



COVID-19 (Coronavirus)

10 Essentials for Preaching Online

By Steve Carter

In the midst of a global pandemic declared by the World Health Organization (WHO), we wanted to share a few insights and recommendations for pastors and church leaders navigating these unsettling times.

John Maxwell once told me, “Everybody communicates but few connect.” Right now as churches are moving their weekend services to an online format, it is imperative that we connect with our people and help them connect with God, Scripture, their feelings, and their family in the wake of COVID-19.

Over the last 48 hours I watched many services, taking copious notes on what I’m observing pastors and preachers do that deeply resonates in a living room. It’s fair to say that most haven’t had the experience of

speaking for 35 minutes into a camera while onstage in an empty room. Many are used to feeding off the energy that a room full of people generates, while speaking to a camera can feel strange, awkward, and profoundly vulnerable.

I compiled a list of 10 essentials that are vital to preaching and pastoring well to an online congregation, a resource I hope you’ll find useful during this time of social distancing due to the current COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Remember: It’s a Conversation with Your Congregation.

If you’ve ever seen an old acapella group, someone pulls out a pitch pipe to help the vocalists stay in pitch. As pastors, what is the tone that your message and your congregation need in this season? As I did research for this list, I noticed that some of the teachings I watched came across unsteady, unsure. Maybe a better word for it is forced—a forced stance, a stiff posture, perhaps a smile

that doesn’t feel authentic. Some even seemed to project a joking manner that made light of COVID-19. It’s imperative to find and use the right tone in order to have the most impactful conversation with your congregation.

Remember that anyone can transfer information, but your job is to speak from a transformed place. This is what will give your congregations hope.

2. Eye Contact Matters.

It’s not easy talking with someone who doesn’t engage or show signs that they’re actively listening. But of course, this is the nature of speaking to a camera. This is one of my personal struggles that I’ve had to work hard to get better at over the years. The way that I did this was to name the camera (I know it sounds weird!) But tricking my brain to think of a specific person that I’m looking at and speaking to really helped me engage as if I were in front of a human rather than a piece of tech. When you

personalize the camera, it becomes so much easier to stay focused and present.

Think about the families who will be watching your services online and perhaps a couple people who you hope will be watching to receive the message you’re preparing to give. Try to envision them tuning in and then speak to them through the camera lens.

3. Clarity Wins the Day.

When you’re teaching to a live audience, you can diesel a little longer, sit in a story for an added minute, or expound on a point to really drive it home. Now that you’re speaking to multiple audiences all tuning in from their living rooms and kitchens, you must make every word count. Editing becomes essential. You might have

so much good content that it feels like a waste to not share it, but for the sake of clarity you must choose what is essential for this specific message.

What will pastor your people well? What will give them hope? What spiritual exercises will you encourage them to participate in this week?

4. Ache + Desire + Stronghold.

Your words must speak to the ache of your people and call out the desires within your congregation so that people are empowered to take action. When speaking to a camera, you must lead with your heart, your shepherd's heart that sees, feels, and recognizes the aches and needs of your people. Open up God's Word and let it address the ache and call out the desires within your people.

Remember nobody has a map for how to live well during a pandemic. But people want to do good and love one another well. They want to be good parents and friends

5. Body Language Matters.

On screen, every part of you preaches. Be aware of any part of your message that makes you feel uncomfortable. Get curious. Maybe you have to hold on a point for another week as you work it out for yourself. Maybe you need to press in because there is something God wants to do in and through you. But when you preach, it's important to be comfortable. If you don't feel

6. Bible + Challenge + Clear Next Steps.

When it comes to the preaching online, consider internally answering these few questions before you ever preach your message: In one sentence what are you trying to teach your congregation? What are you

7. Chair + Table + Living Room + Sofa.

This time has the potential to really help people grow deeper in discipleship and take a greater sense of personal responsibility for their spiritual development. As you think about clear next steps, help your congregation engage throughout their week in chair time, personal devotional time, around the table. What questions can they ask to their spouse or kids in a living room? How

and neighbors and Christ followers. So address that. Name the unspoken desire and remind people what the New Testament church was like: they served, were generous, were respectful, and courageous. Speak as a guide, a shepherd that is leading them toward the life God desires for them. A life that will truly bless those around them.

