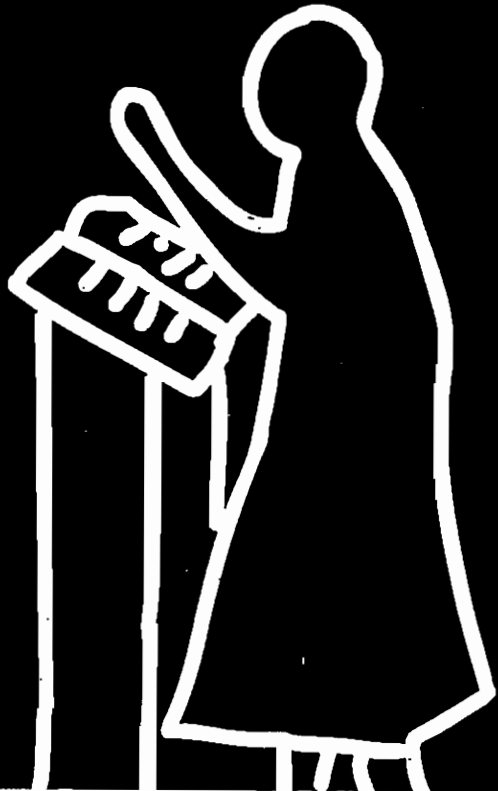


# LECTORS: PROCLAIMING THE WORD

Karen Sue Smith



National Pastoral Life Center

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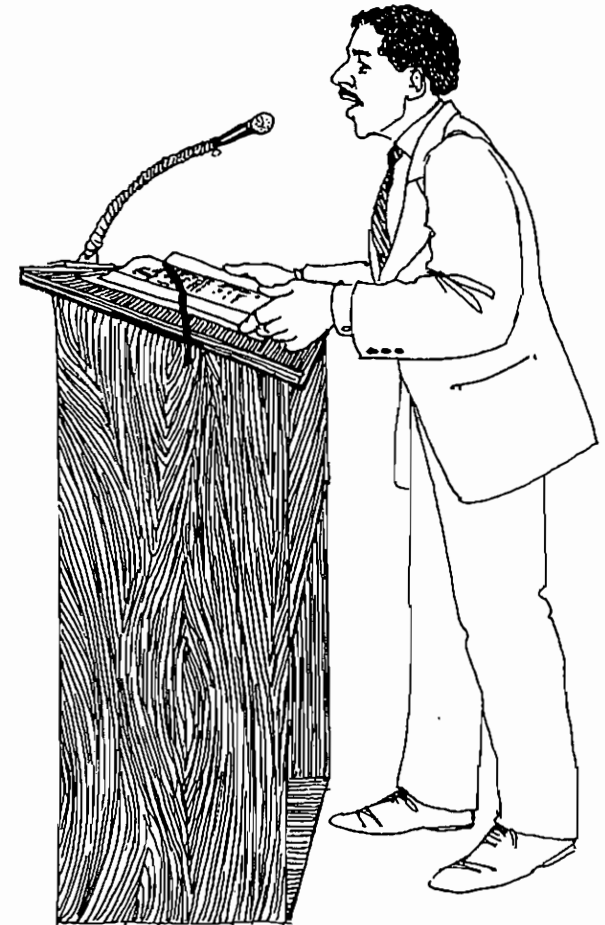
## Do

1. Set aside time at home to prepare yourself for each Sunday's readings.
2. At one sitting or, better, over several days, study the texts at home. The depth of your understanding will be visible to the congregation.
3. Read through all of the lectionary readings for the Mass at which you are a lector, even the gospel. You will be able to see what ideas or themes connect the gospel with the reading from the Old Testament. You can see when there are (and when there are not) connections with the second reading as well.
4. Identify the type of passage you are to read. Is it a story? Is it a dialogue between different characters or voices? Is it a prophecy, a letter, a series of laws, a parable, a witty saying, or a song?
5. Ask yourself a few questions about the meaning of the passage, such as: What lies behind the writing of this passage? Where is its climax? What is the tone—comforting, scolding, warning, informative, intimate?
6. Pick out the most important sentence or phrase. Try to communicate it above all else.
7. Look up all words—proper names usually—with which you are unfamiliar; be sure you know their meaning and how to pronounce them. If you happen to trip over one while proclaiming, move on; your job is to convey the meaning of the passage as a whole.
8. Use your imagination to visualize action passages and narratives. See in your mind's eye what is taking place; imagine how those involved are feeling, why they act as they do.

