

## **Deep Calls to Deep: Nurturing Preachers for the Work of Proclamation**

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Deep Calls to Deep is a program to nurture and strengthen preaching. It is housed at Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS), a seminary of the Episcopal Church, and is funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc. It is one of the programs created as part of the Lilly Endowment's initiative to strengthen the quality of preaching.

In keeping with a major emphasis of this initiative, Deep Calls to Deep is structured around peer group learning:

- Each year the program supports six peer groups of six preachers each, who covenant to meet monthly for a year to preach for each other, receive feedback on each other's preaching, and support each other in the preaching vocation.
- All of the peer groups meet together on the VTS campus for a four-day summer residency at the beginning and end of their program year. The residency offers instruction and formation in the core components of the program, and opportunities for refreshment, renewal, and community-building.
- Each participant has the opportunity to meet regularly with a preaching mentor for ongoing preaching support. In addition, each peer group participates in a mid-year retreat, typically led by one of the program's faculty directors.

This program arose from the conviction that preaching is soul work. The title, Deep Calls to Deep, emphasizes the idea that God speaks as preachers in our depths and we respond out of our depths. To be attuned to this divine speaking and human response, preachers need to cultivate a living, growing relationship with God. They also need to cultivate integration within themselves, in body, mind, and spirit, so that as whole persons they can search their own depths and encounter God there. Strengthening preaching is not fundamentally about offering tips or teaching techniques, but about nourishing preachers for this challenging work.

Although the phrase "deep calls to deep" comes from Psalm 42:7, a touchstone text for the program is Luke 5:1–11, the story of the miraculous catch of fish that leads to Jesus calling his first disciples. The story describes the challenges and joys of discipleship and shows how through God's grace we can respond to the challenges and access the joys.

The text also sheds light on preaching as a joyous and demanding expression of discipleship. In the story, Jesus encounters Peter, James, and John by the Sea of Galilee. They have been fishing all night but have caught nothing. Their exhaustion and even their sense of futility can sometimes assail preachers, too—a sense of having worked terribly hard and yet coming up empty, feeling as if they have nothing to offer. Deep Calls to Deep aims to address this sense of emptiness and soul-weariness so that preachers can continue to bring in a rich catch over their years of preaching.

Jesus addresses the fishermen's failure first by his very presence, reminding them and us that it is in Jesus' company, through him and in relationship to him, that our work bears much fruit. Apart from the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit, our preaching will always be barren.

Second, Jesus responds to the disciples' failed fishing trip by asking them to "put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." This command reminds preachers that the vitality and fecundity of our preaching do not come from staying in the shallows and playing it safe. When we are feeling empty and unfruitful, that is precisely when we are called to take a risk, to launch out into the deeps, to plumb our own depths and those of our culture and preaching context. When we take this risk, the promise is that we will experience unimaginable abundance in our preaching.

However, as Peter's response ("Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!") indicates, this abundance may itself be terrifying because such divine grace reminds us that we cannot stay where we are. God's abundance calls upon us to change our lives, and this call to transformation—to the ever-deepening intimacy with God, each other, and ourselves that preaching requires—can be frightening. If we want our preaching to bear fruit, to be a means of "catching people," as Jesus promises Peter, then we have to wrestle with whether we want God to continue to work in us and change us. Welcoming the refining fire of intimacy with God is not easy, but it is the key to vital, fruitful preaching.

In essence, as preachers we are called into a new way of being in the world, a new way of seeing the world. Moreover, this call comes to us in community. Peter sets forth as a disciple not alone, but in company with James, John, and the others whom Jesus will call. Peter could not respond to the call to launch out into the deep if he had to do so alone. Preachers, likewise, are called to the challenging work of proclamation from the depths not as soloists but as part of a community of fellow preachers.

## **Community**

Deep Calls to Deep builds on all these emphases. The program is built around four themes: community, spirituality, embodiment, and cultivating the preaching imagination.

