

## “Remember the Pastor’s Message Three Weeks Ago?”

Research tells us that we remember less than 10% of the unsupported spoken word. Yet, Sunday after Sunday pastors stand behind pulpits and employ this weakest of communication vehicles. No wonder few could answer “yes” to the title of this article!

Wouldn’t you like to know that the days you spend in sermon preparation would find a long-term place in your listener’s memory? Your message *can* be remembered.

### Two Learning Principles

Knowing how people learn is important before we can know how to teach. The two primary principles by which people learn are redundancy and multi-sensory.

*Redundancy* means we learn when exposed to a message more than one time. *Multi-sensory* means we learn when exposed to a message in more than one way.

Every sermon you deliver should use a variety of communication technologies to achieve multi-sensory redundancy.

### Five Memory Tools

Here are five ways to improve your communication and enhance your members’ retention...

**Visualization** Pete Ward, pastor of a church in England that began a successful new worship service for 18-25 year olds, describes their creative use of images: “With a large white sheet and an LCD projector we achieve spectacular visual effects. A picture that is twenty feet high has an amazing impact. We use a software program to create a sequence of pictures that change throughout the service. Suddenly the visual arts become a responsive, interactive part of our worship.”<sup>i</sup>

An image projector, PowerPoint software, and a remote advance unit should be as common in your worship center as a pulpit and microphone. When used effectively, visual images will greatly enhance retention. Use visuals to outline your sermon, illustrate scripture, show church ministries in action, introduce purposeful cartoons. For additional visual stimuli, include a handout in the bulletin for members to follow along and fill in the blanks. Rather than just hearing your point, they are now hearing, seeing, and writing it!

**Drama** Drama can take many forms. A woman pastor I know delivered a sermon on the woman who touched Jesus’ robe. But she “preached” the entire message dressed in the garb common to women of that day, and delivered the entire “sermon” in the first person. She *was* the woman who had just touched Jesus’ robe! The congregation was spellbound by the personal recounting of the woman who had been healed by the master.

The most common use of drama is a 3 - 5 minute illustration of a key issue related to the sermon. The most complimentary role of drama is to illustrate a *problem* to which the sermon provides the *solution*.

You may wish to purchase scripts written by professional playwrights. After a few years, however, most churches find that the drama sketches they write themselves are more appropriate for the message they wish to communicate.

**Story Telling** Jesus, of course, was a master storyteller. He knew the indelible place in one’s memory that is created by a simple, well-told story. “Storytelling creates community,” says

Thomas Boomershire. “People who tell each other stories become friends ... and the deeper the meaning of the story, the deeper the relationships that are formed by the story.”<sup>ii</sup>

A story is similar to a sermon illustration in that it takes listeners into the realm of their imagination — a powerful and engaging part of the mind. But a story is not a sermon illustration. Whereas a good illustration *clarifies* a point in the sermon, a good story *makes* a point, and the sermon clarifies it. Think about Jesus’ parables. Were they illustrations or stories? Jesus knew the powerful message stories could tell, and the powerful emotions they could evoke.

Story-telling is a skill that can be developed. I recently received a notice from the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS, P.O. Box 309, Jonesborough, TN 37659) inviting me to this year’s National Storytelling Festival. There I could hear and learn to tell ghost stories, family stories, sacred stories, historic and cultural stories. I could receive a bi-monthly magazine with “how to” articles, stories to use and adapt, and where to find networks of other storytellers.

Storytelling is fun, engaging, spontaneous, and playful. To say, “let me tell you a story” is like saying, “let’s go play.” Everyone loves a good story.

**Puppets** Jim Tippens, pastor of First Baptist Church (Myrtle Beach, SC) still remembers what happened in the middle of the service some years ago: “Suddenly, coming up from behind a railing, the congregation saw an orange head with a green nose and blue hair. It had the high voice of a child. Every eye in the sanctuary focused on this amazing sight. As the creature began to talk, the congregation became silent. Smiles broke out on people’s faces, I could tell that every word was being soaked up.”<sup>iii</sup>

Puppets capture the imagination and childlike innocence in everyone. Puppets can personalize and communicate with people in a way humans cannot. Whereas, people are often judged on their appearance, their manner, or their body language, puppets are immediately accepted. Puppets can easily get the attention of sleepy headed children and talkative adults. Puppets can teach moral and spiritual lessons in ways that no human can. Creatively integrated into your message, these miniature marvels can make your message stick like glue!

**Testimonies** Good preachers know that when they tell the true story of a changed life, it can have a dramatic impact on the listener. But great preachers know that when someone tells their own story, the impact is often far greater. The power of a personal testimony is awesome.

A pastor friend recently preached a sermon on why bad things happen to good people. He had asked a member of the church to consider his feelings on what life had been like in the last year since being diagnosed with cancer. On Sunday, during his sermon, the pastor invited the man to join him at the front of the sanctuary for a candid conversation on this topic. The man’s clear and heart-felt testimony made the sermon sing with reality.

### Conclusion

Remember that unsupported spoken words are the least effective carrier of your message. Enhance your message with *multi-sensory redundancy* and you will find far more people answering “yes” to the question: “Remember the pastor’s message three weeks ago?”

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<sup>i</sup> Pete Ward. *Worship & Youth Culture*. London: Marshall Pickering 1993. p. 154 - 155.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas Boomershire. *Story Telling*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988. p. 18.

<sup>iii</sup> Jim Tippens. "Puppetry: It's Not Just for Kids Anymore" in *WORSHIP LEADER*, Jan./Feb. 1995, p. 12.