

“FEED MY SHEEP”



HOW TO FEED YOUR PEOPLE 52 WEEKS A YEAR

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CLARIFIER: THE PRESENT TENSE IS ACTUALLY PAST TENSE

What you have before you is a strategy for church leaders and/or preachers who want to plan a good diet of preaching over 52 weeks.

I wrote this at the end of almost two decades with Common Ground Church in Cape Town, South Africa. What an adventure it had been—seeing it grow from hundreds to thousands, from one congregation to ten. When we asked people why they came, and what helped them grow, one predominant answer was that they found the preaching very compelling and helpful.

Somehow, amidst planting and leading a congregation myself, I also landed the job—for some ten years—of leading the preaching content team as we committed to prepare great content for the church week after week, month after month, year after year. Although we were nine congregations, we all preached a similar message every Sunday. This called for a lot of planning. It is my hope that the lessons we learnt in that necessary specialization may be useful to you as you lead a church of whatever size.

Now, giving myself exclusively to serving the larger body of Christ through www.terranwilliams.com I no longer work for Common Ground church. This means that not *all* the strategies, examples and principles I refer to throughout this document are likely still the modus operandi for the current church. Like a crab that takes up new shells as it progresses, every growing church needs to keep tweaking things. Nonetheless, to avoid the tediousness of always speaking of “back then” I write in the present tense—but it is a present tense that dates back to 2019.

DISCLAIMER: AT LEAST SOMETHING HERE WILL HELP YOU

You are about to drink from a very carefully thought out strategy of feeding God’s people. 52 weeks a year, year in and year out. I am not

suggesting you simply imitate our strategy. There is a saying that methods are many, principles are few, yet methods always change, but principles never do.

What you will find is a complex mix of principles and methods. I leave it to you to disentangle the two. Perhaps some of what I offer here will fit your church perfectly, but I am guessing you will at best be able to pick out some principles and some methods that are especially helpful to you.

INTRODUCTION

Jesus asked Peter the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:17)

As Common Ground we have many key values. One of them is feeding God's Word to God's people. Like all biblical churches in history, we seek to preach 'the whole counsel of God' (Acts 20:27).

Another one is contextualization. By this we mean that we need to be faithful not only to the text but the context we find ourselves in. We believe that we need thoughtfully change our methods to best penetrate our ever-changing culture and best feed people in our day.

This impacts upon how we feed God's Word to God's people.

This document will tell you Common Ground's particular contextual strategy and method in selecting preaching content over the span of a year.

This document does not consider at all the construction of a sermon, only what an entire year of sermons will be about. There is absolutely nothing in this document that tells you how to organize an individual sermon. Rather it focuses on organizing a year of preaching.

It may not be transferable to your context, but then again perhaps there are some elements in it that could be helpful to you.

ONE CHURCH, MANY VOICES

We are a multi-congregational church, which means we are one church in one sense, but many churches in another.

One of the values that keep these many congregations together is that 10 out of 12 months in the year we preach a similar message every Sunday.

The message is not identical, because no two preachers and no two contexts are identical. The term we use is ‘one message, many voices’. Each preacher adapts a manuscript or outline to their own style and contextual application. Usually the same text is used, and most often a similar outline.

Every church preaching a similar message called us to high levels of intentionality. This document reveals some of what we landed on. The first thing we agreed on is...

WHY ORGANIZE PREACHING IN SERIES FORMAT

There was a time in Common Ground when we used to mainly preach self-standing messages. Each week the preacher was free to share on whatever text or topic they liked. In fact, we still preach self-standing message 3 to 5 times a year.

There was also a time in Common Ground when we used to preach long, sprawling series that could last several months. (We would be open to doing this again if we sensed the Holy Spirit’s direction to do so. For example, 3 years ago we preached 14 weeks through 1 Corinthians.)

In the main, however, our default setting is to preach shorter series that last 3 to 6 weeks, but most often 4-5 weeks. There are reasons for this.

We don’t like too many self-standing talks in a year because...

