

# Imaginative reading helps pastors grow spiritually

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WACO —Hulitt Gloer always has loved going into bookstores. But for many years, he felt guilty about stopping to browse the latest bestsellers and the new releases in nonfiction.

Resolutely, Gloer pushed past bestselling novels, heading instead for the religion section to find the books he thought he should be reading.

No more.



Hulitt Gloer and about a dozen other pastors will attend the Imaginative Reading for Creative Preaching retreat in Kerrville.

Gloer, a professor at Baylor University's [Truett Theological Seminary](#), gave himself permission to veer off the customary theological reading track. The result has been more meaningful, relevant sermons, he said. Now he is passing the word to other pastors: Banish the guilt.

Come January, he and a dozen other preachers will head to a lodge near Kerrville for six days to discuss books, from such classics as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Grapes of Wrath* to children's books such as *Does God Have a Big Toe?*—even science fantasy such as *A Wrinkle in Time*.

Imaginative Reading for Creative Preaching, an annual retreat begun in 2006, is offered through the Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching at Truett Seminary.

“For many preachers, reading outside the field makes you feel guilty. You think, ‘I should be reading theology or commentary or the latest church growth manual,’” said Gloer, the center’s director.

“But preachers need to read widely—fiction, short stories, poetry, children’s books, nonfiction,” he said. “They need to be in touch with the world and things their parishioners are reading. If they read widely, they inform themselves and give their preaching depth and richness.”

The \$150 annual retreats are first-come, first-served, and they fill up fast, said Gloer, who also serves as the David E. Garland Professor of Preaching and Christian Scriptures at Truett Seminary. He wants to keep the groups small for intense, intimate discussions, not scholarly lectures.

Weeks ahead of the event, Gloer sends pastors a list of books to read.

What they learn at the retreat is about much more than pulling anecdotes from books, said Greg Garrett, a Baylor University professor of English and a publisher’s Pulitzer Prize nominee for his book *Free Bird*. He attended this year to discuss his book.

“There’s some of the ‘I’m going to quote this from Fitzgerald or Faulkner or Hemingway,’ but this is also about reading in a different way, seeing patterns that can help them write their sermons,” Garrett said. “There’s a dimension that this is art and that it changes you—and the idea behind preaching is to do something transformational.”

Immersing oneself in books and poetry is an excellent way of doing that, Gloer said.

“We always do (Robert) Frost because he writes in such common language about common things, like in *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* or *The Road Not Taken*,” he said.

“We talk about how poets can teach you with the language because they have to choose the words so carefully and compress images and experiences,” he said. “Communication studies show that the more words we say, the less impact we have.

“People who preach every Sunday need to understand that.”

Scott Walker, director of the Institute of Life Purpose at Mercer University in Macon, Ga., is a voracious reader known for drawing upon literature in his sermons. He not only reads the works of great authors, but he also reads their biographies for insight.

“The best way to bridge people of diverse opinions and at different points in their faith development is by stories, and Jesus realized that,” said Walker, former pastor of First Baptist Church of Waco. “He built much of his ministry around parables.

“Reading is a good way to not just depend on upon my own stories,” Walker said. “Many preachers’ illustrations are very first person, and I do a lot of that. But it’s great to delve into literature and history, because it’s a story, too. The Spirit has a way of working through what you’re reading and transforming it into something for your sermons.”