

***Strengthening
the Encounter of Preaching***

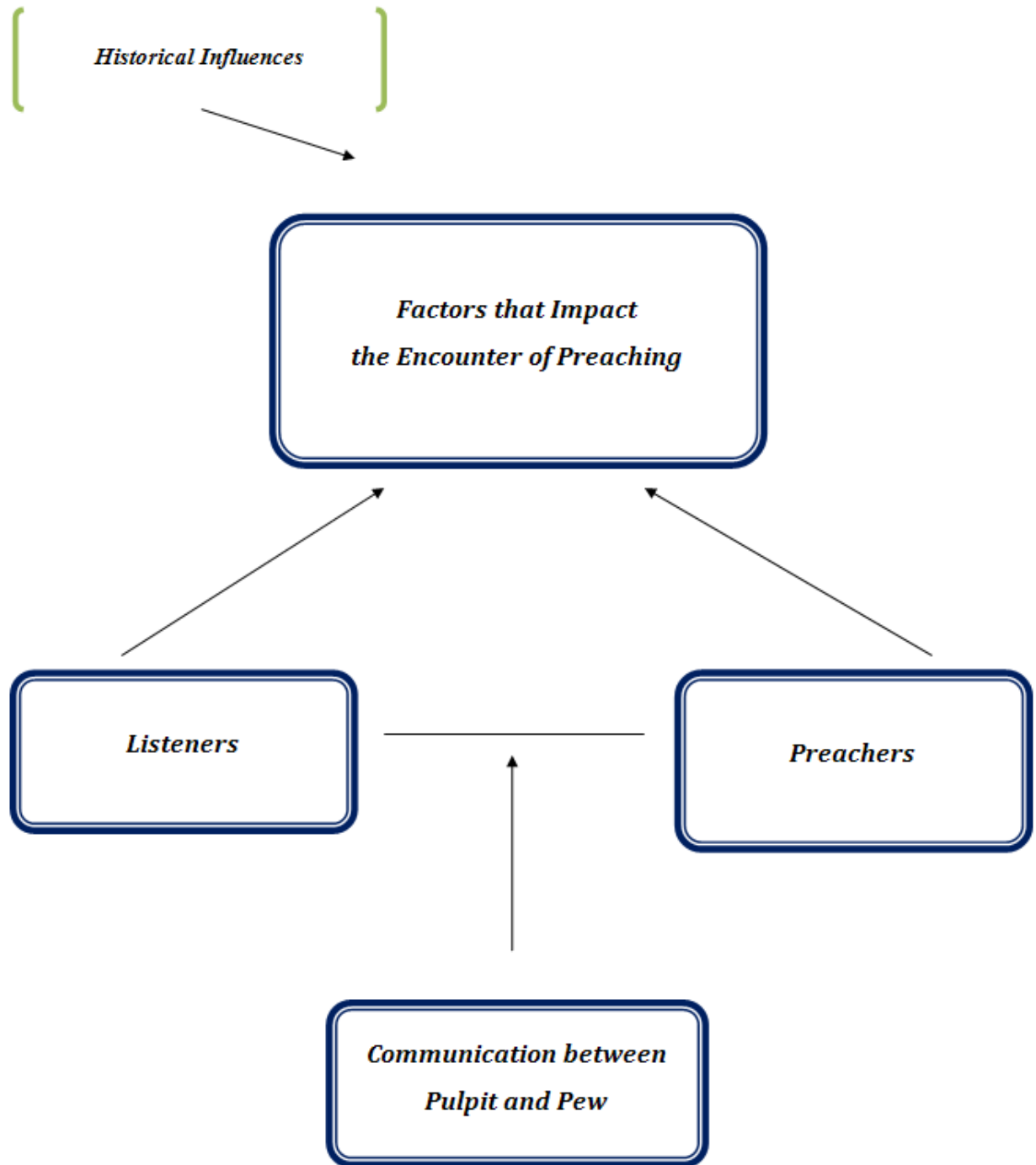
Elements of Strategic Planning

The Fundamental Concerns of *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: the Sunday Homily*

