



Boring or Divine Encounter - Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Non-didactic Approach to Preaching

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Peter Woodward

24 March 2023

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Ethics Approval

The Faculty of Arts and Education Human Ethics Committee gave approval to my proposal **Boring or Divine Encounter - evaluating the effectiveness of a non-didactic approach to preaching** on 29 November 2016.

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Abstract

This thesis offers a critical examination of the causes for and potential solutions to the problem of boring preaching. It maintains that from a Christian perspective the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ is not meant for boredom and uncomfortable listening, and that preaching at its most effective will offer all those involved – preachers and listeners – a divine encounter that harbours a life-changing event. It suggests that preaching can and should open the hearts and minds of all to a lived experience of faith in Jesus Christ rather than being a mere historical and/or academic exercise. It therefore proposes that preaching be undertaken as an important ministry within the *Missio Dei*, namely God's mission in and to the world

The thesis provides a review of selected literature to examine the difference between preaching which is boring and/or forceful and preaching which invites all into a closer relationship with God. It includes those scholars of homiletics who stress the need for diligent and careful study of scripture in order to deliver didactic preaching which directs the thinking and responses of listeners. It also gives attention to those scholars who stress the importance of living in and with the scriptures in order to generate preaching which is expectant that such attentiveness to scripture and to lived experience will generate openings for an encounter with God.

The thesis examines the issues that give rise to boring and ineffective preaching and maintains that the contrast between non-didactic and didactic preaching is critically important in determining preaching outcomes. It defines these terms – non-didactic preaching and didactic preaching – as they are used in the thesis, and accepts the reality that they can be identified as a polarity of preferred styles which nevertheless are best positioned on a continuum, as the delivery of preaching will be weighted toward either end of this continuum

The thesis then reflects on a research project that invited a group of Uniting Church in Australia ministers who preach regularly to engage a non-didactic approach to preaching by examining their self-understanding as both preachers and hearers of sermons; exposing them to non-didactic methodologies; and evaluating the extent to

which this exposure resulted in changes to their attitudes to preaching, and practices as, preachers.

The methodology used in this interactive project was a cycle of Action Research in which participants' contributions were expected to shape the quality and content of the discussions in each group meeting, and the ultimate direction of the research. The results of the research are mixed; and they do indicate the value for participants of examining their approaches to preaching, future directions for additional research, and the benefits of exposing Uniting Church preachers to preaching weighted towards non-didacticism.

Introduction

Word of God¹

Word of God,
leafing through my Bible
seeking a proof text out of context.

Word of God,
the preacher demands
all should follow his interpretation.

Word of God,
you have made us for yourself.
Help me to hear the cries of pain
felt deep down
in myself
in others
and in your love.

My poem, originally written as part of a short devotional for Army chaplains, raises questions about the nature and purpose of preaching. Over more than forty years I have been privileged to be both preacher and listener in a variety of ministry situations. Out of that ministry experience I have developed a strong desire that preaching events engage both preacher and listeners with an invitation, implicitly and explicitly, to move into deeper intimacy with God. The word “invitation” is deliberately used to indicate a particular approach to preaching which will be further developed in the thesis. Such a preaching event would ideally present a loving challenge – nurturing, liberating, correcting, assuring, blessing, revealing, sanctifying, and evoking newness. Delivering this invitational manner of speech contrasts with the confrontational delivery and coercive speech evidenced in other modes of preaching.² In short, can preaching be an expression of a divine encounter – the opportunity to live more fully, more deeply and more faithfully; with the consequence that life could never be the same again? Additionally, is it possible to enhance the

¹ Peter Woodward, *Poetry* (unpublished, 1992-2021).

² It can be noted that coercive speech is not limited to preaching. For example, political life and advertising frequently want to coerce us into their particular way of thinking.

preaching practice of preachers by inviting them to examine non-didactic methodologies and to integrate them into their preaching?

Such a high and expectant view of preaching as a divine encounter differs greatly from the experience of so many for whom preaching is somewhere between boring and hectoring. The story of the young Weary Dunlop is a century old, but it is chosen because of its graphic description and because, as an Australian hero, Weary's experience is highly relatable. Much work has been done in homiletics in that century, but the concerns raised by Fred B. Craddock and Eugene L. Lowry³ indicate that preaching continues to be less than effective in too many cases. Sue Ebury, Weary's biographer, describes the preaching delivered to young Weary Dunlop and fellow church attenders, which sought to make a difference in people's lives by being prescriptive and directive, even coercive, as patently ineffective.

In 1920 Ernie (later known as Weary) gained his Merit Certificate, ... and discarded his religion. He was 13. 'I decided this heaven and hell approach to life seemed a bit illogical. Saints, sinners, cardinals, popes – who really knew about these things? I'd better make up my own mind.'

...
(The family worshipped at the local Methodist Church) This (offered) ... fundamentalist Christianity of a kind which threatened hellfire and brimstone and very uncomfortable punishment at the seat of divine judgement. Yet not even the fiercest efforts of the well-meaning prophets intimidated Ernie and the 'admirable faith of my near-Calvinist parents' satisfied him neither spiritually nor intellectually.

After church, while the grown-ups gossiped round the door, the boys retreated to the banks of the billabong ... and Ernie would mimic whichever portion of the morning homily appealed most to his sense of the ridiculous. Thus, said Alan (his brother) 'purging our minds and souls of fears, making the whole thing a joke ending with hearty laughter.'⁴

These responses to the preaching of "the well-meaning prophets" indicate a limited effectiveness. Adults gossiping suggests that matters of social interest and life in the farming area were of greater significance; and young Ernie's ridicule indicates that to young minds the coercive intent was a source of humour and ridicule.

³ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority: Revised and with New Sermons* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 3 – 20; and Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 4 – 14. These authors are chosen because of their seminal work late last century and early in this one; but they are not the only ones to point to the need for new approaches to improve the effectiveness of preaching.

⁴ Sue Ebury, *Weary: The Life of Sir Edward Dunlop* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1995), 31-2.

My own experience of church attendance over more than sixty years⁵ has on too many occasions reinforced the sentiment that preaching is typically boring, sometimes directive and coercive; and usually ineffective. Two simple illustrations bear this out. Of the sermons I have listened to, I recall less than a handful as having any significant impact, and from time to time, I receive the feedback that, when I preach, I am not preaching at people, rather I preach to them with a lived experience.⁶

Many of the sermons I have listened to attempt a varied combination of retelling the biblical narrative – often in dramatic fashion; explaining the narrative– typically with scholarly commentary; and applying it – even with strident urgency. While some such sermons demand the listeners’ attention, unfortunately many fail to offer a loving and inspiring invitation to a deepened relationship with God. Sadly, more often than not they are typically forgettable and boring! My personal assessment is that most sermons I have listened to fall into two broad categories: an obligation on the part of the preacher to deliver yet another sermon, or a presentation from the preacher, as authoritative expert, delivering the truth of the gospel to the listeners as those needing guidance.⁷

Authoritative preaching with its apparent directive intent has limited capacity to evoke loving and genuine compliance and is likely to result in a form of resistance. Fred B. Craddock offers an apt description of this unfortunate consequence:

I am aware that being armed with Holy Writ and the word of God tempts the communicator to think that the urgency and weight of the message call for pressing in and pressing down, leaving the listener no room for lateral movement. But listeners worth their salt will soon, against this assault, launch a silent but effective counterattack: find flaws in the speaker’s grammar or

⁵ While I have been in ministry for over forty years, for about twenty of those years I have been an occasional preacher, rather than a regular preacher.

⁶ I hasten to add that, while I find preaching fulfilling and life-giving and seek to be invitational and non-coercive, I am aware that it is always an aim, but not always achieved.

⁷ Although my opinion of preaching practice is based here on personal experience, the problems I outline are identified in the literature. See such authors as Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 6 and Robert C. Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon: Personal Pastoral Preaching* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 88. My personal experience of preaching has prompted my interest in seeking a transformative approach.

voice or logic or dress ... [Y]our list of things to do when confronted with such a speaker probably is longer than mine.⁸

Similarly, Adrian Lane's article "Please! No more boring sermons!"⁹ indicates that preaching is often viewed as inadequate. Mike Graves in *What's the Matter with Preaching Today?* offers this sobering comment:

The people often blindly know that there is something the matter with the sermon although they cannot define it. The text was good and the truth was undeniable. The subject was well chosen and well developed, but, for all that, nothing happened. The effect was flat. So far as the sermon was concerned, the congregation might as well have stayed home.¹⁰

In a similar vein, Henri Nouwen, the esteemed author, practitioner and scholar of spirituality from the second half of last century, catches the key elements of inadequate preaching insightfully, naming two difficulties with preaching: "the problem of the message" and "the problem of the messenger."¹¹ The message can appear to be so familiar that it seems to provide nothing of interest or newness, and therefore it is rarely heard because the very familiarity sabotages the "fearfulness of the message," as this would call for a radical and life-changing encounter with the living God.¹² Nouwen suggests that the messenger experiences similar difficulty in that their familiarity with the task and their own possible unresolved emotional issues can evoke theological and emotional content and expectations that too often miss the mark, even to the point of imagining that listeners must be converted to the preacher's latest theological insight.¹³

⁸ Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, 105.

⁹ Adrian Lane, "Please! No more boring sermons! An Introduction to the Application of Narrative to Homiletics," accessed 10 October 2019 https://aahomiletics.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/al_pleasenomoreboringsermons.pdf; and see also the related text Keith Weller, ed., *'Please! No More Boring Sermons!' Preaching for Australians – Contemporary Insights and Practical Aspects* (Brunswick East: Acorn Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Mike Graves, ed., *What's the Matter with Preaching Today?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 12. Additionally, a teaching session I conducted in 2015 with nine theological students indicated the prevalence of the deficiency with eight out of nine students rating sermons from their supervising clergy as boring. The other student did report listening to sermons which were a "divine encounter."

¹¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry* (New York, Image Books, 1978), 23 – 34.

¹² *Ibid.*, 25-29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29-34.

Poor preaching significantly limits the capacity of both preacher and listeners to engage in or promote a deep and purposeful life of faith. Its inadequacy will be either misleading in its intent, reducing God, the listeners and the preacher to pawns in an esoteric “chess game” of theological exactitude, or it will be so bland that any opportunity for transformation is lost in a maze of church jargon, glib comments, and indifferent humour. Preaching which is a combination of some or all of boring, strident, coercive, directive (or didactic), and lacking good relational quality is sometimes a form of laziness or misguided spirituality.¹⁴ David Johnson and Jeff Van Vonderen present the case that misguided spirituality which is coercive and dominating is an expression of spiritual abuse.¹⁵

William Paul Young’s description of bad theology, with evocative use of “Person” to capture the objectification of the listener, is equally applicable to bad preaching:

Bad theology is like pornography – the imagination of a real relationship without the risk of one. It tends to be transactional and propositional rather than relational and mysterious. You don’t have to trust Person, or care for Person. It becomes an exercise in self-gratification that ultimately dehumanizes the self and the community of humanity in order to avoid the painful processes of humbling and trusting. Bad theology is not a victimless crime. It dehumanizes God and turns wonder and the messy mystery of intimate relationship into a centrefold to be used and discarded.¹⁶

This contrast between good and bad theology, and equally between good and bad preaching, is the difference between the invitation into life giving relationships filled with love as a gift from God and the coercive and manipulative speech of a stentorian “expert.” In the former case the preaching seeks to present a non-didactic call to a nurturing, liberating, and transformative faith; and in the latter the approach is didactic, but also demands, even compels, a response. In consequence life, faith, mission, and evangelism are either loving and responsive or demanding and evocative of guilt and shame.

¹⁴ Caddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, 6 – 14.

¹⁵ David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and false Spiritual Authority Within the Church* (Minneapolis, Bethany House Publishers, 1991), 20-22.

¹⁶ William Paul Young, “Foreword,” in Richard Rohr and Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance – The Trinity and your Transformation* (London, SPCK, 2016), 21.

My own approach to preaching has been shaped by a variety of influences, both positive and negative. I recall from early childhood the influence of a fundamentalist faith which claimed extraordinary knowledge of God which demanded the correct and necessary response. At least one uncle told the family that Jesus would return before he died. The uncle died more than twenty years ago; but such claims have a potent influence on young children. Initially, this frightening impact caused bewilderment, even despair, but in the longer term it contributed to my desire to preach with the authenticity of a living and loving faith. Additionally, my early memories of church attendance include a distaste for boring preaching (I recall wanting the clock to move forward more quickly!). As I grew older and entered the education system, I developed a healthy scepticism about claims of spiritual superiority.

During my years of ministry, a rich variety of retreats have offered the invitation to deepened life and faith. This was coupled with the desire to invite people into a living experience of God – dramatically active in people’s lives – rather than to deliver a recitation of formulaic scriptural insights. As the years of ministry continued, I found greater enjoyment in preaching as I sought to discern and present a loving God whose transformative presence invites and nurtures faith as genuine intimacy with God. This engagement is evocative of a participatory relationship.

Richard Rohr and Mike Morell convincingly present the qualitative advantage of participatory over rational knowledge and do so in terms of trinitarian theology:

The doctrine of the Trinity says that it’s finally participatory knowledge that matters, not rational calculating, which is but one form of knowing, God – and the human person by an irreducibly important extension – must never be objectified. As John of the Cross so frequently insisted, God refuses to be known but can only be loved.¹⁷

A significant part of my calling to preach is authorised by and contained within the discipline I participate in as a minister of the Uniting Church. The Basis of Union is foundationally a thoroughly Christocentric statement: “The Uniting Church acknowledges that the faith and unity of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church are

¹⁷ Rohr and Morell, *The Divine Dance*, 54.

built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁸ This means that preaching in the Uniting Church belongs in this same Christology. Paragraph 4, “Christ Rules and renews the Church,” includes the statement: “Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of the God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist;”¹⁹ Thus in Christ’s presence preaching is not only transformative, but also a salvatory event. This preaching must have a particular relationship with the scriptures.: “When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses.”²⁰

The use of the word “control” can be misunderstood as didactic and coercive. However, its meaning here implies a more nuanced use of the text, Thus the phrase “controlled by the Biblical witnesses” is critically different from any concept of control by the text of scripture and can be seen as indicative of preaching weighted toward a non-didactic approach. The nature of the relationship between preaching and the scriptures is further elucidated in Paragraphs 10 and 11 with their expressions of reliance on “Reformation Witnesses” and “Scholarly Interpreters.”²¹ There is no hint of biblical fundamentalism here. The nature of this controlling impact of the scriptural witness will be a matter for discernment through discussion and scholarly endeavour as the church is “a pilgrim people ... (so that) Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way “²²

On the question of exercising discernment F. Russell Mitman makes a careful and pointed distinction between biblical preaching and preaching biblically. He describes biblical preaching as typically a formulaic approach which tends towards a proof texting type fundamentalism. In contrast preaching biblically relies on the expectancy that the Word of God witnessed to in the scriptures will be the driving force in the sermon through the ongoing recontextualization of the word in every generation. Rather than the sermon engaging the biblical text, it should be expected that the

¹⁸ Uniting Church in Australia Assembly “The Basis of Union” 1992 edition, accessed 2 September 2019, <http://uca.org.au/about/basis-of-union/>, the opening sentence of Paragraph 3.

¹⁹Ibid., Paragraph 4.

²⁰ Ibid., Paragraph 5.

²¹ Ibid., Paragraphs 10 and 11.

²² Ibid., paragraph 3.

biblical text will engage and drive the sermon.²³ It is my firm hope that preachers in the Uniting Church will continue to catch a fresh sense of this vision of preaching as expressed by Mitman:

Preaching biblically ...is the homiletical praxis of inviting the assembly to accompany the preacher, through biblical texts, into an event that is intended to become for the assembly the Word of God through the Holy Spirit. So, preaching biblically ...invites us into a wonder-full and grace-filled banquet in which Christ the one Word of God is present and meets us in Word and Sacraments.²⁴

The Basis of Union with its strong expectancy of preaching is utterly consistent with the centuries of church history in which preaching is typically central to the life of the church.²⁵ While preaching has ranged from a short comment lasting about five minutes to a lengthy oration of more than an hour, it has typically had a scriptural basis as expected, even mandated, in Paragraph 5 of the Basis of Union; and, as such, can be described as a presentation of God's word.²⁶

Preaching as presenting God's word provokes two negative stereotypes. For some preachers, a deep sense of their personal unworthiness and limitations causes a sense of inadequacy. Daring to imagine that their words might actually be a word from God is a virtually unbelievable challenge. In a polar opposite some preachers display egoic self-aggrandisement, apparently believing they have the exceptional ability to be the messenger of a divine word and the right to direct the lives of other "mere mortals." Nevertheless, because preaching typically belongs in an act of worship seeking to relate to God, it surely must be viewed as an expression of the word of God, irrespective of the foibles of those conducting the worship.

For example, Walter Brueggemann describes effective preaching as a witness to God's "imaginative or" and the practice of prophetic imagination where preacher and congregation are invited to be "deeply embedded in the YHWH narrative" and thus to

²³ F. Russell Mitman, *Preaching Adverbially* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2018), 7 – 9. See also Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, 45 – 63.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁵ There are exceptions, such as The Society of Friends, where a church meeting for worship does not include a preached word.

