

# worship & preaching

[RESEARCH]

## Sermons Most Likely to Succeed

Do sermons actually change beliefs and behavior? An ongoing study reveals hard facts.

BY LORI CARRELL

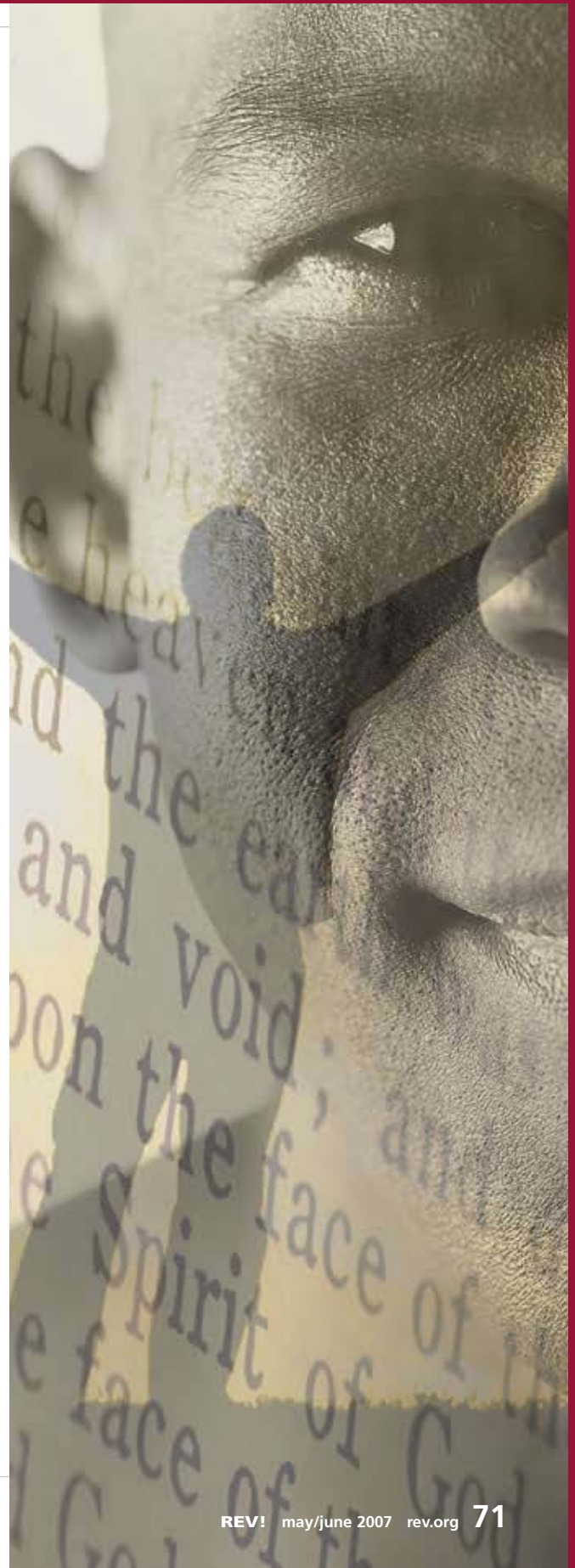
New research is discovering the characteristics of sermons that create lasting impact. The investigation began with surveys and interviews contrasting listener and pastor perspectives in 102 churches across the country. Currently the project, supported by a Lilly grant in conjunction with the Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership at the Green Lake Conference Center, has deepened as 52 Protestant pastors and their 5,000-plus listeners participate in an extensive process of sermon communication analysis.

A central finding of the research to date is that listeners value preaching, asserting that the sermon is the component of the church service most likely to impact their spiritual growth. In fact, listeners love their preachers and declare statistically what one respondent articulated in her written comment, "Pastor ain't broke—don't fix him!" At the same time, listeners' responses also reveal that it's the rare sermon that creates lasting change. Pastors and listeners agree that such change is the desired result of sermon communication, and yet it's unusual. An analysis of these rare sermons that are "most likely to succeed" in the challenging task of spiritual transformation reveals the following characteristics.

### Successful Sermons Ask for Change

Successful sermons are built around a clearly stated change-based goal that emanates from Scripture; for example, "Listeners will pray for their enemies" (Matthew 5:46-48). In less transformative sermons, a desired response may be implied or informative ("understand grace"), but listeners can't discern a clear call

to change. Interestingly, the research demonstrates that listeners are still satisfied with sermons that don't ask them to change, but they acknowledge that the result is reinforcement, >>>>



not growth. In lower-impact sermons, a majority of preaching time is spent on explanation, creating sermons that are more informative than transformative. In addition the listeners' responses indicate that what's being explained is already known to them. If listeners already agree with sermon content, how can they be expected to change? Successful sermons move believers to action. Rather than merely motivating a desire to be different (for example, "Yes, I'd like to be more forgiving"), sermons with lasting impact develop practical implementation ideas, proclaiming the power and grace of God to enable that spiritual growth. Whether the action plan is illustrated through stories or specific steps, a call to change is most likely to be successful when "how to" ideas are included.

