

UWO prof delivers ‘Preaching That Matters’ book

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Each Sunday, many of the 40 million Americans who attend church are hoping to hear a sermon that will inspire them to make meaningful change in their lives.

But 95 percent of all sermons offer explanation or commentary with no call for change, said University of Wisconsin Oshkosh communication professor Lori Carrell.

Carrell’s new book, *Preaching that Matters: Reflective Practices for Transforming Sermons*, published in April by the Alban Institute, is based on years of sermon communication research with hundreds of clergy and more than 30,000 listeners.

She has published some 17 articles on the subject as well as an earlier book, *The Great American Sermon Survey*.

Her academic interest stems from wanting to debunk the myth that spoken words are fleeting and that they immediately evaporate. “Every utterance has the potential to live on forever in the minds and actions of others,” said Carrell, who also studies the process and impact of communication in the classroom.

Yet, some 78 percent of church-goers have never had a conversation with their preacher about a sermon. “It’s no wonder preachers don’t know what members of their congregations think about their sermons,” Carrell said.

Preaching That Matters challenges preachers to “listen” to their listeners and actually have discussions with their listeners before they preach.

In addition, Carrell’s book offers preachers other practical, research-based techniques to improve the effectiveness of their sermons. Through a Lilly grant and the Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership (CECL), Carrell provided professional development in communication for clergy and studied the impact on their listeners.

She learned that specific preparations can make a big difference. Listeners are more likely to take action after a sermon, if their preachers identify a goal or “sermon response” that they hope to achieve; spend time orally crafting their sermons instead of writing down their words in a silent, solitary process; and listening to their listeners on a regular basis before they deliver their sermons.

Carrell’s research also shows sermons that simply affirm the shared beliefs of a community have not gone far enough. Listeners need to be challenged to work together to meet local or global needs.

Carrell, who has a doctorate in speech communication from the University of Denver, is the director of both the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and the University Studies Program at UW Oshkosh.

Learn more:

- [University Studies Program at UW Oshkosh](#)
- [Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at UW Oshkosh](#)