



How to Start a Peacemaker Group in Your Local Church

by Ken Sehested
BPFNA Founding Director

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¶ When you say [something] is impossible, you ought to say, “relative to my present state of ignorance it’s impossible.” —*Mortimer Adler*

¶ Everybody can be great, because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s Theory of Relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second law of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. —*Martin Luther King Jr.*

¶ If you want something really important to be done you must not merely satisfy the reason. You must move the heart also. —*Mohandas Gandhi*

¶ We know too much, but are convinced of too little. —*T.S. Elliot*

¶ I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember. I do, and I understand. —*anonymous*

¶ Nothing is real until it is local. —*G.K. Chesterton*

¶ Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might. —*Ecclesiastes 9:10a*

One of our dreams in the Baptist Peace Fellowship is that, one day, every Baptist congregation in North America will have some small group dedicated to educating and mobilizing the congregation on justice and peace issues. These small units are the critical building blocks of an effective, broad-based movement to revive the ministry of reconciliation—to help our people rediscover their calling as peacemakers.

There are two key reasons for focusing attention on such groups.

First, small groups are the best way for engaging in strategic peacemaking ministry. It’s an effective way to take very concrete action on any number of peace and justice related issues.

Second, these groups can be a place for spiritual discernment and nourishment. We strongly encourage each group to undertake common spiritual disciplines. *Shalom* cannot be neatly separated into “personal” and “public” dimensions. Few things are more urgently



needed than the development of a spirituality of justice.

There is no secret formula for starting and maintaining a group, no easy “one-two-three steps.” Blueprints are for building efficient houses, not effective peacemaking initiatives. There are many variables, some of them unique to your own situation.

Use the suggestions below as a checklist to guide your thinking and planning. Many resources are available on our website: bpfna.org.

(1) Peacemaker groups almost always originate from **three basic ingredients**: a *dream* or *vision* of *shalom*, clarified and focused into a *specific project* initiated by *one or two* people. Jesus’ parable about the mustard seed is a relevant image to this process.

(2) **Responsibility for leading**

the group should be assumed by a **layperson**. A pastor may be instrumental in stating the dream or helping clarify the project. (And, by all means, he or she should be consulted

early in the process of forming the group.) But there is an important kind of “ownership” for the project when directed by lay people. Lay people have more freedom to focus and are not shackled by the restraints that sometimes come with receiving a salary from the church.

(3) **Clarify and limit your project**. Major problems are solved by breaking them down into small pieces. Your group probably won’t halt the arms race, but you could get involved in exploring how military spending impacts your community, for instance. You might not end poverty but you could see to it that members of your congregation are aware of opportunities for

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**Baptist Peace Fellowship
of North America**

300 Hawthorne Lane, Suite 205
Charlotte, NC 28204 USA
704-521-6051 • bpfna@bpfna.org • bpfna.org

ministry in your area. Just because you can't do *everything* doesn't mean you can't do *something*.

(4) **Seek out a community of conviction.** Share your dream and plans with others you think might have common concerns. Talk to selected individuals; write up a brief description of what you have in mind and have it published in the church newsletter; or ask permission to have five minutes at the close of a Sunday morning worship service to state your plans, asking those interested in pursuing the matter to meet you around the piano after the benediction. Have a sheet of paper ready for folks to write their names, addresses and phone numbers for further contact. Assure people they're making no commitments as yet.

(5) **Don't be anxious to get a crowd.** One or two other folks besides yourself will do just fine.

(6) **Set a date and time for your first meeting** as soon as possible. Maybe have a tentative time in mind before you begin signing folks up. Otherwise, plan to spend some time on the phone.

(7) **Prepare carefully for that first meeting.** Consider both your meeting space and the agenda. Prearrange enough comfortable chairs in a circle; make sure everyone has clear directions to your home or other location; prepare refreshments. Develop a concise, one-page statement about your proposed project; indicate why it's important; outline what you see as necessary steps for implemen-

Parable of the coalmouse and the dove

"Tell me the weight of a snowflake," a coalmouse asked a wild dove.

"Nothing more than nothing," was the answer.

"In that case I must tell you a marvelous story," the coalmouse said. "I sat on the branch of a fir, close to its trunk, when it began to snow, not heavily, not in a raging blizzard. No, just like in a dream, without any violence. Since I didn't have anything better to do, I counted snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. When the next snowflake dropped onto the branch—nothing more than nothing, as you say—the branch broke off."

