

A Final Word: Transitions for the JP

Erskine Clarke
Montreat, North Carolina

I

This Pentecost issue marks forty-five years of publication for the *Journal for Preachers* and its transition to splendid new leadership. Mark Ramsey, executive director of The Ministry Cooperative, becomes the new publisher, and Ted Wardlaw, retiring president of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, becomes the new editor. Both bring deep pastoral experience to their leadership of the *JP*, and both bring wide contacts and personal friendships with pastors from many different backgrounds. The Ministry Cooperative will assume ownership and responsibility for the journal. Mark and Ted are assembling a wonderful group of young associate editors, diverse pastors from a variety of congregational settings, who will help to guide the *JP* in the years ahead as it seeks to be a faithful and rich resource for the preaching ministry of the church.

Under Tom Long's leadership, the *JP* received a generous grant from the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship to help with the transition. The grant will allow us to gather in April (I am writing in February.) a group of pastors, half of whom subscribe to the *JP* and half of whom do not, to rethink the mission and shape of the journal. Among the questions to be addressed by the consultation are

1. Is there a need among pastors for a journal like *Journal for Preachers*, one that brings to the practical ministry of preaching solid biblical, theological, and social scholarship?
2. Are there other preaching resources beyond a print journal that pastors desire but currently do not have available?
3. What does the current journal do well and do not so well? Is there a desire for different features and content?
4. Are the current format and publishing schedule of the journal still the best options for pastors?
5. Is the current plan of delivery in both print and digital versions the best option?

The consultation's discussions will help to shape the future character and direction of the *JP*. Because the consultation takes place after this Pentecost issue goes to press, subscribers will receive in late spring a letter from Mark and Ted about the results of the consultation and the plans that flow from it. And they will provide in the Advent issue, 2022, a more extended take on what is in the letter.

Because this transition is a significant moment in the history of the *JP*, I have been asked to write a brief history of the *JP*, and Walter Brueggemann has been asked to write his reflections on the work and character of the journal. What follows below is not an attempt to inflate the importance of our little journal. It is rather an attempt to tell a brief and simple story of a publication intended to be a resource, in its time and place, for the preaching ministry of the church. The story embraces and gives hints

of many stories of many people who, during the last four and a half decades, found that a part of their Christian vocation was to support *the* theologians of the church, those preachers who week by week announce to gathered congregations the good news of Jesus Christ.

II

The journal grew out of a gathering of pastors when Jimmy Carter was president. At Joe Harvard's invitation, we began meeting twice a year at the North Decatur Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. We called ourselves the Young Pastors Group, thinking, I suppose, that we would be young forever. There were maybe twenty-five of us who gathered, talked about what was going on in our ministries, and listened to papers delivered by colleagues on some biblical or theological theme. We were white southerners who had been in college and seminary during the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties and in our first parishes during the Vietnam War of the early seventies. We were men and women who were convinced out of both our theological stance and personal histories that there was an integral relationship between our ministries and the great issues of our time. The question we wondered about was how to be good pastors and responsible public theologians during the social, cultural, and economic dislocations we thought likely to occur in the coming decades. Shortly after one of our meetings, I called Cam Murchison, then a pastor in East Tennessee, and asked if he was interested in our working together on a new journal intended for preachers. He said "yes."

In the Foreword to the first issue, the editors wrote:

This journal is based on the conviction that there is a special and indispensable theological *genre* and task that is found in the preaching ministry of the church and nowhere else—to interpret for congregations, week by week, the Word of God as it confronts our particular history. We hope this journal will encourage preacher-theologians to accept and affirm, without apology, this important task in the life of the church. In a very basic sense, these persons are *the* theologians of the church. That fact is at once awesome and exciting. It is awesome because it is always humbling and often frightening to believe that as preachers and pastors something as important as the theological integrity and health of the Church is entrusted to our care. It is exciting because it gives a larger significance to what might—more easily than we wish—become merely a routine of preparing and preaching sermons for the people of God.

