

Recently Trevor preached in a church he had never visited before. It was only the second time he had taken a whole service. He was very nervous and he spent a great deal of time in preparation – only to find the society steward apologising profusely for the poor attendance and openly admitting that “many people simply don’t attend when it’s a local preacher.”

**He asks..... Is it just me or is there something seriously wrong here?**

Trevor, my first response here is to say that I’m sorry you had that experience. I know how conscientious you are and how very seriously you take the responsibility of leading worship and preaching. I can imagine that you spent hours in preparation and probably didn’t sleep too well the night before. You set out to give of your very best and then you were confronted with the declaration that the numbers were down because a local preacher means lower attendance. The society steward wouldn’t win any prizes for diplomacy but at least he had the grace to express his regret.

Whatever you do you must not take it personally. I would venture to suggest that every single local preacher in the Connexion has encountered the situation you describe. The people who took the opportunity to stay away would probably have done so for any other local preacher. It wouldn’t have entered their head that you might feel discouraged or that you deserved support. When people act like this they betray a fundamental misunderstanding of why we go to church in the first place.

Methodism itself is partly to blame for this. In the days Methodist buildings were known as “preaching places”. People went to the parish church for worship and the sacraments. They went to the Methodists to listen to a preacher. Even when Methodism became a separate denomination preaching was often elevated at the expense of everything else. (It’s within my memory that some ministers used to refer to all that happened in a service leading up to the sermon as merely “the preliminaries”.) In more recent times there has been a recovery of what a rounded and balanced act of worship should be like with the emphasis on encountering and responding to God rather than on the performance of the preacher. For some people however the idea persists that they go to church to listen to the sermon and if they think that a lay preacher will not be as good as a minister then they may well give church a miss when a local preacher is there.

You are of course quite right to question such an attitude. What we need are members whose focus is on God and who come each week to worship irrespective of who is leading. You can build a church with people like that but you can never really count on those who will only attend if they “enjoy” a preacher. How on earth are local preachers ever to gain experience and improve if they are not given the chance? I thank God for the older people who put up with me in my early years of preaching. I made many ghastly mistakes yet received nothing but warmth, encouragement and backing. Some people probably did stay away but at least I knew the support of the faithful core of believers who were prepared to allow me room to learn. Those precious core people are there in every church and are of enormous help to all new preachers.

So how do we find a way around this problem about the acceptability of lay preaching? It's too easy to say that local preachers need to get better and raise their game. This is never going to happen until they are allowed to gain experience. In addition they will need honest mentoring and feedback from people committed to their development. It is not enough for ministers to simply use younger preachers to fill gaps in a preaching plan. A minister should be there to listen and give help, at least until they find their feet. That is part of being a good leader.

If current trends continue we are increasingly going to need our local preachers. They must be recognised as valuable and made part of the preaching team in every circuit. Congregations must be helped to see their role as integral to pulpit ministry and not merely as gap fillers when a minister cannot be found to cover a date. A process of education is called for here and the minister is the one who must give the lead. If the minister is seen to value his local preachers then the chances are that the people will too. If he or she only uses them to get a break or be away at another appointment then the congregation will have a sense of having been left that Sunday with Plan B.

Local preachers of course can do a lot to help themselves. At present there is an expectation that they commit to fifteen hours per year of further learning or training after their accreditation. This might take the form of attending a conference or training event, reading a book on the subject of preaching or engaging in biblical or theological study. It is also envisaged that every ten years each local preacher should take part in a formal review and appraisal of their role. All of this is the Methodist Church's way of demonstrating that it recognises and values the work of local preachers and wants to help them develop and improve. The bar is being raised and local preachers must embrace this thinking and not feel threatened by it.

My advice to you, Trevor, is not to be discouraged. You must never be annoyed or anxious about numbers. Remember that the people who have come to church that Sunday are not the ones you have the problem with. Your job is to minister to those who have come and want to hear from God. Leave God to deal with the others.