

Why Your Preaching Matters More Than You Think

by LORI CARRELL

I've learned something surprising during my ongoing sermon communication research, including the current Lily-endowed Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership study: Many pastors doubt, deep within, that *their* preaching is of great significance to their particular listeners: "I do know God uses preaching, and I do believe I'm called to this, but there isn't much feedback on any given week. I wrestle with the text, pray my way through preparation, and give it everything I have in the pulpit—but I'm not ever really sure what happens after that."

Based on the responses gathered from more than 10,000 listeners, I'm convinced that these pastors vastly under-

estimate the power of their words. We listeners need to speak up. More than 78 percent of us have "never" discussed a sermon with our preachers. So with apologies for previous silence, let the listeners' voices be heard. *Pastor, here's why your preaching matters significantly.*

We listen to your preaching expecting inspiration.

When asked to list the element of the church service "most likely to have an impact on my spiritual journey" the number one answer was "the sermon." Said one, "I like good music and my church friends, but I come on Sunday hoping for inspiration from the sermon, inspiration to encourage my spiritual growth."

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When asked to give advice to pastors, another wrote, "Recognize the power of your words." As the leader of a community of Christ-followers, what is the nature of the growth you are seeking? If it's spiritual growth, you need to know... your listeners are present for this very purpose.

We look to your preaching for spiritual leadership.

Even as technology use explodes, there's one place where face-to-face public speaking flourishes. Where do literally millions gather to hear a community leader speak publicly about important issues? In the United States, at the launch of this millennium, incredibly, that place is the church. One listener admits, "I can get better presentation from television preaching, but I want to hear this person I know, this person who knows me, this leader in our community of believers...I really believe God speaks through the pastor to us." And another, "I count on pastor to have a deep spiritual journey so I can trust where he's leading. I do think for myself, too, but his sermons set the agenda. After 9/11, I couldn't wait to get to church. I needed to hear from God. What pastor said and how he said it led me to deal differently, to connect my faith to the horror."

We rely on your preaching for spiritual content.

Preaching is unique among other sources of advice. Listeners are clear—they want biblically based content in sermons. One *dissatisfied* listener complained, "At our church, we're encouraged to be nice, be kind, have a positive attitude. How is that different from everybody else? What does it have to do with the Bible or God?" Advice columns, talk shows, and Web sites are plentiful, but still listeners find unique value in sermon content. In fact, 75 percent listen hoping for inspiration or life application. Compiled results demonstrate that listeners perceive spiritual-growth potential if the sermon includes insight that reinforces, inspiration that revives, and implementation that requests a response. ▶▶

We listen to your preaching expecting long-lasting impact.

Even listeners who say a particular sermon merely reminded them of something they already knew are resolved to “think about” the content during the week. Listener optimism is reflected in another significant response: A vast majority of listeners in the study anticipate that sermons—regardless of topic or preacher—are likely to impact their

spiritual journeys “in lasting ways.” Even when the pastor hasn’t used inspirational language, hasn’t included implementation ideas, or hasn’t even asked for change, listeners are still committed to contemplating the content knowing there’s potential for spiritual growth to occur. And many who didn’t find content that will lead to life change *this* week still say, “I am motivated to come back to hear more sermons.”

Preachers Respond

Preachers in our study were surprised by these research results. Many have been affirmed, and others have been challenged to raise their expectations about the potentially transformative impact of their preaching in their particular contexts. After hearing a summary of her listeners’ responses, one pastor confessed, “I had forgotten preaching matters. I just stand up and do my thing.” Said another pastor, recognizing that he had underestimated the potential impact of his sermons, “I hoped I might be planting seeds, but I really didn’t think my people would be interested in short-term missions, so I didn’t ask.”

Moved to learn that his listeners perceived him to be highly inspirational, one pastor recently reversed his retirement decision. His listeners said, “Challenge us. We are ready. We long for spiritual growth.” This 40-year veteran, called to preach in a small, older congregation, has now determined to lead his listeners to specific Christlike community action. What’s he doing differently? He is praying for discernment. He is asking listeners to change. He is expecting that his preaching will make a difference. This congregation, not on a mega-church trajectory, is now all about spiritual growth, and their pastor is leading them there with his preaching.

We listeners crave your spiritual leadership and need your high expectations for transformative results. Overwhelmed? Doubting your impact? God has a pattern of calling inadequate humans to monumental kingdom tasks so he can speak through them... I heard one of you preach about that just last Sunday. Amen? 🌀



LORI CARRELL is professor of communication at the University of Wisconsin. This article is fifth in a series revealing results from the Lilly-endowed Center for

Excellence in Congregational Leadership study. Rev! subscribers can access the previous articles in the back issue library at Rev.org.

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