1. The renewal of the preaching ministry - “the quality of homilies needs to be improved” (Verbum Domini #59).
2. A call for renewed evangelization – “the re-proposing of the encounter with the Risen Lord, his Gospel, and his Church to those who no longer find the Church’s message engaging (PYM pg. 3, line 19).
3. Deepening the spirituality of the preacher as the path to effective preaching – “What might we do as ministers of the Word to develop ourselves personally to improve the quality of preaching in our day?” (PYM pg. 7, line 16).

Elements Needed to Create a Strategic Plan to Improve Preaching in the Catholic Church

1. Accurate assessment of the current situation in Catholic preaching
 - a. What are our internal strengths and weaknesses?
 - b. What are the opportunities and challenges of the world in which we minister?
2. What is our vision?
 - a. What should the encounter with God through preaching look like?
 - b. What does the preaching do within the larger context of parish community life?
 - c. How does it impact the mission of the Church in relation to the wider world?
 - d. Where do we want to be in 5 years? In 10 years? In 30 years?
3. How do we get there?
 - a. How do we bridge this gap between where we are and where we want to be?
 - b. What do we concretely need to do to make this vision happen?
 - c. Who will do it? How do we break it down into manageable pieces? What do we do first? When and how?



***Factors that Impact
the Encounter of Preaching***

Historical Influences

Unpacking the historical factors that have affected the connectedness of Catholic preaching

1. After the Reformation, Catholic identity centered on the sacraments
2. Institutionally, scriptural preaching was declared a value
 - a. Council of Trent, 1546: “feed the people committed to them, with wholesome words, according to their own capacity and that of their people
 - b. “the term “Counter-Reformation” is especially appropriate. Its preachers simply refused to move in the direction the Reformers moved in their reform of preaching?” (Old, 160)
 - c. Post-Tridentine preaching - Right knowledge and right action as keys to salvation; pass on doctrine and morals so that people could get to heaven (Atkinson, 34, also pg. 29, line 18 *PMF*)
 - d. Early 20th century: preaching had withered away: optional, non-scriptural, non-liturgical, doctrinal, moral, set apart from the action of the liturgy
3. At Vatican II, “sermon” becomes integral to liturgy; preaching at Mass becomes expected; complaints center on the quality of the preaching,, not its existence
4. Connectedness: Two-tiered cultural system
 - a. Pius X, 1906: “the Church is essentially an unequal society”; “duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led”
 - b. Clergy educated, people high school or less until the GI Bill in the 1950’s in the US; Great respect for the clergy as a profession: Father was Father
 - c. Ecclesiology of “we” the clergy are the church as opposed to “we” the people of God (as Vatican II introduced); or “you” the clergy are the church from those in the pew (not taking ownership); given new birth in *PMF* pg 34, line 22
 - d. By end of twentieth century, fewer clergy required to preach more with less time
5. Investment in preaching limited (follow the money to find what one really values)
 - a. Numbers of Catholic books on preaching in the dozens compared to hundreds of books on saints, sacraments, prayer books, doctrine, history – look at the catalogs
 - b. Preaching graduate education and on-going education sparse: not financed or time-invested: only one Catholic graduate school that issues a doctorate specifically in preaching; grants for those students minimal
 - c. Limited number of preaching workshops; lack of attendance limits their flourishing; ongoing formation in preaching not required

