



Ditch the outdated sermon

Multisensory messages are engaging

I never thought of myself as a crafty person. The small motor skills required for sewing or crocheting make my brow knit in frustration. Coloring books meant to lower blood pressure increase mine. But I confess that there have been weeks where I've been crafting some sort of visual aid to go with the sermon I'm preparing.

One big benefit of serving a small church is that it's possible to make the worship service more of a hands-on experience rather than a lecture. Twenty or 30 people is more like a birthday celebration than a concert-hall event.

As a result, the worship service can be more personal and multisensory. People can talk and mingle. They can even leave with some sort of favor to remind them of what they did in church that day.

In an increasingly visual age, many small churches still don't have the technology for PowerPoint or video displays that larger churches use to enhance the worship experience, so creating a multisensory experience requires some effort.

Many times, I find myself at my kitchen table creating visual aids for sermons. These can be anything from crude drawings on poster board to hand-tied gift tags reminding us of the gifts of God.

For me, crafting a good sermon requires more than putting some inspirational words on paper. Perhaps this stems from my training as a high school teacher who was taught that not all students are auditory learners. The teacher who simply lectured the whole time was considered a poor instructor. Some students have to move around to learn effectively. Others need to talk about what they learned, while still others need a visual to help them understand.

While this multisensory approach can happen naturally in a worship service — with music, greetings, stained glass and candles, for instance — I try to add it to the sermon as well.

There is no doubt that the lecture-style sermon is the best communication tool for big groups and is the preferred learning style for some. Culturally, we still use the lecture style anytime we need to pass information along to a large group. And for those educated in the '60s and '70s, the so-called "sit and get" strategy that teachers were trained in is the most familiar way

to gather new information. Sit at school and take notes. Sit at church and learn about God. Sit in front of the TV and listen to the news.

Increasingly, though, parishioners expect more than a preacher standing behind a lectern. And for swaths of people under the age of 40, who have been exposed to

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multisensory instruction since preschool, such a sermon is outdated. Today's young adults are no longer passive listeners, but active participants in their own learning. They didn't sit in rows and scribble. They saw pictures, learned in small groups and created projects that demonstrated the ideas being taught. When they come to church as adults, they don't just want to hear about God. They want to experience God in different ways. If they want to listen to a sermon, they can do that on their phone.

As small-church leaders, we need to realize that a traditional sermon may not be the best way to reach our communities. We need to discern how we can craft engaging sermon experiences that invite people to deepen their understanding of God in new ways. We need to recognize that not everyone has the same learning style and offer biblical and theological insights in ways that people can internalize rather than just rationalize. As a small group, we can see, touch, taste and hear about the goodness of God together.

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