

Not-So-Simple Sermon Solutions

by LORI CARRELL

Looking for quick tips to revolutionize the power of your preaching? Look no further—because they don't exist. As our sermon communication research continues, one thing becomes clear: There are no simple solutions. Instead think disciplined, long-term commitment, not tweaking.

Do you believe that preaching should regularly result in the transformation of lives, churches, communities, and culture? *Your* preaching, not just preaching in general? Are you ready to take up the challenge of enhancing the transformative power of your preaching? If so, here are the not-so-simple steps—most of which require the participation of a trusted friend.

PERCEIVE PREACHING AS A PRIORITY

Any change requires motivation. For example, if you're satisfied with five extra pounds, they'll never come off. A pastor recently admitted that his expectations had lowered over the years, so that now his sermons seemed like "maintenance work." Listeners across the country would be disappointed to hear this. They expect preaching to be their pastors' most important leadership task. What are your expectations? You're asked to stand in for Jesus and speak the very word of God. Are you sobered or satisfied? The catalyst for change is often crisis, but a deep conviction about your call can also be motivating. Did God call you to preach? Revisit that experience.

GET REAL ABOUT RESULTS

If you want to make changes in your preaching, begin by enlisting the help of a friend and designating a period of time to gather information and feedback. It's important to do the following activities for a number of Sundays if you want to effectively analyze your sermon preparation and its results.

Evaluate your sermon-prep process.

Just as a dieter keeps track of food and

exercise, you need to log your prep time and processes. What are you doing during preparation time? How long are you doing it? Do you ruminate when driving? Are you fueled when listening to music? How does prayer intersect with the process? To discern what's working for you, discuss your prep patterns with the friend who's agreed to partner with you.

Videotape and view your sermons. Even if you need to borrow or buy equipment and train someone to videotape your sermons, get it done. Keep in mind that a poor quality tape won't be of much use (imagine yourself as a small blur behind the pulpit). Now here's the tough part: Get a bowl of popcorn and that faithful friend and watch your sermons. Work to experience the tapes as a listener, not an evaluator. Ask, "How did God speak through this preacher?" Journal your reflections and then discuss them.

Request and review listeners' responses.

Include a short survey in the bulletin, asking listeners to give you feedback on their responses to your sermons ▶▶

“You're called to stand in for Jesus and speak the very word of God. Are you sobered or satisfied?”



(this isn't meant to be a critique of your preaching). Pose an open-ended query such as "What's your response to this sermon?" or list a few questions to which listeners can agree or disagree. For example, "I was reminded of something I already believed; I plan to take action as a result of this sermon; or I have made a decision to change my beliefs." Let listeners remain anonymous, and solicit someone to compile the responses. Review the compilation with your committed companion, looking for themes.

CREATE A STRENGTH-BASED ACTION PLAN

With faith that God has called you to preach, review your results to discern your preaching strengths. In our research study's consulting process, we work to determine a "unique excellence" for each preacher, such as any of the following: authenticity, clarity, compassion, courage, creativity, implementation practicality, insightfulness, inspirational delivery, intellectual acuity, interactive style, language usage, sincerity of belief, storytelling, thought-provocation, vision, or wisdom. Even though you don't have a consulting team, your trusted friend can be of great help in clarifying your primary strengths.

While you may be inclined to focus your action plan on your weaknesses, our successful system asks you to start with strengths as you prayerfully delineate a



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change goal for your preaching. Here are several samples from the pastors in our study:

- *Building on my unique excellence in storytelling, I will work to more frequently incorporate narrative as a centerpiece of my sermons or as supporting material.*
- *Building on my unique excellence to provide insight and provoke thought, I will work to apply those skills not only to exegesis but also to implementation suggestions that my growth-hungry listeners desire.*
- *Building on my unique excellence in linear reasoning, I'll continue to provide a linear summary to maintain the clarity that so many appreciate—but I will also work to include a variety of organizational patterns for the content of my sermons. This will increase the energy and attention of listeners who think and learn differently than I do.*

COMMIT TO SUPPORTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY

Back to that diet analogy again. If someone checks the scale with you once a

week, you're more likely to attain your goal. Personal trainers and Weight Watchers "buddies" improve results. Finding preaching buddies may seem like too much trouble for isolation-prone pastors, but this step is crucial. Those pastors in our study whose preaching has become more transformative have been accountable to a team or a partner, supporting each other through the process of change.

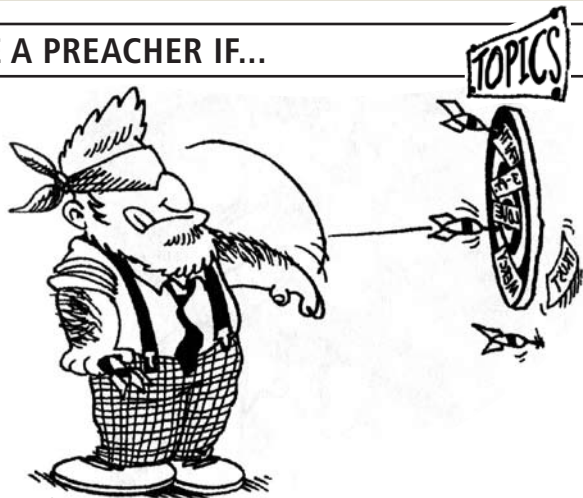
So find another preacher to be your accountability partner. Schedule preaching chats, even if you have to connect through email, and commit to praying for each other's preaching impact. Also seek a group of pastors with whom to meet for dialogue about preaching. Theological minutia or turf issues in the way? Says a newly collaborative pastor, "Get over it. You can't be the only pastor in your community following Christ...this is kingdom work. Are you in?"

You may still be asking, "Are you sure there isn't something simpler? After all, I'm trusting the Holy Spirit to do God's work with whatever I offer from the pulpit." But before you decide you're satisfied with this approach, ask yourself, "Have I done all I can possibly do with the gifts and skills God has provided?" After four months of action plan implementation, one participant emailed this note: "I've been preaching this way a long time. Changing has been a real struggle, but then it hit me—I ask people to change every week." 🗣️

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YOU MIGHT BE A PREACHER IF...

You suffer weekly from P.M.S (Pre-Message Syndrome).



From the book *The Best of You Might Be a Preacher If...* by Stan Toler and Mark Hollingsworth. Available at StanToler.com.



LORI CARRELL is professor of communication at the University of Wisconsin. She's beginning a new phase of sermon research that includes preacher and listener communication training. This article is seventh in a series on results from the Lily-Endowed Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership study. Rev! subscribers can access the previous articles in the back-issue library at Rev.org.