

Elaine suffers greatly with nerves. She is shy by nature and easily discouraged. It is only a strong sense of God's calling that keeps her on track to becoming a local preacher. Each time she preaches or leads a service she conducts a private post mortem asking how it might have gone better. As she gains experience she is beginning to take services in other churches and this leads her to ask her question.

She asks.... **“Why is it so much easier to preach in some churches than in others? What makes the difference?”**

First of all, Elaine, I would want to commend you for that desire you have to improve as a preacher and to learn from each experience in the pulpit. That evaluation is exactly what the Faith and Worship local preacher course tries to encourage. Having read some of your reflections I can see that already you are showing yourself to be a quick learner and one who is unafraid to experiment and try out new ideas. That is the way to improve.

Your question is one that many new preachers have noted and asked. You visit one church. The service seems to flow; the prayers seem to be just right; the hymns are sung with feeling and you sense a deep receptivity for your message. You come away encouraged and elated. A few weeks later you visit another church, maybe even preach the same message and everything about the service is hard work. You struggle your way through and never really feel as though you've made any proper connection with the people. You drive away wondering if you should give the whole thing up. Is it you, or is it them?

The reality of course is that every church is different. Sometimes the differences are obvious. A rural church has a different feel to an urban or suburban one. It is always going to be different (and require a different style) preaching to a small group of twenty than to a congregation of over a hundred. The age profile of a church makes a big difference as well. What you preach and how you preach to elderly folk will be different than when you lead a service of all age worship for families.

But behind your question is a very valid observation. It is always going to be true that you will find yourself more at home in some congregations than in others. There is often a strong subjective dimension to this. You may like the style of music, the degree of formality or informality, the warmth of the welcome or even the freedom you are given to lead as you want. It is easy to preach in what you may see as “your type of church”. As a local preacher however you've got to get past this. When you are sent to a church you go as a visitor and a servant. You are not there to inspect or sit in judgement on a congregation – and especially one that has been carrying out faithful worship for longer than you've been alive! As far as possible you should try and accommodate to the way they do things – to help them worship in their way, not yours.

That said, you have put your finger on it when you refer to it being easier to preach in some settings rather than in others. It's as if each congregation (like each individual) has its own personality. Some have a great musical tradition; some are particularly socially aware; some go out of their way to be family friendly; some have a greater appetite than most for Bible teaching and some see

themselves as strongly evangelistic. To be blunt and honest about it though, some congregations appear to have a deeper level of passionate spirituality than others. You can feel it as soon as you step into the pulpit. You know that the people there want to hear from God. It's always a pleasure and delight to preach to such a congregation – be it to twenty or two hundred!

But if a congregation can help you so too can individuals. One person in the most difficult of settings can make all the difference. You look out over the pews. You see uninspired and vacant faces. You wonder if you can keep going and make it to the end of twenty minutes. And then you spot her! You see that one person who is looking directly up at you, nodding encouragement and clearly thinking and processing all that is being said. What such a person gives to you in that situation is incalculable. As your eyes roam over the church and those dead pan faces, you will find yourself coming back time and time again to that friendly face and that evidence of a receptive heart.

You see at the end of the day worship is a shared activity and not a spectator sport. Too often people see worship as turning up, singing the hymns and after that letting the preacher get on with the rest. That attitude can all too easily breed passivity and lack of expectation and lead to the feeling of heaviness you describe. Our task as preachers is help people to experience worship, not only as they sing but as they pray, as they give and as they listen and respond to God's word.

The one thing you should never do is to drive away at the end of a "difficult" service and blame the people. They were not there to make you feel good. They were possibly just as uninspired by you as you were by them. You have to be humble enough to know that you can't please everybody. In the end the only One you really have to please is God – and you just might find, long afterwards, that you made more of an impact on the people than you thought.

How wonderful would it be if folk came each Sunday ready and eager to hear from God.