

How to Create an Annual Preaching Calendar

Welcome to this MasterClass inside the hub on How to Create an Annual Preaching Calendar. I think an annual preaching calendar is vital because planning prevents problematic preaching. If you plan well ahead in the series you're going to do, the topics you're going to cover and also in that week by week planning, not only the annual planning, you tend to get into less problems in your preaching in your church.

8 Benefits of An Annual Preaching Calendar

1. It gives you space and time to prepare well in advance.

If you know you're going to be doing a series on prayer in June, you can be on the lookout and praying and thinking about stories and scriptures in your own prayer life.

Likewise if you're going to preach through Mark in September, then you've got a few months to study Mark, read it through in various translations, get some audio Bible on podcasts and listen to it, read various commentaries as part of your devotional life even and you can get into your teams head as well and other pastors and how they preached Mark or how they preached on prayer.

It gives you space and time to prepare.

2. Builds confidence.

Planning does that on a whole different range of areas. When we're organised, we're thinking ahead, feeling like I know what I'm going to do in a month's time or in three months' time. It builds confidence in yourself as a leader and as a preacher but it also builds confidence into your team. They know that you're leading, that you're setting direction, they know that you're ahead of the game. You're not behind the eight ball, you're actually ahead and also they get confident in you.

The fact that you can say to your children's church leader, here's my plan for the year - why don't you build some connected topics into my series so we can have a bit of a thematic approach through the year. It mightn't happen every week or every month but it gives them confidence that you know where you're going and what you're doing.

3. Reduces Saturday night fever.

And I'm not talking about the hit movie of the 70's. I'm talking about that anxious feeling that pastors can get on Saturday night - oh my sermon just doesn't feel right, oh that whole sense of dread about Sunday morning because I haven't really got it all together. I haven't

got my text properly, now I'm going to sit up late, I'm going to get up really early on Sunday morning to try and throw something together.

I've always laughed about creating a website called "Saturday Night Fever.com" for pastors where you can download last minute sermons with the price increasing every minute closer towards Sunday morning. A bit of a joke of mine! You can tell I'm a joker!

That Saturday anxiety is a real thing for pastors and preachers and if you've got an annual preaching calendar, then you reduce that because you're well planned ahead of time. You're also structuring your week so you've got sermon prep and study time through the week but you've got a far better sense of I'm going into the pulpit knowing what I'm going to deliver. I'm going into the pulpit knowing that I've given this a lot of forward thought. This wasn't a Saturday morning idea - I threw something together on Friday night and thought this would work.

It doesn't diminish in any way at all that edge that you can, on Saturday or Sunday or even Friday, you get that sense of God wants to do something particularly strong through a certain scripture or an aspect of the message. It doesn't diminish that work of the Spirit that is more spontaneous, that is more in the moment. It doesn't diminish that at all. You can plan and then the Lord can lead you with your plan.

I like to be more relaxed on the Saturday night before I preach rather than anxiously, feverishly thinking what on earth am I going to deliver in the morning.

4. A better diet

Ezekiel 34 talks about the sheep and the paddock and pastors and shepherds looking after those sheep and not feeding themselves off the sheep, but actually delivering to the sheep what they need. There's almost, as it were, kind of warnings to shepherds and pastors that you'd better watch what you're feeding the sheep because I want my sheep in my paddock, my flock, I want them to be fed on the very best food and you cannot disciple people without a healthy diet from the scriptures.

You must have a healthy diet from the scriptures otherwise people will not grow and you've got to learn to take them from paddock to paddock and give them a diversity of food. Sometimes it's milk, sometimes it's meat and so on.

I think an annual preaching calendar kind of gives you that space and that time to think about what's the diet that I'm bringing to my people. What paddocks am I leading my sheep into. Is this healthy food or am I just delivering up something I microwaved off the internet. No no we don't want to be doing that as pastors and shepherds. It's too easy to do that today but we want to be delivering a healthy diet that produces the fruit and the discipling that we want within our people.

5. Reveals healthy leadership

This is similar to what I was saying before. It sends the message that I am thinking, we are thinking about the church's diet, about the Word, about the feeding. The feeding process, feeding the flock.