Having said that, the coalmouse ran away.

The dove, since Noah's time an authority on the matter, thought about the story for a while and finally said to herself: "Perhaps there is only one person's voice lacking for peace to come about in the world."

tation; list human and/or financial resources needed; and say what you think the results would be. Have copies of this statement available. Follow up with those who agreed to attend with a phone call the day before the meeting.

(8) **Clarify the agenda** at the beginning of the meeting. Folks deserve to know what will happen when. Agree on a closing time and stick to it. Try to keep your project outline to 20 minutes. Allow plenty



Artwork by Ken Compton.

of time for discussion.

(9) **Decide on the next step.** Your initial meeting may or may not produce a clear consensus, but at the very least don't close without some agreement as to the next step, even if it's only to meet again.

(10) **Share responsibilities.** As soon as you've found your working group, start identifying and assigning tasks.

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6. Beware of compassion fatigue.

The old-fashioned word is burnout. It comes from working too hard for too long with too little rest. It's important to keep in mind that compassion fatigue doesn't happen overnight. It builds over a long period, and it usually has at least two advance symptoms.

The first is a loss of a sense of humor. If you find it hard to laugh, to play and to relax, you may be headed for a breakdown. A volunteer in a Third World country got this warning from her colleague: "We are suspicious of those who have no sense of humor," her co-worker said. "If you cannot take time to laugh, even in the midst of all this misery, then we doubt that you have the patience to stay here very long."

A second advance symptom of compassion fatigue is a growing sense of resentment. If you find yourself frequently complaining that other people aren't doing their part, that you're the only one that really cares, then watch out!

7. Be bold about the demands of the Gospel, but patient with people.

Most of us find it difficult to live with the chasm separating the *expectations* we have of ourselves (and of others) and the recurring *experiences* we have of not living up to those expectations. Ours is truly a high calling; but also a low success rate. So we're tempted to either give up on the calling or on the results. That is, we begin to tone down the Bible's radical challenge to our ways of living, adjusting it to prevailing cultural standards, to more manageable expectations. Or, on the other hand, we become so alienated from people (and sometimes ourselves)—living lives overflowing with accusation, judgment and intimidation—that we lack any capacity to engage people in genuine dialogue.

In your pastoral work be sure you don't confuse the integrity of the Gospel with your own agenda. Obviously you will have strong convictions. But always leave room for slippage. Never be too quick to assume that if someone disagrees with you they're disagreeing with the truth.

Sometimes people with relatively equal levels of commitment, intelligence and courage disagree on how to solve a given problem. In the end we are saved not by our merits but only by grace.

8. The Gospel is still a scandal, but not every scandal is the Gospel.

Just because the Gospel is indeed a scandal, liable to provoke controversy, not every scandal and controversy is Gospel-inspired. Controversy and confrontation can be the occasion for transformation, for dialogue. Sometimes it can make a bad situation worse. Learning to distinguish the difference takes wisdom.

When controversy occurs, your ability to use pastoral authority depends a lot on whether you've earned the respect which authorizes your leadership.

Some years ago I attended a workshop led by the pastor of a Baptist church in a small North Carolina town. He had recently convinced his congregation to join him in a march one Sunday in August, from his church's sanctuary to the downtown courthouse, to commemorate the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. How did he convince them to do this? "Probably a number of reasons," he said. "But I think it boiled down to the fact that for seven years I've been present with these people in their births, their weddings, their sicknesses and their deaths." His congregation knew he loved them, knew he saw them as more than objects in need of adjustment. As a result, he had been invested with leadership authority—in this case, to lead many on a path they had not previously traveled.

9. Expect miracles, or at least surprises!

Don't assign too much weight to labels like "conservative" or "liberal." They tell you more about people's self-perceptions and culture than anything else. And don't "write off" certain groups, certain churches, certain parts of your city, region or country. Politically progressive people have an enormous bias toward cosmopolitan, urban and well-educated constituencies. Ours is an enormously

class and culture bound movement.

