

Earlier this week I posted a tweet...

"Are you preaching to a camera for the first time? It's awkward at best, painful at worst. I've done it for 25 years on stage & in studio. I have ten tips to make it easier and more effective. Dm me your name, church and cell # and I'll call you for a short chat. #preachingcoach"

Since then I've had multiple conversations with pastors all over the country who are innovating during a crisis, which is not an easy thing to do. Being forced to live-stream by the current crisis has thrust them into foreign technological territory. The churches varied in size (25 to multiple thousands), denominations and preaching styles but regardless of the variants, the tips proved to be helpful. So I wanted to share them with you...

1. **Avoid preaching to nothing but a camera.** Cameras are inanimate objects, and don't provide any encouraging non-verbal feedback. Ask the people that are in the office (or maybe your family) to gather at a safe distance around the camera while you preach your sermon. Set it up so the camera is situated in the middle of the people. Then make eye contact with the people and the camera too. This will feel like a normal preaching event for both preacher and listener. Staring into the camera the entire time is unnatural and unnerving for the viewers. It feels like they are sitting in the third row at church and the pastor is staring at them throughout the message. Combining people and cameras will feel more like a regular Sunday for everyone involved.
2. As you are scanning the people, look intently at the camera too. **Imagine a person** you really want to preach this message to and pretend the camera is a window into that person's soul. Personify the camera and assign a specific individual to the lens. This person will likely change each week. How long should you maintain eye contact? I think Josh McDowell's rule of thumb makes sense: one person per thought. Look at a person (or the camera) until you complete the thought and then move to another. Make sure you are getting back to the camera at least 50% of the time.
3. **Backgrounds matter.** A large vacuous areas behind a preacher looks cold and uninviting on camera. If you are preaching in your sanctuary and your stage is more than 12-15 feet deep, place some kind of backdrop 10 feet behind the pulpit. It doesn't need to be artistic or fancy, it can be something as simple as a wooden crate, a plant, or a bookshelf. The backdrop will make it seem more inviting and warm. If you are at home, make sure you don't have a plain white wall behind you and if outside, be cognizant of the placement of the sun, shade and shadows.
4. Since you are doing this to a relatively empty room, why not **record it earlier in the week?** Getting the service 'in the can' allows you and the majority of the team to stay home on Sunday with your families. You can edit if necessary, or do a second shoot if the first one didn't work. Most importantly, recording earlier in the week relieves the stresses experienced when something goes wrong technically shortly before going live on Sunday. This would also allow you to add services by simply pushing 'play' at different times during the weekend, potentially growing your audience. I noticed while talking to pastors of larger

churches with professional tech teams that all are recording earlier in the week. Interestingly, the smaller churches who are new to this are all trying to live-stream on Sunday morning. The experienced churches know that eliminating the possibility of technical difficulties on Sunday is worth whatever is lost by recording earlier.

5. Make sure the camera is at **eye level** so you can look straight ahead. You don't want it angled down or up. No one wants to look up your nose for 30 minutes and, conversely, the forehead view gets old shortly after your introduction.
6. **Smile more than feels natural.** When we are preaching to a full room we feed off the energy of the crowd. If they are in the palm of your hand your energy increases and builds. If they are falling asleep we feel that too, and our energy lags and dissipates. Cameras have no energy, so you now have to provide 100% of the energy in the room. This means you will need to ratchet your energy up a couple of notches without being cheerleader or cheesy. People preaching to cameras smile less because, let's face it, it is just plain creepy to smile into a video camera. But this leads to a stone faced preacher who looks angry, or worse yet, disinterested. Write "smile more" in the margin of your notes and ask your spouse or a friend to observe your face while you preach so you can get a feel for how you are coming across.
7. The biggest difference with our current reality and our normal preaching routine is the lack of response we normally get from the crowd. This will be most obvious if you say something really funny and no one laughs in the room. Do you remember when we were in middle school and we cracked a joke, but no one laughed? We felt shame and immediately tried to pretend we weren't trying to be funny! As adults we still experience this shame and cover reaction when people don't respond the way we expect. Now, when this happens on a stage, multiply the shame ten-fold. So, when this happens during your sermon you might, out of shame, be tempted to point out that no one laughed. Don't! They are laughing in their living rooms, you just can't hear them! **Have confidence that your people are responding to you the same way they normally do.** If it is really funny, just chuckle a little yourself and give them time to stop laughing before moving on. This will feel normal to them even though it will be strange for you. The same principle applies for poignant moments, or when you tell a sad story. You need to allow for pauses, giving your people time to process and recover. But because your room is silent you will tend to rush the pause and by continuing to talk will wear your people out. As a general rule, pause for twice as long as feels appropriate.
8. **Avoid "breaking the spell"** When preaching we want to cast a spell, causing our people to forget they are listening to a sermon. If they are focused on the sermon, it is about the preacher, if they are simply carried along on a journey, however, then it is about them. They can relax into the truth God is sharing with them. We cast a spell with our introduction, but we break the spell by reminding the listeners that a sermon is happening. Try to avoid allowing your awkwardness to become a topic of conversation. Avoid any comments about "how strange this is", or "how uncomfortable I feel" etc. This will draw their focus to you, the fact that you are feeling uncomfortable, and their sadness for your discomfort. They are no longer focused on the message. You've lost them. Just jump into your message with confidence assuming people are engaging with you on the other end, and don't break the spell! Remember, other people don't feel your awkwardness, only you do!

9. Carey Nieuwhof wisely encourages preachers to shorten their messages while preaching exclusively to a streaming audience. It will be harder for people to concentrate in their living rooms with children crawling all over them and the coffee maker beeping in the background. Attention spans will be challenged and preaching for 40+ minutes will test even the most motivated listeners. Carey suggests shooting for **no longer than a 30 minute message**.
10. Pray when you start to preach. This should go without saying, but let's say it anyway. You will be tempted to see this as a technological event but it isn't. It is a spiritual event. **The Holy Spirit is not limited by space, time or technology.** Ask God to move powerfully in the lives of all who are listening, assume he will, and launch with confidence and joy!

I have been deeply moved in my conversations with pastors this week. The love they have for their people is inspiring. As you love your people by risking failure, innovating, and stepping into discomfort, they will be extremely forgiving and grateful. Things will go wrong, and embarrassing things will most likely happen, but your people will love you for loving them. I'm cheering you on!