- Self-standing talks tend to be highly forgettable. It is our experience that at the end of the year we ask our congregants what we preached on, and they search their memory, they can't remember the topics that lasted only one week.
- Self-standing talks tend to be too packed with content. If a preacher decides to preach on prayer for one week, they will feel pressure to say as much about prayer as they can, because they rightly do not know when the church will be taught on this important subject once again.
- Self-standing talks are easy to miss. Hardly anyone comes to church every Sunday, and if people miss a particular talk which we really hoped everyone would hear, they miss out on that topic until we come back to it again in the future. For example, any church leader will want to annually revisit the importance of financial generosity. The result is that a person who just happens to miss that Sunday might go two years without hearing any teaching on the subject.
- We generally don't like long sprawling series because, for whatever reason, our attendance tends to drop the longer the series lasts. This might not be true of other churches in other contexts, but it has been true in ours. We can only guess why people tend to come less as the series progresses, but it may be because:
 - Our culture has come to expect novelty like they expect fresh water. Before we criticize them for this, we must remember that God is a God who makes everything new, and that novelty is not in itself a bad thing. People like things are fresh. Even Jesus seemed to know this because he advises preachers to bring out of their storerooms things that are old and new, and he modeled an ever-fresh presentation of unchanging truths in his parables.
 - People start to feel they have grasped the gist of a Bible book or topic after a few weeks (even though us preachers feel there is so

much more), and feel they are not missing out if they don't come. Again, we can reprimand our people for this consumeristic tendency, or we can adjust our evangelism and disciple-making strategy to the context we find ourselves in.

- Truth be told, we preachers might be getting lazy in getting to essence. In the same way that work expands to the space allocated to it, so preachers tend to expand their content to the space allocated to it. We as preachers might enjoy the space, but our congregants rightly start to feel we could have worked harder in getting to the point, and keeping the main things the main things in each series.

The net result is that we prefer to preach many shorter series every year (and a few self-standing talks interspersed.) The advantages of this are...

- People are far more likely to remember what we preached on because we camped on a topic or portion of Scripture for many weeks.
- We don't pack too much content into any one talk, so the talk is more impacting, going deeper on a few points rather than shallow on too many.
- Our people enjoy the novelty factor of, every month or so, exploring a new topic or portion of text.
- People feel like their learning curve stays fairly even. Just as they start to feel they have got the jist of a subject, we are onto a new one.
- Most of the big topics in Scripture and discipleship can be adequately covered in 4 or 5 weeks of preaching.
- We have found that when people come to church for the first time and connect with whatever series we are doing, they say to themselves, 'I am coming back for the rest of the series.' They

might not be committing to the church in their minds, but our hope is that if they come for enough weeks they will be bitten by the Gospel and by our church and stay on.

THE IDEAL LENGTH OF SERIES

We have come to believe that it is 4 to 5 weeks. Two weeks is hardly a series. Three weeks is, but if a person who comes only every second week, they can easily miss 2 out of the 3, so 3 seems too short. Once we go longer than 5 weeks, it starts to feel like a long sprawling series. (As I will explain later, we still may create much longer series, but break it up into subseries.)

THE TWO MAIN KINDS OF SERIES WE DO

There are two main kinds of series. There are Bible book series and Topical series.

A Bible book series is when we do part or all of one book of the Bible. In this case we let the texts each week determine the topics we will unpack in our messages.

A topical series is when we do a series on a topic. In this case we select biblical texts based on the topics. In this case we tend to jump to a different part of the Bible every week.

For example, a series on Colossians 1, where over 4 weeks, we sequentially unpack the chapter is a Bible series.

But a series called 'Robust', where every week we look at different Bible passage on perseverance is a topical series. So week 1 looks at James 1:2-12, and week 2 looks some verses in 2 Corinthians 1:3-11 etc.

To be clear, *both* kinds of series unpack a passage from the Bible every week (usually only portion of Scripture). So by 'topical series' we do not mean 'not Bible'.