Do you remember the story in Luke's Gospel when Andrew came running up to his brother Nathaniel and said, "Nat, we've found the Messiah! He's from Nazareth." And do you recall Nathaniel's incredulous question: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" In first century Palestine, Nazareth was the sticks, the boondocks, where parochial, uneducated, unsophisticated, narrow-minded and uninteresting people lived, unlike liberal-minded, cosmopolitan, well-educated Jerusalem. Ever since Jesus came from Nazareth, there's no such thing as the boondocks any more.

10. Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy.

What is it about "sabbath time" that God cautions us not to forget? First, remembering the sabbath is a regular, habitual reminder that everything isn't up to us. Prophetic types tend to get too serious and have a hard time taking a break. There's so much left to do!

Walter Rauschenbusch, the Baptist pastor and theologian most associated with the early 20th century "Social Gospel Movement," once wrote to a Methodist colleague who had confided that he was thinking about leaving the ministry because of his denomination's resistance to change: "It is not sin," Rauschenbusch chided, "to leave some things to our children, and to God."

Sabbath time is when we slow the hands and the mind in order to do a different kind of work: that of opening ourselves to a renewal of vision regarding the deepest character of life. "The paranoid and the mystic share much in common," said Matthew Fox. "Paranoid persons believe there is a conspiracy in the universe against them; mystics believe there is a conspiracy in the universe on their behalf."

In the midst of sabbath discipline we rediscover and reaffirm Who, finally, is in charge! More than at any other time, this is when we are finally able to say with conviction: No, that's not the way things are; no, I won't get used to it; and no, I won't live my life accordingly.

Ken Sehested is the founding director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America.

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Pastoral Principles for Prophetic People

Working for peace and justice isn't easy. We live in a world predicated by greed and violence. Swimming against that stream is hard.

All of us have known people who have attempted to "win the world" only to have their own spirits wither, their vision blurred. Maybe not with such tragic drama—maybe they've simply stopped speaking out. Something has come undone in their lives. Maybe it's happened to you. Even prophets need pastors.

How do we resist that withering of the spirit? And how do we effectively work with and develop a corps of justice and peace advocates? What follows are 10 pastoral principles for nurturing prophetic impulses in your congregation.

1. Decide where to start, not where to finish.

We often seem unable to act on what we know. It's as if we refuse to do *anything* if we can't do *everything*. Edmund Burke noted that nobody made a greater mistake than the one who did nothing because he or she could only do a little.

Most people grow into maturity one step at a time. Most children learn to crawl before they walk, and walk before they run. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. himself once said: "If you can't fly, run; if you can't run, walk; if you can't walk, crawl. But by all means keep moving forward."

People tend to start modestly, tend to make small steps and changes and choices and commitments. Don't disparage such modesty. It is on the basis of such concrete involvements that deeper commitment and analysis can grow. There's an old proverb that says: "I hear, and I forget; I see, and I remember; I do, and I understand."

Well-educated people have a tendency, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to "replace simple action with complex thought." It's so much easier to take a position than to take action. Pay more attention to where you're going to be concretely invested and worry less about where you'll eventually end up. The directional road

signs come into focus only as you begin to move toward them.

2. Look for a community of conviction.

The most consistent problem we face is the sense of isolation felt by those committed to justice and peace issues. Being a part of a community of conviction functions like a "hothouse" does for plants, providing in much larger doses the kinds of elements necessary for growth in both our understanding and our commitment.

There is also a rhythm to our lives, not unlike the rhythm of seasons. There are times when we are at full operating capacity, running at peak performance. But there are other times when we're not so fuel-efficient: times when we're more tired, less enthusiastic, less focused. It's at these points when a community of conviction can mean the difference between a slowdown and a breakdown.

3. Think globally, act locally.

Thinking globally gives a fuller picture of cause-and-effect relations. Especially in an increasingly globalized economy, what happens a long way off has an impact close to home. But global analysis serves little purpose without some corresponding local action. It's more comfortable for some of us to think globally than it is to act locally.

G.K. Chesterton once said: "Nothing is real until it is local." In saying that, he wasn't blessing or justifying this tendency in human nature. He was simply pointing out that that's the way most of us do operate. We usually don't react until something touches us personally.

Thinking globally actually gives us the permission to do "small" things. We don't really have to tackle everything in the world, because we know there are lots of people out there doing their part, too. Acting locally keeps us grounded in reality, helps us "keep the rubber on the road."

