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Dear Members of the Commission on Ministry,

I attended The National Preaching Conference at the Kanuga Conference Center in North Carolina. The conference which was sponsored by the Episcopal Preaching Foundation was held from April 19-22, 2010. It was a mix of plenary sessions with keynote speakers, worship with a homily by the conference chaplain or the Presiding Bishop, and small Preaching Groups where we had the opportunity to not only preach to our peers, but to listen to their sermons, and then have dialogue offering and receiving feedback on what we had heard.

I chose to attend this conference because of its title – Preaching Jesus – and the caliber of the key note speakers. My expectations, based on the title, were that we would be exploring ways to share the Gospel, the Word, with different “cultures” of our society and the world. How do we communicate with young adults, different ethnic cultures, the unchurched, the seekers? I would have to say that my expectations were met, but not in the way I thought they would. The conference was not a list of how to's. The presenters shared their insights on topics from seeing preaching as a spiritual practice in which prayer and meditation are as much a part of the preparation and delivery as exegesis, to looking at how Jesus “preached Jesus”. Jesus made stuff up – parables – drawn from common life and tradition. The topics were things the people cared about and Jesus proclaimed a Kingdom. Challenge – What are we proclaiming? Jesus used parables, sayings, allegory, riddles, a metaphor from daily life, the meaning of which is in sufficient doubt so that it teases the listener to imagine possibilities and bridge between two sides.

The Presiding Bishop reminded us that Preaching has to be incarnate – in a particular context – Good news that is original and current in context - not more propositional which keeps the Good news in the intellectual and cuts off other ways the Spirit may speak. She cautioned us to pay attention to different translations as words change in meaning. Meet God in daily life. Where is God at work in the scriptures? Let your listeners wrestle with you. And just when we thought the world had been turned upside down, the final key note speaker, Bill Willimon sent us off with the images of “Jesus used words to overthrow an empire.” Or ‘No one ever accused Jesus as being well-balanced – he used hyperbole and overstatement.’ Or “In Jesus’ preaching God goes public. Jesus had a willingness to talk about God. He talked about a God that does something, one who moves in love and tells truth in love.” Bill dared us to let God be God, as He is, not as we would make him.

Each one of the 6 keynote speakers was excellent, and their offerings did not overlap, but complimented the others. Another strong point of the conference was the opportunity to

preach a sermon in a small group of our peers, to be able to have dialogue about our efforts, receive feedback and suggestions. Each small group was facilitated by someone from the Episcopal Preaching Foundation who encouraged the conversation that took place so that it was non-threatening, but helpful. The only suggestion for improvement would be that we have longer or more time to spend in the small groups. We found that in addition to the sermons, that we wanted an opportunity to spend more time talking about some of the nuts and bolts – delivery, styles, do you sing in your sermon or not, practical suggestions for preparing for a sermon, etc.

Another strength of the conference was the worship, which wove in and out and held the program together. The chaplain was Bishop Griswold, and his homilies were wonderful in the way that they naturally supported the materials and experiences we were engaged in.

Each of the key note presentations were recorded on CD's, as were worship homilies. I purchased set of the CD's. I believe that an effect way to share the information, and use the CD's would be to offer a series of seminars. The format would be to listen as a group to one of the presentations, and then have dialogue/discussion after. They could be offered as a weekend retreat, with the opportunity to listen and respond to 2 or 3. It could also be offered as a series of evening lectures in a congregational setting, or as a series held in regional settings.

I would also like to explore gathering those who preach to meet and share a sermon with the opportunity to receive feedback, like we experienced at the conference. Such a gathering might meet on a regular basis and be an opportunity to learn, share what works and doesn't. We rarely get to hear each other's sermons, and my insight into the Word is enriched by hearing many voices. Another idea is to create a group inside the parish that once a year for 4 Sundays in a row, evaluates the sermon and provides feedback to the preacher after each. It can be a learning experience for both the members of the group as well as the preacher.

This conference was very rich in content and experience. The experience fed my soul both spiritually as well as intellectually. For me, living and learning with people from outside my congregation and diocese provides me with contacts and experiences that enrich my ministry. I am planning to attend again next year. It will be held at Kanuga Conference Center, March 21-24, 2011. The theme will be "Preaching the Passion and Resurrection of Christ". I highly recommend this conference to those who want to be stretched in their faith and then share that in their preaching.

Thank you for supporting my attendance at this conference.

Peace,

The Rev. Kay Rohde