There are times when Bible series and topical series merge. This happens when we choose a portion of Scripture to unpack over several

weeks that centres around a primary topic. For example, one can preach through 2 Timothy 2 for three weeks on subject of endurance. Or through John 17 for several weeks on the topic of prayer. Or on Joseph in Genesis 37-50 on the subject of ‘God’s sovereign preparing us for our ministry’. Or on Ephesians 1:1-2:10 on the subject of salvation.

FOUR KINDS OF BIBLE BOOK SERIES

Though we may do a long series through a book of the Bible, for the reasons we already shared, we prefer to limit it to 5 to 6 weeks.

As such we will do a shorter book of the Bible, such as Philippians or Jonah for example, or we will do a chapter or a portion of chapters within a book, like Joseph in Genesis 39-50, or like the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) or Romans 8.

We tend to think of four main categories of Bible book series:

- *Old Testament narrative series* – e.g. Genesis 1-3, Abraham, David, Daniel or Esther.
- *Old Testament non-narrative series* – e.g. Psalms, Joel or Isaiah.
- *New Testament Gospel series.*
- *New Testament Acts–Revelation series.*

On any given year we like to preach a series from all four of these categories. We will come back to this later.

FOUR KINDS OF TOPICAL SERIES

In Common Ground we do four categories of topical series—and in any given year we will try do at least one of each kind.

1. Discipleship topical series

Every year as elders, we ask ourselves, ‘As we pastor and lead this church where are the cracks in discipleship most obvious?’ It might be

that people are sharing their faith with their friends, or have absorbed the fear and negativity in our culture, or that there are high levels of sexual immorality. We will then choose series topics that directly speak to these cracks.

We have a masterlist of key discipleship topics we should be preaching on over the years that guides us. They break up into four kinds of topics...

<p>Loving God topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prayer • Worship • The Spirit • Loving God’s Word • Christlikeness 	<p>Loving each other topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community • Serving • Singleness and Marriage • Parenting • Diversity
<p>Loving our city topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evangelism • Faith and work integration • Social justice • Sacrifice and full commitment • Spiritual warfare 	<p>Not loving the city’s sins / idols</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the idol of money • the idol of sex • the idol of power • consumerism and over-busyness • other worldviews – e.g. secularism / New Age

2. Doctrinal series

Every year as elders, we ask ourselves, ‘As we reflect on the preaching we have done in the last few years, what are the key doctrines that we have neglected?’ We might realize we have not done a series on creation, or humanity, or the Attributes of God, or the Trinity, or salvation, or the kingdom, or the church, or the Holy Spirit, or Jesus or last things. We will then choose series topics that directly speak to these theological voids.

3. Creative biblical series.

Strictly speaking a Bible series should limit itself to several back to back texts in a part of the Bible. But we might preach several texts that are held together under a biblical topic (as opposed to a discipleship or doctrinal topic). For example, we might do six weeks on The Stories Jesus Told and select some of Jesus' parables, or Shocking Things Jesus Said and select some of the harder sayings of Jesus, or Encounters with Jesus and select some of Jesus' one-on-one encounters with people, or Acts of the Spirit and preach on the main chapters in Acts that reveal the ministry of the Spirit,

It is especially these kind of series that show the artificiality of the difference between so-called topical and Bible series. Even in Common Ground, we are divided about whether to call these kinds of series Bible series, or topical series.

4. Attractional topical series

At least twice a year, we do a series where we give a lot of thought to what will make it easy for Common Grounders to invite their friends to church. They would need to be able to say to their friends, 'This Sunday at our church they're speaking about' and it has immediate resonance with unchurched people. This therefore increases the confidence in our members to actually invite their friends as well as increasingly the likelihood their friends will agree to come.

Each attractional series are in fact a sub-category of one of the previous kinds of series, but it so happens that the topic can have real appeal to not only to our church but also our culture. For example, if we do a series on love and marriage, it is both a discipleship and an attractional series. If we do a series on Investigating Jesus it is both a doctrinal and attractional series. If we do a series on Encountering Jesus it is both a creative-Bible series and an attractional series.