4. Learn to name the poor.

"Naming the poor" was the title of a sermon preached when a congregation opened a shelter in its facilities for homeless people. These guests are not just "street people," the pastor said. They each have names and unique personal histories. He urged members to "name" each person individually.

Care for and presence with the poor may involve charity work but is more than that. It also means speaking out for justice, attempting to shift the basic power dynamics which keep the poor in their condition. But even beyond the work of charity and the demands of justice, there is yet another reason for our involvement.

We are to be with the poor to listen as well as to speak; to receive, as well as to give; to learn, as well as to teach. Those who suffer need resources and advocates; but they also need relationship and friendship, built on mutual respect—as do we.

5. Prepare for the long haul.

Violence, and the injustice on which it is built, will never give way to a brief flurry of activity and enthusiasm. We need to prepare for a lifetime of conviction—along with a commitment to rear and shape the lives and generations that follow behind us.

We have a great need to develop what the German theologian Dorothee Söelle calls "revolutionary patience." Such patience does not lull us to sleep. We stay engaged; but our barometer readings don't come from the daily paper and the evening news; nor are they dependent on the relative successes or failures of current political forces. We need to learn to plant dates and not just pumpkins, says the Brazilian theologian Reuben Alves. The latter can be planted and harvested in a single season; the former may not bear fruit in our lifetime.

(11) **Develop a written covenant**, of whatever length you choose. It should include: a brief statement of your general concern, a description of your particular project and a list of commitments each member makes to the group.

(12) **Agree on a specific length of commitment** to the group. That comes naturally if your project is short-term (e.g. planning a special peace emphasis for your congregation). But even if your project is open-ended, encourage members to commit themselves for a specified amount of time (at least six months). At the end of that time you can "reconstitute" the group with a covenant renewal for those continuing and for new members.

(13) **Ask each person to commit themselves to some spiritual discipline(s)**, e.g. Bible study, daily prayer, journaling, etc. Like with physical exercise, it's best to begin modestly. Find a way for people to be accountable to each other, but don't create a legalistic atmosphere.

(14) Find ways to **encourage and call forth the particular gifts and talents of each member**. No one person should be thrust into (or allowed to assume) the position of "running the show." Also, giving people limits to their responsibility will prevent fatigue. Sharing tasks among the group will assure people's regular participation and sense of belonging. Establish some future rotation point where roles and tasks can be shuffled and exchanged.

(15) Find a structured way to **be accountable to the congregation**. Report on some regular basis

to your social concerns committee, church council, missions committee—whatever is appropriate.

(16) Along those same lines, **be conscious of the way your project might implicate the congregation as a whole**. Sometimes you may need to spend time interpreting what you want to do. Just because the church might not have to offi-

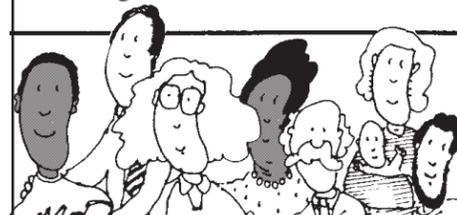
Another Approach

Another way of organizing around concrete ministry is to start by simply raising awareness about issues related to justice, peace, human rights, etc.

- If your congregation does not celebrate "Peace Sunday," begin talking with other church leaders about doing that.
- Ask your pastor to do a series of sermons in this area.
- Volunteer to teach a series of Christian education classes (during regularly scheduled times). Contact our office for educational resources.
- Plan a series of events to bring in outside speakers—people in your community actively involved in various peace and justice issues.

The value of this approach is that talking about shared interests/concerns with others can inspire an action or project. The danger is letting discussion become a substitute for action.

Colin Morris once wrote that, when confronted with an overwhelming problem, the best we can do is find the "near edge" and act at some sacrifice to ourselves. Your goal is to help people in your congregation find the "near edge."



cially vote approval of your work doesn't mean they have no right to ask questions. Don't begrudge or be impatient with this process. Accountability is a two-way street. You want the congregation to be accountable to you as well, not simply ignore or "put up" with you.

(17) Once you get actively involved in your work, **don't hesitate to modify your plans if needed**. You may discover that your analysis of a particular need was incorrect, or that what you thought was a reasonable enough goal is actually more than the group can handle.

