Chapter 8
Time for Feedback

In this chapter we introduce feedback forms that are a tool designed to improve our sermons. Some information is also given on how to deal with feedback and criticism.

8.1 Introduction

It is very important and helpful to get feedback on our sermons. We need to understand how we sound to others. Is my preaching effective? Does my preaching having a clear message? Is it relevant? Does the "world of meaning" of the Gospel and the doctrine of the church connect with the "world of meaning" of our members?

Feedback can also make you aware of what issues of faith members are struggling with. What questions do they have? In what areas of their lives do they need guidance for? What areas of doctrine need to be explained more?

This is known as "dialogical preaching". The sermon becomes a dialogue and ministers are encouraged to invite members to give their feedback on the sermon. Members need to become aware that they have an important responsibility in your sermon preparation. They must not just be "consumers", but also "service providers". Members provide data and experiences, and they produce insights that need to be taken into account. As ministers we do not know everything and should not be afraid to learn from members. Also, we will not have all the answers that members pose, but it is of vital importance today to listen to the congregation and being sensitive to their life of faith.

Importantly, this does not mean that the members determine our preaching. We must preach what the church determined in the Divine Service Guide. It is about connecting with the members. A feedback form can give you vital information on how to 1) prepare and deliver better sermons and connect with the "world of meaning" of our members, and 2) addressing or being aware of the needs of the congregation.

Study the following feedback form (also available as Appendix E):

Feedback Form (Member)

Dear Brother/Sister,

Your feedback and input on my sermon is encouraged and appreciated. **Please read the questions below carefully before the beginning of the divine service.**

I would love to improve the quality of my sermons and to make the Gospel, and the doctrine of our church relevant, informative, and empowering.

After the divine service, kindly answer the following questionnaire as honestly and as constructively as possible by selecting the most appropriate option. You are also welcome to give helpful comments as indicated below. Thank-you for your time and interest!

Member to fill in section A, B and C

SECTION A:

Name of officiant: _____ Congregation: _____

Date: _____

SECTION B:

Member to indicate his/her:

Gender:
a) Male ☐
b) Female ☐

Age:
a) 15-19 ☐
b) 20-24 ☐
c) 25-35 ☐
d) 36-50 ☐
e) 51+ ☐

SECTION C:

Bible Word

1.
a) The meaning of the Bible word was explained in its context [2] ☐
b) The explanation of the Bible word was without its context ☐
c) No meaning of the Bible word or context was given ☐

[2] Context means 1) the date, author, and circumstances of the writing of the book, and 2) the larger literary context within which the Bible word is situated.

2.

a) The sermon often/regularly linked back to the Bible word ☐
b) The sermon occasionally linked back to the Bible word ☐
c) The sermon never linked back to the Bible word ☐

Sermon Structure and Content

3.

a) The sermon had a good introduction that grabbed your attention ☐
b) The sermon had an average introduction ☐
c) The sermon did not have an introduction ☐

4.

a) The sermon had an understandable structure (Introduction, Body, Summary) and development of thought that was easy to follow ☐
b) The sermon was unstructured and difficult to follow ☐

5.

a) The sermon focussed around a specific message (theme) ☐
b) The sermon did not focus around a specific message (theme) ☐

6.

a) There was a clear goal for the sermon that offered members "take-home" value ☐
b) There was no clear goal for the sermon and/or no "take-home" value ☐

Time-keeping

7.

a) The divine service started on time ☐
b) The divine service started late ☐
c) The divine service started early ☐

8.

a) The divine service length was adequate[3] ☐
b) The divine service was too long ☐
c) The divine service was too short ☐

Other:

9.

Give the officiant helpful comments or suggestions:

Comment: _____

_____

_____

[3] Duration of a divine service must be as follows. Sunday morning: 1 hour; 1h15 with acts; Wednesday evening: 40 minutes.

10. If there was one important thing in your life that the sermon (or church) needs to help/give guidance for, what would it be?

Comment: _____

_____

_____

11. Is there a doctrinal teaching that needs further clarification or teaching?

Comment: _____

_____

_____

Ministers will be requested to regularly ask members for feedback, and also to explain to them that they will be invited to do so and that they can contribute to sermon preparation. Select as many different members as possible, that is, from different age groups and socio-economic backgrounds in order to obtain an overall view.

