

Preaching and Pastoral Planning

by
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Harmony Reins. That's the name of a therapeutic riding center where autistic children fill the roster of "Most Notable Riders." The director, Jay Heitkamp, explains the reason behind the success.

"Horses make you pay attention."

Even at a slow walk, a horse's gait is varied and unpredictable enough that the rider must concentrate in order to keep balance. This forces the rider to remain engaged with the movement and disposition of the horse.

"Another success factor," Heitkamp continues, "is the relationship that develops between the horse and the child. Most kids are entranced with horses."

For those who teach autistic children, this opens a new and valued avenue of communication.

The philosophy at *Harmony Reins Riding Center* is easily transferred to the life of a parish. The elements *focus* and *relationship* are essential components for successful parish ministry, from preaching to pastoral planning.

How can *focus* and *relationship* help a parish give good witness and its preacher give good homilies?

The secret, as Rick Warren would say, lies in being "purpose-driven." And this where a good mission statement comes into play.

As with the shifting movements of a horse beneath a saddle, a clear and concise mission statement keeps a pastoral team focused the twists and turns that occur amid the web of relationships that comprise a community of faith.

Last year, my pastoral council jettisoned an elaborate "mission paragraph" in favor of a three-phrase formula: *To know Christ, to love Christ, to bring others to Christ*. Throughout the year, every commission, organization and committee routinely appraised their work according to this tightly focused statement of purpose. Among the results: a three-fold increase in RCIA catechumens and a 40% increase in participation in adult faith formation.

The new statement also influenced my preaching, particularly the last phrase: *To bring others to Christ*. My former homiletic emphasis—fostering community life and cultivating a personal relationship with Christ—expanded to include outreach to individuals in search of God and a church to call their own.

The statement provided a new focus. Furthermore, the consistent review of the goals of various commissions and committees in light of the mission statement, kept the focus fresh.

In many parishes, unfortunately, the bright-eyed dreams ensconced in "mission paragraphs" are soon relegated to the archives of Pastoral Council minutes and the opening pages of parish pictorial directories:

Welcome to Stateline Baptist Congregation! Our Mission Statement proclaims our noble purpose. We exist because of the love of Christ that

dwells within each one of us, urges us to attend to His Word, discipline our life, reach out to others, expand our love within the family of the church, give witness to the power of the Gospel, yada yada yada...

A concise mission statement, on the other hand, can forge a vital connection between the work of God and the life of the parish.

Members of any organization need a regular reminder of the reason and importance for their affiliation. Preachers are in a unique position to provide exactly that.