

Planning a sermonic year

Note these five steps crucial for developing a preaching calendar for the year

Planning out the sermonic year and being intentional about creating a unified schedule of Sabbath services and sermons gives direction and inspiration to members and focus to the pastor and leadership.¹ It helps show the pastor and leadership whether they are balanced in presenting various themes. The sermonic year calendar also can make sure that your church programs are in line with the direction and mission of the church and help both the pastor and ministry teams stay organized.²

Yet, planning a sermonic calendar year takes months. From August to October, I spent about three to five hours each week on it. Much of that time was praying for wisdom and the leading of the Holy Spirit. I needed to hear what direction God wanted me to lead the church in the upcoming year.

Because such plans are so important, what follows are steps that I have found crucial for developing a sermonic year calendar:

1. Survey the community and congregation

The first step involves surveying the community to discover what various sermon topics would interest the unchurched. Be sure to include your leadership team and members in this process. You could actually go to a few neighborhood shops and ask patrons what they would like to hear about when they come to church. Or have members ask family and friends what they would like to hear from a church.

I always had a series of sermons, suggested by nonmembers, that I advertised in a flyer. This created credibility and brought new people to the

church. Some suggested subjects were how to raise kids, how to have a better marriage, defining the New Age, and explaining why there are so many religions. Getting feedback from seekers helps you focus on the needs of the unchurched and be intentional about reaching them.

Take a survey of your congregation to find out what areas they feel you should be addressing. Include openended questions for them to suggest topics of interest.

2. Take a leadership retreat

In August of every year I took my leadership team to a spiritual/planning weekend retreat. We spent Friday night and most of the day Sabbath praying, worshiping, reading the Bible, and reflecting. Saturday night and Sunday morning we spent visioning. I gathered many ideas from the leadership team. We also hammered out dates for special events such as Vacation Bible School (VBS); this was also a time to decide which programs from the previous year, if any, should be terminated.

During that weekend I received valuable feedback about issues and challenges in the congregation and community that were not brought up in the surveys. The leaders shared about the church as a whole in addition to individual concerns. This gave me insights as to the spiritual pulse of the church, which also became the basis of my sermonic year.

3. Pray, study, and reflect

After we came back from the retreat, I spent considerable time in prayer, Bible study, and reflection. Sometimes I felt God was calling us to a greater focus on mission, other times on building community, yet other times towards various topics, such as personal sanctification or spiritual growth. I took all of these ideas and started putting them on a spreadsheet in an attempt to make connections and a logical sequence out of them.

4. Put it together: first draft

By October, I finished working on a first draft of the master calendar and upcoming sermonic year. (I used a one-page calendar for the sermon planning so I could see the whole year at a glance.) Here are some things I included in the master calendar:

A. Pay attention to the major events of the year. As I finalized the sermonic year, I always paid close attention to what I call the “seasonal.” This includes New Year’s Day, Valentine’s Day, Easter, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas. During these days people are much more inclined to go to church, and so I wanted to use these opportunities to minister to them, hoping too that they would continue to come.

Other dates that I added to this list were the church anniversary (to emphasize how God led in the past and His vision for the future), personal vacation times, school breaks,³ VBS, and two short evangelistic meetings. One was to be conducted in February and one in September. Each of them spanned a week and two weekends.⁴ The addition of all these special Sabbaths will take approximately 12 to 15 weeks out of the year. Pay attention to the overall church rhythm and plan accordingly.

B. Schedule Communion services. I put Communion and footwashing on the calendar four times a year. I tried to conduct one or two of them on Friday night or Saturday night to incorporate an Agape Feast and give variety.

C. Plan acts of kindness. I always planned four Sabbath afternoons of service to the community in conjunction with a sermon series on action. During these Sabbaths, people may engage in any form of community service they want—personally, as a family, or as a church.

D. Conduct rewind Sabbaths. We also took two Sabbaths a year around the beginning of December and called them “rewind.” The emphasis is to thank

the Lord and show how He led us in the past. During that time, we brought all the people who were baptized and those who helped them in their walk with the Lord during the year to give testimonies up front. Through testimonies and videos, we highlighted the ministries God empowered the church to do. We gave a summary of all the series we preached during the year and especially emphasized their relevancy and application.

E. Schedule the series. Look for blocks on your calendar that will accommodate a sermon series four to eight weeks long. If the series is shorter than three or four weeks, you do not get the maximum impact. If the series is longer than eight to ten weeks, people lose interest. Schedule one to three weeks of space between each series. That way, the pastoral staff can address current events and issues, bring in a guest speaker,⁵ or take the series a bit longer if the Spirit moves. Be sure to take into consideration the series' length necessitated by the theme you present. While not ideal, if you occasionally have to take a week off during a series to accommodate a special event, you may do so.

5. Solicit feedback and craft the final draft

I gave the calendar to the board members, church secretary, musicians, graphic designer, outreach coordinator—anyone who needed to know. I did this for two reasons: First is to get feedback. Second, everyone knows what is going on and can be a part of what is scheduled. After I incorporated the feedback from the leadership team and made sure that they were comfortable with the schedule, the final calendar for the upcoming year was given to the church body by November. We found it important to let the membership know what was scheduled so they could plan accordingly, such as invite friends and family to a series that might interest them.

How to Plan a Sermon Series

1. *Prayerfully choose major themes to address.* All topics you preach on will basically fall into the following categories:

- *Felt needs* covers all of the how-to topics, such as raising kids God's way, overcoming depression, handling anger, breaking bad habits.
- *Spiritual growth* includes topics such as prayer, Bible study, worship, sanctification, justification.
- *Doctrines* are covered during evangelistic meetings.
- *Stewardship* includes the four *T*'s: tithe and offering, temple (your body), talents, and time.
- *Vision casting* includes the journey the church is going on, both spiritually and relationally, toward embodying the character of the first-century church of [Acts 2](#).
- *Seasonal*, as mentioned before.