Important: Ministers must never *confront* members or make any personal contact about the feedback, and they must read the feedback forms in their own private time. Ministers, when appropriate, can meet to discuss the types of feedback they have received. Here a mutual exchange of ideas and encouragement can also be useful.

Getting feedback from the members may be daunting and intimidating, even hurtful, but most of our members will be sincere and want you to improve as a servant of the Word, and genuinely want the sermon to address their faith. If the feedback is taken seriously, appreciated, internalised, and when making the appropriate adjustments as needed, you will become a more effective tool in God's hands.

As part of the training, however, ministers will be prepared for this feedback by first giving feedback to each other. Each participant will conduct a divine service with the other participants and facilitator being present. This feedback form (available as Appendix D) is more technical and will help participants to evaluate each other as to whether they have applied the principles they are encouraged to adopt for constructing a contextual sermon. This forms looks as follows:

Feedback Form (Training)

Dear participant. As part of the training course you are required to give feedback on the officiant's sermon. Your feedback and input on the sermon is encouraged and appreciated. Kindly answer the following questionnaire as honestly and as constructively as possible by selecting the most appropriate option.

Name of officiant: _____ Congregation: _____

Date: _____

Bible Word

1.
a) The Bible word was read clearly and with the necessary emphasis ☐
b) The Bible word was read clearly, without the necessary emphasis ☐
c) The Bible word was not read out clearly ☐

2.
d) The meaning of the Bible word was explained in its context [4] ☐
e) The explanation of the Bible word was without its context ☐
f) No meaning of the Bible word or context was given ☐

3.
d) The sermon often/regularly linked back to the Bible word ☐
e) The sermon occasionally linked back to the Bible word ☐
f) The sermon never linked back to the Bible word ☐

Sermon Structure and Content

4.
a) The heading and message ("Big Idea") was introduced at the beginning of the sermon ☐
b) The heading and message ("Big Idea") was not introduced at the beginning of the sermon ☐
c) The heading and message ("Big Idea") was not introduced or explained ☐

[4] Ideally, this must not be longer than 1 minute.

5.
d) The sermon had a good introduction that grabbed your attention ☐
e) The sermon had an average introduction ☐
f) The sermon did not have an introduction ☐

6.
c) The sermon had an understandable structure (Introduction, Body, Summary) and development of thought that was easy to follow ☐
d) The sermon was unstructured and difficult to follow ☐

7.
c) The sermon points focussed around a specific message ("Big Idea") ☐
d) The sermon points did not focus around a specific message ("Big Idea") ☐

8.
a) The sermon points were adequate and relevant[5] ☐
b) The sermon points were too many and/or not relevant ☐

9.
a) The officiant demonstrated sound knowledge of New Apostolic doctrine ☐
b) The officiant demonstrated average knowledge of New Apostolic doctrine ☐
c) The officiant demonstrated poor/limited/no knowledge of New Apostolic doctrine ☐

10.
a) The sermon was relevant and applicable to the contextual needs of the congregation ☐
b) The sermon was not appropriate to the contextual needs of the congregation ☐

11.
a) The officiant demonstrated sound knowledge of contemporary and relevant social and cultural issues and developments ☐
b) The officiant demonstrated average knowledge of contemporary and relevant social and cultural issues and developments ☐
c) The officiant demonstrated poor/limited/no knowledge of contemporary and relevant social and cultural issues and developments ☐

12.
c) There was a clear goal for the sermon that offered members "take-home" value ☐
d) There was no clear goal for the sermon and/or no "take-home" value ☐

13.
a) The sermon prepared the congregation for the summary or "take-home" value of the sermon ☐
b) The sermon did not prepare the congregation for the summary or "take-home" value of the sermon ☐

[5] Ideally, not more than 2 or 3 points must be given in the main body of the sermon.

Sermon Delivery

14.
- The officiant made good use of his voice (tone, pitch, volume, speed) ☐
- The officiant did not make good use of his voice (tone, pitch, volume, speed) ☐

15.
- The officiant made good use of body language (posture, gestures, facial expressions) ☐
- The officiant did not make good use of body language (posture, gestures, facial expressions) ☐

16.
Give the officiant helpful comments or suggestions:

This whole approach is quite new, and some ministers may, understandably, feel very uncomfortable with it. So how do we deal with feedback and criticism from members?

