

One on One with Gary McIntosh: The Importance of Preaching for Church Growth

If you have studied church growth, you recognize Gary McIntosh's name. He has spent his life helping churches reach our culture with the gospel. One of the ways he helps many of us is through his writing. He is the author of over a dozen books; I expect you have at least one of them on your shelf. Spending time with him at the Great Lakes District Conference was personally encouraging and intellectually stimulating.

I was interested to hear his thoughts on the relationship between preaching and church growth. How important is preaching for church growth? What are sermons like in growing churches? What are things a preacher should consider to increase his effectiveness?

Join me around a circular table in the Jr. High Sunday School room of Naperville, EFC for a stimulating conversation.

Gary, how important is preaching for church growth?

It is extremely important! Church growth books rarely talk about the importance of preaching, but they should. Much church growth material views the church as a package of worship and programs. Preaching is traditionally viewed as just another piece of the worship package. The latest research is showing that preaching is *the most important piece*. Preaching is 90% of the reason people *stay* in a church.

Churches grow through the congregation inviting their friends and family. The entrance into the church is the relationship the congregation has with their community. Once people are there, it is the pastor's ability to communicate the word in a way that connects with their life that *keeps* them coming.

Our congregations are looking for how the Bible relates to life. It is the pastor's responsibility to provide those connections. When he does it well, the people will come back for more. Like honey-bees, they will tell others where the church is that the best pollen is found.

It is no secret that the pastor's preaching ability can also hinder a church's growth. For example, smaller churches have a relational atmosphere. A pastor of modest communication skills can compensate through his interpersonal relationships with the people. For the church to grow, the pastor will need to develop communication skills that enable him to connect with people from the pulpit, not just at the pew.

I have seen some creative ways pastors compensated for pulpit skills to overcome this church growth barrier. One friend knew he was not comfortable preaching in a large auditorium. His preaching skills were not suited for that kind of pulpit ministry. As the church grew, rather than build a larger auditorium, the church moved to multiple smaller auditoriums. He preaches in the other auditoriums through video feed. It worked! The church continues to grow and his communication style continues to fit the congregation.

From a communicational perspective, what have you seen help and hinder church growth?

The 50's and 60's were a time of declaring the word and expositing the text. In the 80's the popular preaching style was topical. Today we have shifted into a hybrid topical-expositional model where pastors are preaching on larger chunks of scripture and applying the bigger themes to their congregation. This topical-expositional model is something I would encourage young pastors to consider.

Pastors today must be known as authentic, they must have believability. Their preaching posture must be that of a fellow struggler. Good pastors let their people know, within reason, they also lose their temper, they struggle at home just like everyone else. Transparency makes the communicator real. If it is done appropriately, it creates an intimacy that helps people realize the pastor is one of them. If Christ helps the pastor, he can help me.

Pastors also need to be good story tellers. Our culture is not looking for linear logic but a narrative that captures their interest with conflict, climax and resolution. Stories are a legitimate way of preaching. Most of the Bible is stories and that is how God chose to reveal much of his character. I am not a homiletician, but I think it would be wise for pastors to have a story go with every major point in their message. If the story is memorable, it will help anchor the message, not replace it.

Pastors also need to fit their audience. It is not wise to approach a congregation as a scholar and hope they understand what you say. A good pastor will work hard to communicate to the audience he has in a way they understand. The pastor needs to know the heart of his congregation. He needs to read what his people are reading, he needs to watch the television programs his congregation is watching (within reason), and he needs to attend the local sports events that the youth of the congregation are playing. The pastor needs to use every tool at his disposal to understand how the Bible relates to his people

Let me give you an example of the importance of understanding and connecting with an audience; take the example of Joel Olstein. While I am not supporting his theology, it is hard to argue he is *not* a good communicator. Why is he so effective? In my estimation, he is immensely popular because he tried to understand and connect with a deep wound in every one of us. It is the wound of hopelessness. This world is filled with tragedy, dashed dreams and unrealized desires. Joel's messages are targeted to provide people with hope in a world filled with wounds. He understood this need in the American public, he connected with the need in his preaching and his church grew to be the largest in the country. What do you think would happen if we worked on better understanding and connecting with the needs in our congregation?

As we ended the interview and headed for dinner, Gary's reminder to connect with my audience was reverberating through the corridors of my mind. The theme of spending more time understanding the people, not just the Bible, has come up in most of my interviews.

The congregation will bring people in, but 90% of the reason they stay is the pastor's ability to connect the Bible to the people.



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