

David is back from his first experience of participating in Local Preachers' Sunday. It was also his first time preaching in a church outside his own circuit. He went full of anticipation but was dismayed to be told that the attendance that Sunday was down by about fifty per cent. He has ended up wondering what this special Sunday is meant to be about.

He asks..... Why do we have an annual Local Preachers' Sunday?

David, no doubt you'll have heard the extremely old joke that the difference between a minister and a local preacher is that a minister is paid to be good whereas a local preacher is good for nothing! Methodism has always recognised the fact that a person does not have to be ordained in order to preach and lead worship. A local preacher is someone who has a calling and a gifting to teach, explain and interpret scripture in a way that connects with everyday life. Normally that happens within the home circuit but Local Preachers Sunday provides an opportunity for them to minister in another congregation on their district.

Traditionally it is observed on the Sunday after Easter. One very practical reason for this is that it gives ministers a Sunday off after all the preparation and activity surrounding Holy Week and Easter Sunday. They deserve it and are usually very appreciative of the break! There is however a more important reason. Local Preacher Sunday has the effect of raising the profile of lay preaching in the Methodist Church. It draws attention to the fact that Methodism could not function week by week without the role played by qualified local preachers – especially in rural areas. This is even more so in the circuits of British Methodism where often a congregation may only see its minister once a month or less and depends on local preachers for the rest of the time.

I'm really sorry that you came away discouraged by the low attendance. You must not take it personally. It could partly have had to do with the fact that it was the end of the Easter holidays and some folk were away making the most of the last day before the schools went back. I'd love to say that it was nothing to do with the fact that a local preacher was taking the service but I'm afraid there was probably a bit of truth in that thought. Some people feel that they can take the Sunday off because their absence will not be noticed by the minister in a way that it would be any other Sunday.

It has to be said also that some people simply prefer to listen to a minister. Generally of course ministers make good preachers – they ought to, seeing that they have been to college and have the experience of preaching most Sundays. By contrast a typical local preacher in an urban church may only get to preach a few times in a year. This means that they are not gaining the experience that would make them better and more fluent communicators. The reality is that the more they are used the better they will be and the more acceptable they will be to our people. Ministers need to give this some serious thought and see how they can encourage and help their local preachers to develop and improve. Circuit preachers' meetings may be a way to make this happen.

Make sure you never apologise for being a local preacher or think that you are second best to a minister in the pulpit. Your calling is from God every bit as much as a minister's. Do remember that it was John Wesley himself who first recognised and commissioned lay people as preachers. Methodism has always held that preachers are preachers whether they are itinerant (and ordained)

or local (and lay). There is no reason why you may not be as much used by God in the pulpit as any minister. As a lay person you bring that very special perspective of working and witnessing in the secular world. Your illustrations and stories will ring true for people who, like you, go out of church on Sunday into an often hostile working environment on Monday morning. You can “tell it like it is” better than many ministers.

I’m glad you got to go to a church outside your circuit. That is another useful aspect of Local Preachers Sunday – it lets congregations hear preachers from other circuits in their district. That helps promote our sense of being a connexion or family. It also gives you the chance to see how another church conducts worship. Nowadays worship styles vary considerably from one congregation to another in terms of music, participation, movement and degrees of informality. Your job as a visiting preacher is to do your homework in advance and see how you can best fit in with what may be a very different type of service.

I hope that the minister of the church was an encouragement to you and at the very least expressed appreciation for your visit and all the preparation that went into it. Sometimes ministers underestimate how much it means to a visiting local preacher to be given positive feedback after a service or even afterwards to be asked what the sermon or the theme of the service was about. Local preachers are there to serve but no-one likes to feel that they are only filling a slot because no minister could be found.

You didn’t say, but I’m pretty sure you were given a very warm welcome by the people who were there that Sunday. That is one of the very special things about Irish Methodists. They know how to act with kindness to a visiting preacher. I guess the real test is if they ask their minister to invite you back!