I remember years Frank Damazio, a great leader in Oregon in USA talking extensively at a seminar about feeding the flock and it struck my heart so much that we as shepherds have a responsibility to be healthy in our leadership by preparing slow food, healthy food.

I think that advantage that you also get in an annual preaching calendar, it does allow you to step back, and this will come out when I talk to you about how to build an annual preaching calendar. It allows you to step back and take a long term view of what you're feeding your church. So I encourage you when you're building an annual preaching calendar, I'll cover this in more detail as we go on, to actually look at the past two years of what you've preached. Maybe even three years. Make sure the diet is balanced and that's a healthy leader.

A healthy leader is stepping back from the day to day and is actually going alright, let's have a look at what I've done the last couple of years with preaching, our small group themes tied with that, the children's church ties with that as well, what have we been doing and feeding the church. What do I want to do this year and maybe yeah I'll put that in next year. That's a healthy leader.

Unhealthy leaders live just in the moment. They live just in that week or that month. Healthy leaders look back and look at the spectrum of the last couple of years and also where they're going. That's healthy leadership and your preaching calendar I think reveals healthy leadership.

6. Style variation

I love what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14v6, in writing to the Corinthians he talks about coming to them and says: unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction.

And that phrase years ago hit me and I thought wow Paul turns up to these churches that he's planted and he's thinking what am I going to bring. Am I going to bring a revelation, an insight, a quicken truth. Am I going to bring knowledge out of the storehouse of what I know and experience and bring that in my preaching and teaching. Or maybe it's going to be prophetic, it's going to have that edge of this is what the Lord is saying today to this church. Or is it a word of instruction. A step by step, how to live the Christian life, how to walk with Christ, how to love the community, how to care for your husband or your wife, how to raise your children, how to be a great boss, how to be a great employee - a word of instruction.

I like the fact that in our preaching, with an annual preaching calendar, again it makes us stop and think maybe I need a style variation at times. Maybe I don't deal in enough word of instruction, maybe I don't have any prophetic edge - I'm just always teaching, always solid good Biblical but it lacks this is what the Lord is saying edge that I think preachers need to have every now and again.

That style variation, you can make room for it with an annual preaching calendar.

7. Focus on series

I am a lover of preaching in series. If you're going to do preaching, I just love to do series. Now some people are expositional and they work through from Genesis to Revelation and they'll series it up around a book but I think also you can take a book like Philippians and make a series out of it while still teaching or preaching expositionally out of it. Anyway that's a topic for another day!

I think series are a great way to really nail truth into the heart of your congregation. To emphasise areas that you really want to heat up in the life of the church. The things that you want to focus in on for a year or for a couple of months. You can have a series that has a flavour running through it for a whole year. It can have a flavour and a feel through it.

A bit like a bit of spice, put a bit of chillies - I love a bit of chilli on my chicken. I grow chillies in my backyard and I dry them up, grind them up and put a bit on my chicken and it just adds a flavour - I love it, I enjoy it. You can have a series flavour through a year. You can chilli up a year of your preaching. If you just go week to week, month to month, it's hard to do that. But an annual preaching calendar will nail that for you.

8. Titles matter

I think today, more than ever, titles matter. Titles of series, titles of sermons.

Think about click bait. On social media, people want you to click through to read a blog post, to read a news article, to watch a video. Think about click bait and the emphasis on writing good titles on a blog post or on a news headline that make you go yeah that's interesting I want to read that.

Titles matter more today because people have been trained in the thinking if a title's boring, probably the contents not really going to be grabbing me unless I'm forced to read it because of work or study or for an assignment or some sort of deal where I have to get into something. But when I'm kind of there for a sense of I'm going to see if this grabs me, a title matters.

An annual preaching calendar of course gives you far more time to discover series titles, individual sermon titles and I do encourage pastors with their preaching titles and series

titles to cruise through, if not a physical Christian bookshop, then certainly a digital Christian bookshop, Maybe cruise through Amazon for Christian titles and see what the bestsellers are and see what their titles are. Use those titles to inspire you. You can tweak them around to suit your own personality and style and so on but really important that you get titles right and an annual preaching calendar gives you time to get that right. It certainly won't happen on a Saturday night fever deal, unless you're doing a last minute google search. But you haven't promoted it at all and if you've got titles and time you can promote, talk it up, social media it up and so on.