²⁶ The use of an upper case "w" in "word of God" or "God's word" is reserved when referring directly to Christ as in John 1 and as also in the Basis of Union cited above.

encounter the disturbing and transformative call of God.²⁷ Similarly, Anna Carter Florence describes the “wide-awake sermon”: “We want to *liberate* them (the listeners/participants) through the power of the Word we meet in the text. We want to give them hope, not hurt, for a future that liberates and redeems.”²⁸ When preaching, whatever its form (didactic or non-didactic), fails to offer the invitation to be engaged in God’s transforming presence, it will be flawed, at best, or ineffective and misleading, at worst.

Preaching which invites both preacher and listeners into lifegiving relationships will be a participation in the *Missio Dei*, witnessing to God’s “imaginative or” which is always liberating and redemptive. James Nieman points to the *Missio Dei* as the context for all ministry and mission²⁹ so that preaching belongs within the expression of God’s love in the world. In short, and in agreement with theological writer Eddie Arthur, preaching finds its source in “the agenda for missionary thought and action ... (as) defined by the character of God, not the activities of the Church.”³⁰

In addition, Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss make the point that mission is to be central to the life of the church and that *Missio Dei* calls the church into the instrumentality of God’s action in salvation history.³¹ Similarly, N.T. Wright states that

[W]hen the followers of Jesus are obedient to their calling within the *missio Dei*, what they say [and do] ... generates a communal life which becomes a place in real history (events) where God promises to be truly present and where humans can come to know him as whole persons³²

²⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 4. Walter Brueggemann, *The Word Militant: Preaching a Decentering Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 67.

²⁸ Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) 151.

²⁹ James Nieman, “Why the Idea of Practice Matters” in Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, eds. *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice – A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 38.

³⁰ Eddie Arthur, “*Missio Dei* and the Mission of the Church,” accessed 27 March 2019, http://www.wycliffe.net/missiology?id=3960#_ftn., 29

³¹ Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2010), 75.

³² Norman T. Wright. *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2019), 277.

Some describe the concept of *Missio Dei* as inadequate or even misleading. For example, John G. Fleet offers the criticism that *Missio Dei* does not have a sound Trinitarian basis and lacks cohesion making its application complex and even vague.³³ Nonetheless, as David J. Bosch enunciates, for all the limitations in the understanding and application of the concept, *Missio Dei* has served the necessary orientation toward God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit as the initiator and continuing agent of mission.³⁴ Peter J. Bellini in his “Origins and Early Development of *Missio Dei*: A Missional Hermeneutic for Today”³⁵ agrees that *Missio Dei* is the necessary approach to all mission and ministry.

Missio Dei now becomes the accepted foundational concept for preaching which seeks a nurturing and deepened relationship with God and within the community of faith.

At this point, as specific homiletic themes begin to emerge, it is appropriate to provide a definition of the terms didactic and non-didactic preaching and clarify how they are used in this thesis. Dictionary definitions of didactic centre around giving instruction and include the possibility of doing so in a boring or overbearing manner.

Definition of didactic

1a: designed or intended to teach

b: intended to convey instruction and information in addition to serving another purpose (such as pleasure and entertainment)

2: *usually disapproving*: making moral observations: intended to teach proper or moral behavior³⁶

For the purposes of this thesis didactic preaching is an approach which seeks to instruct listeners in set beliefs or an assumed orthodoxy. Usually, it attempts to provide an adopted certitude of correct interpretation and application. In

³³ John G. Fleet, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 76.

³⁴ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission, Twentieth Anniversary Ed.* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2011), 402.

³⁵ Peter J. Bellini, “Origins and Early Development of *Missio Dei*: A Missional Hermeneutic for Today,” accessed 26 March 2020, https://www.academia.edu/35336753/ARTICLE-_ORIGINS_OF_MISSIO_DEI.docx.

³⁶ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/didactic> accessed 13 October 2022; see also <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/didactic>, and <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/didactic> accessed 13 October 2022.

consequence it is easily critiqued as talking at people. Robert C. Dykstra offers a strong judgement of this form of preaching:

An orthodox sermon, which I take to include any sermon that expresses what the preacher and listening congregation already know or, worse, what they are supposed to know and believe and that thereby moves to a predictable conclusion, is ... simply another form of pre-figuring ... and [is] therefore, perverse.³⁷

This definition of didactic preaching does not exclude the reality that there are occasions when giving information and explaining concepts will be instructive and can be seen as didactic. However, the purpose of the information giving and explanatory commentary is critical in that it can be used with coercive intent or it can serve to offer an invitation to openness and expectancy. Didacticism which intends to tell congregants the assumed right way to think is typically invasive, even coercive, and in that sense can even verge on doing violence to listeners. Such coercive speech carries with it a sense of hegemony. Typically, this is a political term:

Hegemony: (especially of countries) the position of being the strongest and most powerful and therefore able to control others.³⁸

When applied to faith groups and to preaching, it describes the capacity for those who adopt attitudes of certitude to exercise dominance over others and to direct them with their assumed authority.

In contrast to didactic preaching non-didactic preaching intends a delivery which is evocative of invitation and expectancy. Thus, it seeks to be relational in approach where openness and vulnerability in the testimony of faith, hope and love are both welcoming and challenging. A non-didactic approach to preaching may include the teaching of particular content; but it will do so invitationally, eschewing the demands of correct interpretation and application.

To stress the importance of a relational approach Eugene L. Lowry firstly describes a view of a “constructed” sermon inherited from past generations. He presents the analogy of compiling a sermon as the building of a brick wall with all the attention given to the bricks which are typically theological and biblical points, even dogma.

³⁷ Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon*, 88.

³⁸ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hegemony> accessed 21 October 2022.

Such an approach fails to realise the importance of the mortar as the relational aspect separating the bricks whilst holding them in the wall.³⁹ Thus, he counters, “a sermon ought not be a collection of parts constructed by a preacher, ... [rather it] has its roots in the truth of the gospel.”⁴⁰ A non-didactic approach to preaching lives within the mystery of relationship with God and with fellow worshippers and cannot deliver coercive speech.

This polarity between didactic and non-didactic preaching must also be held as a tension between preferences. Yet, as Craddock calls for inductive preaching rather than the authoritative speech of deductive delivery, he recognises that there will be occasions when deductive presentation is included in a typically inductive sermon.⁴¹ Similarly, didactic and non-didactic preaching can be seen as belonging on a continuum with the preferences of the preaching being weighted toward one or the other end of the continuum.

As a consequence of my experience of preaching as preacher being personally life giving and transformative, and my experience as listener often not coming near that possibility, I have set out to examine non-didactic preaching that invites attention, transformation, deepened faith, and enriched community, in contrast to the type of the didactic preaching that can be boring, coercive, and demanding a correct response. My intention was to do this by researching contemporary literature, and developing a research project to:

1. examine the practice of and attitude to preaching of a sample Uniting Church ministers (ordained clergy who preach regularly and volunteer for the project);
2. offer them a “non-didactic” approach to preaching; and
3. evaluate with them their experience of using a non-didactic paradigm.

The findings from the literature and from the project research would then be analysed and the conclusions presented in this thesis and offered to the Uniting Church so that they might inform the practice and methodology of teaching homiletics.

³⁹ Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 4-- 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴¹ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 113 – 125.

The structure of the thesis will be as follows:

Chapter 1 consists of a review of the literature pertinent to this thesis which is presented using the framework of a paper, “From boring to divine encounter: Can we preach without the violence of certitude and hegemony?” I presented to the *Societas Homiletica* conference at Duke University in 2018.⁴² This paper suggested that the ministry of preaching must be a participation in the *Missio Dei*, and it paid particular attention to the contrast between didactic and non-didactic approaches to preaching with respect to their relative consistency with the aforesaid *Missio Dei*. Five key headings from that paper⁴³ are used to examine the literature. I list them here with explanations added:

1. “What is God doing?” The paper recognises this as the necessary starting point for examining the call to proclaim God’s word and participate in the *Missio Dei*, accepting that entry into the question of God’s presence and action is a call to live in the mystery of love which cannot be subjected to any notion of objective truth
2. “What is the purpose, intent, and meaning of preaching?” The paper suggests that diversity of influences, theological justifications, and expectations across the breadth of the church calls for a clarification of motivations for preaching. It maintains that at its most effective this motivation will avoid any sense of imposed truth, but will rather engage the relational truth of exposure to the vulnerability of discovering and being discovered by that truth.
3. “Preaching and the preacher:” The paper claims that for preachers their own spirituality, motivation, and faith pilgrimage are basic aspects of their ministry. Thus, preachers would know themselves as participating in God’s newness which is always an expression of God’s ongoing revelation.
4. “Preparation and delivery:” The paper states that techniques, study, composition and proclamation naturally emerge from the preacher’s call to preach and will give expression to their faith pilgrimage. Preachers will thus

⁴² Peter Woodward, “From boring to divine encounter: Can we preach without the violence of certitude and hegemony?” *The International Journal of Homiletics: Supplementum, Duke Conference Edition* (2018), <https://ul.qucosa.de/api/qucosa%3A36324/attachment/ATT-0/>, 142-160.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 143.

be energised by living in the text enabling them to reframe their thinking and their world according to God's newness always in a living relationship.

5. "Evaluation:" The paper concludes that in every aspect of life people determine whether their actions have been appropriate, even optimal, and Theological Reflection as an approach to practical theology always includes intentional evaluation or analysis as a phase of any ministry. Thus, preachers will welcome the vulnerability and accountability of a community of faith where preaching is examined, affirmed, challenged, and even corrected in a praxis of love.⁴⁴

Chapter 2 sets out the Research Model as evaluative research. Small groups of ordained Uniting Church ministers met on two occasions as Discussion Groups to explore their own approach to preaching and to be introduced to a non-didactic approach. The first meeting of approximately six hours involved a guided examination of the participants' perceptions of preaching – their foundational attitudes and practices. The five key headings above formed the basis of the discussions. This was followed immediately by a presentation of the meaning and the methodologies of non-didactic preaching. After a period of two to three months a second meeting was held for each group. The space between the two meetings offered the opportunity for the participants to review their own preaching and to attempt a non-didactic approach in their preaching. The second meeting of about three hours, again as Discussion Groups, re-examined the participants' approaches to preaching and offered them the opportunity to evaluate the whole process.

Chapter 3 presents the key findings and analysis of the data gathered in the meetings described in Chapter 2 including additional and unexpected issues emerging from the data analysis, and the implications arising from the project..

⁴⁴ Peter Woodward, "Theological Reflection as key to Practical Theology," *AEJT* 22.2 (2015), 136-139.

Chapter 1

An Examination of the Literature

This chapter examines the scope of literature about preaching as a participation in the *Missio Dei*. It focusses particularly on non-didactic approaches to preaching which I would suggest are conducive to consistency with the principles of the *Missio Dei*. Preaching is presented as a form of speech which accepts the weakness and vulnerability of the crucified one so that it is invitational and non-didactic proclamation, in contrast to authoritative speech which will be shown to have very limited currency. Francis Pederick states that:

The one thing, in fact, that stands between us and despair - is the vulnerability and weakness of the crucified and risen Christ himself who without condemnation calls all human practices of power to account, including our own.⁴⁵

The quote “Preach the Gospel at all times, use words if you must” – typically attributed to St Francis – serves as a reminder that the life of faith and all the relationships that life offers belong within a call to live authentically as followers of Jesus.⁴⁶ The use of the term Gospel serves to indicate that preaching accepts the witness to God’s loving action in the Scriptures as normative. While the Franciscan quote indicates that preaching the Gospel should not be seen as limited to orations delivered by preachers, its call to integrity and genuineness in life and faith should also be applied to the practice of preaching.

In any approach to the issues of vulnerability, weakness, authenticity and genuineness, especially in relation to preaching, opening the topic and asking the questions appropriately is vitally important. For example, Parker Palmer in his most recent book *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity and Growing Old* makes a

⁴⁵ From a sermon by Rev’d Fr. Evan Pederick, accessed 31 March 2020, <https://evanpederick.blogspot.com/2010/11/reign-of-christ.html>.

⁴⁶ The descriptor “followers of Jesus” is used to give a straightforward expression to the life of faith and to avoid some of the unfortunate baggage that comes with the misuse of the term “Christian.”

telling point about ensuring that the correct questions are asked in the search for meaning and purpose: “I learned what’s wrong with(the) ... ancient and oft-asked question (“Does your life have meaning?”): when you ask the wrong question, you end up with the wrong answer.” Palmer’s search for relevance and meaning in his life and in his faith pilgrimage led him to recognise the illusory nature of his own self-importance and entailed a calling to a grounded spirituality where life’s deepest questions could be addressed.⁴⁷

The intention with this examination of the literature is to come as close as possible to asking the right questions by giving attention to non-didactic preaching as an appropriate element of the *Missio Dei*. The five key categories introduced in the Introduction are:

1. What is God doing?
2. What is the purpose, intent, and meaning of preaching?
3. Preaching and preacher;
4. Preparation and delivery; and
5. Evaluation.⁴⁸

These five categories are not seen as independent or mutually exclusive. Rather they overlap and interrelate, indicative of the fact that preaching, along with all human communication, is inevitably a complex mixture of discernment, interpretation, reciprocity, and encultured responses. Nevertheless, they do provide an appropriate structure for this exploration of preaching which presents the invitation to lifegiving relationships filled with love as a gift from God.

Some may wish to include a further category on examining the audience or listeners, and their importance is never discounted. For example, Terry G. Carter, J. Scott Duvall, and J. Daniel Hays have an entire chapter of their text *Preaching God’s Word* titled “Exegeting the Audience” in which they propose an assessment of the listeners. This exegesis of the audience enables the preacher to deliver their sermon

⁴⁷ Parker J. Palmer, *On the Brink of everything: Grace, Gravity and Growing Old* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018), 12, 53 - 75.

⁴⁸ Woodward, “From boring to divine encounter,” 143.

based on diligent exegesis of the text in the manner of an expert with the certitude and potential coerciveness of reaching down to their level.⁴⁹

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, in her *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* has a chapter “Exegeting the Congregation”⁵⁰ with a more nuanced approach which seeks an understanding of the congregation in order to speak into their world view. However, any description of listeners as a group to be exegeted carries the risk of objectifying them. Listeners too easily become “they,” “them,” even “you”, who must be addressed. It has to be hoped that those who exercise such scrutiny over their listeners are equally ready to apply the rigour of their examination and analysis to their own participation in any preaching event so that it becomes an invitation to a shared divine encounter. In contrast when the preacher has a strong identification with listeners – “we are preaching to people we love”⁵¹ – the listeners must be included, that is, integrated at every phase in the preaching process. The five categories must have consideration “the audience” embedded within them. “What is God doing?”, as the starting point will automatically include the spirituality of the gathered community and of the world beyond. “What is the purpose, meaning and meaning of preaching has to include the relationships with listeners, “Preaching and the preacher” must include the preacher’s engagement in the community of faith. “Preparation and delivery” has to include involvement with listeners. “Evaluation” requires that the people are participants in the preaching event.

What is God doing?

Asking this question accepts the idea and faith that God is present and active in God’s creation and that humanity is called to live in response to God’s presence and action.⁵² That is, as the church recognises itself as members participating in the *Missio Dei*, their identity is constituted by the reality of engagement, even being

⁴⁹ Terry G. Carter, J. Scott Duvall, and J. Daniel Hays, *Preaching God’s Word – A Hands on Approach to Preparing, Developing and Delivering the Sermon* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2005), Chapter 4.

⁵⁰ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1997), 56 – 90.

⁵¹ Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 151.

⁵²“Idea and faith” is inevitably an inadequate attempt to capture state of heart and mind which lives within the relational presence of God.

inextricably united, with God in God's creative, redemptive, and sustaining love – the mystery of God's agency in history and in the entire cosmos.

Envisioning God's agency in all of creation, history and the present is always a challenge for humanity whose understanding cannot easily accept the mystery of this reality. Brueggemann aptly describes this challenge:

It is not easy or obvious about how to “imagine YHWH” because the God of Israel (the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in Christian terms) fits none of our conventional theological categories. On the one hand, we tend to imagine the world with reference to other gods, that is by a product of *idolatry*. Thus we imagine the world according to a remote God who is not involved in the world and who could not intervene in the world; thus “rational Christians” may regard “an interventionist God” as a silly notion. Or we take God as a pet who is preoccupied with our well-being, or variously as the god of nation, party, race, gender, or ideology. Thus the temptation is to an *irrelevant transcendence* or a *cozy immanence*.⁵³

Accepting the *Missio Dei* as the reality which determines preaching and all ministry is thus a challenge to every form of idolatry by which preachers and listeners imagine that they are able to define, manage and control God. As Phil Snider puts it, “Sometimes our lack of emphasis on the “wholly other” leads us to baptize our own finite observations in the name of God.”⁵⁴ Instead of knowing ourselves as made in God's image and therefore primarily relational and belonging to the mystery of creation and redemption (re-creation),⁵⁵ we are frequently tempted to reverse this order, imagining that we are the creators and lords of our existence and create God according to our life and conceptualisations. The result is a frequent temptation to idolatry in the creation of, emotional attachment to, and reverence for objects, behaviours and or intellectual concepts suitable to our inclination.

