

## **Planning One Year of Big Idea Sermons**

The importance of collaboration in the development of sermon ideas.

Dave Ferguson

"Wow, you must be really organized!" is the comment we often hear when we tell people we plan all of our big idea teaching a year in advance. We wish that were the case. The creative chaos and our love for everything new tell the truth about us—we are not by nature a very organized group of leaders and artists. However, we have learned the value of collaboration and a simple strategy that has made a huge difference.

### **Collaboration is a must**

We love collaboration at Community Christian Church. Everything we do is based on a firmly held value that we are better together than any one of us could be on our own. We believe that a team of people with a teaching gift will craft a better message in less time than any one person locking him or herself away for 20-25 hours in a study. Plus, "together" sounds a whole lot more fun to us.

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Our teaching team is made up of a variety of people. Some contributors are regulars. I (Dave Ferguson) am the Lead Pastor of Community, and Tammy Melchien leads our teaching team. In addition there are many other contributors; it might be one of our campus pastors, a member of our children's staff, or a volunteer with a passion and gifting for teaching. Over the last year we've had twenty-three different people make writing contributions to our 54 (each Sunday and Christmas Eve and Good Friday) sermons. Every person on the team chooses to trust the team more than themselves. It takes a healthy dose of humility, but we believe having a variety of perspectives speaking into our message development ultimately produces better teaching and better Christ followers.

### **Keep it simple**

Simple strategies that we can reproduce at other campuses and share with other churches are important to us. This is the first of two articles on this topic we will share on

PreachingToday.com. The simple strategy we are giving you for planning one year of Big Idea sermons has been implemented by hundreds of churches. You can find more on this topic in the book, [The Big Idea: Aligning The Ministries of Your Church Through Creative Collaboration](#). Next

week's article will show you how to plan a big idea series and message; but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

### **Preparing for the big idea meeting**

Every May, we set aside two days for "The BIG IDEA Meeting." During these two days we map out our messages for the following September through August. The goal is to have a calendar filled with series titles, weekly big ideas, along with key Scriptures and general concepts for every week of the coming ministry year. We want to walk out of this May meeting with that deliverable, but the simple strategy works like this ...

*Step One: Survey Key Influencers.* Step one in our process is to gather the key influencers in our church for a brainstorming session several weeks before the meeting. For us, this is primarily our staff. But if you're at a smaller church or a new church plant the key influencers could include small group leaders, elders, your leadership board, or anyone who has a good understanding of your people and embraces the theology and vision of your church. During this 90-minute session, we brainstorm around three areas and conclude with a vote:

- *Spoken Needs* (15 minutes): What are people saying that they need? As your key influencers think about the conversations they've had with people both within and outside of your church, they will remember the struggles, challenges, curiosities, and desires that both church members and neighbors have expressed. List out these spoken needs and look for trends. For example, in our last brainstorming session, several staff members said: "The people in my small group want to know how to grow spiritually beyond what they're doing on Sunday mornings and in our group." We wrote the spoken need "spiritual development" on our whiteboard. Another staff member spoke up: "My daughter and so many of her friends from college are struggling with doubt. I think they are looking for understandable explanations of why it is reasonable to have faith." We added "apologetics" to our list of spoken needs.

- *Unspoken Needs* (15 minutes): Unspoken needs are the things people aren't talking about, but they need. Your key influences are in the trenches doing ministry. They see needed growth areas before the average church member, and they are building relationship with people far from God. For example, "generosity" will probably always be on our list of unspoken needs. In our culture, generosity is an area of discipleship we all need to be challenged in regularly, yet we have yet to hear a member of our church say, "What I really need is a good, challenging message on tithing." Draw on the perspective of your key influencers to develop a list of unspoken needs.