We began by asking friends and associates to write essays for the journal. They received no honorarium, only a year's free subscription—a policy we have continued, allowing us to keep the subscription price low, starting with six dollars a year, in order for the journal to be available for pastors with modest salaries. We soon began seeking writers beyond our little circle of associates, and that search resulted in our beginning to have writers of genuine distinction, from various places and backgrounds, who were willing to contribute essays or sermons for publication in the journal. At the same time, the number of subscribers grew steadily, reaching a peak in the first

decade of this century. After the recession of 2008, the subscriber list began to shrink until it stabilized a few years ago. At the same time, the number reading the *JP* online began to soar, especially through the free articles offered on our website and through the link to theological libraries in this country and Canada.

In 1983 Tom Long joined Cam and me as an editor. His growing reputation as a preacher and professor of homiletics with extraordinary gifts was a huge boost for the journal as he helped to shape and nurture the work of the *JP*. In 1990, Walter Brueggemann, who had been serving as an associate editor, became editor. Cam and Tom, with other pressing responsibilities, became associate editors, joining Joe Harvard, who had been from the first a part of the spirit behind the journal. Cam, in recent years, has taken responsibility for the deep mysteries of digital publication, and Tom has continued to add not only many brilliant essays but also his guidance, encouragement, and friendship.

It is hard to exaggerate the contributions Walter has made to the *JP*. I suspect that every reader of the journal has quoted Walter Brueggemann in a sermon, most likely in many sermons. For over thirty years, he has contributed article after article for our readers, and he has been willing to ask distinguished theologians—ones I did not have the clout or courage to ask!—if they would contribute an article. Through all of this, he has become a generous friend, seen perhaps most clearly in his exaggerated comments about me in his reflections in this issue. I am sure that it is not hard to imagine what a gift it has been to me personally to have him as a colleague, and what a remarkable gift his work has been to the church.

Walter reflects in his essay on those who have written for the *JP*, and I can only add my deep gratitude for their contributions. I remember especially those who over many years have responded to one appeal after another for another essay or sermon—Catherine and Justo Gonzalez, Agnes Norfleet and Ben Sparks, Will Willimon and Jim Lowry, Sam Wells and Mary Hinkle Shore, and too many others to name but who know the important contributions they have made. The work of publication also involves, of course, the work of many “behind the scenes.” And they too have done their work as a part of their Christian vocation. Many have worked for decades for the journal, and gratitude insists that they be named at this moment of transition. Betty Cousar, Dana Campbell, and then Rosemary Raynal, as editorial associates, not only did the hard work of proof editing with care and grace but also perhaps the harder work of hounding writers who had missed their deadlines. For several decades Juliette (Jet) Harper Bullock has served as production manager, getting with patience, perseverance, and good humor each issue ready for the printer. Subscription secretaries Robin Dietrich, Joan Murchison, and Anna Louise Murchison have collected subscriptions from the post office and more recently PayPal and kept the subscription list in wonderful order. And it must be said once again that Cam Murchison has handled with great care the challenges of the digital age. As can be seen in his essay in this Pentecost issue, he did such work not only as a competent “tech guy” but also as a serious theologian committed to theological education and the pastoral ministry. It obviously takes many people, working together amid many other responsibilities, to produce even a small journal.

Regarding my own work for the *JP*, I can only say that it has been an enormous privilege for me to be a part of this effort in support of *the* theologians of the church, faithful preachers of the Word, who week by week proclaim the Good News to gathered

congregations. I have learned so much from our writers and have had my Christian faith nurtured and strengthened by their sermons and essays. And what a gift it is, having run this race with the *JP*, to pass it on to Mark Ramsey and Ted Wardlaw and the young associates they are gathering. Ted was my pastor in Atlanta and Mark my pastor in Asheville. They are themselves wise and faithful preachers who know that they run their race looking to the One who goes before them and who beckons us all to follow Him in hope and obedience.