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## Do

9. Pray with the text, letting a given phrase or admonition sink slowly inside you. ("The Lord is my shepherd" can become "Lord, be my shepherd....") Some texts are especially appropriate for this, while not all will be as accommodating.
10. Refer to Bible commentaries or guidebooks, read books and articles, listen to audiotapes, and watch videotapes, sing the Psalms.
11. After you understand the essence of the passage, practice reading it. Alone, into a tape recorder's microphone, or in the presence of someone you trust, proclaim the text aloud.



**Do**

12. Use a mirror to practice eye contact and note how often you look up at it as you read.
13. Vary your treatment of any text parishioners know well (Christmas texts are among the most familiar). That way your proclamation won't fall flat or become hackneyed.
14. Articulate deliberately the consonants at the ends of words—the d's and t's, for example, as in God (rather than Gaw) and not (rather than naw). Sometimes the whole meaning rests on such words.
15. Learn to stress a phrase or word in various ways: a hushed voice often works better than a raised voice.
16. Pay close attention to where the stresses occur in the passage. Then make them clear to your listeners.
17. Rehearse several times any Bible passages with run-on sentences (sometimes in Paul's letters) or any text where the meaning is apt to be lost to listeners. Your task is to communicate meaning.
18. Let your facial expressions and body language help you express the Scripture's message. The voice is only one part of proclamation.
19. Consider yourself a "proclaimer of the word of God." It is the skills of a proclaimer you will be learning and fine tuning, not those of an actor, radio announcer, or toastmaster.
20. Allow the Scriptures, more and more, to influence your daily life. This is the best part of being a lector; the Scriptures begin to form you.
21. Pray that the Holy Spirit will guide you in your proclamation.

**Do**

22. Take a look at the lectionary before Mass, noting the markers, your page, and reading. Do this especially if you use another book in your preparation.



23. Familiarize yourself before Mass with any space new to you where you will be proclaiming the Scripture: a cathedral, neighboring parish, or parish hall. Find out whether you will be in the entrance procession and where you will be sitting.
24. Make sure your face can be seen over the lectern. If not, ask the parish staff to furnish a step up to the lectern.
25. Approach the lectern as reverently as you would approach the altar. Christ is present in God's word and Eucharist, the "two tables" of the liturgy.
26. Walk upright and with confidence as you approach, standing up straight at the lectern.
27. Begin by adjusting the microphone, if necessary, to your height. If it makes a noise when you touch it, ignore it.

**Do**

28. Look out at the congregation for a second, moving your head to scan the entire horizontal space as you introduce the reading. This is a time-tested way to cinch the congregation's attention and focus it on the Scripture.
29. Look individual members of the congregation in the eye as you proclaim, even if your church is large. A raised head and genuine eye contact are crucial to good proclamation. Speak and look to the last pew.
30. Modulate your voice—its pitch and volume. Use variations to make the text clear to the assembly.
31. Use your judgment about phrasing. There should be a musicality to your speech as you move more quickly over the least important phrases to linger over the most important ones.
32. Address yourself, when proclaiming, as much as you do the assembly gathered to worship. This is an attitude the congregation will understand and appreciate.
33. Provide a moment of reflection after each reading if there is no music minister to ensure it. People should have enough time to repeat mentally at least the last line of the Scripture passage.

The **National Pastoral Life Center** is an independent organization, affiliated with the U.S. Catholic Conference, and devoted to the continuing development and renewal of parish life. The Center publishes **CHURCH**, an award-winning quarterly magazine for pastoral ministers.