Building a community of preachers is central to the vision of Deep Calls to Deep. We create this community both in summer residencies and in peer group meetings throughout the year. The emphasis on community is rooted in the principle that preaching is a deeply communal practice: the preacher emerges from the community to preach, and her sermon responds to the needs and religious insights of the community. At its best, preaching is a dialogue between the preacher and the community rather than a one-way communication. In a real sense, the community hears the preacher into speech, and she gives voice to the community's proclamation, urging members to claim their own proclamatory calling.

Not all preachers feel this sense of being supported in a dialogical relationship with their community. Preaching is typically carried out as a monologue in which the congregation does not seem to have a voice. (Call-and-response preaching traditions are a notable exception to this rule.) The preacher is often set apart, wearing different clothes and standing in a pulpit above the

congregation. Moreover, our consumer culture shapes the way many listeners approach preaching: instead of being active participants, they are passive spectators waiting to be entertained. This stance can make preaching feel like a lonely activity, a solo performance with an audience that merely sees and hears. All of these factors make it important for preachers to have a community that can support them in finding their preaching voice. This is what the Deep Calls to Deep peer learning groups provide. The program eschews some of the common approaches to continuing education for preachers, which involve hearing from big-name preachers and experts, in favor of learning with peers in community.

We pour a great deal of energy into forming and supporting the peer groups, so that they can function effectively as learning communities. At the first residency, participants spend hours in their peer groups, learning about each member's history as a preacher and articulating their personal goals for the program. Early in their time together, peer group members offer a three-minute testimony in which they give "an account of the hope that is in (them)" (1 Peter 3:15). These core gospel statements serve as touchstones for the group's work together, because they reveal an essential aspect of each person's preaching voice. Each group also spends time forming a covenant outlining participants' commitment to each other and norms for how they will interact.

Each peer group has a trained facilitator who hosts the group, handles meeting logistics, and fosters an atmosphere of trust and accountability in the group. The facilitator is not a preaching expert but rather someone who attends to the dynamics of the group, reminds members to keep the commitments they have made to each other, brings forth the wisdom of the group, and helps to deepen the group's conversation. The work of the facilitator in creating and maintaining the group's health is crucial, in part because many clergy have had negative experiences with peer groups, which can become competitive, negative, or unproductive. Extra care is needed to make sure these groups work well. In addition, preaching inherently makes preachers vulnerable, so creating a safe environment for honest feedback requires skill and attention. To help prepare facilitators for their vital role, we provide training before the residency.

Beyond the peer groups, the residency aims to provide a life-giving experience of community. Residency participants include members of the peer groups that are just beginning the program and members of peer groups that are concluding. This overlap between the two cohorts leads to productive synergies. The schedule offers numerous times for all participants to gather in community—for worship, common meals, lectures, presentations, and times of unstructured fellowship.

## **Spirituality**

Based on the conviction that vital preaching depends on a living relationship with God, this program emphasizes building this relationship in a variety of ways. The peer groups are meant to be communities of support as well as of learning, and one of the ways members support each other is by praying for one another. Each peer group meeting has time set aside for worship—time when group members hold each other in God's presence and ask the Holy Spirit to make them the preachers God has called them to be. Likewise, at our on-campus residencies, we worship together at the beginning and end of each day.

We also signal the importance of the spirituality of preaching by setting aside the first day of the four-day residency as a Sabbath day. This might seem counterintuitive; packing each day with programming might seem like a more valuable way to use our time together. But the decision to prioritize the Sabbath speaks to the core principle that cultivating a vital relationship with God is indispensable to preaching. By setting aside a Sabbath day, we give preachers the simple gift of time to nurture that relationship.

Preachers and pastors are not always good at observing the fourth commandment, but our preaching suffers when we do not. Without time simply to be with God and to rest in God, the well that nourishes our preaching will in time run dry. For preachers to take Sabbath time is to acknowledge that it is God's grace that animates our preaching and to allow ourselves to be fed by this grace. Sabbath also stills the chatter of our lives, allowing us to sink into our depths and hear God's wisdom in our souls. We set aside a Sabbath day at our residency not only to ground our work together for the rest of the week but also to induce our fellows to set aside regular times for Sabbath refreshment throughout the program and beyond.