How Do You Create an Annual Preaching Calendar?

Well the very first thing I'd be doing is praying.

I'd be asking the Lord, I'd be waiting on God, I'd be seeking the Lord. If you're working January to December with your annual preaching calendar, I know in the northern hemisphere they sometimes work more September (start of fall/autumn) through to August.

Whenever you're preparing that annual preaching calendar, I would two or three months before just start praying. Lord, lay some things on my heart. Show me where I should be going in the next 12 months. Are there some areas that you want to emphasis, are there some areas that you want me to be focussed on. I think approaching an annual preaching calendar with prayer, waiting on the Lord, seeking the Lord is absolutely vital.

Then decide how you're going to create it. Is it going to be on paper or is it going to be digital?

I tend to kind of work in both spheres when I'm planning. I like to get sheets of paper out, A3 or A4, I like to doodle on them, throw things around. If I'm working on an annual preaching calendar I like to put the months up there and throw ideas down and so on.

I also like to do it on digital because I can kind of save it into Evernote, which is my major area that I'll utilise for something like this. Then when I'm down at a cafe, I'll pull it up and look at it. Or whether I'm out and about somewhere and I want to check it out, I get an idea that I want to drop it in there, then it's stored digitally as well.

These days with iPad's and tablets and laptops and phones, you can get a pen and write directly onto the screen so you can kind of combine the writing and the digital. Anyway, whatever works for you. You might want a combo - whatever works for you do it. Use it. Whatever sparks creativity is the way to go with it.

When you've got your calendar in front of you, digitally or paper wise, you're looking at the year ahead, put in your key events first.

Now the one key event that needs to go into your annual preaching calendar first is your annual holiday's pastor. Pastor I'm talking to you right now. Your annual holidays should go on the church calendar because the annual preaching calendar is really going to be a major part of your church planning for the year. Put your annual holidays on it. You say why should I do that John? Well I want you to last. I'm about to tick off 36 years as a pastor. I want you to last longer than me! If you don't have a good holiday you won't last longer than me. Annual preaching calendar, your holidays first.

Then seasonal events - Easter, Christmas, Mother's Day, Father's Day. Any seasonal event that is primary in your culture, in your part of the world, put that down there because you'll need to think about what you're going to preaching at that particular time. Put down your big days, your outreach Sunday's. You might have a few evangelistic events through the year. Put them on your calendar. They may align with Christmas and Easter, Mother's Day, Father's Day or they may not. It doesn't matter, put them down there on the calendar.

Put down any travel, when you'll be away pastor from the church. At a conference, speaking in another church, besides your holidays I'm talking. A mission's trip, put that down there as well.

Also put down there your guest speakers. Any ministry you have coming from outside your own team in a church, make sure you put them there and also that gives you an idea of not having back to back guest speakers two weeks apart. Spread them out and make them a bit of feature through your church as well.

Put all your key events down on that calendar so it gives you a feel for some of the things going on.

The next thing I would be thinking about is church building.

I'm not talking about facilities, I'm talking about building the church. Building your church that Christ has called you to serve.

What I've tended to have done over the years, is that at the start of the year I would focus on church building sermon series around small groups and around volunteering. So I would launch the church year with that focus on hey get into a small group, because that's where discipleship and community happens best.

Hey get serving because I know if you're serving you're more intentional in your commitment, your attendance and giving into the life of the church. So plan your church

building series around that start of the year when people are gearing up to go yeah I'll do something different this year, I'll get involved.

During my role in leading our church, we'd have an August / September time that was our fundraising time for our Beyond local and global mission's projects and its good I think to have that in there as well. Recognising I need to build the church, that requires finances, let's put some energy into a series around that.

I think these are three different harvests in your church. There are harvests there for volunteering, harvesting people into serving. In connect groups you're harvesting people who aren't committed to a small group, into a small group. Then you're harvesting financially into the life of the church to boost what you can do in your church.