(18) **Enlist the efforts of non-group members**. Don't become the church's "designated peacemakers." Whenever possible, employ the gifts, talents and energy of others for specified tasks.

(19) **Publicize your work, both within the church and in secular media**. Don't hide your light under a bushel! Use every available means to let folks know what you're doing. Publicity can be an effective means of enlisting new members.

(20) **Don't forget to party together**. There's nothing more deadly than humorless work! Remember, "recreation" and "creative" come from the same common root word.

Ken Sehested is founding director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. Artwork by Kenn Compton.

The elderly church member grasped my hand as I stood at the church door after the Sunday morning service: “You know, preacher, every time you preach about peace it sure does cause trouble.”

It is sad but true that the preaching of the gospel of peace causes trouble, stirs up controversy. What is even sadder: at the mention of peace, many people shut their hearing off and put their defenses up.

So how can we preach with integrity, evoke a hearing and, perhaps I should add, not get run out of town? Here are some suggestions I have found from my own experience that might enable us to better preach on peace.

Preach biblically

When all else had failed, the king asked Jeremiah, “Is there any word from the Lord?” (Jer. 37:17).

People do not come to worship seeking a summary of the latest legislative agenda. They do not come to hear an economist or a political scientist. They can go to any number of other places for this information. People come to worship God and to hear a word from the Lord.

As we stand in the pulpit to preach on something as controversial as peace, we must make sure we are standing on the Bible. If people want to disagree make sure they disagree with the Bible and not simply the preacher’s “*well, it seems to me.*” Many Baptists may not like some things said about peace, but few will easily turn their backs on the biblical word.

Preach prayerfully

If people are asking, “Is there any word from the Lord?” then they are assuming we know. How can we be so sure of what God is saying to us as a congregation if we have not wrestled with what God is saying to us personally? Our preaching on peace will be glib unless we know the extent of the violence and fear in our own hearts. Our preaching on peace will be shrill and moralizing unless we have begun to experience some of God’s

shalom in our own hearts.

Preach our calling to be the church

The most radical social act of the church is to be true to her calling. The questions we face are not simply peace or hunger or racism, but whether we will be the church, whether we will be faithful, whether we will follow Jesus.

Stanley Hauerwas says that “the church does not have something to say about



How to:

Preach on Peace (without resorting to violence)

war so much as the church is what God has said about war. The church does not have an alternative to war. The church is our alternative to war.”

This is not a call for withdrawal from engagement with the world. When the church is true to her vocation then she will be actively involved in the world.

“Hubert Humphrey said that politics is the art of the possible.” Walter Brueggemann said in a lecture. “But who determines the possible? That is a theological question! If we let Babylon determine the possible then that is idolatry!”

In our preaching we want to lead the church to be involved for peace. But let us be involved as the church, not just another activist group. The church has its own definition of what the issues are. Our agenda is the Kingdom of God, not the Democratic or Republican Party platform.

Preach using stories

In his *Quest for Better Preaching*, Edward F. Markquart urges us to tell stories, “specific with names and places, of Christians who are fighting for their rights. The present world is filled with millions of stories of Christians who are struggling for food and freedom. The poetic, prophetic preacher is a storyteller.”

Most often when a preacher begins to tell people what they “ought” to do—whether it is against going to movies or for making peace—their back stiffens and their ears close. People have limited appetites for moralizing. They will not listen to it, and should not have to.

A good story, however, allows people to “overhear the gospel,” as Fred Craddock says. Listeners are pulled into the story and then must draw their own conclusions.

Stand in the pulpit and tell stories of Baptist Christians in Nicaragua or South Africa or Bulgaria. Tell about their profound faith; tell about the things that make us brothers and sisters “in the same household of God.” Speak to the imagination of the congregation—you may never have to mention politically-loaded code words.

Preach after doing your homework

I have already said that we are not disarmament experts, but from time to time our sermons on peace need some analysis. When using statistics, choose them carefully and sparingly; know your sources of information.

I once had a church member who had recently retired after 30 years in the Navy. His last assignment was serving as a nuclear weapons control officer on an aircraft carrier. When I got up to preach on peace I knew that I had better have done my homework or he would tune me out and later confront me. He kept me honest. He made me study.