## Successful Sermons Are Organized for Listening

Successful sermons are sermons listeners can remember. Organization of ideas is key to this memory process. According to listeners, well-organized sermons that aid recall are rare. For many preachers, the passage itself provides structure, verse two comes after verse one, so they "preach through the passage," expounding on ideas they encounter. Such an approach can be experienced as a conceptual hodgepodge that listeners call rambling. If content seems disjointed, listening energy, retention, and activation possibilities decrease. When asked what makes a sermon difficult to process and remember, the #1 answer from listeners was "disorganization."

Following exegesis, preachers who preach sermons with lasting impact spend preparation time *organizing the ideas in ways that listeners can process*. Such sermons are structured for oral-aural communication; that is, the preacher talks and the listeners hear. Choosing a listener-oriented structure for the sermon is a critical leadership task for pastors as they seek to guide listeners toward spiritual growth. Basic components of sermons organized for

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listeners include:

- an attention-getting opening to focus listeners' thinking on a clearly articulated subject;
- a specific, spiritual-growth goal delineated in the introduction;
- two or three connected, memorably worded main points;
- conceptual links between the main points that move listeners from one idea to the next;
- a concise review that doesn't include extraneous information; and
- a compelling final statement connected to the spiritual-growth goal.

Listener-oriented sermons *stay focused, providing depth*. Organizing information for auditory processing also includes discipline in content selection so that sermons are deep rather than wide. Wide sermons are characterized by too many points, shallow topic treatment, over-explaining, familiar ideas presented as novel, repetitive subject matter, tangents, or unnecessary length. With wide sermons, listening energy is diminished, as is the potential for lasting impact. Deep sermons are rich with focused content that:

- stays clearly linked to the Scripture;
- obviously connects to the delineated change goal;
- provides insight;
- balances intellect and emotion;
- delineates implementation ideas; and
- declares the grace and power of God to enable change.

## Successful Sermons Are Well-Delivered

Sermons most likely to succeed may be preached by preachers with vastly different delivery styles, from a soft-spoken, compassionate pastor to a proclaimer who sets the back pew aflame

with zeal. The commonality is a delivery that authentically communicates relationship and emotion.

Less than 2 percent of the pastors surveyed rehearse sermons orally. When weighing demands on their time, pastors reveal that sermon delivery is not a priority. Listeners have a different perspective, reporting that delivery does matter. In particular, some delivery behaviors (such as reading or predictable expression) make it seem to listeners that the pastor "just doesn't care." How we say what we say communicates relational and emotional meanings, intentional or not.

The way a pastor speaks the sermon's words communicates the very heart of God for God's people. Delivery also communicates the pastor's emotion related to listeners, the topic, and the act of preaching.

Sometimes pastors who are working hard to preach (or teach) sermons in which they "explain things in a clear, casual, and accessible way" unintentionally weaken word power. In the part of this research designed to identify the "unique excellence" of preachers, "powerful and compelling language usage" was the rarest strength. Word selection impacts listeners' memory and motivation. Listeners crave "inspiration" as a part of what helps them grow spiritually; listeners also identify sermons with powerful word usage as more inspirational than those that are comprised primarily of explanatory language. Artfulness with words that create vivid visual images; thought-provocation with words that construct metaphors for complex spiritual processes; soul-stirring with compelling words that evoke emotion through alliteration, parallelism, and onomatopoeia—all can be found not just in sermons with lasting impact, but also in the public communication of Jesus. >>>>

## Successful Sermons Integrate Listeners' Perspectives

Sermons that honor and integrate listeners' lives are most likely to be successful in their ultimate aim. While pastors express concern that the loud call of listeners for "relevancy" could be a call away from Scripture, listeners describe their desire for connection much differently. Because 78 percent of the listeners have never talked with their pastors about a sermon, it's no wonder that perspectives on this matter differ dramatically. Most of the pastors and parishioners don't talk before or after sermons about those sermons, and yet all are expecting life-change outcomes. As a result many pastors prepare sermons based on general assumptions about listeners (for example, an estimated percentage of "seekers") but proceed with no specific understanding of listeners' perspectives on the selected topic or passage.

How can preachers move beyond assumption when connecting content to listeners? A process associated with successful sermons is a pre-sermon dialogue group in which the pastor "listens to listeners." During such dialogues the pastor's preparation is enhanced by listeners' discussions of how the upcoming sermon passage or topic intersects with their spiritual journeys. This research is demonstrating that such listening sessions can increase the transformative quality of sermon communication by...

- generating fresh sermon ideas (a top need according to pastors);
- increasing sermon relevancy (a top need according to listeners);
- increasing energy given to listening during sermon communication;
- increasing specificity and depth of informal feedback received by pastors after the sermon; and
- energizing pastors personally and professionally with listener sup-

port and prayer during sermon preparation.

Yes, sermons can change beliefs and behavior, yet there's much to learn from the listeners and preachers participating in this study of transformative sermon communication. May this first wave of findings illuminating characteristics of sermons that are "most likely to succeed" provoke your thinking, intensify your praying, and enhance your lasting impact. 📖



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