Here are some ideas for attractional series topics:

- *Tough Questions – answering the skeptics*
- *Sex and dating*

- *Marriage and parenting*
- *Simplify – in an overbusy, fatigued world*
- *I am – finding identity*
- *David’s Other Goliath – this is one on depression and anxiety*
- *Co-exist – exploring other religions and comparing them with the Christian gospel*
- *Soul Detox – identifying and displacing mental, emotional and cultural toxins*
- *Thrive – in body mind and soul*
- *The Real Jesus*
- *Supernatural – angels, demons*
- *The life hereafter*

WHAT IS BETTER: TOPICAL OR BIBLE SERIES?

It is my conviction that this question reveals a false dichotomy. Both are important and have their place.

Topical series tend to:

- Grow us as preachers by forcing us to really grapple with an entire doctrine or aspect of life.
- Fit nicely into a four or five week series format. Bible books tend to want longer than five weeks.
- Really etch a single discipleship value or doctrine into the memory and hearts of our people. Bible books tend to unpack many topics, which may mean that people will remember that we taught through Colossians but will forget what it means for what they believe and how they live.
- Appeal to unchurched people and newer Christians, though all people will benefit.

Bible book series, on the other hand, tend to:

- Honour the Bible in the sequence and format that the Holy Spirit has given it to us.

- Grow us as preachers by forcing us to preach on verses and topics that might be difficult to preach.
- Help people read through and apply the Bible themselves.
- Appeal to more mature believers, although all people will benefit.

Entire denominations and movements tend to have a preference one way or another.

The Bible book advocates tend to argue that preaching through books of the Bible is more 'biblical'. But is it really? It may be biblical in the sense that a portion of the Bible is being camped in for some time, but...

- If we get stuck in just one part of the Bible, what about all the other parts of the Bible? It can be argued that in the span of a few months to only camp in one part of the Bible hardly honours the whole Bible like the approach that explores various genres and epochs in salvation history. If one preaches to the same people for years on end we have time. But in a modern urban setting like ours there is high turnover of people over the years. We'd rather cover more ground in that brief time.
- Where do the apostles or Jesus ever preach through Old Testament books of the Bible? They exercise a lot of freedom in bouncing around the Old Testament when quoting it, for example.

In the final analysis, the argument between a topical selection of Bible passages over the weeks, or a back-to-back unpacking of a portion of Scripture over weeks is a silly one. Both have their place.

Before we explore how we now go about planning the year ahead, here is a quick detour that speaks of two kinds of upgraded series we do every year...

OPTIONAL EXTRA: UPGRADING ONE OF THE BIBLE SERIES TO ALSO INCLUDE A DEVOTIONAL STUDY JOURNEY

In recent years in Common Ground we annually pre-select one of the

Bible series, usually a New Testament series, and upgrade it to a Devotional Study series.

If we plan long enough before, we go about creating a 30 Day Devotional Booklet or Video Journey which we will give to everyone on the very portion of the Bible we will be preaching on every Sunday.

The reason we do this is that every year we try to create an onramp for people to get into daily Bible reading. By encouraging everyone to do it together, it creates buzz around the importance of this personal spiritual discipline.

So for example, we recently did a series on Hebrews 10-13 over 6 weeks. The week before we did a talk on the importance of daily devotions, handed out the 30 devotional study on Hebrews 10-13, and asked everyone to carve out time every day to work through the first week of the devotion. The following Sunday we would preach on that same portion of text, but will be sure to bring fresh angles and applications that were not covered in the devotional guide. Each preacher will make mention of the way God has been speaking to them in their personal devotions.

OPTIONAL EXTRA: UPGRADING ONE OF THE TOPICAL SERIES TO BE A SUPERSERIES

In recent years in Common Ground we have upgraded one of the topical series, usually but not always an attractional one, into what we call 'a superseries' (aka 'campaign').

A superseries is a series which:

- especially aims to bolster the small group ministry by boosting attendance in existing small groups as well as starting new groups for new people.
- requires a prepackaged set of compelling video teaching to be watched and discussed in the small groups.