This idolatry manifests itself in many forms, including fundamentalism, bibliolatry, theological certitude, materialism in a prosperity gospel, propositional faith, “a ticket

⁵³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 2-3.

⁵⁴ Phil Snider, *Preaching After God: Derrida, Caputo and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics* (Eugene, Cascade Books, 2012), 42.

⁵⁵ Rohr and Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, 49-57; reflecting on Genesis 1:26.

to heaven” faith, intellectualism and, conversely, anti-intellectualism. In a wide variety of expressions “believers” attempt to generate belief systems amenable to a directive or didactic approach in which “we know that we know that we are right” so that God can be accommodated into our theology and worship forms.⁵⁶ A particularly dominant and seductive concept is the assumption of *objective truth* effectively declaring that, when we live with assumptions of certainty and objective truth, we can preach with the confidence that we are presenting “the true Gospel.”

In this form of idolatry, the church, and especially those in positions of leadership, has used the certainty and power accompanying it to dominate in areas of knowledge, politics, and social ordering. This coercive use of power has too often produced unethical, criminal or dangerous errors in the lives of people and communities, with the accompanying preaching typically haranguing speech or boring irrelevance. For example, Richard Fidler in *Ghost Empire* shows the dominant part played by the church in the history of Constantinople until its fall to 21-year-old Mehmed the Conqueror in 1453 when Islam became the dominant faith⁵⁷.

Additionally, John Dickson presents a broad sweeping analysis of the history of the church in *Bullies and Saints, An Honest Look at the Good and Evil of Christian History*. His overview of the church shows high moments of goodness, but does not shy away from the evils also perpetrated in the name of the church through the centuries of Christendom and into recent events.⁵⁸ The memory of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2013 – 2017 will continue to remind many of the malignant attitudes in mainstream church hierarchies in past generations and in the contemporary age.⁵⁹

In more recent centuries the ideology derivative from the Enlightenment and the rise of world dominating Western politics enabled the church over many centuries to posit

⁵⁶ Richard Rohr, *Quest for the Grail* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2016), 58.

⁵⁷ Richard Fidler, *Ghost Empire* (Sydney: Harper Collins Publishers, 2016).

⁵⁸ John Dickson, *Bullies and Saints, An Honest Look at the Good and Evil of Christian History* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Reflective, 2021).

⁵⁹ Royal Commissions. “Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse Final Report,” 2017, accessed 14 March 2022, <https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/child-abuse/final-report>

itself as the guardian of ultimate truth, thereby participating in “white, male, Western, colonial hegemony.”⁶⁰ With colonialism the hegemony of European nations was in many ways mirrored by church missionary expansion. In Australia, Indigenous spirituality was typically dismissed or relegated to studies in anthropology; and only in the last half century has the church begun to move to a different position.

Thus, it is only in recent decades that Australian churches have begun to officially adopt a less patronising (less hegemonic) and more respectful engagement with Indigenous spirituality. For example, the Preamble to the Uniting Church Constitution, adopted in 2009, includes the statement:

The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God’s ways.⁶¹

Seeing mission, ministry, and preaching, in particular, through the lens of *Missio Dei* is a corrective to hegemonic attitudes and behaviour. It also means that the key question, number one, in the thesis, “What is God doing?” is vitally important. This shift in approach has required the church to examine and reposition any proclamations, including preaching, moving away from a directive approach of assertions and declarations of superiority and correctness to a cultural expression of invitation and response to God’s loving kindness. With the advent of post modernism and the questioning of virtually any authoritative pronouncement, the church and any declaration made from church leadership are often relegated to marginality, even irrelevance. As world cultures have inexorably moved, the church has been incrementally moved from the centre of Western society.⁶² Walter Brueggemann gives a cogent analysis of the change of the status of the church in Western

⁶⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Remember You Are Dust* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012), 41.

⁶¹ Uniting Church in Australia, “Constitution and Regulations,” accessed 31 March 2020, https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/Regulations/2018/2018_Constitution__Regulations.pdf.

⁶² At a recent funeral I attended I asked the Funeral Director about the ratio of church or religious funerals to those conducted by a (civil) celebrant. The not so surprising response was 25% religious to 75% by celebrants; and my suspicion was that he was being “kind” to me.

societies in the last half century, likening it to the exilic period in Hebrew history. This dislocation of the church from its prominent position in the culture has exposed the myth of objective truth; but it has also opened the opportunity for preaching which questions and challenges the assumptions of the dominant culture.⁶³

The Introduction to the thesis contrasted a high expectation of preaching as the opportunity for lifegiving and deepened intimacy with God with the sad reality of the common perception that the words “sermon” and “preaching” often involve boring and/or haranguing speech. This calls for a genuine attempt to examine preaching which is seeking greater effectiveness and an authentic expression of the *Missio Dei*. In the words of George Lovell and Richard Neill:

...(I)f preaching is a core activity of the church ... a lack of good preaching will lead to a church which is seriously deficient. Similarly, preaching which is anaemic will result in an anaemic Church. There is unlikely to be renewal of the churches without a renewal of preaching.⁶⁴

Recognising the place of the church and the practice of preaching as having the more marginal status gives greater weight to the question: “What is God doing?” as the church seeks to live and act in concert with the *Missio Dei*. The question is, nonetheless, highly challenging. Phil Snider reports attending a continuing education event in which the presenter reminded the participants that they could only preach from their own personal experience, and when asked to describe an experience of God active in their lives, the room was awkwardly silent.⁶⁵

Snider goes on to propose that, to overcome the present homiletical crisis in modernist and progressive preaching, illustrated by this awkward silence, a homiletic of “preaching *after* God” is needed:

If I was to try to describe a homiletic of the event [*after* God], I would start by saying that it is not a proclamation of metaphysical Truth but rather a

⁶³ Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), Chap. 3.

⁶⁴ George Lovell and Neil Richardson, *Sustaining Preachers and Preaching: A Practical Guide* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), ix.

⁶⁵ Phil Snider, *Preaching After God: Derrida, Caputo and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics* (Eugene, Cascade Books, 2012), 19 – 20.

communal proclamation of prayer and praise for the advent of the wholly other. ...

Sermons are preached in restless pursuit of the event that is harboured in the name of God – the hope and desire that stirs *in the name of God* – which is an event that we can never catch up to, an event that we cannot put words to yet at the same time can't resist, the event harboured in the name of God that leaves us hoping and sighing and dreaming and weeping, believer and atheist alike, holding on for dear life, caught up (raptured) in wonder, in love, and in praise.⁶⁶

Similarly, Brueggemann takes up Snider's theme of "hoping and sighing and dreaming and weeping, ... holding on for dear life, caught up ... in wonder, in love, and in praise" in his treatment of preaching as "prophetic imagination." Here the preacher in response to God's action and presence will proclaim a faith which is alternative to any dominant culture:

Prophetic preaching is an effort to imagine the world as though YHWH, the creator of heaven and earth, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ whom we name as Father, Son, and Spirit, is a real character and defining agent in the world.⁶⁷

These approaches to preaching in Snider and Brueggemann are congruent with the understanding of preaching as embodied within the *Missio Dei*. This is because *Missio Dei* brings the corrective that the source of all mission and ministry is God, not the church or political powers or any other part of human culture.⁶⁸ This then makes the question, "What is God doing?" utterly necessary as an expression of receiving and loving God who is always present and active, and simultaneously living in the mystery of not knowing God fully. Rohr and Morrell give this vivid expression: "God refuses to be known, but can only be loved."⁶⁹ Preaching thus operates in a faith community which celebrates the intersection of mystery and intimacy – love which is utterly relational and always in process of being revealed. This shift in

⁶⁶ Ibid., 114 – 115. I cannot but comment that Snider's "lost in wonder, in love, and in praise" apparently uses the final line of Charles Wesley's hymn "Love divine, all loves excelling": "lost in wonder, love and praise;" but does not acknowledge it. The Australian Hymn Book Company Pty Ltd, *Together in Song: Australian Hymn Book II* (Sydney, Harper Collins, 1999), Hymn 217.

⁶⁷ Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, 71.

⁶⁸ Bellini, "Origins and Early Development of *Missio Dei*", 27.

⁶⁹ Rohr and Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, 54.

approach has required the church to examine and reposition any proclamations, including preaching, moving away from a directive approach of assertions and declarations of superiority, privilege, and correctness to a cultural expression of openness, even vulnerability, and responsive to the Spirit of love present in all the universe. With the advent of post modernism and the questioning of virtually any authoritative pronouncement, the church cannot escape the reality that declarations made by church leadership are often relegated to marginality, even irrelevance, requiring a new way of expressing God's gracious imperative.

David Heywood says that preaching, along with all ministry, accepts the call to express the transformative Word of God and equip the community of faith to share in God's mission.⁷⁰ Raewynne Whiteley expresses it thus: "If preaching is a place where we meet Christ, then we must imagine that God is somehow present in this act."⁷¹ She firmly grounds her approach to preaching in her sacramental life; and she expresses the humility, even vulnerability, of seeing preaching as an act of living faith – a genuine encounter with God – making it much more than an intellectual exercise, a display of public oratory, or an obligatory part of a worship service. Her tentative approach invites discernment of God's presence in a preaching event and, by implication, within it the place of didactic and non-didactic speech. In similar vein Snider presents an approach to preaching which does not depend on the human capacity to capture the truth; but on the desire for God who is always beyond human knowing:

As a communal proclamation of prayer and praise for the advent of the wholly other, sermons turn less on our best efforts as human beings and more on a hoping and sighing and dreaming and weeping for what we long for yet can't quite make out ...with a desire beyond desire ...⁷²

Living within the question of God's action expressed as *Missio Dei* means that we must accept that the coerciveness and hegemony of much preaching cannot be

⁷⁰ David Heywood, *Transforming Preaching: The sermon as a channel for God's Word* (London, SPCK, 2013), 16. Richard Rohr and Mike Morrell provide a thorough, almost mystical expression of the Triune God in the transformation of the individual, the church and the world. Rohr and Morrell, *The Divine Dance*.

⁷¹ Raewynne J.Whiteley, *Steeped in the Holy: Preaching as Spiritual Practice* (Plymouth UK: Cowley Publications, 2008), 14.

⁷² Snider, *Preaching after God*, 115

sustained, if it ever should have been. Brueggemann reminds us that preaching which assumes the control of knowledge and its dissemination is typically attractive; but it requires that preachers and listeners accept a deterministic and dictated reality.⁷³ Snider describes this situation as the “domestication of transcendence”.⁷⁴ I refer again to Snider’s experience of being in a preaching seminar when the presenter asked for examples of when God had acted in personal lives. The inability of the preachers to give personal testimony illustrated that in their lives and in their preaching transcendence had been tamed and apparently God was missing in action.⁷⁵ Thankfully, the advent of postmodernism has inexorably drawn us into the epistemological questions of the nature of language and truth and presented challenges to such expressions of certitude and hegemony. Thus, we have been thrown back into questions of life and faith concerning God’s presence and action.

An allied concern with the coercion of certitude and hegemony is the difficulty of boring preaching.⁷⁶ While it is almost impossible to conceive of a preacher being intentionally boring, anecdotal evidence and the literature attest to the fact that much preaching is boring even if the preacher intends otherwise. For example, Mike Graves claims that:

In reality, good preachers are still few and far between, while questions about the health of preaching are more common than ever. It is hard to find a homiletics book of any sort that does not begin with a jeremiad or apology on the state of preaching today.⁷⁷

The causes of boring preaching will be given greater attention below; but sermons which fail to capture the imagination, heart and soul, of listeners or which merely deliver information are ineffective, at best time wasting, and at worst misleading.

⁷³ Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*, 40.

⁷⁴ Snider, *Preaching after God*, 19–31.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

⁷⁶ My project began as a reaction to boring preaching; and exploration of the issues around boring preaching, particularly in Brueggemann’s and Florence’s writings, lead me to the conclusion that the coercive nature of certitude and hegemony in preaching are active forms of abuse, whereas boring preaching is more passive, but, nevertheless, an allied form of abuse.

⁷⁷ Mike Graves, “Harry Emerson Fosdick’s Timeless Question,” in *What’s the matter with preaching today?* 4–5.

Such preaching, when it has a wearing down effect on listeners, can even be argued to have a similar abusive quality to the coercion of certitude and hegemony.

The alternative to the desire for certitude with the consequent susceptibility to hegemony, and the sad risk of boring preaching, is to live within the risky questions: What is God doing and how do we live and preach as participants in the *Missio Deo*? These are risky questions for two reasons. Firstly, for some it is the height of presumption to imagine that we can dare to determine the method and manner of God's action. Secondly, the so-called discernment of some has led to unethical, criminal, or dangerous errors in the life of the faith; at its worst spawning weird, often extreme, sects and cults, and equally the deviant and culpable behaviour in so-called mainstream churches.⁷⁸

Brueggemann reminds us that God reveals God's self to us, but will not be subject to any facility of definition, management, or control. Past generations defined God with the three "O's" – omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence; but Brueggemann recognises that this definition is unworkable: "it will not work ... in Trinitarian terms because it is impossible that the Father of the three O's would have sent such a compassionate, self-giving Son into the world."⁷⁹

Adam Hamilton and Andy Stanley provide two examples of the impact on preaching which comes from ministry practice which seeks alignment with the *Missio Dei*. Hamilton is the Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas whose mission, "to be a church where the unchurched and those on the fringe can grow in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ" determines the preaching.⁸⁰ Enacting this deliberate sense of mission has resulted in spectacular growth in the multi-campus congregation. Similarly, at Northpoint Church in Atlanta, Georgia, Senior Pastor Andy Stanley and an initial group of church members,

⁷⁸ For example, refer again to the 2017 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

⁷⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Disruptive Grace: Reflections on God, Scripture, and the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 23.

⁸⁰ Adam Hamilton, *Unleashing the Word: Preaching with Relevance, Purpose, and Passion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 11-19.

determined that they would be a church “that unchurched men, women, and children love to attend.”⁸¹ Again, with deliberate adherence to this mission with attention to all aspects of the church’s ministry, including carefully delivered preaching, dramatic growth in attendance has occurred. The growth in these two churches – respectively liberal and conservative – is not a guarantee that they have got it right; but their intention to discern their calling and mission, and then to deliver ministry, preaching, and evaluation accordingly calls the church to ask, what is God doing and where are we being led?

A further instructive aspect of preaching as participating in the *Missio Dei*, is the mystic tradition of the church. While Protestants for centuries had great antipathy for anything related to the Roman Catholic tradition, thankfully both sides of the “divide” are now much more cognisant of the rich traditions that belong to all and call us to a life of intimacy with God. Whether it is recognised or not, the reality is that we have always lived in the midst of mystery which is utterly benevolent and beyond the confines of the human mind. Paul R. Fagan, in his Doctor of Ministry thesis: “Towards a Spirituality of Preaching: the preacher as friend of God”⁸² gives a good summary of the mystic expression of faith through the centuries in terms of friendship with God which is a necessary component of the life and faith of the preacher.⁸³ Thus the question, “What is God doing?” becomes the quest for an intimacy with God which dares to express itself in terms of heart and soul and directs the preacher away from the temptations of certitude and control.

In this context, note must be taken of the importance of two-way theology – theological nourishment, learning and understanding as a shared undertaking for all, so that it is both top down and bottom up.⁸⁴ Thus, if the preacher desires to preach

⁸¹ Andy Stanley, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend*, (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2012), 11.

⁸² Paul R. Fagan, C.P, “Towards a Spirituality of Preaching: the preacher as friend of God,” Doctor of Ministry Thesis (Saint Louis: Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2012).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 12-44.

⁸⁴ The view of top-down theology where “the expert” theologian imparts faith and theology to the faithful, also called trickle-down theology, has doubtful validity and does not work for Practical theology. See Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

effectively, they must be attentive – carefully and lovingly – to the explicit and the implicit theology of people in their congregation, and in the community at large, in order to celebrate and participate in God’s activity in all their lives. Theological reflection, as a key to practical theology, requires ministry practitioners – preachers, ministers, pastors – to engage in critical and prayerful reflection. This praxis provides opportunity to deepen the faith and understanding of their own relationship with God as well as that of their faith community.⁸⁵

What is the purpose, intent, and meaning of preaching?

Having explored the understanding that preaching participates in the *Missio Deo*, we will examine the aim of preaching in particular. Wesley Allen states that an examination of the dominant approach to preaching across the broad scope of Christendom indicates a specific approach characterised by a concern that the “real” meaning of Scripture must be determined in order to construct sermons that explain and apply the text to the lives of listeners.⁸⁶ Allen describes two highly influential forms of this preaching. First, the “university sermon” as developed by the Franciscans and Dominicans in the late Middle Ages with a propositional approach: “name the point or thesis at the beginning and break it into smaller didactic propositions for analysis” and application. Second, several centuries later the Puritan approach to preaching used the exposition of Scripture, “biblical exegesis, theological interpretation, moral exhortation”,⁸⁷ as the model of preaching.