Alright so we've worked through a number of how to create so far.

Another how to create point is previous years.

Have your previous year's calendars sitting there so that you don't fall into the trap of the same diet year after year. I love the book of Mark, I'm preaching that again this year, here we go folks! It might be fresh and new to you but people are going really? Can we have Luke for a change? Look at your previous years of what you've been preaching.

If you haven't had an annual preaching calendar, maybe look back on the sermons, I'm assuming you've got them stored somewhere. Digitally or on paper, you can look back and even build an annual preaching calendar as it were, build it in retrospect. Have a retro calendar! Look at what you've been preaching so that you can avoid the same diet.

Nothing worse than stale bread. You buy fresh bread from the baker, get it home, you cut it up, it's soft, you throw some butter and jam on it - it's gorgeous. Do that 48 hours later and its ewww! That needs to go in the toaster. I'm not going to eat that - that needs to get toasted, that needs to have something done to it to make it palatable. Previous years are a really good idea.

Next one on how to create core values.

Look at your core values and look at which core values - I mean core core values of your church are you going to preach on this year. Every year don't visit all of your core values or all of your key values every year. It gets a little bit monotonous for people. But think about your core values and think, which one needs some heat on it. Which ones needs some temperature on it to warm it up because, maybe around relationships in the church, we're

haven't really got that relational vibe going well but it's important to us so I'm going to do a series on relationships. I'm going to heat up that core value.

Or maybe it's evangelism. Whatever it is, spend some time on it, focus on it. Again, don't do like yeah we've got 7 core values every year I'm going to preach through our values. That, I think, is boring. Take one or two and pour some heat on them and you'll see some great elevation of those core values in people's lifestyles and in peoples following of Christ.

I think every year you should do a book of the Bible.

I think it's a really good practice with an annual preaching calendar to take a book of the Bible, it can be a small book or a long book and take 4 weeks, 6 weeks I reckon which I think is about the right size for a series. Unless you've got a real buzz going on a thing you can go to 8-10 weeks but people can get a little bit dry on it as well. So a book of the Bible I think is a great way to emphasise this.

Let me also drop in a thought here. People say, well everyone's not attending as much, how do I cope with that when I do a series?

They're going to miss one of my opening introduction to the book of Mark and it's got key points in it.

Even though you preach series you have to treat every single sermon as a stand-alone event knowing that that crowd, as it is formed, will probably not ever form again, unless you've got a very small church like that.

There will always be someone away, or always be a visitor so I think you just have to accept the fact that even though you do a series, recognise the fact that each preaching event has to stand alone. And if you've got some key things you want to say in a series, keep them running through like chilli. Flavour, spice the series with those key thoughts, those key phrases. I think a book of the Bible every year is important.

I think also doing a Bible character every year is really important.

Having a Bible character that you think about, that you look at. You might look at David one year and maybe Luke or maybe it's some of the more obscure names in the Bible, people that we don't know much about. A great guy, a hero of mine in the New Testament, Titicus. He was the guy who hung out with Paul and who carried Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon. Those three epistles, he carried them to the churches and to Philemon. But

you've got to dig around to find that stuff. I had a sermon on Titicus I used to preach. I roll it out again sometimes, a great message, I think it is anyway. You can do a series on obscure, almost no name, faceless, nameless people almost.

Doing a Bible character a year again digs your people down into the scripture.

When you're creating, think different styles.

What's going to be a teaching series, what's going to be more preaching, what's going to be topical (jumping around different texts), what's going to be narrative, what's going to be expositional.

Think of the different styles when you're thinking that through so you might think I'm going to do the book of Daniel but I'm going to do it in a teaching style about the second half of the book which has a lot of prophetic insight, very interesting sort of difficult stuff, apocalyptic sort of stuff. I'm going to teach that. Or you might say I'm going to do Daniel as a preaching series and focus on the first half of the book where there's great stories and it's going to have a narrative feel. I'm going to preach that and make it really almost topical within a book as it were.

What's the style? You can mix it up because you're well planned. You're stopping problematic preaching because you're well planned.

Another thought about creating an annual preaching calendar, is the depth of content. Milk to meat.

