

## **Developing a Big Idea Series and Sermon**

Use the skills, talents, and knowledge of everyone on your team.

Tammy Melchien

Sometimes when we first describe our teaching team approach to sermon preparation, pastors who were trained to lock themselves in an office and develop their Sunday message by themselves think we're crazy. "I'm used to doing this by myself," they might say. Or another common question is, "How can you teach something someone else has written?" Some pastors feel that if they don't spend 20-25 hours crafting a message by themselves, it's cheating.

Before we talk about our process for developing BIG IDEA series and sermons, we need to explain the type of teaching team that makes this process work. Most of the teaching teams we have observed are like a baseball team with a pitching staff. That team will put one pitcher on the mound and the whole crowd will watch to see if that pitcher can bring victory to the team. Pitching staffs always have their one ace. If there's a big game on the line (like Christmas or Easter), you always go with your ace to get the big win.

When you leverage the skills, talent, and knowledge of every player on your team, you end up with better content, better illustrations, make better use of time, and have more fun!

The kind of teaching team that best creates The BIG IDEA is not like a pitching staff; it's more like a basketball team. All the players on a basketball team have a position to play and know that if they are going to be successful then they have to pass the ball and run the play. A good basketball team must have all five players on the court and not just one pitcher on the mound. A basketball team will have a leading scorer, but they know that to be a great team every player must be able to shoot the ball and score. Our team is much more like a basketball team; we have some players that are more skilled for certain positions, but we depend on the entire team for the victory and not just one ace. We believe we are better together than any one of us could ever be on our own.

In the same way that a gifted worship leader can take a song that others have written and make it his or her own to lead people in genuine worship; we believe each of our teaching pastors can take a message that has been written by our teaching team and make it their own in order to lead people in genuine discipleship.

### **The process of developing the sermon**

### *Step One: The BIG IDEA Map*

Our process begins with the development of a foundational document we call the "BIG IDEA Map." 10-12 weeks out from the start of a series, a few key members of our teaching team (including Dave as our lead pastor and myself (Tammy) as the leader of our teaching team) brainstorm a big-picture view of the coming series. We already have a series title and a breakdown of topics for each week from our yearly Big Idea brainstorm (see [Part One](#) in this article series). The goal at this stage is to describe an overview of the series in a few paragraphs and provide a breakdown of each week of the series that includes a Big Idea summary statement, Scriptures we will focus on, and a general description of the message. Of course, all of these things will be refined as we move through the brainstorming and writing process, but the Big Idea Map provides a starting point for our team.

### *Step Two: Meeting Preparation*

Once the Big Idea Map is created, members of the teaching team can begin their preparation. Each contributing writer on our team will be assigned to a particular message (two writers per message). They are encouraged to prepare for our teaching team meeting by reviewing the Map, reading through exegetical research on the Scriptures, and thinking through illustrations or stories that could be used in the message. As we prepare to meet to brainstorm the messages, everyone knows they are expected to bring lots of ideas to the table.

### *Step Three: Teaching Team Meeting*

Now it is time to brainstorm. Eight weeks out from the start of a series, our teaching team meets to brainstorm message outlines for the entire series. We allow one hour per message in this brainstorm so if it is a three week series, the meeting lasts three hours. If it is a four week series, the meeting lasts four hours. We don't recommend brainstorming more than four messages at a time.

To best utilize everyone's time, only myself and one other senior member of our teaching team are in the entire three to four hour meeting. They help brainstorm every week of the series and provide continuity between the various messages. The rest of the teaching team members cycle through and help brainstorm the message they will be writing.

So with myself, a senior member of the teaching team, and two writers sitting around a table, we have one hour to brainstorm a sermon outline. We spend about 40 minutes getting ideas up on a whiteboard. Everyone in the room contributes ideas based on their preparation.

With about 20 minutes left in the hour, we start identifying the best ideas and begin to work these ideas into an outline. We have a general framework we call the "Five W's" that helps us in constructing our outline. Here are some questions we ask:

- **Wow!** How will we start the message? How will we grab people's attention and point them to the Big Idea?
- **Why?** Why does what we are about to say matter? What is the problem we're trying to address? How do we build tension? Why should people care?
- **Word.** What does God say to us through Scripture about this Big Idea?
- **What Now?** What do we want people to do in response to what God has said? What is the one actionable next step?
- **We.** What would happen if we all took this step? What is God's vision for us as a community in relation to this Big Idea?

At the conclusion of the hour, we have a sermon outline with the key points we will make and the illustrations and stories we hope to use.

On a side note, at the same time the teaching team is brainstorming sermon outlines, our creative arts team is using the BIG IDEA Map to brainstorm artistic elements to express the BIG IDEA. Our teaching team and creative arts team work hand in hand, communicating often. Our arts team might suggest a video element to use in the message. Our teaching team may ask the creative arts team to craft a response moment leading out of the message. Everyone is working together to clearly communicate one Big Idea.

#### *Step Four: Writing*

Following the teaching team meeting, the writers have two weeks to write the first draft of the message, what we call the "Good" version of the message. As we mentioned, we assign two writers to every message so those writers will decide who will write each section of the outline. Then, one of the writers will take the various sections and weave them together into one seamless draft. This draft is a complete manuscript of the sermon, not an outline.

#### *Step Five: Reading Meeting*

Six weeks out from the start of the series, we gather every writer who has contributed to the series and read our "Good" messages aloud to one another. We simply read the messages aloud; we don't "preach" them. After the sermon has been read, everyone in the room gets the opportunity to provide feedback. We think this process is critical. Not only does the reading meeting provide accountability to the writers to hit their deadlines, but also it gives our team a great opportunity to refine, fact-check, and clarify the message.

#### *Step Six: Editing and Personalizing*

Following the reading meeting, the message will go through an editing and personalizing process up until the day it is taught. First, based on the feedback from the reading meeting, I edit every "Good" message draft to the "Better" message draft. This "Better" draft is typically completed three weeks before the message is taught. By Wednesday before the message is

taught, one of the senior teaching team members will do one more edit to create the "Best" version of the message.

Each of our teaching pastors then takes this "Best" version and personalizes it with their own stories and manner of speaking. Currently with 12 campuses, we have 12 teaching pastors delivering this Big Idea message all over the Chicago area every week. If you were to attend any of our campuses, you would hear the same basic message personalized by that particular teaching pastor. One church. One Big Idea. Multiple teaching pastors who make up one team.

There certainly are challenges to functioning more like a basketball team than a baseball team when it comes to planning series and sermons. You have to trust the team more than yourself. You have to multi-task working on several different messages in any given week. You might have to change "your style" in order to work together as a team. There are certainly challenges, but we believe the benefits outweigh them all.

When you leverage the skills, talent, and knowledge of every player on your team, you end up with better content, better illustrations, make better use of time, and have more fun! As teaching pastors, we also feel you can be emboldened to teach with more confidence. Every time we stand on the stage to deliver a message, we know that we're not out there on the pitcher's mound by ourselves. The content we are about to deliver has been crafted, evaluated, and refined by our entire team. We just made it our own. We are better teaching pastors because of our process and because we are better together than any one of us could be on our own.

Tammy Melchien serves as Community Christian Church's Teaching Team Pastor. She oversees the development of the weekly Big Idea messages delivered at all 12 of Community's campuses.