

Reaching the ‘Choir’

Are you transforming your listeners or simply telling them what they already know?

by LORI CARRELL

Nearly 8,000 listeners from across the country are responding to sermons in an ongoing study of sermon communication being conducted in conjunction with the Lilly-endowed Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership. The study shows that, regardless of their age or gender, the type of church, the sermon topic, or even their preacher’s years of experience, (1) listeners understand the sermon, (2) listeners already agree with the sermon, and (3) listeners are not changing their beliefs as a result of the sermon.

But the listeners in this study also confirm that although they already agree, (1) they will think about the sermon during the week, and (2) they anticipate spiritual growth—which means that if you tailor your preaching to *transform* instead of *inform*, you can energize the choir to Christlike action.

INFORMING THE CHOIR

Although pastors intend that their preaching will bring about change, this comprehensive study demonstrates that transformative results are rare. Most sermon communication is comprised primarily of explanation and thus is more informative than transformative.

Why do preachers who aim to transform continue to inform? Exit interviews

and focus groups of pastors reveal the following three commitments associated with informative preaching:

I’m a teacher, not a preacher. A vast majority of evangelical ministers describe themselves as teachers, not preachers.

This identification with teaching often arises from an admirable desire to be amicable and approachable rather than high and mighty. And of course, our model Jesus was repeatedly described as a teacher. Unfortunately, the research reveals that those with a teaching orientation have a tendency to overexplain and underinspire.

I’m committed to biblical preaching. Exegesis and exposition of the Scripture are crucial commitments for many who preach. While preachers and listeners (and this researcher) remain firm in their expectation that sermons be biblically based, a preacher’s dedication to textual analysis can sometimes produce chronological, verse-by-verse explanation

sermons without a unifying theme or a discernible request for change. Often in this type of informative sermon, the choir reports that it is either *overwhelmed* by the amount of information or *underwhelmed* by the familiarity.

I will not manipulate people. Informative preachers who make this declaration often have childhood memories of coercive altar calls. Their commitment to avoid pressuring people with emotional, guilt-inducing pleas is an appropriate ethical standard for all preachers. But if preachers avoid even asking for change, based on an aversion to all things “persuasive,” their sermons will be less transformative than possible. ►►



TRANSFORMING THE CHOIR

You may be thinking, *Hey, wait just a minute; you're describing my commitments. Does this mean my sermons are stuck in informational mode?*

Not necessarily. It's possible to maintain these same commitments—to be a teacher, to be biblical, to be ethical—and to preach in ways that transform. How can a sermon preached to the choir have an impact? This research reveals that the most transformative sermons reinforce existing beliefs and then move listeners to act on their beliefs using the following:

Insight that reinforces. Sermons that transform begin by reinforcing shared beliefs. Your insight about Scripture is critical here. A transformative teacher can freshen the familiar, deepen understanding, and clarify complexities. Sound biblical exegesis and the pastor's spiritual authenticity are essential. Your listeners report being strengthened and encouraged as you articulate their collective be-

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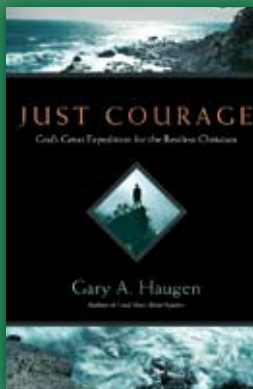


liefs. A listener described movement from frenzy to peacefulness while listening to a sermon on the Beatitudes, verses she had committed to memory as a child. The echo of those truths reverberated deeply within her, settling anxieties. The reminder brought needed nourishment, and such reminders can also fuel passion and infectious commitment.

Inspiration that revives. Transformative sermons build on the community's shared beliefs, creating a vision of how things could be if those beliefs were enacted. Content already understood and accepted is used as a meaningful springboard to reveal the need for action.

After reinforcing Jesus' command to love our neighbor as ourselves by reading

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Gary A. Haugen is president and CEO of International Justice Mission (IJM), a human rights organization in Washington, D.C. He previously worked in the U.S. Department of Justice and was director of the UN genocide investigation in Rwanda. He is often featured on programs like *60 Minutes*.

the good Samaritan passage, a preacher inspired his listeners with a creative translation of the story. In the new story a church member on his way to brunch after the service encountered a needy transient who had just been evicted from a disreputable hotel. The hotel was a real place that many listeners passed on their way to services each Sunday, and the criminal activities of desperate, drug-addicted, impoverished residents often made the local paper. Said one listener, "I was really moved. I've always thought of myself as a good Samaritan type because I wouldn't wish harm on anybody...but it's so easy to blame those people for their problems. Pastor made me think about what I should be doing with what I believe. I've been trying to imagine what that hotel would be like if we all got in there and showed God's love."

Implementation that requests a response. Sermons that transform offer motivated listeners answers to the question: How do we implement our beliefs? For example, we listeners agree that God has called us to "give thanks in all things." After you show us what a lifestyle of gratitude could look like, challenge us to respond. *How* can we do this? *When?* *Where?* In one sermon in a series on God's healing power, a preacher reinforced beliefs about our role in God's work using biblical passages. Then he described the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa with startling statistics and a story of an AIDS orphan with newly found hope, thanks to a missionary school. Finally, he called his listeners to be part of God's healing process. After the sermon parishioners could peruse tables with displays describing multiple implementation opportunities—from financial support for medication to participation in mission trips. The response was astounding. The beauty of preaching to those of us in the choir is our readiness to move from amens to action.

Even if you are preaching to the choir, let this news encourage you to approach preaching differently, prayerfully aiming to let God work through you to transform listeners who

share your desire to become more like Christ.

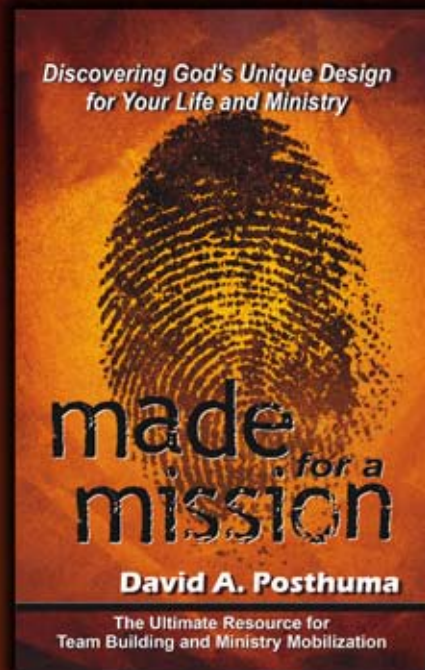
Begin by reshaping your picture of that choir. See them not as complacent head nodders, but as expectant, believing, potential world-changers, ready to act. As you prepare your sermons, envision your choir in their loft, poised on the edges of their seats, ready to sing. Teach them the music. Use your biblical and ethical commitments to convince them a needy

audience is waiting to hear their Christlike cantata, and then inspire them to sing in ever more majestic harmonies. 🎵



LORI CARRELL is professor of communication at the University of Wisconsin. As a parent of two teens, she often wonders if she knows anything at all about

communication, but she continues to study the power of the spoken word.



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