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Listeners

1. Commitment is spotty – pockets of fervor, much ambivalence to faith
2. Expectations for the liturgy of the Word are low, thus attentiveness is also low. Sacramental education is the stronger.
3. Feedback loop in preaching is absent; response to preaching is only given to those who preach well.
4. People in the pew are inundated with information; marketers say that we are learning how not to listen – we tighten the intake valve so only let some information gets through; also overwhelmed, can't pay attention to everything
5. Time-pressed people are more easily influenced by negative impressions – they also carry more weight.
6. Culturally, we are influenced less by objective analysis and more by subjective comprehension – marketers, media, pollsters work to sway people by impressions rather than purposeful scrutiny of the message
7. Becoming a visual society; not trained in oral discourse
8. Communication is evolving into a two-way conversation, especially among the internet-accustomed young: a monologue from the pulpit is a foreign medium
9. Churchy words have gone flat – liturgical and theological language has no air of experience within it; not understood as a result of historical catechetical failings
10. Characteristics of spiritual life from my study and from research: youth values from study:
 - a. Trying to be a good person matters most.
 - b. Making God first in my life and prayer are at the bottom of the value system

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Preachers

1. Strong emphasis in seminary on spiritual formation and Scripture in last thirty years
 - a. From my study, this has borne fruit – good men who can unpack the Scriptures
 - b. Skills of preaching lag behind formation – good men, yes; good homilies, well...
 - c. The formation paradigm/ministerial skills paradox
2. Sense of brotherhood – source of friendships, camaraderie
 - a. In seminary, practice preaching to those who are like them in theological training and gender with a potential disconnect from preaching for parish life.
 - b. In early years of priesthood, ongoing formation comes from pastor of parish – an apprenticeship model: can be uneven as to effectiveness in attitudes toward and connecting with the people in pew
 - c. Brotherhood of clergy is basis of experience; if only stay there, can create isolation from parishioners' lives; blind spots as to the needs of the people
 - d. The experience of seminarians who enter young may be seminary-weighted; limited life experience from which to preach
3. Rewards system
 - a. Unlike Protestant ministers, Catholic clergy are not advanced in position through better preaching; rewards are intrinsic but not extrinsic
 - b. Because feedback is absent, preachers may find other forms of ministry more personally rewarding: e.g. visiting folks at the hospital gets more enduring gratitude
 - c. Those “downtown” may not: 1) encourage the preaching or 2) assess/hold accountable or 3) understand the demands of life in the parish.
 - d. Trouble can come from preaching if a parishioner complains to the bishop. Quote: “better to be bland than prophetic”.
4. Factors of life impact homily preparation and ongoing homiletic training (see following chart from clergy interviews)

Summary of clergy concerns about preaching (from interviews)

- Time-pressured. Not as much time for homily preparation as they would like. Some pastors are weary.
- Preaching is not a priority; there are just so many other things to do. Many homilies given in a week.
- A cultural silence in feedback and assessment, both from their hearers and from those who are trained in communication. As a result, it is not really clear how they are doing.
- May not feel a need to improve; the preaching is good enough. (82% above average – Shea and Lovrick)
- Do not know exactly how to improve, how to better relate to the people, especially the young. Do not hear others preach.
- Inaccessibility of preaching improvement programs (especially in relation to time constraints).
- Continuing education has to be practical to make the best use of limited time.
- Do not realize how much impact their 7-12 minute homily has in the faith life of their people.

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Communication between Pulpit and Pew

