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Breaking News

by LORI CARRELL

A local TV station with a “Breaking News” brand routinely rehashes stories. Melodramatic teasers suggest something big is happening in our sleepy corner of Wisconsin. “Tornado on the way?” After the commercial, viewers learn there is no storm in sight. For weeks reporters announced, “An inmate has escaped!” Our response? “Oh, *that* ‘breaking news’ again?” We tuned out. Then came an important detail: the dangerous escapee had been spotted near our neighborhood. Now the old news was relevant and we tuned back in.

In this last issue of *Rev!*, we take a last look at “hard hitting news” from the sermon communication research that reports responses from over 30,000 listeners. If you’ve been reading this series, it’s not a news flash that sermons need to be more transformative. But please stay tuned, because this sermon story may be happening in *your* neighborhood.

“Who me? My preaching? Who us? Our congregation?” *This* neighborhood? Yes. If you are like the hundreds of preachers who participated in this study, your intentions are good. Your integrity is stellar. Your convictions about the Scriptures and faith in Christ are real. Your listeners want your sermons to be biblical. Your listeners want to grow spiritually. Your listeners

like you. So, let your defenses down and re-read these central headlines from the listener feedback. The most transformative sermons (top five percent):

- ask for change, clearly and specifically,
- are organized for listeners, helping them maintain energy and focus,
- are well delivered, demonstrating God’s emotion for God’s people, and
- integrate listeners’ perspectives, creating connection.

And do you remember the breaking news from pastors who increase the impact of their sermons without increasing their prep time? We have learned that these preparation habits increase transformation:

- discerning a clear sermon goal,
- pursuing a deeper faith journey through personal spiritual growth activities,
- rehearsing orally throughout the preparation process, and
- talking with others about the sermon.

Now, it’s time for you to do some “investigative reporting.” I encourage you to ask yourself some tough questions.

What do I really believe about what God’s spirit can do through my preaching to these people in this place?

When I suggested that a coordinated preaching effort in one community could have a measurable impact on hunger, a pastor hinted that perhaps tinges of “megalomania” were beginning to emerge in my thinking. High expectations for transformative impact from your preaching are not about belief in your ability, effort, method or congregation (or my communication research). Such high expectations need to emanate from what *you* believe about who God is and what God wants to do. Yes, attention spans are short. Yes, biblical literacy is shamefully low. But preaching *can* make a difference. A *significant* difference. Listeners are clear: They believe that preaching *matters*.

How does your preaching lead your listeners to reveal the presence and power of the living God in your neighborhood?

This research reveals that most preaching reinforces what listeners already believe. Many outside of the church perceive that your primary function is to solidify the status quo. What might Jesus say about that? As preacher, you are charged with the overwhelming task of speaking for God each week. Where are compassion and justice needed in your neighborhood? Who are the “lepers, widows, and orphans?” And what would Jesus be doing if he walked your streets? Do your listeners see your neighborhood through the lens of God? Are your listeners equipped to challenge the cultural norms of materialism and self-centeredness with sacrificial giving and community? Do they love mercy? Do they do justice? Do they walk humbly? *Are you satisfied?* With God’s help, your preaching can lead them from amen to action.

How well do your sermons include a challenge to change and to be changers?

This research reveals multiple practical suggestions for increasing the impact of your preaching. Are you still providing information sessions with one sentence of application stuck into the conclusion? Including an overwhelming number of main points? Running out of time week after week? Here's the "scoop": strategic organizational choices will better serve your holy purpose. Are you still avoiding oral rehearsal? Speaking your thoughts improves organization and language choice, which affects attention and memory. Have you viewed videotape of your preaching with a trusted mentor for constructive criticism? What is happening in your preparation? How well do you know your listeners' perspectives? With whom are you conversing upcoming sermon topics? What's happening in your own spiritual life that can feed your preaching? Maximizing the transformative impact of preaching be-

gins with *your own* transformation.

What stands in the way of your pursuit of higher-impact preaching?

Too many meetings? Inability to delegate? Time-wasting activities? Addiction to affirmation? Exhaustion? Avoidance of conflict? Lack of information or skill or discipline? Do you justify these challenges by entertaining the notion that preaching is just not a priority? Yes, technology is changing our world rapidly. Some predict that podcasting dynamo-preachers will soon take over the local "average" preacher. But at this moment, the spoken act of preaching remains the predominant mode of communication of God's Word to God's people. Next weekend, next month, and probably next year, you will continue to speak face-to-face with believers who want to grow spiritually. As a person in a spiritual leadership role,

studying the Scriptures and deepening your faith are both critical commitments. For as long as you continue to speak for God in preaching, a critical and reflective examination of your sermon communication is a worthwhile endeavor.

God's spirit will work no matter what. But this news update is urgent: You can use these research findings. Your calling to preach is high and holy. Let us not be mired in mediocrity. Let us not be satisfied too soon. Let us not give up on the spoken Word.



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My Top Five Worship Absolutes

by STEPHANIE CARO

Since this is my last "creative worship ideas" article in Rev!, I want my "parting shot" to be my five best worship absolutes. Here they are:

1) Take yourself out of the picture. Every once in awhile, write yourself out of any worship role in the Sunday services and sit in the back or up in the choir loft. Then what? Just watch. See who does what. Watch expressions and reactions. Get a sense for how people engage. Look at your worship leadership for little things that can be tweaked. You might see something you'd never see from up close.

2) No response leads to no response. The sermon can be the best ever. The praise band can groove like U2. The drama

doesn't miss a beat. But it's all wasted time and effort if worshippers aren't provided with an opportunity to *respond* to the day's message in a practical "ah-ha" takeaway. Worship really is a verb.

3) See the visuals. Maybe you can't pull off big-time visuals or themes in your worship space. Perhaps the only spot for a "message memory maker" is on or near your table at front. Never neglect the importance of what people see up front. I will never forget the picture of seeing each Beatitude written on a mountain of rocks with the foundational words on stone of "Blessed Are..."

4) Mind-meld. Make sure the theme or daily point or life principle for each Sunday is clearly communicated and un-

derstood by each member of the team *in advance*. Otherwise, here's what you'll hear all too often: "Gee, if I'd known you were going to quote that song, we would have sung it." Or, "I had a great video in my file for that very same object lesson." Or, "We could have done that in the children's sermon."

5) No comparisons. Don't fall into the habit of comparing your service's effectiveness to what other churches or pastors are doing. What makes you think the Holy Spirit works in "cookie cutter" ways? My worship team keeps hearing stories about this other pastor in the area, how he preaches, how many people his services draw, and so on. If your planning team looks to God to reveal God's will and plan for *your church's* worship, then no other comparison is needed. Trust the Holy Spirit.



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