The whole deal of maybe I need to do a bit of a series that younger Christians, immature Christians, can get their handle around really easily and it's not to in depth. If I'm going to do my apocalyptic Daniel series that's pretty meaty stuff, I don't want to follow that up with an in depth 10 week series on Revelation. I think I'll do a bit of milk. Something that's easy to digest and swallow. So think through your depth of content when you're planning out your series as well.

We've already talked about the whole deal of series but let me give you a few ideas around that.

I think when you're working paper and digital wise with planning out your annual preaching calendar, think through and put up a few columns. It's kind of a sub section in your calendar to a great degree. You're thinking columns.

What's the big idea? What's the main thing I want to say in this series?

What are texts that I'm going to be utilising and coming out of? Have your scriptures.

What's the call to action? Here's the big deal folks. What do I want people to do because of that?

What's the title of my series and the title of individual messages if I am going to title each message differently? You don't have to - you can just run one title for the whole series.

I kind of like to think of a series with those columns. Big Idea, the text/scriptures you're going to use, the CTA (the call to action) and the titles. That will help flesh out your series a bit more while you're planning the calendar.

Key questions to ask as you plan

1. What is God saying to our church? What is the Lord saying? What is our current season? What is the Lord trying to emphasise in our church at this time?

2. What is my church thinking about? Where is my church focussed? What's going on out there in the world, in the community? What are people watching and listening to and what are people talking about at the moment?

Think that through. If it's a political scenario or a sports scenario - I'm not saying you need to be preaching about politics but is there a major election on at the time that you're going to be doing a certain series and you just want to factor that in. Maybe there's a major event in your city, in your region that you need to think about and co relate also.

3. Where is Jesus in my preaching? That's a great thing to sit back and look at your annual preaching calendar and say ok where's Jesus? I want Jesus in the mix here. Think about where you can add the Lord. Make sure He's a part of your preaching.

4. Am I making room for evangelism? Is there an evangelistic flavour coming through in different series or those Big Days that I'm going for. Is there evangelism bubbling away in my calendar.

ABC- Always Be Creative.

Sales people will tell you that stands for always be closing but for me it's Always Be Creative. So a few tips about creating because you've got an annual preaching calendar you've got time to think about what's my learning style? Oh my learning style is listening so podcasts. I

can always be creative by listening to podcasts that will stimulate and stir me. Or I would say I love watching videos so I'm going to get into Ted Talks or watch some YouTube preaching of Steven Furtick. That will help me create. Others will say I like to read so I'm going to get some books about Mark or about prayer or about relationships, about what I'm planning to preach on and I'm going to be creating through my learning style.

I've got a great, a really good Quick Win on learning styles. If you jump into the Quick Win area of the hub you'll find a tremendous Quick Win, a few minutes long, on learning styles that will help you always be creative.

Always be creating by stories. Your own stories. Write them down, think about them. This is the beauty of knowing I'm going to be preaching on prayer in 8 months' time. I'm going to be watching what happens in my prayer life, my answers to prayer, things I'm wrestling with in prayer, things I'm struggling with in prayer.

Write those stories.

Keep those stories so that you can utilise them when you come to that series.

Also as you read blog posts, as you listen to podcasts or watch videos, you can collect stories. Always be collecting stories. There you go ABC - Always Be Collecting!! As well as Always Be Creating. Collect stories, store them away for the future series you're going to do.

Storage

Where are you going to keep all this? Well work it out. OneNote, Evernote, an app, you can use Microsoft Word for it all, are you going to set it up in a spreadsheet with Excel or Google docs or a paper system. I don't know.

Think through your storage so that you can easily access the content you want. If you're going to do this digitally, break down folders for different series and then different documents for each individual sermon then documents that relate to stories or illustrations or thoughts. Whatever you're creating as you go. You can keep dumping stuff in there. Then when you come to study and prepare your sermon you'll have material already sitting there.

There you go. That's the end of this MasterClass - how to create an annual preaching calendar. I hope it's been helpful for you. Jump into the community area if you've got any questions or any thoughts come back with me - I'd love to hear your comments on this MasterClass. Go forth and preach. God bless you.