1. A lack of data - We really don't know how we are doing:
 - a. Little objective data, largely anecdotal; ongoing assessment lacking
 - b. Clergy sample of response tends to be from their inner circle (when they get it);
 - c. Parishioner sample of response comes from family and friends
2. Feedback - no consistent/credible feedback from the pew
 - a. Not expected to give feedback; feel that it might not be desired
 - b. Don't know how to give it
 - c. Immediate feedback can have various meanings "I like you" or "Have a good day" or "I would like more influence around here" (Untener)
 - d. A culture of "niceness" – feedback only given to those who do well; those anonymous unsigned "nasty letters"
3. Feedback requests from the pulpit – from interviews, what would be helpful?
4. Painting a picture of how we are we doing in connecting.
 - a. Grades from survey results – connecting, motivating, overall (see charts)
 - b. Person of preacher – 82% agree or strongly agree that he is a role model for them
 - c. Evaluation of homily – average grade – 2.46/4.0
 - d. Personal faith life – 55% of those attending Mass could say that they had grown in faith in some way in the past year through preaching; 45% could not
 - e. Correlations between those –
 - i. faith life of respondent did not impact evaluation of the homily
 - ii. perception of the preacher did not impact evaluation of the homily
 - iii. reason for coming to Mass – whether came to worship God or whether parents required – did not impact evaluation of the homily
 - iv. for those outside the inner circle, the homily rises and falls on the quality of the homily – they don't know the homilist
 - v. no statistical difference between the preaching of younger and older preachers; except in the characteristic "helped me understand the Scripture," the younger preachers were better in a statistically significant way
5. In their words: "If you could say anything about how to better connect with you, what would you say?"
 - Relate to my life (and let me relate to yours)
 - Go deeper – don't talk on superficial things
 - More passion – monotony kills interest
 - Be personal; be interested in us; be interesting
 - Reciprocal interchange that was trusting and true and *jointly* uplifting

6. Good news about the connection in preaching:
 - a. From the study, young people are asking for more, not less: more depth, more connection, more gospel transformation
 - b. Sources of influence are becoming more local – authority resides in those you know; don't trust those at a distance – institutions, government, etc.
 - c. This opens tremendous potential for a credible and personal connection with a minister of the gospel
7. Clergy concerns about “selling out” or accommodating as we work to connect: Paradox about “relate to me” – the gospel message does not change, the packaging does: whether unpacking a passage of Scripture, a doctrine or a teaching point, each time, it has to be packaged in a way that the listener can understand

Sample data from those who attend Mass regularly:

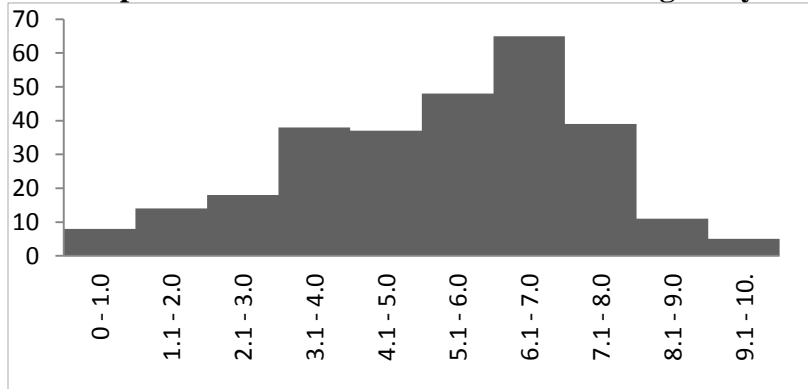
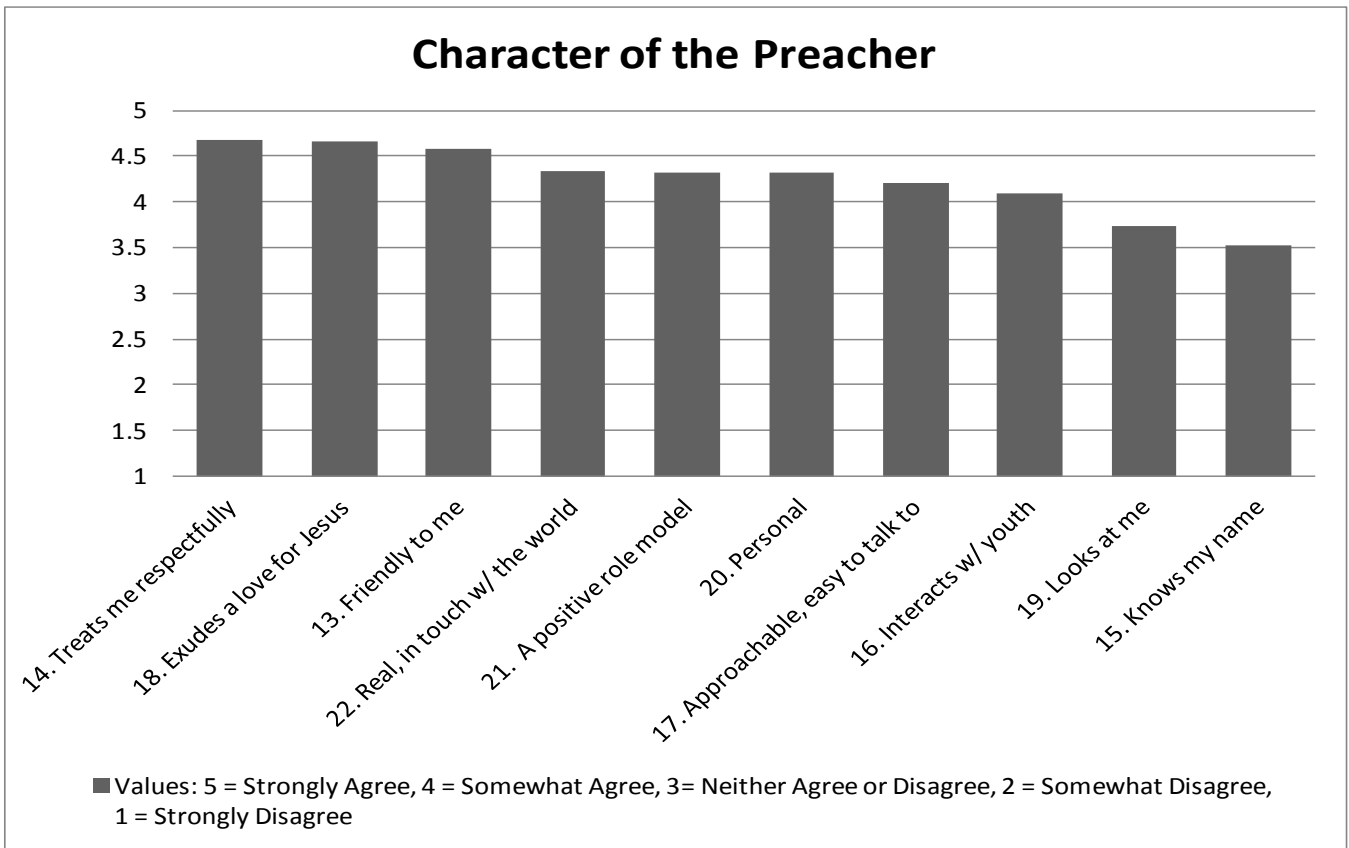
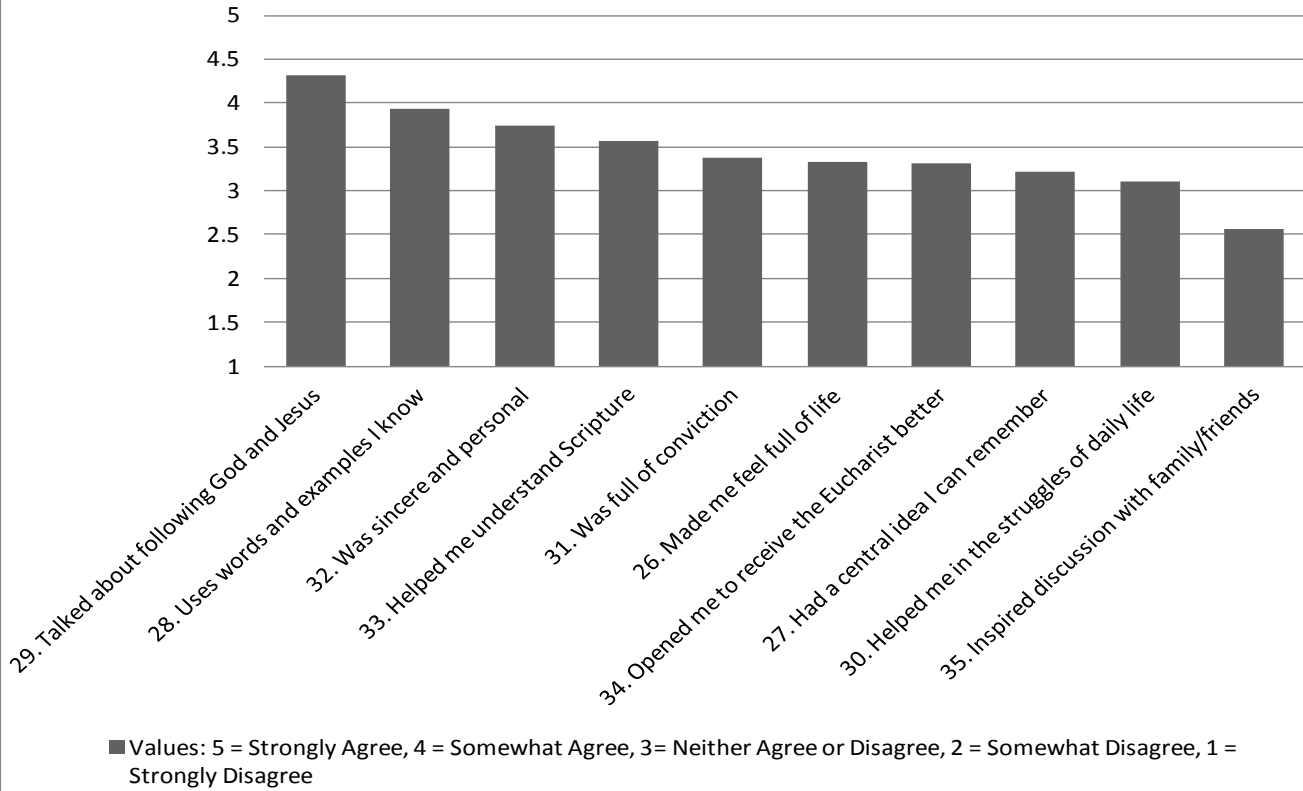


