

CHAPTER 6
RESPONSES TO FINDINGS

The data generated through the course of the project provided interesting information for interpretation. The visual aids did have an impact on the retention of the sermon content. The test group respondents showed a considerable improvement on the recall test, the questionnaire that required short answers. The five percent increase over the entire testing period showed the value of the visuals.

Numerous interpretations can be generated to support and detract from the research hypothesis. Several interesting observations can be made in reviewing the results. First, many of the 30- to 50-year olds, the first generation to grow up with the television, were greatly affected by the visual sermons. This is significant because part of the reasoning behind the project was that Americans in recent decades have become a multi-media saturated society. Second, the results show that respondents who were Christians more than twenty years were positively impacted by the visual sermons. Those most familiar with the Scripture passage and topic would be the most likely to "tune-out" the preacher and subconsciously believe they had

heard it all before. Third, it appears in reviewing the results that visual aids replaced stories as the most interesting aspect of the message. Fourth, when rating the messages immediately after the services, respondents as a whole found the messages more appealing when visual aids were utilized. Fifth, it appears by the results that the visual aids caused the sermon content to lodge more deeply in the memory of the listeners. Their ability to more accurately relate the information on the recall questionnaire and the drastic difference on the follow-up questionnaire showed the visuals had a profound effect on their remembrance.

The responses to the recognition questions, or multiple-choice questions, can be interpreted numerous ways. First, it could be that the absence of any significant difference between the groups on the recognition questions shows that the visual objects did not impact the test group's ability to recognize the themes and points. In chapter three, a discussion of recognition versus recall led to the conclusion that even unattended information could leave traces behind that could be recognized by the respondent. The control group may not have been as engaged mentally in the message but could still have the ability to recognize the correct response from a multiple-choice list. It could be argued, however, that the disparity on the

recall questionnaire reveals the difference in attentiveness between the test and control group.

Another plausible, alternative explanation to the similar numbers on the recognition questionnaires is that the questions were too simple and too easily identified by the respondents. The fact that the average percentage correct was in the upper eighty percent range shows that for at least some of the respondents the questions were not too simple to answer. A wide range of educational backgrounds was present in the sample and the questions were chosen while understanding the tension between a non-threatening test for the adult respondents and the need for fine differentiating data. The first explanation for the equity between the groups appears more promising to the researcher.

Several surprises were identified in the testing results. The respondents under the age of thirty were actually negatively impacted by the visual objects in the messages. The immediate memory of the messages by the test group was lower than the control group. This data is incongruent with the hypothesis that Americans are becoming increasingly media-dependent. However, it should be noted that the sample size of eight in the non-visual group and five in the visual group, in this demographic, may not fully reflect the true trend for this age group.

A second surprise was that the respondents over the age of fifty were impacted greater than the groups as a whole. The middle-age to older-age adults formed a demographic range that the researcher felt would not show a significant difference. Another group that posed a surprise was the group of respondents that had completed masters degrees. This demographic in the control group, without the assistance of a visual object, proved to score better on the recall questionnaire.

Final conclusions can be drawn from the interpretation of results. First, the hypothesis that the use of visual objects in preaching to adults would increase retention of sermon content was supported. However, no statistical validation was performed and no claim of statistical significance is proffered from this research. The burden of this type of detailed analysis falls outside the scope of what is required of the Doctor of Ministry student.

Both short-term and long-term memory were affected positively by the visual objects. An additional conclusion is that the congregation was appreciative of the visuals. The ratings of the messages from the test group revealed a higher interest in the messages than from the control group. Additionally, the visual objects were rated the most interesting part of the messages and were the answer given most as the reason for the higher interest in the sermon.

An additional conclusion is that adults are open to the use of visuals in the Sunday message. No respondent related that he or she felt the message was too childish or that the visual was too much of a gimmick. People often expect visual objects in children or youth sermons. However, this research presents a strong case for using visuals in the adults service.

The project data can help the researcher conclude that steps can be taken to improve what is retained by the congregation. Many pastors feel that it is solely up to the Holy Spirit as to what listeners take from the service. While the general premise of this belief is true, the human side of the equation is also at work in sermons.

Overall, the data from the project supports the initial hypothesis outlined in the first chapter. Visual objects enhance a sermon's effectiveness on memory retention of sermon content. Certain aspects of the project, in retrospect however, could have been improved. Five general improvements have been identified by the researcher.

First, a longer testing period with more sermons would have given more significant samples for data interpretation. The limitations of the researcher's position in the church and the fact that almost all eligible adults were included in the samples of the project limited the use of more services. Second, utilizing the testing methodology in several churches would have broadened the scope of the

research. Different denominations, cultures, and worship styles would have led to the possibility of more profound information.

Third, more tightly written questions on the recognition questionnaires might have been beneficial in notating differences between the test and control groups. Fourth, including demographic information and increasing the number of respondents on the follow-up questionnaire would have benefited the overall conclusions of the project. The most significant shifts in memory between the groups were seen two weeks after the messages. Fifth, a later follow-up questionnaire, one or two months after the sermon, would have also generated interesting results for the researcher. Each of these improvements should be considered in future research conducted by Doctor of Ministry students.

Further research could also expand related issues present in this project. Utilizing actual learning style inventories for the adults could further identify what is taking place in the visual messages. A second area of further research that should be attempted is utilizing differing styles of sermons with the visual objects. Modifying length, number of points, and delivery style would all provide interesting research to help identify which sermon style is best served by visual elements. All of the messages in the present project were narrative, short, three-point messages.

Finally, a project that focused on actual behavior change as a result of a more memorable message would be a further development of the project idea. If something is remembered better, it is hoped that it will be more readily implemented in a person's life.

Hopefully, after reading this project, pastors will desire to improve the retention of their congregation to sermon themes and points. It is hoped that readers will start using variety in their preaching. Visual aids for many pastors will be a first step into varying what is expected of them by their church. A major benefit of this project is that it can be implemented anytime, anywhere, at little or no cost to the pastor. A pastor who wants to test the effectiveness of this approach could start preaching a visual message once a quarter and utilize small focus groups to evaluate the visual sermon's effectiveness. Hopefully, the end result of pastors stretching themselves will be that creativity is stirred and new ideas and promptings from the Holy Spirit will revive old messages into new experiences. Pastors must reflect on the end result of their preaching. A concern for what is retained from a sermon by the congregation is essential. More importantly, the message should impact the listeners' lives and draw them closer to God.

The project has numerous theological implications for the Church and pastors. God desires for His people to remember the works He has done. Pastors participate in the work of remembrance when they strive to teach the Word through more effective mediums. The inclusion of visual elements only enhances the ability of the hearer to remain attached to the teaching.

Preachers are faced with a dilemma in sermon preparation today. The media-saturated society of America at the close of this millennium has made it difficult for the pastor to hold the congregation's attention. The need to prepare sound theological teaching that is presented in the most effective, relevant means possible is a daunting task. This project has attempted to challenge the pastor to vary from the status quo and understand the spiritual and human side of preaching.

The message from God has not changed. The medium used to convey the truth can vary. Increasing memory of sermon themes and points is a significant matter for the Church to consider. However, a concern far more crucial than retention of material is internalizing the information to the point that behavior becomes more Christ-like. The project raises theological implications about sermon preparation and delivery. However, the best prepared sermon, without the power of the Holy Spirit, is a hollow pursuit. The success of a sermon is not based on the congregation's ability to

recall the content. The success of a sermon should be based on changed lives brought about by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This project outlined one possible solution to better convey the truths of a message. The hypothesis was supported, the kingdom of God was expanded, and the researcher learned much through the course of the project experience.