The Enlightenment, with its quest for objective truth, served to reinforce this latter model with the “certainties” of biblical faith providing the necessary and sufficient conditions for correct and vital preaching. This deliberately didactic approach continues into the present and still has its strong adherents. For example, David Jackman⁸⁸ opposes the “virus” of post modernism as a compromising influence on

⁸⁵ Woodward, “Theological Reflection,” 131-132.

⁸⁶ O. Wesley Allen, Jr., “Introduction: The Pillars of the New Homiletic” in O. Wesley Allen, Jr., Ed *The Renewed Homiletic*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010), 3.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸⁸ David Jackman, 2008, “Preaching that Connects 1. External Connections: Strategy and Resources,” *Trinity Journal 29NS* 2008, 5-6.

“faithful, biblical, God-honoring preaching”, and for Graeme Goldsworthy preaching must deliver the “absolute truth ... of an absolute and coherent God”, so that “postmodernism and popular relativism are expressions of ideological atheism and must be resisted.”⁸⁹ Similarly, with passion and thoroughness that are laudable Carter, Duvall, and Hays call for a sermon to be reliant on biblical authority following “closely the intended meaning of the biblical text” with a deliberate and precise approach.⁹⁰ Their didactic approach gives priority to an assumption of correct theology and biblical interpretation over a praxis of love which is inevitably vulnerable, even ambiguous. Richard Rohr and Mike Morrell differ markedly from Carter, Duvall, and Hayes as they accept vulnerability and weakness as the path to deepened faith.⁹¹

The didactic approach expressed by Carter, Duvall, and Hayes has a coercive, even violent, attitude, even when cast in language which references love. For example, Phillip Jensen and Paul Grimmond would almost certainly protest such a description of their work, but their title *The Arrow and the Archer – Preaching the Very Words of God* and the following excerpt contain violent imagery which is difficult to deny or excuse:

In the next thirty minutes he let fly the arrow of God’s word.

It was strange watching the arrow do its work. In God’s kindness, the arrow flew straight and true at the hearts of each person there. At some ribs, the arrow stopped abruptly, as if repelled by some unseen armour hidden underneath the skin, and dropped harmlessly to the floor. But in others, the arrow penetrated deeply and drew blood, and ... [the preacher] could see the joy in their faces.

As the sermon ended, ...[he] gave thanks to God. Mission accomplished for another week. Well, at least until morning tea, when he was hoping to fire some more arrows.⁹²

⁸⁹ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Teaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 13.

⁹⁰ Carter et al., *Preaching God’s Word*, 22.

⁹¹ Rohr and Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, 57-61.

⁹² Phillip Jensen and Paul Grimmond, *The Arrow and the Archer – Preaching the Very Words of God* (Kingsford, N.S.W.: Matthias Media, 2010), 97-8.

As noted in the Introduction, the approach to preaching which assumes authoritative pronouncement has quite limited capacity to speak to the heart and soul of listeners or even to the preacher. Anna Carter Florence finds techniques based on the assumption of authoritative pronouncement quite unacceptable in that they contain elements of violence in their demand for correct interpretation of the text. While they may demonstrate a scholarly approach, they too easily avoid the personal challenge and transformation of a deeper and heart-felt engagement. In contrast, she calls for “living in the text” in which genuine intimacy and a living experience of the text creates an experience where preacher and listeners are called to newness of life and faith.⁹³

Florence’s quest is for an approach which listens and lives within the text, engaging it in fresh ways. She sees any search for a precise or true meaning in Scripture as “badgering” the text, “nagging it to death”, or “torturing a confession” from it so that the meaning arrived at “may or may not bear any resemblance to the truth the text knows and really wants to tell us.”⁹⁴ Florence continues:

Here then, is the awful outcome of the preacher’s “hunt for Meaning,” all the more sickening for its good intention: when our authority as preachers rests in being the ones who explain Scripture, we are going to find ourselves resenting the biblical text and doing things to it we never would have dreamed we would do. And I don’t believe *any* of us signed on as preachers because we sincerely wanted to crucify the Word of God.⁹⁵

Florence thus opposes any attempt to derive an exact meaning to be imposed on listeners. F. Russell Mitman reinforces this in his chapter “Preaching Invitationally.”⁹⁶ He makes a distinction between “invitational preaching” and “preaching invitationally.” The former risks the possibility, exhibited in some so-called mega churches, of acting on the ulterior motive of drawing people into a church’s doctrinal position or particular experience of faith. In contrast preaching invitationally is to be an expression of God’s invitation into God’s action in “judgement and grace” as a present reality. It has to be more than an invitation into a life enhancing or problem-

⁹³ Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 133-5.

⁹⁴ Anna Carter Florence, “Put Away your Sword” in Mike Graves ed., *What’s the Matter with Preaching Today?* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 98-9.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹⁶ Mitman, *Preaching Adverbially*, 77-86.

solving relationship with God through the church's proclamation: "Preaching invitationally is ushering people to the edge of the great mystery that cannot be explained, and inviting the assembly to peer in and to hear the divine invitation."⁹⁷ Thus, in Mitman's contrast between invitational preaching and preaching invitationally the latter is the more weighted toward non-didactic preaching with its openness and vulnerability.

This movement from the "orthodoxy" of Christendom, Enlightenment, and Modernist approaches to preaching invitationally presenting openness to God's word or God's "imaginative or" – always in the process of God's loving self-disclosure, to use Brueggemann's term⁹⁸ – is simultaneously extremely demanding and highly assuring. The challenge is to abandon the comfort of believing that correct interpretation with its accompanying coercive authority is sufficient food for the faith journey and instead to encounter the mystery, even uncertainty, of a fresh and life-giving experience of faith. Florence likens this challenge to the experience of the Exodus journey where the fleshpots of Egypt appeared more attractive than the promise of Canaan.⁹⁹ The strength of the assurance is that we can grow in intimacy with the text and with God as we allow the text to speak in new, fresh, challenging, and liberating ways.¹⁰⁰

The contrast between preaching as following "closely the intended meaning of the biblical text" and preaching which lives in and experiences the text anew so that it invites a fresh encounter of life and faith must include a recognition of the diversity, even rich tapestry, of approaches which differing scholars present. They invite preachers to examine critically the basis, consciously or unconsciously held,¹⁰¹ from

⁹⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁹⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 67.

⁹⁹ Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, xiv – xv.

¹⁰⁰ Rohr and Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, 76-8.

¹⁰¹ My experience of preaching as listener is that many, even most, preachers have absorbed their approach to preaching from a diversity of influences, most of which are held unconsciously and often with limited critical analysis. My own experience was that, as I continued in ministry and found preaching a highly fulfilling aspect of ministry with accompanying support from listeners, I also needed to take time reflect on what and why I was preaching in the manner I had "grown" into.

which they operate in their preaching. A representative group of such scholars is offered here.

As presented above Carter, Duvall, and Hays call for expository preaching, the proclamation of the Word of God as determined through the careful and diligent exposition of scripture. Thomas G. Long sees the faith of the Church as evidenced in Scripture as the key starting point to which preachers are called to bear witness.¹⁰² His emphasis on the faith of the church and biblical exegesis is balanced by a readiness and humility to critique the assumed faith of the church which may have become a blockage to receiving the full import of the text through its fixed position.¹⁰³ Patrick W.T. Johnson gives particular attention to the proclamation of the mission of God – “Preaching confesses Jesus Christ through a missional interpretation of Scripture ... to equip the community for witness in the world.”¹⁰⁴

By contrast John A. Dally provides an approach weighted towards the non-didactic. He finds the richness of the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, particularly as proclaimed by Jesus in the Gospel narratives, the compelling reality in preaching.¹⁰⁵ His proclamation of the Kingdom calls for an invitational approach much nearer to non-didactic preaching. He provides the instructive contrast between an “Exegesis/Illustration/Application” approach, in which the congregation are virtually told how to believe and act to maintain their faith and to maintain the church; and a “Proclamation/Implication/Invitation” approach, where the kingdom is proclaimed and all are participants - preacher and listeners – are invited and called to the life of the kingdom.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 52 – 66.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰⁴ Patrick W.T. Johnson, *The Mission of Preaching: Equipping the Community for Faithful Witness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 195-216. Johnson carefully argues his case; but its location “in the church” risks evading the margins, the places where God is active virtually despite any church theology and declarations of missional intent.

¹⁰⁵ John A. Dally, *Choosing the Kingdom: Missional Preaching for the Household of God* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2008), 113-7.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 113-7.

Brueggemann's approach to preaching relies heavily on his Old Testament scholarship where the task of the prophets was a call to imagine and give voice to God's new and yet to be fully revealed alternative – God's "imaginative or" – in a closed and hegemonic culture.¹⁰⁷

Prophetic preaching is an effort to imagine the world as though YHWH, the creator of heaven and earth, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ whom we Christians name as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is a real character and a defining agent in the world.¹⁰⁸

Similarly, John W. Wright, presents preaching as an act of "moving" - seeking a narrative which delivers a transition from a contemporary point of view and belief to a place of accepting God's call to life as a "contrast society."¹⁰⁹

For Robert C. Dykstra, preaching is "playing with the text" in order to be drawn into the depths of heart and mind to "discover" the sermon, or rather be discovered by the sermon.¹¹⁰ In similar vein, Florence presents preaching as testimony – a liberating, hope filled, redeeming, and costly expression of what has been "seen and heard" in the text.¹¹¹ This sense of witness and testimony is echoed by Gordon W. Lathrop who, guided by his Anglican ecclesiology, calls for preaching which is attentive to – a virtual "waiting on God" – the text, the sacraments and to contemporary life.¹¹² Lathrop continues: "The purpose of the texts is not for the assembly to imagine how things might have been in other times, but to encounter the biblical God, the God who comes now to this time with all biblical judgment and promise."¹¹³ Lovell and Richardson call for "preaching, grounded in the scriptures and prayer and inspired by the Holy Spirit (which) increases the faith, renews the hope, and replenishes love of those who hear it [and, presumably, of those who preach]."¹¹⁴ Mitman uses the musical concept of transposition to propose that preaching will take the scriptures in their context and enable them (transpose them)

¹⁰⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 67.

¹⁰⁸ Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, 23.

¹⁰⁹ John W. Wright, *Telling God's Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007),

¹¹⁰ Robert C. Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon* 128.

¹¹¹ Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 151.

¹¹² Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Pastor: A Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 46-48.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹¹⁴ Lovell and Richardson, *Sustaining Preachers and Preaching*, ix.

to do or produce the same reality and loving faithfulness in the new context of present life.¹¹⁵

Lovell and Richardson make the point that preaching which is non-didactic and avoids the coerciveness of certitude and hegemony, will inevitably be informed by this diversity of approaches; and will continue the task of listening and evaluating as part of seeking greater effectiveness. A preacher's preferred mode of preaching, implicitly or explicitly expressed, inevitably guides their actions. Awareness of the underlying assumptions guiding their preaching and the ability to critique them becomes part of the preacher's ongoing development.¹¹⁶

The common factor in the above approaches to preaching is the centrality of encounter with God in the preaching event. This is consistent with my proposition that preaching belongs vocationally within the *Missio Dei*. Also in this diversity of approaches a key concern is the relationship between Scripture and preaching. This leads to the critical issue of "hearing" or "discerning" God's word for the preacher and listeners. Those who limit the hearing and discerning exclusively to their examination and analysis of Scripture may appear unwilling to accept that the Holy Spirit is active both through the Scriptures and apart from that witness, albeit consistent with the biblical witness. The importance for Christian people to give weight to hearing and discerning God's word, whatever their situation, is a recurrent theme throughout the history and tradition of the Church. Three examples, one from history and the other two from scripture, illustrate the prevalence of this theme within the Christian consciousness; even for those whose experience of Church is a marginal or marginalised one.

Firstly, Florence presents women's preaching from the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the accounts of a number of notable women, when preaching by women was a marginal activity, either barely tolerated or worse, deemed illegal, and thus subject to legal sanction.¹¹⁷ Of particular note was Anne

¹¹⁵ Mitman, *Preaching Adverbially*, 9.

¹¹⁶ Lovell and Richardson, *Sustaining Preachers and Preaching*, 212–227

¹¹⁷ Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 1-58.

Marbury Hutchinson (1591-1643)¹¹⁸ who dared to preach in Boston when women were forbidden to preach. Her calling to preach arose out of a deep depression, prayer and questioning following the death of two of her daughters, Sussanah and Elizabeth, from the plague. Her depression lifted with the experience of her own “immediate revelation” which moved her from a “covenant of works” to a “covenant of grace.” This sense of God addressing her directly gave her authority to discern God’s guidance, to recognize true and false preaching, and to preach and prophesy.¹¹⁹

Secondly, the account of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) sheds interesting light on receiving and discerning God’s word and the interpretation of Scripture. The typical interpretation of this pericope is that Jesus’ presence transformed Zacchaeus’ approach to wealth: “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” (verse 8 NRSV). However, in the Greek text the verbs are present not future tense¹²⁰: “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold.” (RSV) Is it possible that Zacchaeus already practised this generosity before meeting Jesus, and God was already active in his life? David Lose supports this possibility:

If we can imagine reading the Zacchaeus along any of these lines ... then we might ask who among us, both in our congregation and outside, are those who have been left on the margin, who have been ruled out of bounds, who might surprise us by their generosity and faith, and who just want to see Jesus but have been kept at bay. If we are willing to ask -- and dare answer -- such questions, we might see both Zacchaeus and Jesus in a whole new light.¹²¹

These two possible interpretations are both instructive to preaching and the mission of the church. The presence of the church should be transformative, and the church

¹¹⁸ Ibid., Chap1.

¹¹⁹ Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 5-13. A sad footnote is that the end of Hutchinson’s life along with six of her children came at the hands of Native Americans after they had moved to the Dutch colony on Long Island, and this was seen as vindication by the magistrate who had prosecuted her for preaching – “the controversy by which Massachusetts had nearly come undone.”

¹²⁰ Διδωμι not δωσω, and παραδιδωμι not παραδωσω.

¹²¹ David Lose, “Commentary on Luke 19:1-10,” accessed 17 April, 2019 http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2968..

should also welcome God's presence and activity in everyone, including those whom the church might consider as on the margins. Preaching which assumes that any particular listener is devoid of knowledge of (or experience of) faith critically fails to acknowledge that God is always present and active. Treating any person as a *tabula rasa* or as being outside God's grace demeans both them and the preacher.

Thirdly, the persistence¹²² of the Syrophenician Woman (Mark 7:24-30 and Matthew 15:21-28), unnamed in Scripture, but named Justa in the early church, points to God's surprising activity. Here deep discernment was required of Jesus himself as he encountered the startling faith of a victim of social and religious marginalisation. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza¹²³ proposes four lenses through which we can view this pericope:

Insider versus outsider,
Honour versus shame,
Abundance versus scarcity, and
Christology at the margins.

These lenses challenge the church, and in this case the preacher in particular, to examine the ways in which they engage with others. Justa's encounter with Jesus in what is typically viewed as a marginal circumstance, that is, "Christology at the margins," calls into question judgements that are commonly applied to those who are seen as strangers or different. From Fiorenza's presentation the common attitudes by which people can be seen as outsiders, as deserving of shame, and in situations of scarcity have to be relinquished and the accompanying preaching cannot but welcome the stranger.¹²⁴

My experience of preaching concurs with the work of Rohr with Morell, and Ched Myers whose writings add two more lenses are added:

¹²² In a conversation with a congregation, whose origins were what white church leaders call "Third World," one woman noted particularly that Justa did not give up.

¹²³ I first encountered Fiorenza's four lenses decades ago and do not recall the source; but Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her – A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th ed. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1994), 137-8 is indicative of her thought.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

Suffering as the crucible for revelation¹²⁵, and
Was Jesus learning from this woman?¹²⁶

The first of these calls for preaching which engages both preacher and listeners in an openness to the possibilities of God's presence and action in the harsh and challenging situations that life brings.

The second lens which involves learning from the marginalised is presented by Myers who states:

Jesus' example of learning from this woman and being moved by her to deeper faithfulness invites us to learn from her as well. Jesus' receptivity to her wisdom points to a critical truth: Oppressed people often have a profound analysis of social situations, and know the paths to justice. People in positions of authority need to heed them.¹²⁷

The above six lenses – four from Fiorenza and two from Rohr and Morell and Myers are summarised in Patrick Oliver's concept of: "Communion versus alienation,¹²⁸ or radical inclusiveness that knows God in all of life within and beyond the Scriptures.

The above three short narratives are evocative of themes, such as shame, marginality, vulnerability, and even exclusion, which are pertinent to preaching the reality of God's presence and action in people's lives. They call for, even demand, that the Christian community practice the openness and discernment to recognise God's word and action in their world. A preacher who is mindful of that godly presence in the life and experience of the church will seek to hear and discern that gracious presence in the praxis of preaching.

¹²⁵ Rohr and Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, 127-131. They present "awe and wonder" and "suffering" as the two ways of receiving a genuine spiritual experience; and give the greater attention to suffering.

