

## *Sermon Planning Sabbaticals*

The ideal way to use this planner is to build a series of mini-retreats into your schedule. A week retreat in the early or mid-summer is an excellent time to plan a get away with a suitcase of helpful books, e.g., Bible, inspirational, devotional, commentary, a hymnal, etc., and check into a motel or a lodge, retreat center or whatever. Make this a time to pray and listen and read, exercise, whatever helps you connect with the Lord and disengage from all the other “to do’s” in your life. Ask yourself what are the spiritual needs of those to whom you are called to preach. Read, journal, take notes about possible themes, pastoral topics, book series you might do. Over the days, ask God to impress your mind with hymns or other appropriate music that might reinforce possible topics. If a particular biblical book is impressed on your heart, read it and re-read it over those days and listen to what preaching themes emerge. In pencil, on the Annual Overview of the 52-Week at a Glance planner, bracket the number of weeks that might be devoted to one theme. Pencil in a theme description for any specific days you will devote to a topic. Consider expositing over several weeks a key passage that might cover all the Sundays in Lent or Holy Week or Advent.

Make it your aim to be more definite about the first full quarter of the year you are planning. This way you can readily begin on a more detailed plan each week and let the rest of the year develop in more detail as you move along.

Having done the main planning sabbatical, continue to review the annual plan weekly to see if any further ideas for fine-tuning arise, but mainly get to work on what you have got down. You might find it helps to schedule a mini-sabbatical each quarter thereafter to focus on getting more specifics. You might even research some exegetical nuts and bolts for the later blocks in your annual plan that are still a bit fuzzy. Identifying key words in a text is an easy thing to do well in advance of actually crafting the full sermon. I also find that targeting appropriate texts, and trying to state tight textual themes, sermon goals and memorable sermon titles is something I can do, in some instances, well ahead of the real hard spade work. Of course more study often necessitates changing statement of theme and sermonic goals.

The shocker for me, especially if you preach only one sermon each Lord’s Day, is just how few days there are available for all the ideas that start flowing once you start praying and planning like this. What looks paralyzing and large, when you try to go “on the fly” each week, suddenly becomes small to the point you honestly wonder how you will ever preach the whole counsel of God in a lifetime! (Secret: you never will!)

Everyone of us will have our own approach in the details. Our spiritual gifts and temperaments will greatly influence how we approach the art of creating and crafting sermons. But we will all benefit from planning. It is important to realize that “taking the time off” to plan is among the most important parts of the work we do. Taking a preaching sabbatical is not being lazy, though it may seem like it at first. And what if God wants on any given Lord’s Day to have you preach something outside your plan? Well, lacking the stress of having no plan, you will be freer to hear and act on such direction than you would if your mind was crowded by the noise of frantically trying to figure out what to do next.

Have a great 2010! May God’s people be blessed along with you as you labor to feed them with good things from His Word.

Sincerely in Christ,  
Rev. E. Neil Culbertson