

Students of ministry come together to make history at Preacher Camp

Written by Janna Ross

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Imagine having a presentation every day for a week, having to prepare for it after most of the world is in bed and be prepared to present your thoughts early the next morning. Or having to write a paper or a story or a speech every night and be prepared to present it the next morning.

Then imagine when you are presenting your work there is a small video camera in the back of the room recording every gesture, pause and word of your presentation.

And when you and all of your peers have concluded with your presentation an 'expert' who has sat quietly in the back of the room has taken pages of notes from the morning of presentations and then shares his comments with the group.

This is exactly what took place last week at Country Lake Christian Retreat in Henryville. A group of young preachers came together at this beautiful spiritual setting for a history making preacher camp. The students were put in small groups where they were able to learn from each other and collaborate with seasoned preachers.

The idea of a preaching camp came to Dr. Dwight Moody, the Executive Director of the Academy of Preachers, which was launched in January, as he was the Dean of Chapel at Georgetown College. Dr. Moody spent 11 years at the college where he worked daily with young women and men on the same life path he had chosen.

"I worked with ministerial students, lots of them. I had a feeling as I worked with young men and women that they were wrestling with the idea if it is a socially significant vocation. Kids want to make a difference. They didn't know about preaching, they became a writer, went into social justice, a lawyer or a doctor," Dr. Moody stated. "I had a sense they were losing confidence in preaching because it wasn't a socially significant vocation."

He continued, "The part missing in the vocation journey was hearing from professional preachers and receiving encouragement."

Moody's idea of a preaching camp just made sense. There are camps for other vocations, for all sport teams, singing, acting and everything in between. So why not a preaching camp?

"My daughter is an actor. When she was 10 years old she was already in camps. There are organizations, FFA, Junior Achievement, it just makes sense," Moody explained. "I wrote an article on 'Poetry Out Loud' recently. What they did is exactly the model we are following."

The Poetry Out Loud project began as a pilot program in Washington DC and Chicago. The program helps students with their public speaking skills, builds self confidence and introduces them to great literary works.. The program went nationwide in 2006 and now has more than 200,000 youth who compete for scholarships.

The Academy of Preachers, which sponsors the preaching camp, is such a pilot program. They received a \$400,000 grant from the Lilly Endowment to launch the Academy, which is based in Louisville. The Academy draws from students within a 150 mile radius of Louisville including Bloomington, Evansville, and Indianapolis in Indiana, Dayton and Cincinnati in Ohio, Nashville, Tennessee, Bowling Green, Owensboro and Lexington in Kentucky.

"This is just the pilot program. We will tweak it and either enlarge the region or start a second region. I have thought of starting the second region centered in D.C., Birmingham or New York. We have people very interested in the program in those areas," Moody explained.

A very energetic Moody continued, "We hope to identify, support, mentor and encourage young people in their church that want to be preachers."

The group of young preachers who gathered recently in Clark County definitely received encouragement and support during the week long camp. Many were tired by midweek from the pressures of writing sermons and preaching every day. They were learning what a day in the life of a preacher is truly like. Although they were tired, they were still very excited about what was

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happening at Country Lake Christian Retreat.

Winterbourne Jones, a senior at Fisk University in Nashville, was quick to respond to what the camp has meant to him.

“This has been one of the most aiding experiences in my preaching ministry. The atmosphere is safe and secure for preachers to come. It’s not filled with competition or filled with racial tension. We are making bonds and friendships,” Jones stated. “We have welcomed new people. It has been absolutely amazing.”

He continued, “There are better preachers here, the same age level and same preaching level. I just love it, I would recommend it to anybody. I hope it grows. I wish this was available to every preacher.”

Jones concluded about the diversity of the group, “There is so much diversity in the group. We all learn from one another. This type of setting is absolutely fabulous. I would recommend this camp to anyone who is serious about preaching period, serious about honing in and perfecting your craft with peers.”

Kara Hildebrandt, a recent graduate of the Vanderbilt Divinity School, was not sure what to expect from the camp.

“I didn’t know what to expect. I was mostly curious. I just graduated in May so I am further along than some. I am a senior member,” Hildebrandt explained.

“I didn’t necessarily expect it to happen as much as it has,” she stated about the other students looking to her for advice and help.

“My education is not just for me. Because of the education I know things, because of the education I have learned the most, if I can be of service to someone else, that’s my greatest thing of worth,” Hildebrandt stated. “It’s just them realizing they have the stuff. All I have to do is ask the right questions when they are stuck. Last night a lot of that happened.”