- *Series Ideas* (45 minutes): Armed with a lot of perspective on spoken and unspoken needs, we start to ask questions like: What Scriptures address these needs? What topical series could address these needs? From which book of the Bible could we teach? What creative series titles

or "hooks" could we use? We spend the bulk of the meeting time brainstorming ideas for series. The ideas aren't refined yet. We will typically get 15-20 rough series ideas up on the board in a 45-minute period. Key influencers often come prepared with some ideas they've been pondering, and this is their chance to pitch them.

- *Reflection & Voting* (15 minutes): With about 15 minutes left in the meeting, we stop the brainstorming process and take the pulse in the room. We give people about five minutes to prayerfully look over the three different areas we've brainstormed and ask, "If you could only pick two items in each area that you think are top priority, which would you choose?" After this time of reflection, we ask everyone to vote for two in each of the categories: spoken needs, unspoken needs, and series ideas. Our final decisions will not be solely based on this vote, but it helps us get a sense of what ideas are resonating most strongly with some of our leaders.

Typically, we hold at least two of these 90-minute brainstorming sessions. Most key influencers only come to one. Some come to both. We find that this is a great way to not only get a broader perspective for our planning, but also a way to give your most invested people a voice in the teaching ministry of the church.

*Step Two: Ideas for Seasonal Series.* A second step in our annual planning process is to identify ideas for specific series that we do every year. For example, we know we will celebrate Christmas and Easter every year. We also know that every fall and spring we want to do a series that will be of interest to people who don't currently attend church and is easy for people to invite unchurched friends. If you are taking on a new initiative like a building campaign or launching a new ministry, that will also require a series.

Our goal for these specific series is to gather as many good ideas as we can so that we can discover the best idea. Sometimes ideas for these targeted series emerge in our key influencer brainstorm sessions. Other times we might ask our arts staff to come up with a great idea for a Christmas series or our finance team to come up with an idea for a generosity series. We know we are going to do these specific series and we plan for it.

*Step Three: Research Other Churches.* It was Pablo Picasso who said, "Good artists copy, great artists steal." Teaching is an art, and we would be foolish not to grab ideas from other great churches. There are a lot of brilliant ideas out there, and simple Internet searches can make them yours. You would be amazed at the number of brilliant men and women around the country who have been a great help to our teaching team (even though they don't know it!). We are better together!

## **The big idea meeting**

We are now ready for "The BIG IDEA Meeting." We've got the input of key influencers, we have some great ideas for seasonal topics and we have also gathered great ideas from other churches. It's now time to plan a year's worth of sermon series. This two-day meeting in May gathers key senior staff in the room and other key players on our teaching team and arts team. Again, if you're at a smaller church, gather some of your most committed key leaders—whatever that looks like for your context. The decisions we make in this meeting will have a broad affect on the coming year of our church, and we want to make sure it is in alignment with our vision and that everyone is on the same page.

As the lead pastor and teaching team leader, we may start by pitching some suggestions based on the preparation that's come before, but we are also still open to new ideas. Much of this two-day meeting involves discussing and lobbying for series until the best ideas are agreed upon. Early in this meeting we make sure that each proposed series has a title and breakdown of each week along with key passages of Scripture. While we will only need 12-16 series we will have easily have more than 50 from which to choose. Once we have selected the dozen or more series we want to do, we will look to fit them into our calendar. It's like putting together a jigsaw puzzle as series are moved around until they fit in around holidays and other key events. After hours of discussion and looking at our teaching calendar from every angle, we emerge from this meeting with a roadmap for the next year.

At the end of first day we review our plan and all commit to prayerfully sleep on it. The next day we come back together to confirm our plan. Giving ourselves the night to sleep on it gives us time to remember something important we may have forgotten the previous day. Undoubtedly, there will be adjustments and occasionally major detours as the year unfolds; but after those two days we feel confident that we have a plan that will grow Christ followers, reach people far from God, and accomplish the mission that Jesus has for us.

As we look back, it has been the value of collaboration and implementing a simple strategy that has given us a one-year plan of Big Idea sermons.

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