¹²⁶ Ched Myers, Marie Dennis, Joseph Nangle, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, and Stuart Taylor, *Say to this Mountain: Marks Story of Discipleship* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996). Quoted by Paul Nuechterlein in "Girardian Reflections on the Lectionary: Understanding the Bible Anew Through the Mimetic Theory of René Girard," accessed 17 April 2019, girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-b/proper18b/.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Provided by my Spiritual Director, Dr Patrick Oliver with his permission.

Elaine A. Heath presents this approach as a “hermeneutic of love” which is foundational to her approach to evangelism and which must be equally applicable to preaching. Evangelism then comes from a position of love and hope in contrast to fear and judgement, and views sin as a complex expressive of woundedness and unmet needs.¹²⁹

When we believe in and experience love as God’s meaning, love becomes our meaning, for we become like the God we worship. When love becomes our meaning, the ramifications for evangelism (and preaching) are immense. We are cleansed of legalism, judgmentalism, coercion, and exploitation. We are liberated so that we can now see the “total face” of others, which is so much more than their guilt and sin, or their wounds. ... We can love this way only because God first loves us.¹³⁰

In summary the intention with non-didactic preaching is for preachers and listeners to enter the invitation to the intimacy with God which makes hearing and discerning God’s word, both in Scripture and in everyday life, a natural and critical expression of the preacher’s spirituality and their preparation and delivery. This then is consistent with preachers finding their meaning and purpose for preaching in their ministry as an expression of the *Missio Dei*.

Preaching and the preacher

With a non-didactic approach to preaching, the call is to intimacy with God which invites preachers and listeners to life-giving relationships as a gift from God. Hearing and discerning God’s Word both in Scripture and in everyday life as a participation in this intimacy calls for an examination of the preacher’s spirituality.

Paul Fagan names the spirituality to which preachers are called “Friendship with God” which is “visionary, sacramental, relational, and transformational.”

Christian spirituality is visionary, (because) we see reality in a new way through a spiritual lens ... It is sacramental because it involves the presence of God ... in every aspect of life. ... (It) is relational because ... (it) demands sensitivity to the needs and gifts of others. Finally, ... (it) is transformational, because it puts us in touch with the presence of the Spirit that heals, reconciles, renews, bestows peace, sustains hope and brings joy.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Elaine A. Heath, *The Mystic way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach 2nd Ed.* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2017), 109.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹³¹ Fagan, “Towards a Spirituality of Preaching,” 116-7.

Friendship with God has the qualities of benevolence, mutuality, becoming another self,¹³² and accompaniment. This relationship with God is life giving¹³³ for preacher and listening community, generating the assurance of God's action in contemporary human life.¹³⁴

As a foundation for preaching, friendship with God is a call to prepare and deliver the invitation to this intimacy, to be a conduit by which the space is created for all to be open and to respond to God present and active in their lives. Otherwise, preaching is constrained by performing according to church requirements and/or personal satisfaction (or dissatisfaction for those who find preaching burdensome). In preaching, as in all ministry, responsiveness to God's loving presence is extremely liberating and highly challenging. It (friendship with God) is liberating in that it frees the preacher from the requirement to achieve since God is the source of all ministry. However, the high challenge for preachers and listeners is to be fully engaged in this deep spirituality of friendship which will be expressed in the praxis of their faith. Brueggemann's work on "The Practice of Prophetic Imagination" which "can only take place where the preacher is deeply embedded in the YHWH narrative"¹³⁵ is an analogous calling to a deep spirituality and faith praxis. John M. Buchanan, who wrote the foreword to Brueggemann's text, sees this prophetic tradition thus: "The prophetic tradition ... proclaims a God who is an active agent, who is manifestly present in the life of the world and is always up to the business of creating newness."¹³⁶

Friendship with God and prophetic imagination as a lived response to God active in our lives, requires of the preacher a critical capacity to live in and present a voice

¹³² "Becoming another self" may seem strange at first sight. The incarnation is surely the ultimate expression of God's becoming another self for the sake of humanity. Additionally, Paul expresses it as: "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22b NRSV); and "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:20a NRSV)

¹³³ John 10:10b "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (NRSV)

¹³⁴ Fagan, "Towards a Spirituality of Preaching," 72-3.

¹³⁵ Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic*, 4..

¹³⁶ John M. Buchanan, "Foreword" in Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination* xiii.

counter to the dominant culture.¹³⁷ The “expected” voice of the dominant culture, and even of the church hierarchy, can be seductive, but can lack the authenticity of the preacher’s own lived reality. Dykstra, who skilfully uses insights gained from psychological research, makes a very strong point that ministers (and preachers) who often live out of a confused understanding of themselves and of the call to be pastors and preachers.

Dykstra continues with the view that pastors and preachers live in the world of expectations derived from a combination of parishioners, church leaders, seminary education, and their own derived concept of ministry which may result from influences such as their need for ego gratification, family expectations, personal coping strategies, and idealised views of ministry. He continues by noting that this mixture easily creates an externally contrived, even controlled, outlook on ministry; and preachers are easily out of touch with their deeper or inner selves. The issues and passions, sometimes apparently trivial or embarrassing, that actually drive the preacher are apparently relegated to lesser importance. Dykstra believes that this results in an inner dislocation brought about by confused emotions and competing logic which easily produces preaching short on vitality and reality.¹³⁸ Edward F. Marquart provides a helpful summary of concerns about dislocated preaching typified by excessive use of abstractions and theological language that result in poor connection with the realities of everyday life. Often this includes the moralism and predictability that can come from poor and last-minute preparation.¹³⁹

Dykstra sees this dislocation in the life of the preacher as the major source of boredom in preaching. A preacher preparing and delivering in compliance with an expected concept of ministry, especially preaching, will inevitably be short on personal authenticity and in consequence cannot help being boring.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, 41. The Old Testament prophets courageously called the people to relinquish the seductions of contemporary culture announcing the newness that a faithful and loving God is yet creating.

¹³⁸ Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon* 4.

¹³⁹ Edward F Marquart,. *Quest for Better Preaching: Resources for Renewal in the Pulpit* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1985), 46.

¹⁴⁰ Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon*,24-28.

Similarly, Eduardo Samaneigo asks the question of: “Whose voice?” When preaching, does the preacher use a voice of limited relevance from times past; or a voice bearing the assumed authority of “another”? Alternatively, with greater authenticity does the preacher use their “own voice” which comes with the congruence of personal experience and the depth of inner self.¹⁴¹

If preachers are to speak with an authentic voice rather than with expected or contrived speech, they must live in the creative tension of both speaking out of personal experience and being in the “space” of allowing God to speak. Patrick Johnson critiques Lose’s and Florence’s presentations of confession and testimony as merely the preacher’s experiential and subjective experience. Johnson argues, however: “preaching must not be reduced simply to the personal experience of the preacher with God, especially apart from any normative revelation to the historic Christian witness.”¹⁴² The reality, however, is that preachers always disclose their own agenda and personal story even when they imagine otherwise. For example, Barbara Brown Taylor says:

Every word I choose, every image, every rise in my voice reveals my involvement in the message. That is why I have never understood preachers who claim to “stay out of” their sermons, preaching the word of God and the word of God alone. It is not possible, but there is no reason why it should be.¹⁴³

This inevitable personal self-disclosure can be expressed as: “When I preach, I present the Gospel according to ... (here insert your own name).” In reality the preachers can only offer the gospel as they are currently experiencing it. This necessary tension between preaching The Gospel – “The Very Word of God”¹⁴⁴ – as “objective” reality and preaching as an act of self-disclosure points to the preacher’s need for critical self-reflection. Lovell and Richardson express this creative situation of the tension between “objective” preaching and the inevitable self-disclosure as:

¹⁴¹ Eduardo A. Samaneigo, SJ, *If you preach it, they will come* (San Jose: Resource Publications, 2006), 15-6.

¹⁴² Johnson, *The Mission of Preaching*, 157.

¹⁴³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Cambridge MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), 84.

¹⁴⁴ For example, see Jensen and Grimmond, *The Arrow and the Archer*, 97-8.

“Preaching is both a deeply self-effacing activity and also a very personal means of communication.”¹⁴⁵

The teaching of theology and biblical hermeneutics in academic settings is one of the key determinants of the expectations preachers have in their preaching. Florence makes the point that seminary training outside of preaching classes presents an effectively limiting, even closed, outlook. In consequence she says:

(Preachers) need a hacksaw, to cut through their own chains. They need a paradigm shift from the myth of scarcity (*not enough time, not enough skill, not enough answers, not enough imagination*) to the promise of God’s abundance: there is bread enough, and daily bread, for everyone. They probably also need permission to begin *receiving* the biblical text, instead of trying to *solve* it (through special knowledge, or contortions). ... A preacher who has been liberated into the daily practice of faithful imagination isn’t worried about what the biblical passage means. He knows that if he asks, “What is this biblical passage *saying* to me?” he will *discover* meaning.¹⁴⁶

This calls for a deep personal self-awareness on the part of preachers so that they are able to deconstruct themselves and then enabled to reconstruct their approach to preaching. This means that “a new culture is needed in which in-service training and support are accepted as normative.”¹⁴⁷ For preachers to engage this process some combination of spiritual direction, professional supervision, peer support, in-service training, and regular listener feedback become essential. Through these processes preachers can be supported and grow in delivering their own authentic voice as their expression, albeit tentatively, of the word or voice of God to be known and experienced in the preaching event.

James W. Thompson addresses this challenge of engaging with scripture and determining the voice of God as the movement from *First Naïveté* to *Second Naïveté*. The *First Naïveté* is the premodern approach to Scripture, which has been critiqued as simplistic, uncritical, and sometimes strange with its imaginative use of

¹⁴⁵ Lovell and Richardson, 14–15.

¹⁴⁶ Anna Carter Florence, “The Preaching Imagination” in Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale eds. *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice – A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 125.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, xi.

allegory and the like.¹⁴⁸ This First Naïveté has undergone a loss of that naïveté with the advent of the historical critical method applied to the Scriptures. More recently the *Second Naïveté*, also called a postmodern view, has emerged so that “we are open to the contributions of those who come to the text with insights and questions that are shaped by their experience.”¹⁴⁹ In this *Second Naïveté* the Scriptures become a living document which “speaks” to preachers and listeners so that they can be open to their own experiences together with the voices of a broad community of prophets, scholars, mystics, preachers and “everyday” people. In this Second Naïveté the reader and preacher value their subjective approach to the Scriptures and allow it to be critiqued and informed by, even integrated with, the voices and commentary of a much wider world.¹⁵⁰

This has resonance with one of the sustaining sayings frequently used in the 12 Step Movements of groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, “Let go, and let God,” where prayerful humility, vulnerability, and recognised need produce a readiness to trust God. Lovell and Richardson similarly express this in a manner consistent with Heath’s “hermeneutic of love”¹⁵¹ as a key aspect in her “The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach”:

According to Christianity the source of truth is God. And the nature of God is love. So *this* truth is not so much a dogmatic claim as a life-giving experience; it is a truth which, in some deep, mysterious sense, makes us free. Human beings are never more truly themselves than when they love.¹⁵²

This same openness and “risky” vulnerability are similarly expressed by Fagan:

The interaction between preacher and community, between preacher and God, sits at the heart of the matter in proclaiming the Word. The preacher walks with God and the community.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ James W. Thompson, “Interpreting Texts for Preaching” in Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, eds. *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice – A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 61-73.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism*, 109.

¹⁵² Lovell and Richardson, *Sustaining Preachers and Preaching*, 12.

¹⁵³ Fagan, “Towards a Spirituality of Preaching,” 72.

At this point I note, with a mixture of delight and surprise, that the preacher must love the congregation¹⁵⁴ The surprise and delight come from the realisation that, to the best of my memory, direct attention to loving the congregation has not been a part of my ministry formation.

This vulnerability is consistent with the emphasis on the participatory knowledge presented in Rohr and Morrell which must engage both preachers and listeners:

The doctrine of the Trinity says that it's finally participatory knowledge that matters, not rational calculating, which is but one limited form of knowing. God – and the human person by an irreducibly important extension – must never be objectified.¹⁵⁵

In summary preachers whose aim is to participate in the *Missio Dei* through preaching responsive to God's presence and weighted toward non-didactic delivery there is a particular calling to a deep spirituality and praxis of faith. This will be an expression of an intimacy with God through being thoroughly embedded in the Gospel – the continuing narrative of "YHWH (in Christian terms, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ)."¹⁵⁶ That is, they will know themselves as members of a community of disciples of Jesus where love, authored in God and evident in the faith community, is the governing reality.¹⁵⁷

Preparation and delivery

Preaching as participation in the *Missio Dei* which is invitational and non-didactic will be expressive of a spirituality of friendship with God. This hermeneutic of love will mean that God meets each preacher (and listener) in such a manner that preparation and delivery are inevitably as individual as each preacher. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that:

Every preacher has a different routine for preparing a sermon. My own begins with a long sitting spell with an open Bible on my lap, as I read and read the text. What I am hunting for is God in it, God for me and for my congregation at this particular moment in time. ... I am hoping for a moment of revelation I can share with those who will listen to me and I am jittery, because I never know

¹⁵⁴ Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 151, and Lovell and Richardson, *Sustaining Preachers and Preachers*, 214.

¹⁵⁵ Rohr and Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, 54.

¹⁵⁶ Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, 5

¹⁵⁷ From time to time, I remind myself that the ultimate choice in my life is, do I choose love or something less than love; and knowing that I will fail more often than I wish to recall, by the grace of God I choose love.

what it may show me. I am not in control of the process. It is a process of discovery, in which I run the charged rod of God's word over the body of my own experience, and wait to see where the sparks will fly.¹⁵⁸

Particular attention will now be given to Florence, Dykstra, Brueggemann, and Lathrop as examples of an invitational or non-didactic approach to preaching. My reasons for choosing these authors are because their differing approaches to preparation are each consistent with a non-didactic approach to preaching. Florence in her "Preaching as Testimony" gives particular attention to living in the text, not to determine an authoritative meaning, but to bear witness to a loving and liberating God. Dykstra's assertion that a sermon is discovered, or even that the sermon discovers the preacher, calls for expectancy and openness in preaching. Brueggemann's emphasis on witnessing to God's "imaginative or" provides opportunity for preachers and listeners to be engaged in the mystery of God's self-revelation past, present, and always yet to be fully revealed. Lathrop's attentiveness to God's contemporary word, not for infallibility or inerrancy, but for engagement with God's present action in the life of the world, invites a challenging openness to hearing God as a present reality. Their methods of preparation and delivery give differing, but coherent, approaches that eschew forms of preaching which are coercive or demanding speech weighted toward didactic presentation. Their approaches form the basis for the research model presented in the next chapter.

Florence approaches Scripture in order to hear it in the fullest sense of the word, "not for enlightenment, or inspiration, or instruction, or any other apparently good reason - not even to preach, primarily", and thus "to *welcome* it and *host* it in our lives and bodies."¹⁵⁹ In Chapter 7 of her *Preaching as Testimony*, she gives a detailed approach to preparing and delivering "the wide awake sermon" through the three exercises of attending, describing, and testifying.

¹⁵⁸ Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 85-6.

¹⁵⁹ Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 76.

She offers fourteen exercises for attending¹⁶⁰ in order to “live in the text” to which she gives the somewhat ironic subtitle “The Radical Art of being Idle and Blessed.” The exercises in attending may appear strange or even time-wasting; but the intention is to take the opportunity to experience the impact of the text in its strangeness or newness as well as its ordinariness and familiarity. Florence recommends using at least three of the exercises with at least one of them to challenge or stretch the preacher’s imagination beyond their comfort zone. I list them here with a short explanation for each of them.

1. Write it: take the time write it by hand and get a feel for it;
2. Pocket it: carry a copy round to read it often;
3. Memorise it: self-explanatory;
4. Underline it: without self-editing note the parts that stand out;
5. “Soccer Mom” it: read it in the presence of others wherever life takes you enabling non-experts to comment;
6. Dislocate it: read it in a place where “you feel odd, marginalised or nervous”;
7. Subtext it: imagine the text “behind” the text which can be done in groups;
8. Block it: imagine the text as theatre, again with others, if possible;
9. Body it: add action and gesture to the reading of it;
10. Push it: preferably with a partner, imagine the possibilities even the absurd;¹⁶¹
11. “Other” it: read the text from the position of a radically different other;
12. Counter it: look for the texts which support and those which challenge;¹⁶²
13. Create it: preferably in a group give artistic expression to the text; and
14. Study it: as a concluding act of living in the text, go to the commentaries.

The selection of at least three of these exercises gives the preacher opportunity for the text to be evocative in fresh ways. In that openness, even vulnerability, the preacher will not seek to determine the meaning of the text to be delivered to others, thus avoiding the desire to develop a didactic kernel for a sermon. Rather, the

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 139-143. It is ironic in the sense that, while Florence talks of “The Radical Art of being Idle and Blessed” with its apparent *laissez faire* nature of not pursuing the “meaning of the text. She makes it clear that it does require diligence and attention to the text.

¹⁶¹ A caution here is that the pushing of the text requires partners who can calmly and non-judgementally let each other know when they feel it is going “too far.”

¹⁶² For example, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says: “You have heard that it was said ...,” and what follows calls for a changed understanding.

preacher allows the text to interact with his or her heart and mind and begin to create a source of witness and testimony.