She continued, “There are lots of laughs which is nice. We are creating friendships. Then we can ask them, ‘what did you think of my sermon’, or ‘I need help’. We are all coming from different traditions. We are preaching from our traditions and that cultivates respect for each other.”

Hildebrandt too said she would recommend the camp to others looking to become a preacher.

“I would recommend this to others. My last act as the Leadership Team will be the Festival (of Young Preachers) in January. I have been active to that point and after that I will do something to remain active.”

Hildebrandt’s last act for the Leadership Team, due to her age, will be the Festival of Young Preachers to be held at St. Matthews Baptist Church in Louisville January 7-10, 2010.

The Festival of Young Preachers will give the opportunity for 100 young preachers to prepare and present a sermon. The purpose of the Festival is to encourage and identify those young people who want to preach.

Dr. Moody and the officials with the Academy of Preachers, who will also sponsor the Festival of Young Preachers, expect 100 young preachers to participate.

The Festival will be designed like a high school speech tournament. There will be several venues. The young preachers will be with ones of similar age and experience. The preachers will have 30 minutes including a five minute break between segments. Music, introduction and the 18-minute sermon will total the 25 minute time slot. The way the Festival is planned in a three hour time slot a total of six young preachers will be highlighted at one venue.

Each of the young preachers who participate in the Festival of Young Preachers will be

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inducted as charter members of the Academy of Preachers, which is open for young preachers ages 16 to 28.

"The age is really just a guideline. If we have a 15 year that wants to sign up and preach, we'll take them," Dr. Moody added.

The deadline to register for the Festival of Young Preachers is October 1.

Once a young preacher has become a member of the Academy, they are eligible for the other activities the Academy sponsors including the preacher camps.

"I have been stunned at the positive reception to the Academy across a broad spectrum of churches and denominations. It is really a very simple idea and is attractive to a lot of people because the focus is on young people," Dr. Moody stated. "The Festival is the gateway to the Academy of Preachers. The only way to get into the Academy is to preach at the Festival. Once you are a member of the Academy you can sign up for the preaching camps, sign up for the certification programs, you can go on the international preaching mission, apply for internships that we are going to create, apply to be on the Leadership Team. For all of it, the first step is to preach at the Festival."

Besides giving young preachers the knowledge that the vocation is a socially significant vocation, the pilot program, according to Dr. Moody, has three goals.

"The first goal is to have 100 young preachers at the Festival. Secondly, to secure 50 partners, businesses, institutions, denominations that endorse what we are doing and agree to help in some way. We keep a list on the website. Right now we are at 18," Dr. Moody explained. "Then we want to raise \$100,000. The Lilly Endowment was very generous to us but their gift don't cover all our expenses."

The history making camp, Dr. Moody cannot find any information where a camp of this kind has ever been held in the nation, allowed the small group of young preachers to gain confidence, receive constructive advice of their daily sermon and make everlasting friendships with the other young preachers, coaches and staff. They were also treated to a special guest speaker each day including Bob Russell, the former pastor of Southeast Christian Church in Louisville; Amos Jones, an attorney from Washington, D.C.; Rick Stern, a professor at St. Meinrad Seminary in St. Meinrad, Indiana; Teresa Stricklen, Director of Worship and Liturgy at Presbyterian Church USA, Louisville and David Emery, Pastor of Middletown Christian Church in Middletown, Kentucky.

The young preachers who attended the camp were: J.C. Campbell, Winterbourne Jones, Brandon Perkins, Kara Hildebrandt, Caela Wood, C.J. Childs, Jonathan Scott, Alex Williams, Adam Kilchenman, Scott Claybrook, Tanner White and Brother Thomas Gricoski.

The coaches who helped lead the young preachers were: Tommy Valentine and Rich Voelz. Dr. Moody and Rev. Lee Huckleberry, Senior Consultant to the Academy and Pastor at Howard Park Christian Church in Clarksville, were also on hand for the initial preaching camp.

Huckleberry was still excited about the camp on Monday morning.

"The camp exceeded all of our expectations. There was energy and passion and excellence in abundance all week," Huckleberry stated. "All of us who were involved in the camp feel very good about the future of the church after hearing these young preachers."

Huckleberry concluded, "We are looking forward to growing this aspect of the Academy and in fact have all ready talked about having three camps next year."

For more information regarding the Academy of Preachers or the Festival of Young Preachers please visit the Academy's website at www.academyofpreachers.net.