Pastors reflect on preaching in pandemics

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When COVID-19 hit Houston in March 2020, South Main Baptist Church had to make many adjustments quickly. But Pastor Steve Wells' previously planned sermons on fear and anger gained new relevance.

Steve Wells, pastor of South Main Baptist Church in Houston, participated in an online workshop on "Preaching in Pandemics," offering in conjunction with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship general assembly. (Screen capture image)

"In the fall of 2019, I was pretty convinced that the fall of 2020 was going to be the most contentious period we have known in our city and as a nation," Wells recalled during a Zoom teleconference offered in conjunction with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship general assembly.

So, in early 2020, Wells already was helping to prepare his congregation for "really smart people [who] are spending all their time trying to work

you into a frenzy" by appealing to fear and anger.

"That ended up not needing changing," Wells said.

Ways to 'reclaim some sense of power'

However, in direct response to the pandemic, he and his worship planning team developed a list of challenges members of the congregation likely would be experiencing. They identified issues such as anxiety, stress and depression.

Then he contacted a therapist and made appointments to spend 30 minutes each week with him.

In each session, Wells presented the biblical text for a sermon and the issue of the week, and he asked: "If someone came into your office and this was their presenting problem, what is the healthiest counsel you could give them to address that?"

"So then, every week, I was trying to offer both my best insights into the text and then say: 'Here is sound psychological counsel if you're feeling this. These are concrete steps you can take to reclaim some sense of power in your life and to move forward,'" Wells said.

After that sermon series, Wells said, he felt like his congregation "needed a great big dose of Jesus last year." So, he began an extended series based on the Sermon on the Mount.

Wells and three other pastors offered their insights during a virtual workshop on "Preaching in the Pandemics," which dealt not only with the challenges presented by COVID-19, but also political division and racial injustice.

‘Absolutely exposed to the elements’

Cheryl Anderson, pastor of Palmetto Missionary Baptist Church in Conway, S.C., acknowledged feeling overwhelmed as she addressed the challenges members of her predominantly Black congregation experienced.

“I found myself preaching from my own despair and anger, and that was a real challenge to my integrity,” she acknowledged.

Because the church shifted to a virtual worship format where “anybody could listen in,” Anderson said she felt particularly vulnerable.

“I had to be true to my calling and true to the reality of our life,” she said. “So, I addressed the challenge of being absolutely exposed to the elements. … I addressed it with an openness to the Holy Spirit, with the practicality of the gospel, and with a genuine reliance on truth as the foundation for my personal apologetics.

“I felt absolutely compelled to preach the whole truth and nothing but the truth, because I felt there was no more time on the clock.”

Christy McMillan-Goodwin, pastor of First Baptist Church in Front Royal, Va., described the challenge of “the uncertainty—week to week—of not knowing what was going to happen with the virus, the shutdown, masking and unrest in the community,” she said.

Preaching from the lectionary provided not only an appreciated structure in a time of change, but also a remarkable relevance, she noted.

“It’s interesting how connected the lectionary was to what was going on,” she said.

Identifying ‘felt needs and pain points’

Shaun King, senior pastor of Johns Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta, Ga., spoke to the challenge of preaching in the COVID-19 environment—first to empty seats in all-virtual worship services and later to socially distanced and masked congregants.

He acknowledged an “interruption of the energies of the preaching moment” he felt in tangible and visceral way, missing the “energy swap” he was accustomed to experiencing.

King used surveys to identify the “felt needs and pain points” his congregation was experiencing, which he sought to address in sermons, including a series from the Old Testament book of Job.

Entering into 2021—particularly the Lenten season and Easter—King directed attention toward “trying to name and reframe the experience through the lens of resurrection.”

Need for self-care

King acknowledged ministering in the midst of the pandemic brought him almost to the point of “existential exhaustion.” He found help through therapy, an exercise routine at the gym, regularly scheduled meetings with friends who also are ministers and the practice of “centering” prayer each morning.

“If I don’t do that daily, to frame the day, I am an absolute train wreck,” he said. “When I routinely attend to that, I’m unflappable. And there really is no in-between.”

The other three pastors likewise emphasized the importance of connecting with small groups of friends, engaging in some form of exercise—preferably

outdoors—and guarding their schedules to avoid constant demands on their time.

Wells mentioned the importance of ministers learning to recognize “how much gas is in the tank,” and saying “no with conviction” on occasion to be free to say “yes with abandon” at other times.

Moving forward, before he begins a series of messages based on the New Testament book of Galatians, Wells said he plans to preach several sermons about the importance of “claiming sabbath.”