## **Embodiment**

Connected to the theme of spirituality is the program's focus on embodiment. We discover our relationship with our own depths, where we meet God in our bodies. Here again, embodiment is not a matter of teaching "delivery tips" but of integrating body, mind, and spirit so that we come to our preaching as whole persons. By engaging our bodies, we discover the body's wisdom—what our bodies know about God, which is often more than our minds know. It makes sense that this should be so; core tenet of the Christian faith is that God became incarnate in human flesh. The incarnation points to the sacredness of all bodies, to the fact that God is known in and through the body.

To engage the body and unlock its insights, we spend a considerable amount of time at the residency engaging in bodywork. We teach exercises from the Linklater method of voice training, a method that aims to free the speaking voice by reconnecting the voice to the speaker's body and emotions.<sup>1</sup> The goal is fully embodied communication, in which the words that exist in the speaker's mind find expression through the entire body.

Dis-integration—the split of mind from body and spirit—is the soul-sapping condition in which preachers and hearers often live. Engaging the body can help integrate mind, body, and spirit, thus freeing up energy and joy in the preacher. Such integration while speaking grants authenticity and authority to preaching and creates a deeper connection to one's hearers. The preacher speaks from a state of aliveness, inspiring hearers to live integrated lives themselves. Embodied communication makes the preacher available to the Holy Spirit's leading—to deeper truths within—and provides the courage to speak these truths.

The program's focus on embodiment thereby links the themes of spirituality and community, since integrated, embodied communication opens the preacher to deeper relationships with God and with the community of listeners.

## **The Preaching Imagination**

Cultivating the preaching imagination is an overarching goal of Deep Calls to Deep that unites the other three themes. The imagination is not to be confused with fantasy; rather, it is a holistic way of seeing the world. To cultivate the preaching imagination is to practice preaching not as a discrete task for Sundays but as a complete way of life. The preacher perceives the world through the lens of Christian scripture, tradition, and theology, seeking connections between these sources of authority and the preacher's own cultural contexts.

To live in the world as a preacher, to perceive the world through the preaching imagination, is to promote different values and visions of human flourishing than the world at large might favor. To see the world differently in this way is a matter of lifelong formation. It requires the courage to embrace ongoing transformation, to leave one's nets, and to journey into the depths of God and God's desires for the world.

One way that Deep Calls to Deep cultivates our fellows' preaching imagination is by tapping the imagination more narrowly. Presenters at the residency often draw on poetry, music, and the visual arts to invite a more poetic, right-brained approach to biblical texts. Embodiment is another way into a more imaginative interpretation of texts. Bringing the freedom of voice and body to the speaking of scripture yields surprising insights; embodied, performative interpretation of the text sparks the preaching imagination. This is one of many ways we weave the themes of this program together in practice.

## **Implications for Teaching Preaching**

The homiletician Thomas Troeger once said, "I don't teach preaching; I teach preachers." That statement expresses the guiding principle of Deep Calls to Deep. The program is designed not principally to teach preaching skills but to form preachers who are open to their own depths, where they meet the depths of God and the depths of their hearers.

Program alumni describe the changes the program has wrought in them as more foundational than functional: they are deepened as preachers because they are deepened as human beings. As one participant said, "I now experience preaching as an act of faith, not as a task or burden. I have a path ahead for fully integrating my vocation and life into the joy of preparing to share God's Word with God's people."

Teaching preaching so as to engage preachers holistically is particularly important in our current cultural moment. Allegiance to the church is on the wane in this country; people no longer attend church out of habit or to fulfill cultural expectations. Instead, if they come at all, it is for a deeper purpose. They come in quest of meaning. They come seeking preaching that will feed their souls. And this preaching needs to come not from people who are skating on the surface of life but from those who are willing to cast their nets out into the deep. We recognize such preaching when we hear it, and it is this preaching that Deep Calls to Deep seeks to cultivate.