Florence then moves on to the next stage in sermon preparation with twelve exercises in describing¹⁶³, designed to move towards a testimony of what has been seen and heard in the text, with the preacher stating what they believe about the experience of attending. Again, they are listed with short explanations.

1. Image it: list the images and creatively reflect on them;
2. Rewrite it: with or without language guides write your own version;
3. Slang it: put the text into the vernacular or the voice of a marginalised group;
4. Character-sketch it: imagine the details of the people in the text or its author;
5. Monologue it: from a position or character in the text or out of the text write a short description of the situation;
6. Dialogue it: make an imagined conversation in or about the text;
7. Text-jam it: take monologue and dialogue further to create a dramatic scene;
8. Letter it: write a letter in response to a person or situation in the text;
9. Dream it: read and pray the text before sleep, then journal your dreams;
10. Journal it: use a “stream-of-consciousness” approach in a journal;
11. Change it: rewrite the text to suit yourself and reflect on the rewrite; and
12. “If only” it: imagine what you would say if only you had the nerve.

These exercises in describing offer the preacher the opportunity to move into a deeper experience of dialoguing with the text and living in the text. The describing responds to the question of what is seen and leads the preacher into the questions of what they believe about what is seen through immersion in the text. Preachers in a non-didactic mode require a testimony or witness that can enliven their faith and can be shared with congregations and with the faith community.¹⁶⁴

Testifying moves the preacher to the difficult questions of how to speak a word which will carry all the possibilities of love and support, criticism and judgement, liberation and hope, and desire and uncertainty, permitting the testimony to do its work. The preacher’s temptation is to avoid the vulnerability and the potential offence of a

¹⁶³ Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 146-150.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 143-146.

radically new witness to what is “seen and heard” in the text. In effect, can that which risks being seen as the “foolishness of the cross” invite a fresh invitation into a hermeneutic of love? However, if the preacher seeks and submits to an encounter with the living Christ in the text and beyond the text, the liberating love cannot be denied.¹⁶⁵

Robert Dykstra also suggests a creative method of sermon preparation with the preacher both discovering and being discovered by a sermon. This discovery brings to both preacher and listeners the challenge of searching any hegemony, and of engaging the ambiguities that offer the opportunity of transforming faith. He dares to suggest the irony that “a sermon teetering on the edge of so-called heresy may actually come closer to an authentic witness to a personal, vital, complex faith and doubt.”¹⁶⁶

He names his preparation “playing with the text,” that is, seeking a creative encounter with the affirmations, ambiguities, and dissonances of the text, of life, and of the liturgical situation where the preaching takes place.

Firstly, he sets aside up to four hours to give the text its evocative potential by writing down whatever comes to mind, as the text is read and reread. This process produces all manner of associations: some trivial, some embarrassing, some creative, all of them accepted in this part of preparation. This does not become the sermon; but becomes the seedbed out of which a sermon might grow.¹⁶⁷ Next he moves to about two hours of a similar exercise with his own life – choosing a point of interest or incident – that he “plays” with, somewhat like Florence’s blessed idleness in “attending,” making it a virtual catalyst in the sermon process.¹⁶⁸ This is followed by “playing” with other resources, typically commentaries, to engage both their familiarity and their strangeness and to reveal the more intricate and complex issues that may be hidden to the naked eye.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 150-3; 1 Corinthians 1:18.

¹⁶⁶ Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon*, 88.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 11-42.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 43-73.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 75-104.

Finally, in his chapter “Playing with Fire”¹⁷⁰ Dykstra reaches the point of writing a sermon, where he sees the most important task as “getting out of the way” and permitting the thoughts and insights generated, especially the dissonant ones, to come together in a way that seems independent of the preacher, a virtually serendipitous occasion:

A sermon’s coherence seems to emerge quite removed from, and not infrequently contrary to, the preacher’s own intentions ...

Although I cannot fully explain it and though it remains for me almost always disconcerting, so frequently have I experienced what may best be described as being written *by* a sermon even while I am writing it that I now simply attempt to respect the sermon’s own insistent claims on me.¹⁷¹

The third scholar referenced here is Walter Brueggemann, who calls for preaching which invites and accepts openness to God’s “imaginative or.” His Old Testament scholarship means that his approach to preaching focusses on the text. However, this is not to produce its definitive meaning, but to hear God’s newness:

Rightly understood, the occasion of preaching requires both preacher and listening assembly to suspend many assumptions and to entertain the possibility that there is indeed a word other than our own, a word that comes from outside our closed systems of reality. In the word other than our own, the world is re-characterized, re-narrated, and re-described, shown to be other than what we thought when we entered the meeting.¹⁷²

This suspension of many assumptions eschews any of the idolatry that comes with religious categories such as “irrelevant transcendence or cozy immanence.”¹⁷³ It also avoids the conventional wisdom of the secular world which Brueggemann describes as “therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism”¹⁷⁴. Brueggemann states that such a move “requires courage and unfettered imagination”¹⁷⁵ that can open firstly the preacher and secondly the listeners to God’s alternate reality. The idolatry, whether in religious or secular terms, typically expects the certitude and coercion of a didactic approach, but the attention to God’s alternative has to be evocative,

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 105-126.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 110.

¹⁷² Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 13.

¹⁷³ Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, 3.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 3.

challenging, and invitational, that is, non-didactic. Brueggemann's preaching is rich with story and illustration, not to make a point, but to carry the evocative sense of the text calling for God's "imaginative or."¹⁷⁶

Brueggemann thankfully recognises that many, perhaps most, preachers are caught in the busy schedules of demanding pastorates and proposes a five-step approach to the text to elicit the evocative, challenging, and invitational word of God's "imaginative or":

1. Undertake a rhetorical study of the text to examine the structure of the words in the text and the world and culture they reveal.
2. Carry out a word study "to focus on the freight carried by particular words" emerging in Step 1 and with attention to cross references in the Scriptures.
3. Examine the vested interests in the text and their relationship to contemporary vested interest in the lives of preacher and congregation.
4. Consider the text "as if it were the only text we have" so that a "radical nonfoundationalist" interpretation is possible without "reference to protective universals."
5. Look at the text in the context of the wide scope of scripture and of ecclesial traditions.¹⁷⁷

Thus, the preacher is enabled to recognise and deliver God's "imaginative or" despite knowing that preachers and congregations are always tempted to look for a definitive, even coercive, pronouncement:

Anyone who imagines that he or she is a benign or innocent preacher of the text is engaged in self-deception. Preaching as interpretation is always a daring, dangerous act, in which the interpreter, together with the receivers of the interpretation, is consuming a text and producing a world.¹⁷⁸

In a similar vein to Florence, Dykstra, and Brueggemann, Lathrop's call for attentiveness requires an openness to God's contemporaneous word.¹⁷⁹ His advice

¹⁷⁶ Brueggemann, "Remember what we know, Little Baby," Sermon delivered at the Festival of Homiletics, Denver, Colorado, 2015.

¹⁷⁷ Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 77-8. Brueggemann presents a three-step process; but then goes on to add the additional two stages (steps) in the sermon preparation.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁷⁹ Lathrop, *The Pastor: A Spirituality*, 49.

that each must find their own method (and giftedness) in preaching resonates with the vital challenge of a non-didactic approach. God's invitation to know and respond to an "imaginative or," never fully revealed and always emerging, is confronting to those for whom preaching requires a didactic or formulaic approach; witnessing to God's ongoing self-revelation and relationship with humankind demands humility and openness which avoid certitude and hegemony. Lathrop claims:

There is no such thing as infallibility or inerrancy; there are no universal truths for us to own or access at will. There are only fleeting glimpses of the truth we see and confess in Jesus Christ, the truth, that encounters us in our concrete human experience, by the grace of God.¹⁸⁰

Thus Lathrop is aware that the openness of a non-didactic approach which eschews certitude and formulaic methods always provides the challenge of those who seek the apparent assurance of fundamentals and basic truth – the most extreme cases often producing tragic results.¹⁸¹ However the reliance on the grace of God will always invite us into living relationships of love even when expressed in the apparent dogmatics of theology. As Rohr and Morell quote from the nineteenth-century poet, Coventry Patmore:

This "dry doctrine" of the Trinity, or primary Act of Love, is the keynote of all living knowledge and delight. God himself becomes a concrete object and an intelligible joy when contemplated as the eternal felicity of a Lover with the Beloved, and the Anti-type and very original of the Love which inspires the Poet and the thrush.¹⁸²

Eugene Peterson expresses this reality in terms of the intersection and closeness of love and God:

The basic and biblical conviction is that the two subjects (love and God) are intricately related. If we want to deal with God the right way, we have to learn to love the right way. If we want to love the right way, we have to deal with God the right way.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 65.

¹⁸¹ The BBC documentary on David Koresh and the Branch Davidian of Waco, TX, "Waco cult: How David Koresh persuaded 30 Britons to join?", accessed 6 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46039014> amply illustrates how well-meaning seekers pursuing a deeper and more fulfilling faith can be so sadly misled.

¹⁸² Coventry Patmore, *The Rod, the Root and the Flower* (Tacoma: Angelico Press, 2013), 111, quoted by Rohr and Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, 179.

¹⁸³ Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 2002), 2222.

Evaluation

Preaching non-didactically calls for an act of self-giving with the openness and vulnerability that unconditional love provides. Knowing the reality of human perversity –sin is perhaps an uncomfortable term – such preaching will accept the careful and loving scrutiny of fellow travellers on the journey of faith. That is, preachers will know that their efforts require ongoing feedback enabling them to assess their effectiveness through honest and caring critique.

Feedback, assessment, evaluation, and critique are inevitably part of the preacher's life. The polite, "Thank you," or "I liked your sermon," as well as the evasive, "I liked the hymns," are informal feedback and the preacher cannot avoid dealing with personal ego and pastoral relationships that accompany such comments. All feedback comes with a risk of destructive impact. With formal feedback, in particular, André Resner notes that: "Post-sermon reflection can be categorised in two ways: (1) critically constructive and (2) violent."¹⁸⁴

For some the idea of honest and caring critique or assessment and evaluation can evoke the nervous memories of preaching classes in theological training. Students, having delivered a trial sermon shared the nervousness of fellow students about offering feedback and, at worst, awaited a seminary professor's soul-destroying comment such as: "I liked your presence in the pulpit, your voice and your opening illustration; but you failed ..."¹⁸⁵ Casual and informal feedback are inevitable; but structured or deliberate feedback requires the intentionality which casual and informal feedback lack. The intention needed relies on deliberate preparation for engagement in the process of evaluation in order to create meaningful outcomes. The best preparation for homiletics courses and for the feedback process occurs when students undertake courses on theological reflection, particularly as it relates to preaching and to evaluating the sermons of others.¹⁸⁶ For the purpose of sermon evaluation, Resner has twenty-one questions (quoted in Appendix 1) which examine the impact or growing edge of the sermon, and the congruence of the sermon: its

¹⁸⁴ André Resner, "No Preacher Left Behind: A new Prerequisite for the Introductory Preaching Course," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 13, 4 (2010), 341.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 340.

biblical and theological content and the use of language and imagery, emotion, and logic.¹⁸⁷

Lovell and Richardson present the need for personal and professional development programs to include evaluation of sermons from listeners to preachers. They identify a preaching circle of preparation, delivery, feedback, and reflection as inevitable – usually informally done, and on occasions formally undertaken. It is most effective when the evaluation moves from an informal to a deliberate process of theological reflection. The preacher and listeners, the occasion and context, the preparation and delivery, the theology and liturgy, and the responses will all be carefully, lovingly, extensively, and prayerfully examined.¹⁸⁸ Critical in evaluation and soliciting feedback is the preacher’s awareness of their own desire for self-assurance or ego gratification. Open questions such as “how do you honestly feel that went? I would very much like to know”, are much healthier than “loaded” questions such as “that sermon was all right, wasn’t it?”¹⁸⁹

For Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert the evaluation should always be delivered with care and humility such that offence is neither given nor received, and positive outcomes are optimised.¹⁹⁰ In addition Andy Stanley points out that where the vision and mission of the congregation and preacher include the desire for greater effectiveness, there will be readiness to tackle challenging questions and move forward using assessment and evaluation.¹⁹¹ Opportunities for feedback and evaluation can – must – be built into the praxis of preaching. Chadwick and Tovey give a good summary of approaches to evaluation including supervision by a specialist supervisor or peers; consultancy with experienced preacher(s); feedback from peers and or congregation, learning partnerships, and journaling to review one’s preaching.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 342-343.

¹⁸⁸ Lovell and Richardson, *Sustaining Preachers and Preaching*, 53-70.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 64.

¹⁹⁰ Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert, *Preach [Theology meets Practice]* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2012), 131-141.

¹⁹¹ Stanley, *Deep and Wide*, 302-5.

¹⁹² Charles Chadwick and Phillip Tovey, *Developing Reflective Practice for Preachers* (Cambridge, UK: Grove Books, 2001), 12-14.

The praxis employed in evaluation sessions is critically important. Dever and Gilbert provide four key competencies foundational to the process, which are summarised as:

- a. “Giving Godly criticism” so that all are seeking to act in an atmosphere of encouragement and support and address specific issues with offers of positive alternatives;
- b. “Receiving Godly criticism” in an atmosphere of mutual trust and always desiring improvement;
- c. “Giving Godly encouragement” which addresses the impact on heart and mind; and
- d. Receiving Godly encouragement” in grace and humility acknowledging the giftedness of those involved.¹⁹³

Feedback and evaluation call for a culture where all are valued and loved so that all contributions, even from the least expected source, enable preachers and listeners to be incorporated into God’s “imaginative or.”

Conclusion

If preaching functions as a means of grace, human words – human actions – become the vehicle of divine presence. God uses them to communicate godself to us with a directness and intensity that evokes and echoes the incarnation itself.¹⁹⁴

This review of the literature points to non-didactic preaching as authentic participation in the *Missio Dei*, as preachers will give deliberate attention to their intention and goal to present a hermeneutic of love and engage in a vital spirituality of friendship with God. Preparation and delivery will be attentive to God’s “imaginative or” by living in and or playing with the text so as to offer their testimony to the sermon which they discover and which “finds” them. Effective preaching will also be accompanied by careful and mutually supportive feedback and evaluation. These five areas of concern – “What is God doing?”, the preacher’s spirituality, goals

¹⁹³ Mark Dever & Greg Gilbert, *Preach {Theology meets Practice}*, 133-9. Some might criticise their use of the word “Godly;” but it serves as a reminder that not only should preaching seek a divine encounter, but that evaluation should continue with that intention.

¹⁹⁴ Whiteley, *Steeped in the Holy*, 13.

and intentions, preparation and delivery, and feedback and evaluation form the basis for the research project presented in Chapter 2.

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Chapter 2

Methodology for Research Project

This research project began with my personal experience of preaching. I am grateful that I was brought up in churchgoing family, but my earliest memories were that preaching was typically boring, having very limited appeal or applicability to the mind of a child or a growing adolescent. Upon entering full time ministry at the relatively youthful age of 26 years, I strove to deliver sermons that spoke to the listeners with authenticity in our lived situation, and as the years progressed I have been privileged to participate in preaching events both as preacher and as listener in different ministry appointments. As a preacher, particularly over the last several decades, I have found the preparation and delivery of sermons both life-giving and challenging, and, in consequence, transformative both for myself and for listeners. The evidence for the impact on listeners is anecdotal with regular comments of approval. Perhaps the most striking was a spontaneous: “That was different – good, but different, good, but different!” received on the first occasion I preached within that congregation. Similarly, another midweek response was, “I will not ever forget that!” in response to the previous Sunday’s sermon. In contrast, I accept that my preaching has developed over my years of ministry; but I also reflect with some sadness and frustration that much of the preaching I have listened to has been boring and/or coercive. With all forms of communication, there is always scope for feedback, review, evaluation, and greater effectiveness. In consequence, the contrast in my experiences grew into a quest, even a passion, to make a difference.

This quest was further fuelled by the literature examined in the previous chapter which highlighted the contrast between preaching which at its extreme is a mixture, in varying degrees, of strident, coercive, and boring, and preaching which is reflective, transformative, and an invitation into the *Missio Dei*. The expectancy of this invitational approach to preaching resonates with Brueggemann’s “imaginative or” of God’s ongoing revelation¹⁹⁵ and the invitation into the *Missio Dei* is resonant with Fagan’s description of “friendship with God.”¹⁹⁶ This preaching offers a liberating

¹⁹⁵ Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 67.

¹⁹⁶ Fagan, “Towards a Spirituality of Preaching,” 116–117.

relationship with God. Again, this contrasts with a delivery which is either an obligatory performance or a corrective delivery demanding change into “the correct” expression of a faith, both of which are inadequate and fall short of an expression of a life-giving relationship with God. As Anna Carter Florence puts it, “We want to give (them) hope, not hurt, for a future that liberates and redeems.”¹⁹⁷ In short, the examination of the literature combined with my personal and life-giving experience as a preacher points to invitational non-didactic preaching as a highly effective form of ministry.

