

Pastors challenged to link faith, society in their sermons

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP)—Prophecy is not about gazing into the future. It's about passion for a better world right now, speakers at a celebration of preaching stressed.

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While many think of the prophets of the Bible primarily as predictors of the future, that prophetic proclamation is mostly a critique of social evil and a

call to justice, they said.

The speakers addressed as many as 2,000 church leaders from across the nation during a Celebration of Prophetic Preaching event in Nashville, Tenn., sponsored by the Indianapolis-based Lilly Endowment. The one-day celebration was part of a longer Festival of Homiletics, an annual event aimed at promoting good preaching.

Some presenters approached the theme of prophetic preaching directly, identifying its key characteristics. Others held up visions of what a world shaped by the values of a prophetic faith could look like.

“The two great hungers in our world today are the hunger for spirituality and the hunger for social justice, and the connection between the two is the one the world’s waiting for. There’s a whole generation out there waiting for a different kind of message.”
—Jim Wallis

Author and activist Jim Wallis spoke of longing for preaching that links faith with real problems. An evangelical Christian, Wallis edits the Washington, D.C.-based Sojourners Magazine.

“The two great hungers in our world today are the hunger for spirituality and the hunger for social justice, and the connection between the two is the one the world’s waiting for,” Wallis said. “There’s a whole generation out there waiting for a different kind of message. I think prophetic preaching is meant to clear up the confusion of what faith means.”

Pastors who speak prophetically must go beyond dissent and critique, the Washington activist explained.

“Prophetic preaching says a clear ‘no,’ but prophetic preaching also has to have a strong and clear ‘yes,’” Wallis said.

Citing an Old Testament example, Wallis said the prophet Habakkuk pointed to the injustice around him and demanded God do something about it. But the text doesn’t stop there. “Somebody’s got to write a vision and make it plain,” Wallis said, echoing the response God gave Habakkuk.

Preaching that links faith to society may be the only hope for fundamental change, Wallis suggested.

“When politics fails to even address the biggest issues, what normally happens is social movements rise up to change politics. And the best social movements have spiritual foundations,” he said. “We won’t even get to social justice without a revival of faith.”

Joseph Lowery, a United Methodist pastor and co-founder with Martin Luther King Jr. of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, underscored the role of faith in the struggle for racial justice.

Lowery said even in the days of slavery, the church had served as a source of spiritual strength and a center for organizing resistance to oppression.

“Jesus meant two things: he meant liberation from sin, and liberation from the sin of slavery—personal sin, social sin.”

A key participant in the Civil Rights movement, the 85-year-old Lowery stressed the motivation behind the non-violent approach of King's generation of prophetic leaders.

"It was a movement that was rooted in love, faith, hope and love," he said. "We preached that black people cannot love themselves and hate white people, and white people cannot love themselves and hate black people."

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