Moreover, the challenges of living in the economic and spiritual conditions of neoliberal capitalism call for a different kind of preaching than heretofore.<sup>2</sup> Neoliberal capitalism is a harsh

economic system that puts people's well-being on a precarious footing, making them competitive with each other, isolating them from communities, and convincing them that their primary objective is to fend for themselves and their immediate family. Moreover, neoliberalism is a totalizing cultural framework, making it difficult for us to imagine any other version of selfhood than that which the culture provides. As Kathryn Tanner notes in her work on contemporary capitalism, "There is no 'you' apart from it; it covers the entirety of life, at work and outside of it, and the whole of one's aspirations," such that it is impossible to imagine escape from the current economic order.<sup>3</sup> Bruce Rogers-Vaughn describes the condition of the self in neoliberal capitalism as isolated, fragmented, and disconnected from institutions and traditions. This state of being leads to "suffering that is not aware of itself as suffering," which is characterized by depression, addiction, and a tendency to blame oneself for a diffuse misery in which there seems to be no one else to blame.<sup>4</sup>

The totalizing regime of neoliberal capitalism, Rogers-Vaughn says, withers the soul, "soul" being "an aspect of the embodied self, namely *the activity of self-transcendence*, where this refers not to an act of individual rationality, but to that activity which holds individuals in relation with self, others, creation, and the Eternal."<sup>5</sup> The soul is found in relationship, for "soul, by its very nature, cannot be confined within the individual. It is, rather, a fabric that embeds every one of us within all that is."<sup>6</sup> The soul atrophies in neoliberal capitalism as selves are isolated and fragmented. The remedy for such soul-sickness is to form communities based on values of mutual care and abundance. Such communities, united around a common desire for God and dependence on God as the source of life, can model the existence of ways of life outside of the totalizing claims of neoliberalism.

In such cultural circumstances, preaching must be about nurturing soul, making it possible for humans to engage in that self-transcendence that allows them to be in relationship with God, self, and others. Deep Calls to Deep aims to nurture such preaching. It forms a community of preachers and strengthens these preachers to build communities, through their preaching, in which souls can be healed and nurtured. The connection between embodiment and spirituality seeks to weave preachers into the fabric of integrated relationship with self, others, and God, which is where the soul is found and strengthened. Overall, the program seeks to shape preachers into a different imagination, a different way of seeing the world than that of the culture in which they find themselves—to be free of its totalizing claims so they can impart this freedom to others in their preaching.

These emphases of Deep Calls to Deep suggest a need for broader transformation in how preaching is taught, particularly in our current cultural context. The program is based on the conviction that the preacher's role is not to solve technical problems but to meet adaptive challenges.<sup>7</sup> While technical problems can be solved using existing know-how, adaptive challenges require deeper changes in people's habits, priorities, and loyalties. Such profound change can happen only by engaging people's hearts—their entire selves. If preachers seek to transform their hearers in this deeper way, preachers themselves need to engage the fullness of their own selves, soul and body—and the way preaching is taught must reflect this. Teaching preaching is not about solving technical problems with technical solutions but about meeting an adaptive challenge holistically.

According to this model, teaching preaching is less a matter of conveying intellectual knowledge or technique and more a process of forming character and teaching a way of life. Teachers of

preaching are akin to spiritual directors, who engage in a process of listening that draws forth the student's authentic voice, or art teachers, whose work involves creating space for students' creativity and courage to emerge. Such teaching requires a high level of integration, self-knowledge, and courage on the part of those who teach preaching, which means that they too need to be nurtured in community in order to strengthen these qualities in themselves for the work they are called to do. Teaching preaching is a call to ever-deeper integration and transformation, so that this way of being can be passed on to students of preaching, who in turn offer it to their congregations. Teaching preaching is itself a demanding, yet fruitful way of life that responds to the promise of abundance to be found in the deeps.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This voice method is outlined in Kristin Linklater, *Freeing the Natural Voice*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Hollywood, CA: Drama Publishers, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, in *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), notes that "neoliberalism" has become an umbrella term to describe "the transformation and global expansion of capitalism that has advanced steadily since the early 1980s," a development that "has been progressively and systematically undermining social, interpersonal, and psychological well-being," 6.

<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Rogers-Vaughn, 169.

<sup>5</sup> Rogers-Vaughn, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Rogers-Vaughn, 5.

<sup>7</sup> This distinction is described, among other places, in Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing your Organization and the World* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 19.