My personal Journey of Theological Reflection

My decades’ journey with preaching as listener and preacher and the quest to make a difference can very reasonably be described, albeit with the clarity of hindsight, as a decades’ long cycle of theological reflection (TR). This trajectory provides the background to the research project which forms the basis of this paper, and it quite naturally led into an action research (AR) methodology for the project itself. What follows is a description of the TR phases of my quest which underpin the use of AR in this research.

The TR cycle is represented diagrammatically in Figure 1 and is a conflation of elements from Todd’s Pastoral Cycle,¹⁹⁸ Laurie Green’s Reflective Cycle,¹⁹⁹ and Emmanuel Lartey’s five-phase cycle.²⁰⁰ As a preliminary point of explanation, it is noted that none of the phases in this TR can be seen as isolated from any other phase. Thus, placing *Review* at the centre of the diagram with dotted lines radiating to each of the phases indicates that evaluation, re-examination, and revision can arise throughout the process.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁷ Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 151.

¹⁹⁸ Judith Thompson with Stephen Pattison and Ross Thompson, *SCM Guide to Theological Reflection* (London, SCM, 2008), 56 – 57; and *SCM Guide to Theological Reflection, 2nd ed.* (London, SCM, 2019), I will be referencing the earlier edition because, at this point, it provides more detail than the Second Edition.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 57–59.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

²⁰¹ Peter Woodward, “Theological Reflection,” 138.

“engaging in dialogue with the Christian tradition (and other traditions).”²⁰³ Laurie Green’s reflective spiral, on the other hand, has the steps of exploration and reflection.²⁰⁴ In my TR I find it best to describe this process as *Thick Description*, *Exploration and Critical Analysis*, and *Biblical and Theological Examination*.

The *Thick Description* began as I further explored the contrast between the inspiration I found in preaching and the often boring quality of sermons I heard. Sermons which were a combination of retelling, explaining, and applying the biblical narrative, with varying emphasis on each of these three facets, typically failed to enthuse. This was especially true when the delivery became strident with an apparent guilt inducing quality. In contrast, I had reached the determination that the God, whose active love is clearly evident in the Scriptures, should be known as active in the lived experience of preachers and listeners. If I could not give at least a glimpse of such reality in my preaching, I might as well be delivering a talk on ancient history or a faith which was remote and only interesting from an anthropological or psychological perspective. This *Thick Description* phase lasted for decades, and was important in generating a personal love of preaching as preacher and the passion to be a positive influence in the homiletic landscape.

The *Exploration and Critical Analysis* carried the *Thick Description* forward. As a military chaplain I was privileged to attend a five day retreat each year for three decades with a variety of retreat leaders.²⁰⁵ That variety continued to feed my quest for authenticity in my spirituality and effectiveness in my preaching. This poem provides evidence of that quest:

²⁰³ Ibid., 57–58.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 58-59.

²⁰⁵ The Chaplains gathered for these retreats were the Protestant Denominations group, that is, Uniting, Presbyterian, Baptist, Churches of Christ, Lutheran and Salvation Army. Over the years this provided retreat leaders from a variety of denominations.

“But we're Comfortable -
A Psalm for Middle Class Christians”

Comfortable,
insulated,
stopping short of reality ...

"Blessed are the poor in spirit."
"Blessed are those who mourn."²⁰⁶

O God, that we should be really in touch with ourselves.
O Jesus, that we should see life through your eyes.

"Give me the faith which can remove
and sink the mountain to the plain."²⁰⁷

O Holy Spirit of God, breathe fresh life into our reality.
God, Father, Daddy, you come to us in love.
You care, you love.
The agony of Golgotha was yours.
Your grace is given more readily and plentifully
than we know how or why.

But ...
But we're comfortable
and we're strong, brilliant, capable, determined ...
to do our own thing ...
to manage without your grace.

"Great God of wonders all your ways
display the attributes divine;
and countless acts of pardoning grace
beyond thine other wonders shine.
Who is a pardoning God like thee?"²⁰⁸

We want to come humbly;
we want to come in full dependence;
we want to come submitted;
but we get in our own way.

Lord Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us,
have mercy on us.
Grant us your peace

²⁰⁶ Matthew 5: 3a and 4a.

²⁰⁷ Charles Wesley, *Methodist Hymn Book* (Aylesbury and Slough, Hazell, Watson and Viney Ltd, 1954), Hymn No 390.

²⁰⁸ Samuel Davies, *Methodist Hymn Book* (Aylesbury and Slough, Hazell, Watson and Viney Ltd, 1954), Hymn 356, alt.

Additionally, a course in Spirituality and Ministry in 1993 led me to examine the motivations for military chaplaincy. Reflecting back on about twenty years of working with chaplaincy colleagues, I humbly confess with the clarity of hindsight, that for quite some time my dominant approach to chaplaincy was that I should give the military community the best expression of practicing the faith – a form of keeping the rules described below. The major influences that contributed to a shift in my motivation towards a more open and welcoming approach were a quarter of Clinical Pastoral Education and the course on Spirituality and Ministry.

I observed that the differing ways in which colleagues approached their chaplaincy could be attributed to four basic drivers; which had wider application including motivations for preaching. First, some chaplains found parish ministry to be too demanding and that military chaplaincy offered greater excitement and prestige, feeding their ego gratification or proving an escape from difficult church situations – *escape and pleasure*. Preaching from this motivation was either a form of ego satisfaction or chore required of ministers. Second, some found their greatest fulfilment in providing the defence community with correct denominational practices in worship and faith – *keeping the rules*. Preaching from this ministry motivation attempts to provide approved and correct theological and biblical proclamation. Third, many were deeply concerned for the welfare of soldiers and their families and exercised a strong pastoral and support ministry – *pastoral care*. Pastoral Care preaching seeks to bring care and support, and problem-solving sermons. Fourth, an integrated approach exhibited by a few was that of *response to what God is doing*. This approach recognised that God continues to work in people's lives whatever their awareness of God's loving presence. The chaplain's privilege was to be part of the process of enabling military personnel and families to come alive to that reality. Preaching in this mode aims to open the space where preacher and listeners can grow in their awareness of and in their relationship with God as a living experience. Response to what God is doing is both liberating and highly demanding. It is liberating in chaplaincy, because, as with the *Missio Dei*, ministry and mission are God's initiative and continued action and thus not the chaplain's responsibility. It is demanding because it requires chaplains to live and minister out of their personal

awareness of God and God's continuing activity in their own lives. If these motivations are applied analogously to preaching four basic styles emerge. These are: *escape and pleasure*, *keeping the rules*, *pastoral care*, and *response to what God is doing*. My continued desire for effective preaching, the influence of retreats and studies in spirituality (as above) were key influences fuelling my deeper exploration of the question of authentic preaching.

The fourth phase of my TR was *Biblical and Theological Examination* which ensured that the insights from scholarly and critical authors were brought to bear on the topic. This concern is a natural aspect of my passion for effective preaching. The study of the literature presented in the previous chapter confirmed the reality that had developed through my regular participation in spiritual direction and professional supervision. This was that preaching, at its most effective, should enable all participants – preachers and listeners – to grow in a loving relationship with God. To reiterate, Walter Brueggemann's openness to God's "imaginative or,"²⁰⁹ Anna Carter Florence's "Preaching as Testimony" as the witness to what has been seen and heard,²¹⁰ and Robert C. Dykstra's "Discovering a Sermon" or actually being discovered by the sermon²¹¹ all convey the anticipation that God will be known and or encountered in the event which will thus be an expression of the *Missio Dei*.

Laurie Green's Reflective Cycle includes a secondary cycle of TR arising within the theological tradition.²¹² During the Biblical and Theological Exploration, as I engaged the quest for effective preaching which is consonant with the *Missio Dei*, two significant *Secondary Cycles of TR* occurred generating additional insights: firstly, the recognition arose that, "You only ever tell your own story." That is, when a preacher presents a sermon, their spoken words are an expression of their faith, that is, their own personal approach to and understanding of a relationship with God. Even preachers who ardently believe that they must avoid personal participation in their preaching are nonetheless delivering their expression of knowing and relating to God.

²⁰⁹ Brueggemann, *The Word Militant*, 67.

²¹⁰ Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 151.

²¹¹ Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon*, 128.

²¹² Judith Thompson et al, *Theological Reflection*, 58-59.

Secondly, further reflection on the motivations for military chaplaincy gave rise to a consideration of varying approaches to preaching. The first motivation of self-interest – *escape and pleasure* - is likely to generate sermons which are a display of self-aggrandisement or an expression of the disinterest which accepts that preaching is one of the obligations that have to be fulfilled while enjoying the more exciting life in the military. The second motivation of providing proper ministry and faith – *keeping the rules* – usually generates preaching which gives an explanation of the meaning and intent of the scriptures and often includes the application of the explanation to the life and its problems. The third motivation displaying strong caring relationships – *pastoral care* – will usually express itself in sermons which seek to help people cope with life and to build caring and supportive communities. The fourth motivation of openness and responsiveness to God's presence - *response to what God is doing* – will produce sermons which encourage or invite listeners into a growing faith and at best will be an encounter with God which is powerful, amazing, challenging, humbling, and saturated with love. This became a straightforward taxonomy of approaches to preaching:

1. a. A display of self-aggrandisement;
b. Presented as a chore, boring, the expected requirement of ministry;
2. a. The Scripture explained with correct theology and worship – history, context, and meaning;
b. The Scripture explained and applied to people's faith;
3. a. Presenting the ways to help people cope with life;
b. Presenting the way to build a caring Christian community;
4. a. A way to help people grow in their faith – to draw nearer to Jesus, and
b. An encounter with God -powerful, amazing, challenging, humbling, and saturated with love.

These two secondary cycles of TR confirmed and gave added impetus to my quest to contribute to more effective preaching. For example, in a presentation on preaching to a group of nine ministry students at St Francis College, Milton in 2015 eight indicated in discussion with some chagrin that they experienced the preaching they regularly listened to as boring and one student alone reported having experienced preaching that manifested a divine encounter.

The approaches to TR from Todd, Lartey, and Green cited above²¹³ all expect a response, that is, a changed perception and understanding of the issue which invites a new, albeit sometimes tentative, praxis. This response and the changed course of action, especially when tentative, may well lead to further cycles of TR.²¹⁴ In my TR cycle the next phase was *Invitation and Response*²¹⁵ which was the realisation that this would be best achieved by entering into a research project engaging other preachers in the quest to make a difference. This invitation therefore became the impetus for developing the research project.

Action Research Methodology

In my quest to make a difference I engaged in a research methodology consistent with a non-didactic approach to preaching. That is, the presentation to other preachers needed an engaging and invitational quality rather than a directive approach. Evaluating a non-didactic approach to preaching would best be achieved through offering the preachers who had volunteered to participate the opportunity to explore and evaluate their own approach to preaching, and, where necessary, to move toward a non-didactic mode.

This indicated an Action Research (AR) model. AR, as Anne Burns, and Michael Putman and Tracy Rock point out, is not a singular research model, having at least 30 different expressions in educational research.²¹⁶ Rather it is the descriptor for research that follows an action-reflection cycle designed to improve practice and the understanding of that practice for the participants. This generality of definition means that the action-reflection cycle is flexibly employed and typically includes the following phases: observing and identifying of issues to be addressed, exploring and implementing a course of action, gathering and analysing data, evaluating the

²¹³ Ibid., 51-62.

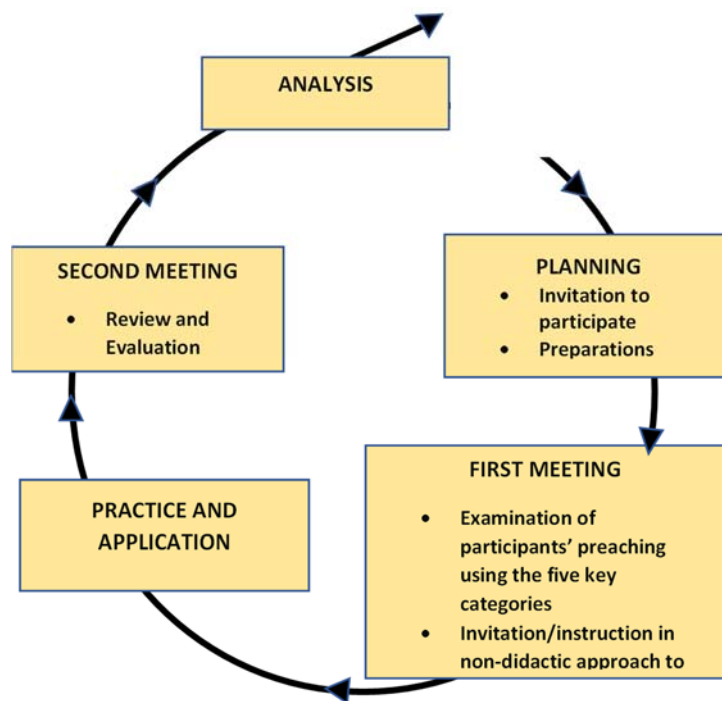
²¹⁴ Woodward, "Theological Reflection," 136-38.

²¹⁵ Adapted from "Invitation to new praxis" in Lartey's five-phase cycle: Judith Thompson et al, *Theological Reflection*. 60.

²¹⁶ Anne Burns, "Action Research," accessed 18 February 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282199978_Action_research, 188-9; and S. Michael Putman and Tracy Rock, *Action Research: Using Strategic Inquiry to Improve Teaching and Learning* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2018), 11-19.

process, and proposing modifications and potential future action.²¹⁷ This determined the methodology to be used, namely AR. This would generate data in a manner consistent with the *Research and Data* phase in the TR model (see Figure 1). Figure 2 below outlines the AR²¹⁸ cycle which has been applied to the TR cycle at the Research and Data Analysis phase, and leads to Future Directions as the concluding phase of the TR.

Figure 2: AR Cycle



In contrast to AR, a linear or “expert” approach to research assumes that the qualified practitioner or expert will conduct the research by investigating one or more settings or experimenting with the practice and persons involved. With an assumption of the objectivity of an *outside view*, the data gathered can then be developed into a theoretical framework, to be applied to particular situations. By comparison AR seeks an integration of theory and practice by collaborating with the

²¹⁷ Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead, *All You Need to Know about Action Research*, (London, Sage Publications, 2009), 8-9; Susan Noffke and Bridget Somekh, “Action Research,” in Bridget Somekh and Cathy Lewin eds. *Research Methods in Social Sciences, 11th Ed.* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 2005), 89-94; Patrick J.M. Costello, *Action Research* (London, Continuum, 2003), 1-13.

²¹⁸ Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead, *All You Need to Know About Action Research*, 7-17.

people to generate the findings about their praxis so that it relates directly to their particular activity or day to day reality. AR is carried out by participants themselves or by the researcher engaging with the participants in their sphere of social action.²¹⁹

At this point it is worthwhile addressing the question of whether AR as a social research method should be applied to a research project about preaching. For some preaching is seen as belonging to the categories of “spiritual,” “theological,” and “biblical.” With this mode of thinking social research is seen as virtually irrelevant as a means of studying preaching. However, this approach of a highly spiritual understanding of preaching avoids the reality that all knowledge, including preaching and theology, is interactive. In any discipline that involves people, the interactions between the persons involved is critical to the study of that discipline. Preaching always involves preachers and listeners, and at its most effective engages them at the points of deepest meaning and faith. It is also instructive to examine preaching as social research because the alternate view, with its emphasis on biblical studies and theology, tends to assume a power relationship between preacher and listener. In this approach the preacher is the “expert” who engages in a one-way flow of communication, whereas preaching belongs to the community of faith with people being gifted variously for mutual encouragement and support.²²⁰ Indeed it is instructive that Homiletics as a study belongs within the field of Practical Theology which is an integrative discipline where spirituality and social research sit alongside one another.

Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead, from within an educational research context, present a comprehensive list of the characteristics of AR, noting its differences from other traditional research methodologies. AR is “insider” research in contrast to “outsider” research by an external agency, and it emphasises the importance of improving practice within the discipline. The practitioner seeks to improve the process, engaging in the learning him/herself rather than seeking a better objective learning outcome. Thus the practitioner gives greater attention to the values inherent

²¹⁹ Susan Noffke and Bridget Somekh, “Action Research”, 2005), 89.

²²⁰ 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11; Ephesians 4:1–13; Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 8; and Bridget Somekh, *Action Research: A Methodology for Change and Development* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006), 17-19.

in the learning context and process than to specific outcomes. AR requires a community of action and research, so a collaborative approach is required which seeks greater effectiveness and improvement of the understanding of and theories of practice. AR must engage in deep and critical examination of the processes –values, logic, concepts, and context – of the practice. This requires higher order questioning that will probe presuppositions and “norms” of practice. While AR is typically designed for improving learning and practice, it can, even should, also lead to transformation of context and culture.²²¹

Other research methodologies suggest differing approaches and questions about effectiveness. S. Michael Putman and Tracy Rock point out that in educational research, where the desire for accountability and results drives research, the questions posed will be similar to: “What have students learned and what standard have they achieved?” This form of research accepts the positivist view that knowledge requires an objective stance enabling results to be validated and replicated. In contrast, AR seeks a more dynamic and inter-related view of reality so that the persons involved and the practices used are given critical attention, with questions emerging such as: “Has the educational process provided the best forms of engagement with the learners?”²²²

It could be argued that preaching as a research area is conducive to AR as a research methodology. In the educational context learning outcomes and standards are typically set by the authorities who determine the requirements to be met. These constraints and processes for teaching and learning in best practice should not inhibit the reflective and critical cycles of AR. For preaching in a non-didactic mode, the outcomes are not seen as learnings achieved. Rather, the aims and intent of this preaching is that preacher and listeners are “discovered by the sermon”, to use Dykstra’s concept²²³ so that they are “caught up [raptured] in wonder, in love, and in

²²¹ Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead, *You and Your Action Research Project*, 3rd ed. (London, Routledge, 2010), 17-24.

