

Are You Wasting Your Sermon Prep Time?

by LORI CARRELL

Kneading a stress ball in one hand and nervously tapping a foot, my pastor friend gave a quick response when I asked about his sermon preparation: "I can't find more time, so there's no reason to talk about it!"

For all who preach, sermon prep pressure is a relentless reality. A recent Google search for "saving sermon preparation time" resulted in more than 50,000 responses. But our research reveals that instead of trying to prepare a sermon in less time, it's more important to ask, "How can I best use whatever preparation time I have?"

A group of preachers enrolled in the Lilly-endowed Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership at the Green Lake Conference Center and their thousands of listeners are graciously allowing us an unprecedented opportunity to learn from their experiences. We believe with them that sermon communication should regularly result in visible and lasting changes in peoples' lives. So we're trying to determine what works, using listeners' feedback as a measure of impact. In this part of the study, pastors carefully documented their sermon preparation time and activities as they worked to maximize the transformative power of their preaching. What we discovered is that *how* preachers use their

preparation time matters more than *how much* time they use.

COMMON PRACTICES

You may be just a little curious about how your sermon prep compares to the common practices of other preachers. The first thing you should know is that pastors who select topics months in advance and those who wait for Saturday night inspiration are unanimous about one thing: There is *never* enough prep time.

How long does it take most preachers to prepare their sermons? While the times range from five to 20 hours, the average prep time is consistently between 12 and 13 hours a week. But many preachers described "living with" a text all week—while taking a shower, steering a stubborn committee, or squeezing that stress ball.

What do preachers do during those hours of sermon prep time? Nearly all spent the majority of their preparation time alone, studying Scripture and writ-

ing an outline or manuscript. Activities in the "studying Scripture" category include exegesis, examining various versions of a passage, cross-referencing, commentary reading, and word studies. Other common practices include revising (57 percent), internal rehearsing (47 percent), reading related books (47 percent), and creating visuals (36 percent).

UNCOMMON SOLUTIONS

As this research study progressed, pastors implemented new sermon



preparation practices to make their preaching more transformative. While the amount of time they spent stayed the same, they did change the way they used their time. Pastors decreased the amount of time spent reading related books, viewing related media, and revising. What did they do instead? Here are the four prep practices that helped them create sermons listeners experienced as more transformative.

1) Discernment of a clear sermon goal

"My primary challenge was to be more intentional and focused on what the sermon is asking of the people."

Can you name the response goals of your last three sermons? Could your listeners? Many pastors are only able to name sermon topics, Scripture passages, or ideas that listeners should now *understand*. Pastors in the study reported that having a clear goal shapes their thinking throughout the prep process. First, as you study Scripture, work toward a

“**How preachers use their preparation time matters more than how much time they use.**”



clear, compelling, text-connected subject. Once this subject is formulated, allow a specific, high-expectation response goal to emerge. Prep time spent formulating a spiritual growth goal reduces revision time and results in more focused content. Prep time used in this way pays off in listener-perceived impact.

2) Personal spiritual growth activities

"I needed to leave room for the Holy Spirit to work."

Several pastors recognized that they had been neglecting their own spiritual journeys. Those who made changes in this area of sermon preparation spoke of experiencing an increased sense of integrity, inspiration, and invigoration. The specific discernible changes in preaching

"We're out of room. Do we build, relocate, plant, develop two campuses?"

"Our staff isn't on the same page. How do we unify?"

"Our congregation has plateaued. Is there a vision, a catalyst for the future?"

"The church's government frustrates more than helps. How can we change?"

"New young people are moving in all around us. How do we effectively reach them?"

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that accompanied this uncommon prep practice varied: For some, self-disclosure increased because transparency had been lacking, while for others, self-disclosure decreased as ego diminished. Regardless of the specific alterations, as preachers spend more time in meditation, journaling, or personal devotions, listeners report a stronger impact of the sermon on their spiritual lives.

3) Oral rehearsal

"As the years roll by, I'm distracted from sermon prep by exhausting engagements—and by pride. Thinking I know what I'm doing, I spend less and less time preparing. I didn't think I needed oral rehearsal. I was good enough."

Most pastors resist spending precious prep time polishing delivery. While it's true that oral rehearsal enhances language usage and fluency, that's not the key significant finding. Changing from *internal* rehearsal ("going over it in my head") to *oral* rehearsal affects organization. Speaking out loud helps preachers clarify main ideas, maintain focus, avoid tangents, construct transitions, make introductions and conclusions more concise and compelling, and make better use of their sermon prep time. What do listeners say? Better organized sermons are more transformative sermons.

4) Dialogue with others

"I spend too much time dealing with self-doubt as I wonder about the value of what I'm doing. I need fresh ideas. I wait for inspiration but then have to push to get it done. It's a lonely process."

For the small sample of pastors who talk about upcoming sermon content with their spouses, listeners, or other pastors, impact is increased. Because so few pastors make time for this activity, this revelation is the most tentative. But take note: As listeners beg for relevancy and preachers long to freshen the familiar, engaging in pre-sermon dialogues with parishioners can invigorate sermon preparation and impact. Intentional conversations with spouses and peers (even via email) also appear to make a differ-

ence. Sermon communication is *public* discourse; a solitary prep experience may not be adequate.

Do you want your sermons to have greater impact? You may not have more time to spend in sermon preparation, but you can spend that time differently. Such changes are hard work. One pastor says, "We ask people to change every week, but changing my preaching habits was more difficult than I ever imagined."

As you work to manage the pressure and maximize the power, consider these uncommon prep practices, and pray for uncommon results. 🌱

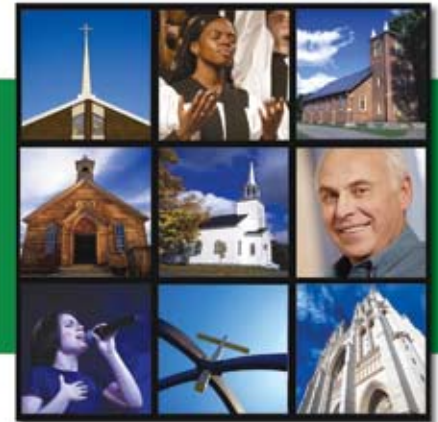


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