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comfortable preaching in the large auditorium alone, choose a different room. If you feel more comfortable in your home and the lighting works, do it there.

Find a place to record that will transfer well to camera. Make sure it's well lit, clear, not distracting, and quiet. You want your whole presence, body, and environment to be well engaged to pastor and guide people.

challenging them to be and to do in this season? Have you given them any helpful tips or application on how to put these truths into practice?

can they connect via Zoom or FaceTime or Marco Polo with their small group in this season of social distancing? What are ways to engage this specifically to the streets—the chance to love their neighbors creatively in this season? Pray for a neighbor, share a message, pick up groceries for an elderly person, and many other ways.

8. 25-Minute Messages.

Most of our favorite shows have an average air time of about 22 minutes. It's what we're already adjusted to, comfortable with, and tend to expect from a screen. So I think 25 minutes is an ideal goal to aim for in a message right now. Again, you are honing your message to be clear and concise, there isn't a lag time for engaging with a room or dragging out a point. So change your expectation from a marathon to a relay, and view your teaching as one leg of the race. After you preach, you're passing the baton to your staff who are connecting with your congregation via chat, email, phone call, and text, and other ways to make connections that are missing from their weekend experiences.

9. Be Thoughtful & Please Don't Be the Hero or Expert.

Use this time to point people to Jesus. Not to you. Use this time to point people to good sources of factual information regarding COVID-19 and don't try to be an expert. If you see something that seems compelling on Twitter, look for trusted sites that verify. Many churches started watch parties, which is a cool idea and have been pumping images of that on their social media, but medical professionals for weeks have been saying that this isn't wise. Politicians, pastors, businesses, and leaders are beginning to see how big a deal this all is. If

10. Don't Be Afraid to Make the ASK!

Invite people to make decisions. Challenge people to get involved. Help people take the next best right step in their faith. Give people the chance to say yes to Christ. Help people see the importance of giving in this season. Don't shy away. Be you. Be bold. Get creative. If people are tuning in online and you have a chat room, let them share they made a decision to follow Christ.

We know that most churches were down in giving last week. Be honest. Look your people in the eye and invite

Can you open up a platform online for a time for Q&A? The power of online is not information but accessibility. How can you and your pastoral team be wildly accessible during these service times or specific times during a week? One church of 3,500 have asked each of their staff to call 3 people a day to check in on them, pray for them, and let them know that they are here for them. Imagine this—if their staff does this, within a few weeks they will have touched base with their entire congregation. Content + accessibility is pure gold.

you unintentionally made a mistake, own it, be honest and human because it will go a long way in building trust with your people.

Lastly, share stories of how your people are living this out. These moments of disruption have the ability to solidify values that will far outlast COVID-19. Be on the lookout for how your people are choosing to go deep with Jesus and creatively love their neighbors in this time and lift them up.

them to give. If you have a flip chart or a TV beside you, show a simple graph with a horizontal line. On one end write January. On the other write December. At the top write the dollar number the church needs each week to do ministry and fulfill its budget. Remind people that God has always been faithful to them and draw another line of where you are currently. Maybe in January and February it was trending but in March it dropped 12%. Let your people know. Invite and call them to be faithful.

All in all, be you. God has asked you to lead and pastor your community during this unique day and time, shepherding your people through COVID-19. Try your best to see these days to lead and shepherd as a privilege, the kind of disruption that can help the church innovate and serve in brand new ways for decades to come. You've been trusted and entrusted with your congregation. So lead—with humility, boldness, and a deep, deep connection to Christ and the people He's entrusted to your care.

We're with you, for you, rooting you on, and here to help any way we can.