

# Getting mail

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 16, 2002](#) issue

It's a truism in my trade that one negative comment about the sermon can pretty much ruin your Sunday. We preachers position ourselves at a sanctuary door or in front of the chancel to greet the members of our congregation after worship, many if not most of whom tell us that they liked or enjoyed or appreciated our sermon. The rest smile and say, "Good morning."

We all know the responses are mostly superficial, that "nice sermon" is the ecclesiastical equivalent of "have a nice day," pleasant to hear but not reflective of any reality. Most of us are aware that it can be cloying, perhaps addictive to stand there waiting—needing, asking—to be affirmed. And we all know that one genuine negative comment can take your breath away and spoil the rest of the day.

A somewhat similar experience—one I did not anticipate when I joined the Christian Century—is encountering the stack of letters on my desk each week addressed "To the Editor." I read every one of them. The criteria we use in deciding which will be published include: does the letter respond to a recent article in a lucid and compelling way, and does it carry further the conversation or argument regarding the original topic? We can print only a fraction of the letters we receive. Some articles elicit 20 to 25 responses. Martin Cook's July article on "Soldiering: Can Christians serve in the armed forces?" and Associate Editor Debra Bendis's accompanying essay "Navy mom: Living with the military" prompted an extended discussion on the military which we thought was lively and helpful. James Wall's editorials on Palestine/Israel issues also stimulate strong responses.

This magazine is fulfilling its mission when it becomes the occasion for a conversation between readers and writers, and readers and readers, about the critical issues of the day. So write to us. Even if we are unable to publish your letter, it is read and appreciated, and does have an impact on the magazine. We love to read compliments, of course, though we tend not to publish many. It is particularly important for us to hear and share your criticisms and counterarguments. Actually, I don't mind this sort of criticism nearly as much as "I hated your sermon, Reverend."