

Eva took a bit of persuading before joining the class. She struggles to believe that there is a place for her on the preaching team in her local church alongside a very gifted minister and two experienced local preachers. As a young working mother her life is already full of demands and this course of study is going to add considerably to her workload over the next two years. She wonders whether it will be time well spent and whether there will be a useful role for her at the completion of the task.

She asks.....

Why would my circuit need yet another local preacher?

I imagine, Eva, that you've recently taken part in the Covenant Service. As part of that you will have stood up and said "*I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will...*". Those are incredibly strong and solemn words. They're a bit like signing our names to a blank cheque where God fills in the amount. For Methodist people they frame the year, giving meaning and purpose to all that we do. It's rather like God is the master strategist: He knows what he is about and he directs us and deploys us as seems best to him.

In the light of that your question is surely the wrong one to ask. It's not about whether a circuit needs fewer preachers and more youth leaders or whether a treasurer would be more valuable than a worship leader. It's about Christ's call. Recent years have seen all sorts of attempts to imitate the professional world and run the Church with the latest business techniques and strategies. We like to have our mission statements, church audits and five year plans. None of this is wrong in itself but far more often than not we find ourselves being led in entirely different directions by a God who opens up new paths and calls us to follow. Our job is to discern that leading and to be obedient.

What is true for a church is true for individuals also. I know that you've joined the class and embarked on this exploration of preaching as an act of obedience and a venture in faith. With your natural modesty you may honestly wonder what you have to offer alongside those other more experienced preachers but you have to allow God to be the judge of that and to believe that He really does know best.

Remember that Methodism has always been ahead of most denominations in its use of lay people as preachers. The genius of this is that ordinary people for whom faith is real can communicate readily with others who inhabit the same world of work and family life. You can only be yourself and bring to the role the perspectives and insights that life has given you. As a young mother who struggles daily to balance the demands of holding down a busy job and bringing up two young children you immediately have the healthy respect and attention of at least the female section of any congregation!

I can see what you mean when you say that you don't feel that your church needs another local preacher at the moment but I'm quite sure your minister and those other experienced preachers wouldn't see it like that. One day they will be gone and it is important that younger people are coming along behind who will take up the challenge to preach. I would hope that they will want to mentor and encourage you as you go through the course. You will learn a lot from watching them

but however much you respect them you must be allowed to develop your own style. There nothing worse than those who sound like clones of preachers from the past. Indeed I could see you being a very welcome and refreshing breath of fresh air as you speak to people in new and creative ways.

The hardest thing for any new preacher to overcome is self-consciousness and the issue of performance. You have a fear of messing things up and embarrassing yourself. Somehow you have to get past this. You have to be liberated from any notion of comparing yourself to those other preachers – either favourably or unfavourably because it's not about you, it's about the message. Darrell Johnson in his book "The Glory of Preaching" suggests this honest and realistic prayer as you go into the pulpit: *"Lord, I want these people to think well of me. But more than that I want them to think well of you"*. When you really mean the second half of that prayer you will be set free.

Right now you are at the start of a journey that will take you through at least two years of hard work – with written assignments, exegesis exercises, logs of worship participation and sermon preparation. No-one would blame you if you felt it was just too much to cram into an already hectic schedule. On the other hand most local preachers would say that the heavy investment carries amazing rewards. There is something so enriching about carving out a time slot each week to meet with others and give disciplined focus to the things of God. You will learn about theology; you will study Methodist distinctives; you will discover more about how to lead and structure worship and above all else you will become more familiar with the word of God. What could be better than that?!

At the end of the road you become a fully accredited local preacher. Maybe at the moment in your own circuit you will not be called upon to preach very often but you will most likely find other circuits badly in need of help. You will also discover that local preachers find themselves doing many other things – leading Bible studies, convening prayer meetings, helping with youth fellowships and generally influencing and promoting the spiritual life of their congregation. So it all comes down to a question of call – and remember this, when God calls he never ever fails to equip.