

# PREPPING A SERMON SERIES LIKE AN #ADULT

By Ted Carnahan

**W**HAT MAKES A good sermon? Every church, denomination, and tribe may have a different answer to this question. But there are some things we can agree on: it should be biblical, relevant to the community and its needs, and help people grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. There are lots of faithful men and women who are preaching solid sermons on a regular basis, but far fewer who are regularly connecting with the unchurched and dechurched in their community.

At Spirit of Grace, where I'm the Mission Developer (that's Lutheran for "Church Planter"), we've been growing the church by reaching out and attracting millennials and their families intensely for several years. I'd like to share with you my process for sermon series creation that I used for our June 2016 sermon series called "#Adulting." I've written the following as a step-by-step how-to article for putting together a sermon series designed to reach young adult families. These are the steps we take to invite and connect with the wider community so that they participate with us on Sunday mornings.



Ted Carnahan is a geek and a bacon freak. He lives in Holdrege, Nebraska with his wife and four children while serving as mission developer pastor of Spirit of Grace Lutheran Church, a congregation under development of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

## Finding Inspiration

The first step in developing a new sermon series is also, in my opinion, the most difficult: getting inspired. Fortunately, you're not alone. The Holy Spirit is promised to live in our hearts and be with us (John 14.17). Start with prayer – that your eyes and ears would be opened to the concerns that your community already has and want to hear from God about. So, with Karl Barth's admonishment to keep one eye on the Bible and the other eye on the newspaper, it's time to pray and start searching around for ideas. Conversations with people inside and outside of your church, current events, and popular culture should all inform your search for a theme to begin with.

In the case of the #Adulting series, between a webcomic that I enjoy recently referencing the imposter syndrome some people feel when they realize that they are expected to be adults<sup>1</sup> and the ironic hashtag #Adulting going around, I realized that there was current conversation going on about what it means to be an adult.

To explore the theme further, I plugged "#Adulting" into Google to see what I could learn. I found three interesting things: First, it definitely is a current idea in popular culture. Second, it's widespread enough that many people in our target audience will have heard of it. And third, it has already attracted some serious social com-

1 <https://xkcd.com/1674/>

mentary. This kind of intentional, undirected web surfing will help you get an idea of the territory.

## Do Your Homework

While you surf, take notes. What phrases, words, and ideas stand out to you? What rings true, and what feels hollow? I found a few ideas that were important as I read. First, millennials were told that they could be whatever they wanted when they grow up. There is a sense of entitlement, but also a deep grief that the real economy they are in will not permit the opportunities they were promised. Second, the hashtag #Adulthood is about acting like an adult when you don't feel like an adult. While our target audience feels that acutely, that's a more universal experience than millennials realize. I knew the series was going to hit the bullseye, but even our non-millennials were going to make a connection. And finally, I discovered that the rejection of stress as a status symbol is growing.

## Identify Themes

There are opportunities here for scripture to speak into people's lives in ways that are timely, helpful, and oriented towards faith in Jesus Christ. As you work on your own series, you'll start noticing that certain ideas keep coming up. In my research for the #Adulthood series, I noticed patterns of ideas that kept appearing.

Millennials often feel like they are drifting purposelessly through life. This drifting sometimes gets called "failure to launch." In the age of social media, it seems odd that we might feel isolated – but isolation is a huge part of the modern experience. Some of that isolation is due to a lack of connection and involvement in something bigger than themselves. And so on ... through themes like entitlement, isolation, contentment, and suffering, it turns out that #Adulthood is hard!

## Dive Into the Scriptures

And, of course, scripture has much to say on all of the themes I identified ... and it will speak to the ones you identify as well. Spend some time in prayer and open your Bible and find stories that connect with the heart of the issues you've identified. There are several websites out there that will help you find a particular verse or passage on a topic, and these can be great help for jogging your memory and considering passages that you might not have thought of at first. One of the risks of not using a pre-planned lectionary is repeating your favorite ten to fifteen Bible stories over and over in your preaching. Consult a list of scripture you have preached on to make sure that you're not leaning too heavily on a small set of passages or just a handful of books of the Bible.

For the #Adulthood series, I decided that I wanted to focus on the book of 1 Timothy. Paul's advice to the young pastor – and his critique of opposition within the church



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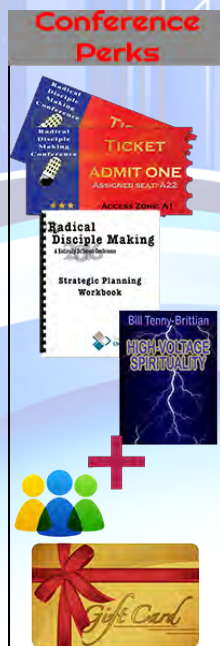
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and in society – works well as a corrective to drifting through life, being disconnected from community, and feeling discontented.