Do not limit yourself to just one or two of these themes. Try finding a place on your calendar to touch on all of the above categories. Because it can usually take about four to eight weeks to cover each one, expect about two years to cover them all.

For example, every year in January, I dealt with my vision and the values and mission for the church. Stewardship was addressed in April, and the seasonal was covered throughout the year. Some ideas of how to approach the seasonal could be topics like the life/teachings of Christ around Easter, or marriage and parenting around Mother's or Father's Day.

Be sure to have a good mix of Old Testament, New Testament, and topical or thematic sermons. Books such as Genesis and John can be used to cover almost every category presented above. Help your people get deeper into the Word. Regardless of the theme, the gospel message should be reflected in every sermon.

Sometimes we gave the whole year a theme, such as "The Year of Mission." Every sermon series was related to what it means to be missional. Many of

the series were overtly about mission, such as “The Most Effective Evangelist in the World” and a series on the Holy Spirit’s role in mission. There was also a series on James, with the central theme “If we’re going to be a church on a mission, then our best testimony is how we live.”

Other times, we decided that each month or sermon series needed its own theme. For example, the whole month of November could deal with thankfulness.

Some themes⁶ to consider are the character of God, denominational distinctiveness, Christian basics, Bible characters, and the Ten Commandments.

2. Intentionally craft sermon series. A sermon series demands more from the preacher in the way of “packaging” than does a stand-alone sermon. You need to divide the topic into individual sermons and scriptures that cover a certain amount of terrain each week. Keep your sermons simple enough for seekers to understand (avoid jargon and explain theological terms) but without watering down your message. You need to choose the series titles; perhaps a series metaphor, subtitle, and text presenting them in a unified way. You may write a marketing paragraph for the church Web site to stir interest in the series for your church and community.

Once you know the blocks of time you have to work with, then schedule each sermon series on the calendar and plan the order of the individual sermons within each series. Try moving from week one being more theological to the final weeks leaning in a more practical direction—from the *why* to the *what*. This way you are leading people toward personal and corporate application of the spiritual truths they have learned. Factor in the sequence of evangelism, discipleship, and Christian maturity.

3. Plan with a creative team. Develop a creative team before delivering your series. This team should include worship leaders, media directors, elders, and a couple of other creative people. Look at the series in broad brush

strokes, talking about the overarching metaphors and ideas you want to communicate.

The role of the team is to help flesh out the ideas. They need to be honest enough to say things such as, "I think if you preach it that way, you will deliver the theological goods; but I don't think that will change anybody's heart." Take their comments seriously, and go back to the drawing board. Always ask, "How is this truly going to change lives?"

In addition to giving honest feedback, creative teams are beneficial because they keep you working ahead. When you work ahead, the series become more creative and good ideas eventually become great ones. Team members can help with illustrations, PowerPoint presentations, videos, titles, and so on.

4. Brand the series. Once you determine the flow of the series, you should begin work on "branding," which means the words and images that will be used to communicate the series. For example, we titled a series on the Holy Spirit "3rd Person" and chose titles and graphics that reflected the mystery of the Spirit. We gave the title "TXT MSG" to a series on the Bible. Coordinate your titles and visual elements, not for the purpose of being slick but to help people stay focused in one direction.

Another element of branding would be to see whether there is a way to incorporate ministry initiatives during a series so that people can see how what they hear is connected with how they live.

At the end of the day it's not about clever branding; it's about relevant preaching. If we are not handling the Word of God with integrity and showing people how truth makes a difference in their lives, all our creativity would be nothing more than smoke and mirrors. We hit the mark when we faithfully preach God's Word in a way that opens up the possibility for genuine life transformation.

Conclusion

Some of the benefits of planning your sermonic year are being able to avoid the rush and panic that comes with not knowing what you will be preaching about next week. This also allows time for the worship and communication coordinators to plan services and branding that will contribute to the theme. Finally, it allows for a balance in the topics and spiritual lessons presented.⁷

Keep in mind that there needs to be a balance between structure and flexibility. The calendar changes sometimes. If there are new issues that need to be addressed, such as a death in the church or crisis in the community or global events, then change your sermon schedule accordingly. The sermonic year should be used as a tool to bring edification to members and further the call of God's mission.

References:

1 A sermonic year calendar can still be effective for those in multichurch districts but may require your elders and guest preachers to preach to a specific theme rather than picking their own topic. For more information about planning with church districts in mind, see Rodlie Ortiz, "Planning a Preaching Calendar for a Multichurch District," *Ministry*, August 2011, www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2011/08/planning-a-preachingcalendar-for-a-multichurch-district.

2 "But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" ([1 Cor. 14:40, NIV](#)).

3 It is not wise to start a new series during spring break or other weekends that are traditionally family vacation times for those in your congregation.

4 One of these could be extended to a full evangelistic series spanning three to four weeks.

5 My philosophy is that I invite guest speakers not to fill time but to help me fulfill my vision and mission for the church. I might invite some guest speakers for training purposes, others for evangelistic purposes, yet others because they have a big name and will draw a crowd.

6 For more theme ideas, see J. Reynolds Hoffman, "Planning a sermonic year," *Ministry*, December 1978, www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1978/12/planning-a-sermonic-year.

7 For further insights, see Derek Morris, "From Panic to Purpose: The Process and Benefits of Planning a Preaching Calendar," *Ministry*, September 2004, www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2004/09/from-panic-to-purpose.html.