might be like to take on the responsibility and commitment of being a fully accredited local preacher. How can you know if this is God's call on your life? All I can say is that, if it is, you'll not be able to walk away. This thing will niggle and call you back until you give in and agree to it. What is more the people in your local church will tell you if they think you are called. Listen for the voice of God in what the people of God say. They often exercise wisdom – even in the case of the crusty old gent who had never been invited to play the organ! Finally and most importantly listen for God's "still small voice". We know the voice of our Shepherd. He knows how to make His intentions clear to us - and He will.

One other thing. At the end of the day your call to be a local preacher has to be recognised by the Methodist Church in Ireland. That is what the long process of study and apprenticeship is all about. You have to have the humility to submit your sense of call to others in leadership in the church. Their job is to test your call and hopefully to confirm it. Becoming accredited as a local preacher is the church declaring that it fully recognises and affirms your call.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones once wrote *"What is the chief end of preaching? I like to think it is this: it is to give men and women a sense of God and His presence."* What an aim! What a calling! What a privilege and what a responsibility! With an end like that in view those Faith and Worship assignments surely don't seem so onerous! Keep at it!