- creates content around the same topic that complements but does not duplicate between Sunday messages and small group videos.
- invests a lot more in pre-advertizing and mobilizing of the church to 1) invite people 2) commit to groups and 3) start groups.

Superseries involve lots of work, but when done well, can deliver amazing results. Our advice is to first adopt superseries done by other churches for a few years before trying to create your own.

For example, last year (2017) we did a superseries called Follow. On Sundays we defined discipleship. In small groups we watched another churches set of videos on the same subject dealt with from a different angle. Last year (2018) we did a series called More to Life. We watched the Alpha film talks in small groups, and on Sundays answered the same questions the Alpha talks covered, but by looking at section in the Gospels where Jesus answered that same question. In 2019 we did a series called Thrive. Each week in both the Sunday message in the small group video we will discover how biblical wisdom and Gospel-light helps us to thrive spiritually, physically, mentally, emotionally, relationally, financially and vocationally.

PLANNING AHEAD FOR A GOOD DIET

Like a parent who plans the long-term diet of the family by having a nice variety of meals planned every week or month, so in Common Ground we like to plan a year ahead in the same way.

Following Jesus' plea to the apostle Peter that he feed Jesus' sheep well, we seek to give our people a balanced diet of God's Word.

In October and November every year, we as preachers prayerfully discuss and plan the menu for the following year.

We do this by using a template that serves as a starting point...

THE DIET-MENU TEMPLATE

Every year, we feed our people...

- 4 or 5 Bible book series that come from...
 - Old Testament narrative series – e.g. Genesis or 1 Samuel.
 - Old Testament non-narrative series – e.g. Psalms or Isaiah.
 - New Testament Gospel series.
 - New Testament Acts–Revelation series.
 - One of these will be upgraded to a Devotional Study series.
- 4 or 5 topical series consisting of...
 - Two Attractional series
 - One or two Discipleship series
 - 1 or 2 Doctrinal series
 - 1 or 2 Creative biblical series (which could also be listed under Bible series)
 - One of these will be upgraded to a Superseries.
- And don't forget about four to six *stand-alone messages* that might be...
 - A vision talk at the start of the year, after the major holidays
 - A half-time talk 6 months later
 - Good Friday
 - Easter Sunday
 - Christmas
 - Gratitude Sunday (we usually do this as the last Sunday message of the year after Christmas)

THE BENEFIT OF STARTING WITH A TEMPLATE

Instead of looking at 52 weeks of Sunday messages, and then trying to discern what to preach each Sunday, we have found it so useful to start with a template.

So instead of one dizzying conversation ('What should we preach on

this year?') we break it up into 10 smaller and manage-able conversations as we prayerfully think and discuss questions like:

- What are the stand-alone messages?
- What OT narrative series should we preach?
- What OT non-narrative series should we preach?
- What Gospel series should we preach?
- What Acts–Revelation series should we preach?
- Which of these Bible series can be upgraded to a devotional study series where we create a 30 devotional study book?
- What one or two discipleship-topic should we preach on?
- What one or two doctrine-topic should we preach on?
- What two attractional-topic series should we preach on?
- Which of these topical series can be upgraded to a superseries, with small group videos as well?

THE IMPORTANCE OF STARTING WITH BIBLE SERIES

In the creative process of selecting series to preach on, we have found it useful to first decide what Bible book series will be preached on and then only what topical series to preach.

The reason is this: once we have decided what Bible book series to preach on, we can do a little bit of early work and consider what the major topics are that will surface in those portions of Scripture. This way we are less likely to duplicate the same content in the topical series, where you would hope to preach on other important things.

For example, we may want to do a series on worship, but when we select to preach on the Psalms, we might realize that actually Psalms will cover the topic of worship, and no additional topical series on worship will be needed.

THE BALANCE BETWEEN BIBLE AND TOPICAL

At the time of this writing, we have just had a lengthy conversation as congregational leaders where we are feeling that next year we are going to tweak the dials even more towards Bible series. This is not a decision for every year, but for next year it is.