Preach as you sit where they sit

The prophet Ezekiel was called to go to the people in exile and “sit where they sit” (Ezek. 3:15). While we preach on foreign policy or health care policies or prison reform, most of our people are just trying to make it through Tuesday. Then we feel depressed at the Monday

ministerial coffee break down at the cafe, complaining “my people must not care about peace.”

Fred Craddock tells this story:

It came to pass, there was a certain minister who preached to his little flock of “the world today,” “modern man” and “the history of the race.” A layman complained of not being addressed by the sermons, but his complaints were turned aside with admonitions against small-mindedness and provincialism.

In the course of time, the minister and the layman attended together a church convention in a distant city. When the minister showed some anxiety about losing their way in the large and busy metropolis, the layman assured him there was no reason to fear. With that word, he produced from the rear seat of the car a globe of the world.

If our people knew more about how military spending affects the price of bread, they might care more about peace than we realize. Their lives are overwhelmed with paying the rent and electric bills. Many small business people and family farmers are going under. So we should not be so quick to blame them when they are reluctant to get involved in peacemaking.

This means two things for those of us who preach. First, we must be out there “amongst them”—to sit where they sit. Secondly, we must study so we can better communicate about our militarized economy, clarifying the connection between money spent on weapons and people not having jobs.

Preach with the eyes of the poor

Most of the Bible was written “from below.” It is stories of and by people who were on the run, enslaved in exile, in jail and poor. So those of us in affluent churches of North America often have a difficult time understanding the Bible. If we might somehow begin to preach and read the Bible with the eyes of the

poor then a whole new world could break in upon us.

If you are a pastor or member of a normal middle class congregation perhaps you might lead people to be with the poor. This might mean working in an urban church’s soup kitchen, opening a shelter for the homeless or coordinating volunteers to tend to the needs of people with AIDS.

We are only able to act in the world we see. If we learn to see with the eyes of the poor then the way we live and act will be influenced and changed. Our preaching will be different because we will have a new vision of what God’s Peaceable Kingdom is all about.

Preach pastorally

Brueggemann says, “It seems clear to me that at the same time we must be very bold about the claims of the gospel upon the church and very patient with one another as we hassle about change and the refusal to change.”

When dealing with a controversial subject people need a pastor who is preaching for them as well as to them, who is with them over a cup of coffee as well as sees them from across the top of the pulpit. Indeed, most any preacher knows that, of any harvest reaped in a sermon, the seeds were planted in someone’s kitchen or sitting room.

In other words, do not shock everyone some Sunday morning by preaching on sexual orientation or the local school board’s racist policies without warning. Beforehand, talk with your people about peace, struggle with them, even butt heads. This takes time, patience and a lot of individual attention.

Secondly, and more fundamentally, we are not one-issue people. I know preachers who are as single-minded about “getting my people to be peacemakers” as others are about “getting people saved.” Both kinds usually run off more people than they ever convince.

People need to know we are not there trying to convince them of something but we are there because we care for them. We love them for who they are and not

for who we can make them into.

Preach with specific suggestions for action

Often, after spending time with people and then preaching on justice and peace-related concerns, some church members will ask, “What can we do?”

Give people some specific ideas of actions they can take. Do it during the sermon, in an after-sermon dialogue or in your church newsletter column.

Don’t forget to lift up ministries in which the congregation is currently involved—but never thought to call “peacemaking.” Affirm what is already happening as the basis for new initiatives.

Preach in the context of worship

One concluding word of caution: Preaching does not exist in order to get people to do or feel something. Preaching is not a pep rally for peace but is about glorifying God. The liturgical context for preaching helps protect us from a simplistic functionalism in our preaching.

The sermon does not have to carry the whole load of freight in worship. The great hymns of the faith, the prayers, the silence, the Lord’s Supper and baptism all serve to help the community of faith have an alternative vision of reality.

The church exists to give the world an alternative vision. The world says violence is legitimate, and peace is only secured by greater armaments. The church, as the foretaste of the Reign of God, says peace is the way—we do not live by violence but by trust.

Of course, the world scoffs at the church’s vision. So, as you stand to preach, remember William Willimon’s words, “The first job of the preacher is to give them a vision so true, so concrete, so clear, so demanding, so gracious, so alluring that it evokes their most courageous response.”

Kyle Childress is pastor of Austin Heights Baptist Church, Nacogdoches, Texas.