8.2 Feedback and Criticism – Is it right?

Above the rationale of feedback was explained. Part and parcel of feedback, however, is receiving criticism.

The word criticism is derived from a Greek word that refers to a person who offers reasoned judgement or analysis. Our members come to divine services with certain expectations. They *want* to hear God's Word. So the question arises, what type of "reasoned judgement or analysis" do members give of our sermons? It is also important to realise that ministers are constantly evaluated and criticised about their preaching whether they like it or not.

So we can make a mental adjustment where we turn criticism into a learning tool, a vehicle for self-improvement, *to turn a perceived negative into a positive*. This is important because our preaching is

a primary contact point between the church and the members, so what ministers preach and how they preach is of critical importance.

So the feedback form is designed to be a teaching tool, and to facilitate our knowledge of the "reasoned judgement and analysis" by fellow ministers or members of our preaching. It is not there to undermine ministers in their appointment and authority to preach. Ministers must know full well that they have been ordained by the Apostle ministry with the authority to preach. The danger may exist, however, that ministers can think that they are above criticism, and that members in the benches have nothing to contribute to their abilities or growth as ministers. This would be a mistake, since "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

8.2.1 A Life Under Examination

All of God's children, including ministers, live a life under examination. The call to repent (Greek *metanoia*, meaning "to turn [back]", or "to have a change of mind") is a critique of our sinfulness. The sermon and preaching of the Gospel is a critique of human society and for all people to come to salvation in Christ. Our whole existence "in Christ" is a call to be transformed, and presupposes the way things are, are not how they ought to be.

> All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.
>
> 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Why should the content of our preaching, therefore, not also come under examination? As servants of the Word, does our preaching not also stand under reproof and correction? Do we not want to become "more complete", and "equipped for every good work", including our preaching? A devoted minister will take the task of preaching very seriously and acknowledge: there is always room for improvement!

8.2.2 Leadership Exposes You to Criticism

Being a preacher of the Word by its very nature puts you in a leadership position. You influence how people think and make decisions and respond to their daily lives. As a result, being a leader, and being more visible, will automatically make you a "target" for criticism.

Successful leaders are those who engage with feedback and are open to change. Adaptability is not a weakness, but a strength. Responding *assertively* to constructive criticism (see 8.5 below) is a necessary (and acquired) skill for those in leadership positions.

8.3 Types of Criticism

Criticism can either be constructive or destructive. *Constructive criticism* is where people give genuine feedback in a helpful and non-threatening way. The critique is valid and true. The aim is for the person being criticised to learn and improve. For example: "I really enjoy the way you constructed the sermon, but I think it could be better if you explained how the message must be implemented in my life in a practical way."

Most of our members will also engage in constructive criticism when it comes to our sermons, because their life of faith is at stake. They want and need God's Word to touch their hearts and minds and speak to them. They want you to be a "brilliant" preacher. So think of the feedback form as a way to renovate your "house". Some things will be broken down and removed, some things will be rearranged, but the overall frame and foundations remain, and when the renovation is complete, something better emerges.

Destructive criticism does not want to renovate, but rather to destroy and burn to ashes. Its purpose is to embarrass and hurt, and is given without much thought. For example, "Your sermons are boring! There is no point to listen to it!" The thing is, even destructive criticism can contain a kernel of truth and it takes emotional intelligence to respond assertively, that is, to recognise that kernel of truth and discard the rest.

There will also be people who are always critical of you. There will be people for whom you are never going to get it right. For some people no one will ever do anything right. When it comes to destructive criticism, you have the right to set boundaries.

8.4 How Do People Respond to Criticism?

If ministers are afraid of criticism, this is quite normal. Most people do not enjoy receiving criticism. The overwhelming majority of people feel hurt or react negatively to criticism. Being criticised is like being attacked, and the natural response of the brain is to go into "fight" or "flight" mode. How people respond to criticism also depends on how they experienced it as children. If it was harsh and punitive then criticism is experienced as hurtful and as a form of rejection.

Here follows some negative and positive ways how people respond to criticism:

8.4.1 Passive Responses to Criticism

Passive people tend to internalise the criticism they receive. They can run away, withdraw and hide, feel hurt and confused. They stew over it. They see criticism of the things they do as a rejection of themselves. This type of response can lead to depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. They also can agree with any form of criticism whether it is valid or not. They can say things as follows:

- "All this criticism means I am stupid."
- "People in this congregation don't like me!"
- "They are right. I'm not good enough. I am useless as a preacher."