This is because, after a 3 year gap in doing this, we want to do a long series in a whole book of the Bible, a series that will take longer than five or six weeks.

As we spoke, we agreed that, if possible, we need to choose a Bible book that will subdivide up into smaller series, so that it does not feel like a long marathon, but rather four smaller journeys.

As we prayed and thought about it, we noticed that Ephesians can nicely be divided into four four to six week-long topical series:

- Personal salvation. 1:1-2:10,
- The church. 2:11-4:16,
- Transformed life and relationships 4:17-6:9,
- Spiritual warfare. 6:10-24 (as well as Acts 19 – which tells of Paul’s encounter with spiritual warfare in Ephesus).

We will now do four series that will feel both topical (one topic (e.g. salvation and then church) unpacked over four to six weeks) *and* biblical (the entire book of Ephesians, verse by verse) at the same time.

WHO DECIDES WHAT SERIES WILL BE PREACHED?

Who gets to decide what series will be preached every year? Different churches, or the same church at different seasons of its existence, will have different answers to the question:

- The lead elder or teaching pastor decides what will be preached.

- The eldership team or preaching team decide what will be preached.
- Many more people are invited to chip in.

In Common Ground, we have done all three of these at various times...

- In the early years, when we were one congregation our lead elder mainly decided what series would be preached.
- Since Common Ground's senior leadership team now consists of nine lead elders who each lead their own eldership teams and congregations, our current approach is for these nine to decide.
- There's a third idea that has worked really well – to keep our creativity levels high and to give more leaders a sense of ownership in what is being preached in the church.

We have done this in the past, and may do this again. We invite as many key leaders into the room as possible to help us brainstorm and weigh best ideas. For example, we have had 60 people in a room who we had asked them, of it were up to them personally, what would their choice be for the following...

- What OT narrative series should we preach?
- What OT non-narrative series should we preach?
- What Gospel series should we preach?
- What Acts–Revelation series should we preach?
- What one or two discipleship-topic should we preach on? ('As you have led people in our church where are the cracks in discipleship most obvious?')
- What one or two doctrine-topic should we preach on?
- What two attractional-topic series should we preach on? ('What series would make it so easy for us to invite our unchurched

friends because there will be immediate resonance with the topic.’)

In a high-energy meeting, we give 5 to 10 minutes to each of these seven sections and ask people to come forward and share their best idea as well as a rationale for doing this series. So, for example, we might have 7 ideas presented for an OT narrative series. We then say, ‘As a way of weighing these ideas, and not as a final decision (which will be left to the senior leaders), you each have two votes for your top two favourites.’ We then run through the list, ask for hands up, count and write down the count on each. By the end we will have one or two favourites in each list.

The lead elders will then make final decisions, heavily factoring in, but not being limited to the results of this exercise.

As lead elders we should pray and discuss together what series we believe will be best. Sometimes we will reach easy agreement, but very often the decision takes longer.

At the end we want to be able to say, ‘It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us that we preach on...’

IN A MULTI-CONGREGATIONAL MODEL, ANOTHER NUANCE OF COMPLEXITY IS ADDED

Across all congregations, we agree to 10 months of series we will all preach on, and about 7 or 8 weeks (either 1 longer series or 2 normal length ones) each lead elder and their eldership team decide what they will preach on.

This allows local eldership teams to pastor the unique patterns they are finding in their church, as well as giving people the chance to create their own message entirely – without the need to collaborate in the creation of it.

12 GUIDELINES IN PUTTING THE SERIES TO CALENDAR

Once we have decided all the series we want to preach on in the year, the next challenge is to plan it into the actual calendar.

This is where it gets complicated.

Here are 12 guidelines for doing so that we tend to abide by in Common Ground (although we may break our own rules from time to time.)

Note: These guidelines may not apply to you, but they may inspire your own guidelines.

