

David never seems to have a minute to call his own. He has a demanding job; he has a young family and he lends a hand with any number of church activities. He often struggles to make it to the weekly local preacher class but he comes because he believes that God is calling him to this role. Looking ahead though, he wonders how he will ever be able to cope with the preparation required to lead worship and preach.

He asks**How much time does it take to prepare for a Sunday service?**

They say that what you see of an iceberg is about ten percent of what is really there- the most substantial part being hidden under the water. That's probably a fair description of what goes into a normal Sunday service. People see and hear the twenty minute sermon, the children's address, the selection of hymns and the prayers. Some won't think about it at all; some will think you got it all readymade out of a book and some will reckon that you put it all together in a single quiet evening after work. Some will admire your nerve and some may secretly think they could probably have done better themselves!

Your question and the concern behind it, though, are very valid. Preparing to take a service can be incredibly absorbing and time consuming. If you have a month it can take a month. If you only have a week it can be done in a week though always with you wishing you had more time. There is no doubt about it – working fulltime and preparing to preach on Sunday is very demanding and a considerable pressure when added to all the other demands of personal and family life. You have to be prepared for this. I would advise you not to take on more preaching appointments than you feel you can safely manage. Learn to say no, especially in the early years! Hopefully your minister will be sympathetic and sensitive to your situation.

The whole thing starts with deciding what exactly you are going to preach on. Some local preachers will automatically consult the lectionary and from the readings for that Sunday home in on a verse or passage that captures their attention. Others may well find themselves spending a lot of time in prayer going through vast amounts of scripture deciding on a message or theme that has spoken to them and that they want to share with the congregation. Next come reading, observing, comparing, consulting commentaries, formulating the main thought or aim, constructing an outline, finding illustrations and applying the truths you have expounded to the lives of the people.

All of this takes time. Nowadays you can be helped enormously by technology and the internet. You have vast resources of scholarship available at the touch of a button. You can listen to some of the world's best preachers and learn a great deal, not only about imparting truth but also about connecting with people. You can go online and find stories, sayings, quotes and anecdotes to illustrate any message. You just have to be careful. CH Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher once remarked "*Thoughts belong to everybody, brethren. I must not wonder if other people steal my thoughts since I have stolen so many of other people's. For my part I beg, borrow and steal from every conceivable quarter, but when I steal a man's coat, I tear it to pieces and make a waistcoat of it.*" I think he meant that, however you draw on resources, what you finally preach has got to be

your own. People will soon realise if it is or not. You don't want to save on preparation time at the expense of authenticity.

People often ask if it's OK to use a sermon a second time if you're preaching in a different church. Of course it is - and this may well be a life saver for you if there isn't enough time to prepare something fresh! Ask most ministers and they will tell you that often a sermon goes much better second time round because you are familiar with your material and able to be freer and more responsive to the moment. Just remember that to be in any way effective you've got to rekindle that original spark which you felt in preparing the original message. This also can take time. You don't just pick a sermon out of the file and preach it. You have to discern that it is right message for the congregation you are addressing. Often you will find yourself tweaking it a new direction for a different set of people.

Always remember that we serve a loving Master and not a cruel slave driver. If He has gifted you to preach (what greater privilege is there!) then He wants you to know pleasure and fulfilment in that calling. He doesn't want to see you crushed under the weight of impossible demands – from any quarter and certainly not from your local church. To be a local preacher may well mean you having to prioritise and perhaps drop out of other regular weekly church duties and responsibilities to give time to preparation at least in the early years of your ministry. Time spent in the study is serving the Lord every bit as much as attending committees and doing youth work.

Now David for the good news and the bad news! The bad news is that it's not just the sermon that takes time. Choosing hymns, constructing suitable prayers and finding a helpful children's address can also be slow work. You can avoid a lot of pressure and anxiety by starting your preparation as early as possible so that you are not working to the very last minute. The good news is that it really does get easier as you gain experience. There is a confidence that comes from knowing that somehow the Lord always gets you through and can speak through you even when you least expect it. He's good at helping build icebergs!