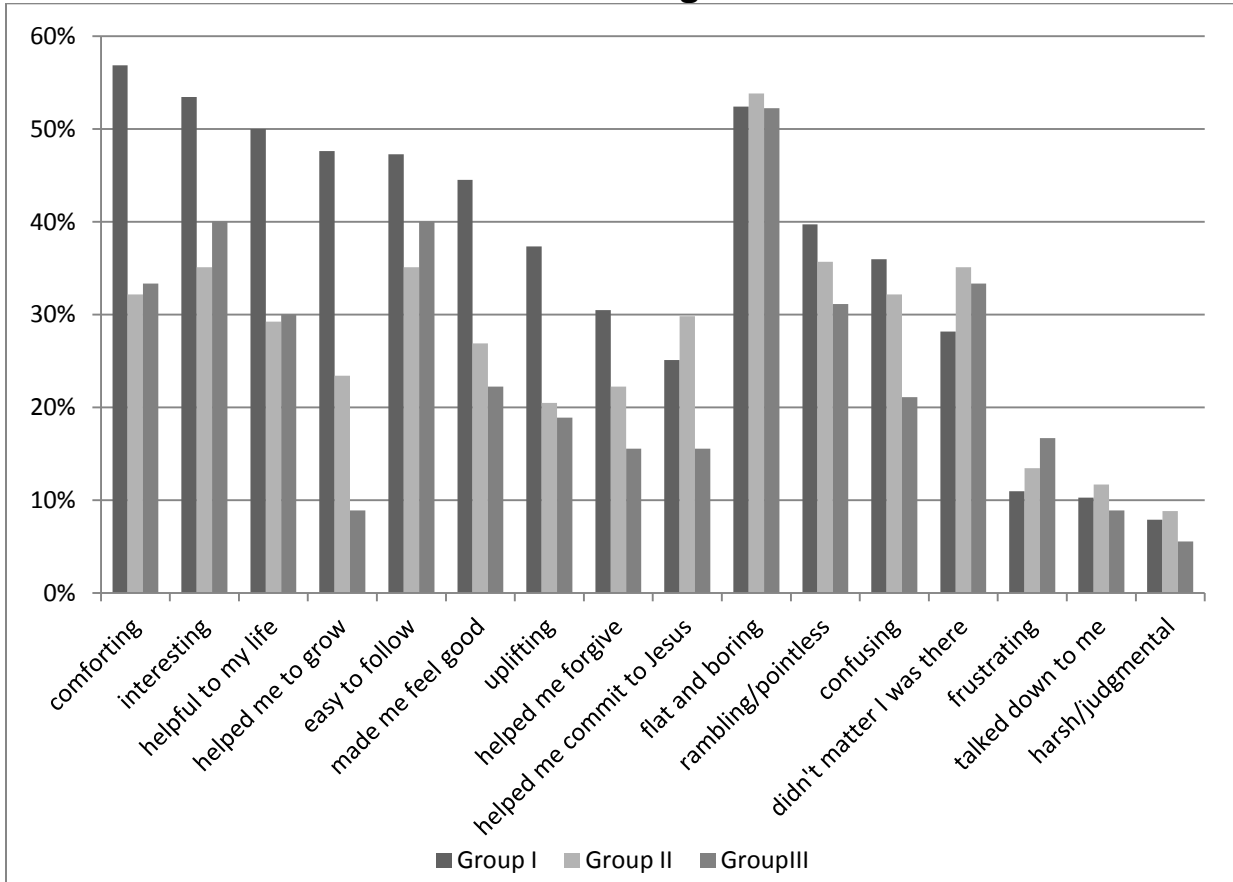
Figure 4.7. Question 25: How well does this preacher connect with you? (on a gradient scale of 1=completely disconnected, 5=somewhat connected, 10=very connected)



