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By Grace Thornton

Alabama Baptist

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP)- Megachurch pastor Rick Warren may fill the pulpit of your church this Sunday morning. Actually, he might have been there before too. The question is, did you recognize him?

Warren's sermons-and those of other well-known preachers-are available for the buying in books and on websites such as SermonNotes.com. And pastors increasingly are turning to pre-written material to upgrade their sermons from tired to inspired.

"Whether pastors are pressed for time or feeling the need to preach a 'Cadillac sermon,' the practice is becoming a common phenomenon," said Robert Smith, professor of Christian preaching at Beeson Divinity School.

But with instant improvement available at the click of a mouse, pastors are faced with the temptation to take sermon swapping one step too far, Smith said. Some pastors preach the material nearly verbatim without giving

credit to the authors.

“It's a matter of integrity, and using the work of others as his own robs a pastor of integrity and personal growth,” Smith said.

It also can cause a pastor to lose his profession. Last spring, Robert Hamm stepped down as senior pastor of Keene United Church of Christ in Keene, N.H., after admitting to plagiarizing full sermons, Religion News Service reported.

No preacher needs to reinvent the wheel or create information from scratch, Smith said, but researching, processing and assimilating are part of the spiritual growth process.

“It is not necessary for a pastor to manufacture new material, but it is wrong to take others' material without citing the source,” he said.

A pastor's job is to spend time with God and with Scripture, said Clint Pressley, senior pastor of Dauphin Way Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala.

“I think that if you are using someone else's sermon as your own, you are not only cheating yourself; you are cheating your people.”

Though Pressley is not against being well read, he said preaching is a personal event and should overflow from a pastor's personal spiritual life.

“It's hard to infuse passion into something that didn't emerge from your own personality,” he said.

Pressley noted that researching others' work correctly for background, then fleshing it out with personal experiences and insights, can keep the spirit of sharing alive for some pastors.

Others, he said, move past help with preparation into plagiarism and disaster, as did Glenn Wagner, pastor of Calvary Church in Charlotte, N.C.,

Pressley's hometown. Wagner resigned in September after admitting to the congregation that discouragement and depression had led him to plagiarize sermons for the last two years.

What makes a pastor turn to ready-to-read sermons?

“Pastors are expected to be everything, everywhere, all the time,” Pressley said. “They are stretched in lots of directions, and often it is hard to carve out time to study.”

Preparing to preach, opening the Bible and waiting to hear from God is a waning practice, he said.

Jay Wolf, pastor of First Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala., said the Internet can be an excellent tool if used correctly and simply as a part of the sermon-developing process.

“Plagiarism, camouflaging or masquerading is never appropriate. It is certainly wrong to take other people's material and experiences and pretend they are your own,” Wolf said.

But in a world that's increasingly media-driven, it becomes more and more difficult to be completely original on approaches to the Scripture.

The key, Wolf said, is “to dress the same truths in new clothes that connect to the fresh needs of people.”

Mixing personal experiences with knowledge gleaned from outside sources makes a pastor a more effective communicator and avoids compromising his integrity, Wolf said.

“Sermons are like recipes,” he said.

“It's like making homemade fried chicken. You start with a basic recipe, but what makes yours so good is the ingredients only you can add.”

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