- 1) First place the stand-alone messages: Vision Day, Good Friday, Easter, Halftime, Christmas, Gratitude.
- 2) In month one (in our case January) do a high-challenge discipleship series. People are fresh from their Summer leave and ready to be challenged and grow, so we go hard. This series can also double up for vision-casting for the year ahead.
- 3) In the next 4–6 weeks of the year (in our case, February and early March) do the Superseries.
- 4) If possible select a series that surrounds or starts with Easter Sunday (and if possible Good Friday too) into which the themes of cross / resurrection naturally fit. (This is why we usually do a Gospels Bible series in March/April and see if we can include a message on the cross and one on the resurrection in it.)
- 5) When there are a few public holidays or special city events in close proximity on the calendar that tend to drive numbers down considerably, try have a longer series to stretch over this patch of up-down-attendance.
- 6) Do the next attractational series about 6 months after the superseries, usually August / September.
- 7) After the final attractational series do the Devotional Study series.
- 8) Alternative between topical and Bible series.
- 9) When the same subject appears in two series, put some months of distance between them.

- 10) Start series on Sundays where there will likely be higher attendance – if possible, not during school holidays or long weekends.
- 11) In the 4-6 weeks before Christmas, do a series that is more encouraging than challenging. (Our sense is that when people are fresh they are open to challenge, but when they are exhausted they probably would appreciate more encouragement.)
- 12) If possible, contain a series in a month. So we might say, ‘In August we are doing a series on... and in September we are doing a series on ...’. People whose lives are driven and flavoured by these 12 monthly segments appreciate the way God’s Word comes to them in that riverbank of time.

PLANNING IN THE SPIRIT, PLANNING IN PENCIL

One objection to planning far out in advance is that it does not honour the Holy Spirit.

This view argues that it is better for the preacher to seek for some special direction from God what they should preach on next.

Of course there is wisdom in that view. Especially in churches where there is one star preacher who is free to do so, wonderful things can happen. Charles Spurgeon is a case in point.

There are several problems with this approach though.

- It tends to favour a very individualistic preacher-leader. When a plurality of people lead a church together and are deciding upon what will be preached, conversation is required not just one person receiving some direction from the Spirit. It is one thing when a preacher says, ‘God told me to preach on this in my Monday devotional time.’ It is another thing to say, ‘We elders have given much foresight and prayer to what we preach this year. After much conversation and prayer, it seems good to us and the Holy Spirit that we preach on...’

- It suggests that the Spirit can't tell us in advance what he wants us to preach on. Besides, if he can tell us on Monday what he wants us to preach on in 6 days time why will he not tell us to preach on, in 6 months time.
- It means we cannot prepare very well. 6 days of planning means that we can't put in many of the special touches, meeting implications and extra research we could have if we planned further out.
- It means people often do not get a balanced diet. If we are left to our 'spiritual sense' of what we should preach on every week, we don't use the mind God has given us to reflect on the whole of Scripture and the best way to feed and disciple our people strategically.
- The general advice in discerning God's guidance is have a plan and allow God to adjust it than sitting around waiting for the next direction. A moving ship is easier to turn.

One more caveat. We plan the year ahead, *but we do so in pencil*. This means that as we draw nearer to a series which is on the calendar, we may realize there is a new more pressing issue to speak into, or we realize that we have already covered some of the content in that series in an earlier series, or we may indeed be directed by the Spirit to do so.

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One reason I started www.terranwilliams.com is to create plug-and-play six week journeys for churches to use.

In a very intensive time of seeking God I sensed him calling me to do only what I do best—which is setting up churches to fly with great content. In the past it was nine congregations in Common Ground, but in the years to come I hope to serve a much wider church in the wider world.

I know from experience how time-consuming it is and what a specialist gift is required to create ones that weave together Sunday messages, small group videos and conversations, and personal devo videos and studies are.

My first one, complete at the time of this writing is called “*What’s so amazing about Scripture?*” It weaves together preaching content, small group videos and discussion and personal videos and devo studies for people to go through on their own. It is found on my website under *Churchwide Journeys*.

I hope to generate many more in all of the series categories I speak of in this ebook—topical, Bible book, doctrinal and attractional series.