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## Do

34. Make the pause long between the Scripture and your closing words: "The word of the Lord." The congregation should be able to tell where the one ends and the other begins.
35. Remain standing in place as the congregation responds in unison: "Thanks be to God." Only now should you leave the lectern.
36. Recognize that psalms are songs—even if your parish has no cantor to lead the singing and no instrumentalist to accompany the lector.
37. Render a psalm as poetry, changing your reading style and rhythm appropriately. You might lift your hand to invite the congregation to respond with their lines. After all, the psalms are called "responsorial" because leader and congregation read or sing antiphonally.
38. Ask for feedback about your proclaiming skills from the most candid people you know. Don't take just one person's word; ask several people for constructive criticism. Let it improve your skills.
39. Attend lector and Scripture workshops and special study groups to learn more about how to fulfill your role as a proclaimer of God's word.
40. Try your hand at reading a book of the Bible as you would a novel—from cover to cover. Some are quite short. You might begin with one of the Gospels or a story: Ruth, Daniel, Esther, or the Exodus.
41. Commit your favorite lines of Scripture to memory, or try writing them down in a journal.
42. Ask your parish staff about sponsoring a workshop for lectors, for example, covering the readings for Advent, Lent, or Easter.

## Don't

1. Hesitate to ask questions about the Scriptures you are to proclaim. Your pastor may be able to help you or refer you to others who can.
2. Ever read from the missalette. Every church has a lectionary—a nondisposable, well-bound book, which communicates more appropriately the weight, solidity, permanence, and importance of the liturgy of the word than does a newsprint throwaway.
3. Begin with a long "A": "Ay reading...." Speak normally, without affectation in voice or manner. Say "Uh reading from the letter of Paul..." just as you would say "Uh woman won the election" or "Uh boy walked his dog." Stress the second word—"reading"—rather than the first word.
4. Announce that the reading is "the first," "the second," or "the third."
5. Let yourself be distracted by a baby's cry or by latecomers. Sometimes a pause is appropriate if the distraction occurs before you actually begin. Usually, raising the volume of your voice will keep attention on the Scriptures.
6. Ad lib. It's the word of the Lord you are proclaiming not your own.
7. Hold up the lectionary at the end of your proclamation as you say "The word of the Lord." The word is not present in the pages of any particular Bible, but rather on the lips of those who proclaim it and in the hearts of believers.
8. Be surprised if God's word inspires you. It may come to you subconsciously at a moment when you particularly need to hear it.
9. Hesitate to let your own emotions show. A smile is appropriate when the words are joyful

## Don't

- or when words of hope or promise stir your own faith.
10. Think of or speak of the congregation as an audience. Your proclamation is to believers like yourself. While the liturgy certainly has dramatic and artistic aspects, it is not a performance before spectators.
11. Draw attention to yourself either by your apparel, your posture, your gestures, or your speech. Let the message come through you.
12. Lean on the lectern or crane your neck to speak into the microphone. Stand erect on both feet and move the microphone toward your mouth.
13. Speak too slowly or too quickly (the more frequent problem). Either way, the message is obstructed and the word may be lost to a whole assembly waiting and ready to hear it.
14. Get flustered if you make a mistake; everyone will flub at some time or another. Simply pause a second to regain your composure and keep right on going.



## Don't

15. Forget to call another lector to replace you at Mass if you cannot fulfill your responsibility on a given day. Try to give your replacement as much time as possible to prepare the proclamation.

16. Think you must be a perfect example of God's word in action in order to be a lector. God—not to mention everyone at the parish—already knows better.

## Special Concerns and Resources

### General Intercessions:

If, as lector, you are asked to lead the petitions during the prayer of the faithful, announce the congregation's response before you begin when it is different from the standard "Lord, hear our prayer."



Also, if you will be reading a prepared list of petitions, be sure to go over them before Mass. Find out how to pronounce any parishioners' names that are unfamiliar to you.

### Gatherings of Lectors

Parish lectors might enjoy an annual meeting or get-together (the staff might consider sponsoring an appreciation dinner for all the lectors in the parish). Lectors can really benefit from discussing what the experience of proclaiming the word means to them. Staff members can benefit by listening attentively to what the lectors say.

### Materials

Parishes might want to provide a shelf of resource materials for lectors. Some of the materials could be circulated (make up library check-out cards for each) among the lectors. Most of the following items can be purchased at your local Catholic book store:

- a comprehensive Bible commentary (e.g., the new *Jerome Biblical Commentary* or *Harpers*);
- a Bible atlas
- several different Bible translations (e.g., the *Oxford Annotated*, the *Catholic Study Bible*, the *Jerusalem Bible*)

Karen Sue Smith is the editor of CHURCH.

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