Another passive response is where we laugh it off, make jokes, and criticise ourselves more to create the impression that we are not hurt (deflection).

8.4.2 Aggressive Responses to Criticism

If people perceive criticism to be a personal attack then people tend to get defensive, respond aggressively, and go on the attack themselves. Key words here are denial, being self-righteous, and irritation. They need to convince themselves that they are right and the critique is wrong. This can lead to conflict and aggression, which in turn, can also lead to depression and low self-esteem. People in this category say the following things:

- "How dare they criticise me? They have no right to instruct a minister!"
- "These people do not know what they are talking about! I refuse to listen to them!"
- "How dare they question me? They don't even know the Bible themselves!"

8.4.3 Assertive Responses to Criticism

When we respond assertively to criticism then we are in a position to identify the difference between constructive and destructive criticism. We respond in the correct way equipped with skills (see below). We remain calm and accept the criticism without negative emotions. We see criticism as addressing our preaching, not necessarily as saying anything about us as a person.

8.4.4 Negative versus Positive Thinking about Criticism

When we look at the above it comes down to people having unhelpful or helpful beliefs about criticism. Negative thinking makes people take criticism very personally. Positive thinking makes people ask: "What can I learn?" Positive thinking also makes us realise that we cannot learn anything new without making mistakes.

8.5 Responding Assertively To Constructive Criticism

Here are some techniques to respond, depending on the type of criticism that is given:

8.5.1 Be prepared

You know what is coming. At times the feedback can be very positive. Acknowledge it and celebrate it. When it highlights some flaws, respond, but do not react. Emotion always comes first, this is normal, but take a deep breath and allow yourself to ingest the information.

8.5.2 Accept the criticism

Accepting criticism also means you accept that you are not perfect. Who is? If the criticism is valid you can accept it without guilt or any negative emotion. There is no "perfect" preacher, so criticism helps you learn from your mistakes, or to improve on the skills you already have. See what needs to change, address it, and move on. Our attitude could be:

Accepting criticism: “Thank-you. Tell me more.”

Or ...

Rejecting criticism: “Thank-you, but ...”

8.5.3 Agree with the criticism

Next to accepting valid criticism, you must also agree and acknowledge it. For example:

Criticism: “The sermon was all over the place. I couldn’t figure out what it was about.”

Response: “Yes, it’s true, I’m not good at organising my sermon around a focussed message.”

It is about being confident to have the ability to change, to be assertive, instead of feeling demolished and having passive or aggressive responses. There is no excuse in the face of a valid criticism.

8.5.4 Understand the criticism

Stephen R. Covey writes: “Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.” Criticism need not make us defensive. See criticism from our members as a gift, done with the best of intentions, and also see it as a plea: “Feed my soul!” “Listen” when you read the feedback! We need to develop a deeper understanding of the needs of our members.

8.5.5 Look for common themes

If the same type of criticism keeps appearing, then there must be a problem even if you do not think there is.

8.5.6 Do not take it personally

We need to distinguish between who we are as persons, and the individual actions we take. Identifying flaws in your preaching says nothing about your ability to learn in order to become a better preacher. It does not necessarily say anything about your faith and your commitment to God’s work.

8.5.7 Make a plan to address it

Let us say, for example, a repeated critique was that the message was too abstract, and no guidance was given to apply it in real life. Make a mental note to yourself or when you prepare your next sermon write in big bold letters: REMEMBER LIFE APPLICATION! Or REMEMBER TAKE-HOME VALUE!

8.5.8 Keep on preaching

Receiving criticism does not mean we must lose confidence and give up. God has called you for a task. Fulfil it!

8.6 Time for Reflection

Reflect on the following and discuss:

1. How do I normally respond to criticism?

I get defensive.	I get aggressive. I retaliate with anger and blame.
I try to avoid it.	I withdraw or run away.
I shut down.	I get confused.
I internalise it and stew over it.	I ignore it and hurt inside.
I appreciate criticism.	I joke and make fun of it.

2. Make a list of 3 flaws in your preaching, and where there is room for improvement.