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Mind Reading Preachers

by LORI CARRELL

“If only I could read minds,” you wish, staring into the sea of faces as you preach each Sunday. “What are these listeners thinking?” For preachers who prayerfully pursue a transformative impact, that question is critical.

Thanks to a new phase of on-going sermon communication research, answers are beginning to emerge. Listeners in six churches are keeping detailed written records of their sermon responses. Most are using one of two common approaches to listening: *listening to comprehend* and *listening to evaluate*.

Listening to Comprehend. These listeners take notes on the *concepts* being explained in the sermon. They may use outlines, lists, definitions, diagrams, or doodles. Regardless of method, in this kind of sermon-response, listeners

seek to understand the overall message. Many take the extra step of summarizing and sorting material, rather than simply writing down each thought as the pastor speaks it.

Listening to Evaluate. These listeners use critical thinking skills to evaluate the *content* and *process* of the sermon. They note such things as, “This notion was clear, that idea was vague; this example was relevant, that one did not connect; this assumption about attendees made me feel included, that wording made me feel distanced.” While preachers may fear this kind of evaluation, adult learners need to analyze ideas and emotions for the purpose of decision-making.

THE ULTIMATE GOAL: SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Think about how you listen differently to a concert, a comedian, or a chemistry

lecture. Listening goals and resulting strategies are situational. So what is the listening goal in sermon communication? Previous phases of this research have shown that preachers and listeners agree—our high expectation can and should be *spiritual growth*.

Listeners who are able to use both listening styles are comprehending *and* evaluating, thus increasing the odds that spiritual growth will result. Of particular importance to preachers, however, is that these journals reveal particular methods of preaching that can jolt listeners out of routine thinking habits and into deeper listening patterns.

ASK QUESTIONS THAT PROMPT INTROSPECTION

These listener journals are full of questions that prompt reflection, connection, imagination, and integration. These questions interrupt the habituated tasks of comprehending or evaluating, as the listener pauses to ponder in the margins. One listener jotted, “Where is my desert? Do I have a place where I am alone with God?” and illustrated the question with a complex doodle.

A critical note! Some questions do

not prompt spiritual introspection, such as those with obvious factual answers (Who built the ark?); questions designed to check the congregation's wakefulness or garner affirmation (Did you get that?), and rhetorical questions that the preacher answers in the same sentence. These kinds of questions do not encourage deeper thinking.

ACCEPT THE TASK OF PROVIDING SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Some sermons appear to be information sessions. Acknowledging the great need for sound biblical teaching, a wise pastor can also approach the sermon aware of listeners' need for explicit spiritual direction. Listeners' thoughts recorded in these journals show that preachers can directly frame the sermon as an opportunity for spiritual growth in a variety of ways. An opening prayer, the wording of the introduction, consistent and integrated relevancy, personal vulnerability, responsiveness to community and world events, and specific challenges can all be used to provide spiritual direction for one's listeners.

Journal response formats vary widely within the same church for the same sermon, but if a spiritual growth *challenge* is given by the pastor, in every case listeners include that challenge in their sermon response journals. In follow-up focus groups, listeners not only express appreciation for the spiritual direction provided by the challenges, but request further accountability. Here were some of their notes: "Could we have a partner call or e-mail us on Thursday to see how we're doing with this week's challenge?" "Could the challenges from each week be listed in the bulletin, to keep us reminded and on track?" "I'd like some time during the service to talk or write about how God moved in my life as I worked on last week's spiritual growth challenge."

AIM FOR THOUGHT-PROVOCATION

Another aid to listening involves the element of surprise. Several listeners mention being startled by a carefully crafted phrase that stimulates insight. Writes one, "He didn't do what I expected. I've

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heard this passage preached so many times I was sure I knew what he was going to say." Journals another, "I never thought about yeast and dough that way. That's going to stick with me." And yet another, "I haven't been able to get that little phrase out of mind. It will affect my prayer life for a long time."

BE COURAGEOUS

One journaler wrote, "He made his point quietly but strongly, and left everyone with a great deal to think about. Abortion is a sensitive topic for many, and as unpopular as it seems, it needs to be discussed in churches."

As pastors preach about challenging issues in gracious ways, or at least resist the temptation to dodge those topics as they logically emerge in a series or scripture passage, listeners express gratitude and the potential for growth. Another journaler wrote, "I think about this issue a lot, and struggle with how to talk to other people about it, but before this, I hadn't really heard it preached. He's showing me a way that I can approach this with people."

RESPECT LISTENER ENERGY

Even in the journals that focus almost exclusively on listening to comprehend, evaluative remarks about sermon length are common. Interestingly, participants in this study often comment that the length is "just right this time," noting that their listening energy has not been expended before the end of the sermon. At its best, listening for spiritual growth is not a passive process, but an engaged and even exhausting endeavor.

These listeners are committed to the task of listening to sermons—they participated in training, attended many pre-sermon dialogues, and kept these listening journals over time. Yet even they noted difficulties in maintaining listening energy. One resolved to sit near the front, to help her focus in a large

church. Said another, echoing a reality faced by many, "On the way to church, both hearing aid batteries went dead so I heard almost nothing," adding generously, "Her gestures were good."

SEEK LISTENING SAGES

In each participating church, at least one journaling listener demonstrates especially keen spiritual discernment and faith. The journals are confidential, but over and over this researcher wished she could share the deep understanding of the "wise listener" directly with the pastor. It is legitimate to speculate that such a sage exists in your church as well! These unique sermon responders are able to analyze congregational complexities, understand critical nuances, and offer insightful ideas. Seek out listeners with such spiritual giftedness and depth, and converse with them regularly.

Preachers who listen to their peers preaching via videotape report that they can simultaneously ask, "How would I have organized this material?" "Is that explanation theologically sound?" and, "What is God's spirit saying to me through this proclamation of the Word?" Though you can't read their minds, please know that your listeners are also engaged in mental multitasking. This research suggests that you can and do have an incredible impact on directing those thoughts toward spiritual growth.



LORI CARRELL is professor of communication at the University of Wisconsin where she also coordinates the Center for Scholarly Teaching. She is the author

of *The Great American Sermon Survey* (Mainstay Church Resources). This article is part of a series revealing results from the *Lily-Endowed Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership* study. Rev! subscribers can access Dr. Carrell's articles in the back-issue library at rev.org.