Characteristics of the Homily Last Heard



Characteristics of the Preaching Heard in the Past Year



Research Needs

Rather than assume we know, go and find out

Developing an accurate assessment of the current situation in Catholic preaching:

Overall assessment of where we are:

- 1) Large scale study of the quality of U.S. Catholic preaching – horizontal and longitudinal (5-10 years)
- 2) Large scale study of the long-term impact of Catholic Sunday preaching – determine what elements of preaching further the encounter with God, which block that encounter

Strengthening the rewards system for “Why improve?”:

- 1) Correlation between the role of preaching and the decision toward ordination, especially between the ages of 12-18.
- 2) Correlation between the quality of Sunday preaching and parish finances, attendance, and engagement factors

Strengthening the understanding of the listener:

- 1) Correlation between the message sent and the message received: subjective and objective understanding of the listener
- 2) Listener study of relationality: what brings them into an encounter with Jesus Christ? What motivates? Maintains attention? What does “bored” mean?
- 2) Parishioner spirituality: what do they value? How do we speak to their needs for spiritual growth? What are their needs for spiritual growth? What are their catechetical/doctrinal needs? How much of the weight of those needs can the homily carry? What are other venues for meeting those needs?

Strengthening the understanding of the needs of the preacher:

- 1) What are the overall strengths and weaknesses of our preachers in general? Which preaching skills need to be targeted first? Where can we make incremental change that will result in exponential growth?
- 2) What are the most effective means of transmitting preaching improvement information to clergy?
- 3) What assessments are effective in analyzing individual strengths and weaknesses in furthering the encounter of preaching? What is the response to those assessments? What are the results of pilot projects in preaching improvement?
- 4) What motivates change in preaching preparation habits? What sustains that change so that it becomes a way of life?
- 5) As a man of communion, what factors influence a preacher’s listening abilities? How can we identify role models/best practices: those habits which create an openness to the needs of the people?
- 6) What are best practices in preaching for the long-term growth of a parish community?