## Structured Communication

One of the most helpful things I've discovered for sharing the vision and planning for a new sermon series is the development of a sermon "series guide." The audience for this guide is twofold: First, I write it for my staff and volunteers who are going to be working in various ways to promote and carry off the series, and second, I write it for myself. In the guide, I identify Scripture, write a short summary of the passage's context and purpose, and provide a sermon title. I cast vision by identifying exactly how this particular message fits into the church's mission statement and vision for the future. I also identify any special occasions in the life of the church and community on that day.

I also write a series of message planning notes. These notes will be unique to you and your preaching style, but you might cover things like:

- What is your hearers' problem, and how is faith in Christ helpful?
- What do your hearers already think about the problem, and why might it be hard for them to change their minds (if they need to)?
- What do you propose that your hearers do differently? What risks might they face if they do that, and what objections might they have?

I have found that having these notes prepared and distributed ahead of time makes worship more cohesive and helps me write the sermon. After all, if all you have is a Bible passage and a title when it comes time to writing the sermon, you might find that you can't really remember why you had planned to use that particular text that day! Plan ahead, and your sermon will come together much more smoothly.

## Graphics for Everyone

Now it's time to promote the series in the community. The biggest task is to create a series of themed graphics that communicate what the series is about and encourage people to attend. Since I'm assuming you don't have your own graphic designer, you get to do this yourself!

I knew from the beginning that I wanted a picture of a kid pretending to be an adult. I used Google Image Search until I happened across the perfect stock photo of

a kid wearing an adult's suit. Unfortunately, it wasn't free – but for \$8 from CanStockPhoto.com, I decided it was affordable. I found a few other images I liked that were not encumbered by copyright while I was looking, and I saved those as I went along to use later.

We use a variety of posters and graphics to promote series, but I've whittled the graphic design task down to three basic items:

- A poster-shaped image (2:3 width-to-height ratio),
- A screen-shaped image (16:9),
- And an invitation card (4:3).

The 2:3 image can be printed at 24"x36" for a poster for our church's storefront window and at 11"x17" for posters inside the building. The 16:9 image works well on our screens at church, the front page of our website, and often without modification as the Facebook page cover photo. And finally, the 4:3 image can be printed on invitation cards to give to our church's participants for word-of-mouth advertising, uploaded to the visit page of our website, and shared on our Facebook page for people to re-share on their timelines.

## Marketing Online

I used to think that the best way to market a sermon series was to buy ads on Facebook. Today, I'm not convinced. Our target audience is almost completely immune to paid advertising, and we have a much better resource to bring to bear: their friends. The "30-Minute Mission Trip" advanced by Bob Franquiz in his book *Pull: Making Your Church Magnetic* is a great way to invite people to share their faith on social media and give them the tools to do it well. They can do things like changing their profile picture to the sermon series graphic, record a video inviting their friends to church, and starting conversations through texting and instant messages. This is a very simple event to organize, and no matter how many people bring their phone, tablet, or laptop and participate, you've amplified the invitation significantly.

For the #Adulting series, we are encouraging people to make a "true confession" of a time when they had to act like an adult when they didn't feel like one. At the end, we're giving them this text to read for a video to post to Facebook:

*If you've ever felt like a kid in grown-up clothes, I'd like to invite you to join me this coming Sunday for*

*#Adulthood. We're going to be talking about how to be a spiritual adult and find contentment, meaning, and determination in a childish world. The series starts Sunday, June 5th and continues through the 26th. You can find out more at [SpiritOfGraceHoldrege.org](http://SpiritOfGraceHoldrege.org).*

## Door Hangers

For big events, it can be a great idea to do a door hanger campaign. Getting door hangers printed isn't expensive, and it can be an effective way to reach your local neighborhood. Like everything new your church does, make sure that you give your volunteers lots of instruction, pray with them before and after, and make it an event that they want to participate in. Help them to see the larger vision of the role their invitation could play in the lives of the people in their town.

One thing that has worked well for us is having our "door hangers" printed on 4x6 Post-It notes. While you

can only print one side with this method, they stick to doors without leaving a residue and won't get blown off of doorknobs in our strong Nebraska winds. You can also put them at eye level which makes them harder to miss on the way in the door! We have ours printed at [PaperDirect.com](http://PaperDirect.com).

## Conclusion

#Adulthood is hard – and #Adulthood a sermon series is harder than most of us would like to admit. But if we apply a little bit of adult grit and determination to preparing and marketing a sermon series, we will have opportunities to help the people in our churches grow as disciples and to help the people in our communities come to a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ. I'm looking forward to sharing this series of messages with the community!

**NET** Results



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