²²² Putman and Rock, *Action Research*, 2-7.

²²³ Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon*, 110.

praise.”²²⁴ This intended outcome is a participation in and an acceptance of the invitation into the liberating Word bringing faith, hope, and love.²²⁵

The Research Project

In my overarching research trajectory the human aspect of the project fits into the Invitation and Responses section of the TR, and it uses an AR methodology, as outlined above. The critical and reflective cycles of AR when applied to a non-didactic approach to preaching were designed to give careful attention to the qualitative personal and subjective attitudes of the participants examined using the five key issues presented in the previous chapter:

1. What is God doing?
2. What is the purpose, intent, and meaning of preaching?
3. Preaching and preacher;
4. Preparation and delivery; and
5. Evaluation.

Aims of the research

Based on the conclusion reached in the previous chapter that a non-didactic approach is a highly effective mode of preaching and consonant with the *Missio Dei*, the intention and expectation of the research project was to evaluate a non-didactic approach to preaching within the framework of direct engagements with Uniting Church ministers in southern Queensland who preach regularly and who volunteered to participate in the project.

The project contained three aims. The first aim was to determine the participants' attitudes to preaching and underpinning assumptions affecting their practice of preaching. The second aim was to examine whether exposure to a non-didactic approach to preaching made any changes in attitudes to or practice of preaching. The third aim was to explore additional and unexpected issues concerning either their attitudes to or practice of preaching that arose in the course of the discussions.

²²⁴ Snider, *Preaching after God*, 115.

²²⁵ Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 151.

Design of the research

The research was designed to involve four groups of up to six ministers from the Uniting Church Presbyteries of southern Queensland.²²⁶ They were to be invited to participate in the project which would involve their consideration of ways to improve their effectiveness as preachers through exposure to a non-didactic approach to preaching.

The process of eliciting volunteers was to include the distribution of the Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix 2) to ensure that participation would be entirely voluntary, that participants would know they had the right to withdraw at any stage without recrimination, and that the protocols of confidentiality would be carefully observed.

For the conduct of the meetings a Student Consent Form (see Appendix 2) was prepared, and a Draft Program (see Appendix 3) together with handouts (see Appendix 4) designed to assist in guiding the discussions.

The research was designed with five phases. Phase 1 was to consist of establishing the initial arrangements and administration of the meetings – venues, dates and times along with the offer to provide lunch on each meeting day with each group of participants.

Phase 2 was designed as a one day meeting with participants to be conducted in six stages: firstly, initial administration; secondly, focus group type discussion to elucidate the participants' methodology and theological assumptions about preaching which would provide the initial data on their attitudes to preaching; thirdly, shared lunch which would allow for general discussion; fourthly, exposure to a presentation of a non-didactic approach to preaching; fifthly, the issuing of an invitation to implement this approach in the next two to three months; and finally concluding administration especially to arrange the next meeting (Phase 4).

²²⁶ The Presbyteries of Moreton Rivers, South Moreton, Bremer Brisbane and The Downs.

Phase 3 would be a period of two to three months to allow participants time for exploring and implementing non-didactic approaches to preaching.

Phase 4 would be the follow-up meeting to receive feedback from participants on their experience of preaching in the months of the third phase which would provide data on their implementation of a non-didactic approach to preaching. It would also provide opportunity to offer feedback on their experience of the project.

It was intended that data would be collected in Phases 2 and 4 by using voice recorder which would facilitate the free flow of discussion without the intrusion of note taking. The recordings were to be subsequently transcribed to text for ease of analysis. In this analysis the anonymity of the participants would be guaranteed through the random assignment of letters from the alphabet to the participants – B, D, F, G, J, K, M, N, R, T, V, W, and Y. It was anticipated that gender differences could prove to be informative, and because all other identifiers were to be eliminated, the descriptions of participants would use singular third person pronouns, for example, “she” and “he”, and “him” and “her. “

Phase 5 was to consist of my analysis of the data gathered in the aforementioned second and fourth phases. The data extracted from the transcripts and used in the thesis would be selected according to its ability to serve the aims of the research. Consideration would therefore be given to what the data revealed about participants' initial attitudes to and practice of preaching; what the data revealed about changes in participants' attitudes to or practice of preaching; and what the data revealed about underlying feelings and assumptions about preaching that might emerge spontaneously or unexpectedly.

The specific criteria used to interrogate the data within the context of the above aims would consist of the five categories applied throughout the discursive section of the thesis: What is God doing? What is the purpose, intent, and meaning of preaching? Preaching and the preacher, Preparation and delivery, and Evaluation.

Implementation of the research

The invitations to participants were arranged through contact with the Presbytery Ministers or Chairpersons, who gave a variety of responses. The best results for seeking participants came from the presbyteries which offered contact details to enable direct liaison with individual ministers. The resulting groups were: one group of three from The Downs Presbytery, one group of four from Bremer Brisbane Presbytery, and two groups of three from Moreton Rivers Presbytery which were arranged through direct contact by telephone and email with prospective volunteers.

The meetings were arranged at times and locations suitable to all involved. Three of the research groups met for a single day for Phase 2 and a half day for Phase 4, but one of the Moreton Rivers Presbytery groups found it more convenient to arrange Phase 2 as two half day meetings a week apart and phase 4 as another half day meeting.

At the initial meeting the necessary administrative arrangements were fulfilled. Participants were given a copy of the Participant Information Sheet together with a verbal assurance that their involvement was entirely voluntary, that they could exercise the option of withdrawing without any negative consequences, and that all the information gathered would be treated completely confidentially. As an appropriate acceptance of these assurances the Student Consent Forms were also signed by each participant.

The meeting with the first group of three resulted in good insights which assisted in the smooth-running of successive sessions. While the meeting was successful in terms of the discussion of issues flowing freely, this first group did suggest that that it would have been better if the first three handouts (see Appendix 4) had been emailed in advance. This then became the practice in the following three groups.

I recognised that an invitation to participants to explore and examine and possibly improve their preaching carried with it the potential for an implied criticism of their current approach to preaching. I further recognised that participation would require vulnerability and possibly an acknowledgement of a need for change. These issues of implied criticism and participants' vulnerability were addressed both explicitly and

implicitly. In the introductory sessions and at the conclusion of the research assurances were given to the participants that the conduct of the research was entirely within their freedom, and maintained confidentiality with all the data reported in an anonymous manner.

With the intention of eliciting responses of openness and vulnerability the discussions were deliberately conducted in a manner consistent with a non-didactic approach to preaching. The group discussions were facilitated in a spirit of openness and acceptance, and in a non-threatening manner. Thus, the discussions in the small groups were free flowing avoiding any sense of assessment of participants' ministry skills or preaching, and while the research had a direction and purpose, it was presented as non-coercive and invitational – the approach was inquisitive, but non-judgemental and without therapeutic intent.

The implicit aspects of enabling participants' openness and vulnerability included the fact that I do not hold any position of authority in the Uniting Church so that whatever they said would not impact their relationship with their presbyteries, and the provision of shared lunch enhanced the atmosphere of each meeting. While the research was designed to critically examine participants' attitudes to and practice of preaching and to foster a non-didactic approach, divergent themes, such as a desire to reflect on and improve effectiveness in other areas of ministry, were always possible, and they were also noted for examination and evaluation, as outlined in the third aim of the research which involves taking note of unexpected elements which emerged.

In conclusion I have to express my deep appreciation for the ready involvement of all the participants. Unfortunately, one was unable to fulfil all aspects of the project as he did not attend Phase 4 for health reasons.

Data management and analysis

The detailed analysis of the data – to be presented in Chapter 3 – will be delivered initially in the mode of case studies with each participant's self-description extracted from the data. This is then followed by a critical examination of that disclosure by the researcher using the five key categories, to establish initial attitudes and practices,

and to examine the extent to which attitudes and views changed as a result of their involvement in the project. This analysis of each participant will then contribute to a summative analysis in terms of the first two aims of the research. Following the summative analysis, key issues and unexpected points that arose will be presented and analysed collectively.

This description above of the aims and design of the research includes data management strategies, and an account of implementation. In Chapter three the gathered data will be presented and analysed according to those aims and in line with that design.

Chapter 3

Data and analysis

Consistent with Action Research²²⁷ methodology and with a non-didactic approach to preaching the data gathered in the two meetings – Phases 2 and 4 – arose from discussions that engaged the participants in their values, attitudes, spirituality, theology, and intentions concerning preaching. Thus, the conversations, whilst guided by the research agenda, allowed the range of expressions to flow freely around their personal and subjective views and experiences of preaching. and related ministry issues, and generated qualitative data.

From the data gathered in the two meetings, each participant's position is presented as a case study under the headings of self-description and critical examination. From hours of discussions – approximately eight hours with each group – the material in the self-description has been selected to relate to the five key issues. In the critical analysis, the responses of each participant are examined with four purposes: firstly, to determine their view of preaching as this relates to the five key issues; secondly, to identify changes in their attitudes and approaches to preaching as expressed in Phase 4; thirdly, to explore additional and unexpected issues that arose in their self-disclosures; and fourthly, to consider implication arising from the research and possibilities for future research.

Participant B

Self-description

B presented a mixed understanding of God's presence in preaching. He expressed the positive expectation, "The word that God has given you," but then also gave the less than assured comment that "the word has to be there somewhere." Similarly, his comment, "I tend to have the Chinese water torture theory of preaching. I just keep preaching the gospel and hopefully it will come through," again expresses his mixed feelings.

²²⁷ See, for example, Noffke and Somekh, "Action Research," 96.

B understands that God is always active; but he is concerned that he may have missed the opportunity to participate in God's action, even despite his own best efforts:

I'm very much of the conviction that if we don't preach or speak the gospel, then to use the story of Balaam's Ass, God will find a way anyway; but God's usual way of speaking to people is through people whether it is those who were inspired to record what has become the Bible or whether it's the preacher on Sunday or the friend you share with about an issue and you start thinking about where God is in the midst of this.

Thus, for B the aim and intent of preaching is for the word of God to "get through":

I think it's an ultimate letting go of rationality, not abandoning rational thoughts and ideas, but saying ultimately God is the one who speaks and not my nicely worked and crafted sermon or theological framework but it is ultimately God who speaks.

Not surprisingly, this comes with a level of uncertainty, even frustration:

One of the frustrations with preaching is that you don't know, really don't know what has happened to that word that God has given you, that you have presented and sometimes the word that you think God has given you and you presented is not the word they hear; but they still hear a word and you sometimes find out about that. ... It is always exciting when at the door you get something like, "That was interesting," ...rather than, "Lovely."

B views Scripture from a mediated and interpreted approach which relies on the biblical account, not as a proof-texting, literal view or "rehashing of Scripture;" but seeing the inspiration for his preaching as a calling to a faith and life experience which is authentic to the present situation.

B's commentary on his preaching shows mixed feelings toward that ministry as he gratefully acknowledges the affirmation and support of his wife:

I have the tendency to forget about the grace of God at times; and to think it's all about me saving the world and the church. Sometimes I kind of throw my personality particularly into the sermon but (also) into the whole package of the worship. I throw my personality into it hoping that somehow, I will connect people to God, knowing that my theology says that is rubbish, but my (wife) ... says I experience preaching really positively – my wife says I come alive when I preach. I'm basically an introvert; but, unusually for an introvert, I love public speaking.

B is diligent in preparation and on occasions feels he “comes alive” in the delivery of preaching and in the entire worship service. The privilege expressed by B: “We are probably in a very privileged position of getting to reflect and hear more from God, and think more about the sermon, and what God might be saying ...” is consistent with B’s criticism of preachers who apparently commence preparation late on the Saturday evening before preaching the next day. This commitment to diligent preparation is also expressed in the expectation that preaching requires a personal faith and sense of vocation:

If you don’t believe in what you are doing, then why on earth are you doing it? And I don’t just mean “believe” in the intellectual sense; but if you don’t have that relationship, that spark, that led you into preaching, that God thing, then why on earth are you doing it in the first place?

While B responded that all feedback, both positive and negative, was most welcome, he desired better assurance that his preaching achieved its goal. As reported above: “One of the frustrations with preaching is that you don’t know, really don’t know what has happened to that word that God has given you.”

At the return session, B indicated he had used some of the exercises from Florence in attending and describing, which gave him a fresh way of approaching the Scriptures in his preparation.

B has a very deliberate approach to his preaching at funerals for which he happily reports that “people speak most highly.” He prepares for this preaching with a very deliberate attentiveness to the bereaved family:

I pump them for information (sometimes to the point of annoyance) when I visit them ... because I want to get a proper picture of who they are. I don’t then do the eulogy in the sermon but I do try and fit the sermon to the person in a way without compromising the gospel still ... (to) assist the congregation – the friends and family and others who have gathered – to hear the gospel and (the) hope in relation to that person as well as in relation to themselves ...

B expressed the difficulty of engaging listeners in intentional evaluation. One practice that he has used infrequently is to provide questions in the pew bulletin to prompt listeners to engage with the preaching in an alternative manner. However, he recounted that to his dismay in a meeting of Church Council members gave such

inordinate attention to the relocation of chairs which made it appear that any critique or evaluation of preaching was of much lesser importance.

One intriguing comment was the wish that there could be a readout, a type of “soul-o-meter”, to gauge listeners’ condition of faith before and after the church service and especially the preaching!

Critical examination

What is God doing?

B’s understanding of preaching as participation in the *Missio Dei* was a strange mixture of commitment and an almost dismissive uncertainty. His expression of “the word that God has given you” is expressive of God’s direct action in the preaching. However, the difficulty in knowing whether that word “gets through” or the ironic observation that the likes of Balaam’s ass could be a more effective agent, are evocative of the desire to be alive to God’s presence, and suggest uncertainty in discerning that presence.

What is purpose, intent and meaning of preaching?

The motivation for preaching for B is that the gospel will “get through.” His notion of “getting through” carries with it a mixture of motivations. The scriptures are to be used with intelligence and discernment rather than rehashing or proof texting and thus a level of intellectual rigour so that the gospel is not compromised. At the same time, he feels that he should throw himself into his preaching, with a dependence on God so that rationality can be abandoned as in his wife’s words he “comes alive.” This mode of engagement contrasts with his espoused theology.

The concept of the gospel getting through is strongly suggestive of a need to impose a meaning and understanding of the faith on the listeners and thus is weighted toward didactic. His report of his preaching at funerals carries the peculiar mixture of receiving positive feedback but achieving that “by pumping” the grieving family even on occasions to the point of annoyance to get a clear picture of the deceased person to deliver a message that has an impact.

Preaching and the Preacher

As a preacher B sees himself as being called by God and this is a fall-back validation of his ministry: “if you don’t have that relationship, that spark, that led you into preaching, that God thing, then why on earth are you doing it in the first place?” This privileged position leads him to observing that he gets “to reflect and hear more from God.” In the flow of the group conversation his “hearing more from God” was not explored, but B values his position as preacher because he carries the privilege of the priestly function of hearing and speaking the word God has given. Thus, he persists in this calling even though often frustrated by less than satisfying responses from listeners.

This privilege of preaching carries with it the responsibility of leadership and B’s language conveys a strong and sometimes ponderous sense of his place over and against the listeners. Thus, B’s statement: “I have the tendency to forget about the grace of God at times; and to think it’s all about me saving the world and the church,” expresses a level of uncertainty and dissonance which is perplexing, even troubling. He sees his preaching as important; but doubts its effectiveness. He seeks to be theologically exact; and then casts that aside to “come alive” in his wife’s words. He wishes to relate to the listeners; but he expresses a position of power over the listeners, even using violent language of “Chinese water torture.”

Preparation and Delivery

B strives for diligence in his preparation and delivery in that he does not countenance a Saturday night approach to preparation, and his preparation for funerals was equally as intense. The privilege of being able to reflect more and hear what God is saying carries with it B’s intention to deliver the gospel properly and this implies a weighting toward didacticism.

His occasional use of questionnaires with the pew bulletin in order for the listeners to engage the sermon in a different manner is alternately a creative attempt to “get through,” or a subtle admission of his concern that his preaching could be more effective if accompanied by those pew note prompts. B’s persistence in the face of uncertain results was expressed in the unfortunate expression of “Chinese water torture.”

Evaluation

B appreciates the informal feedback which expresses appreciation for his preaching – particularly in relation to funerals – and his wife’s positive support. However, a formal process of evaluation and feedback appears to be outside the scope of B’s experience. The attitude of a routinised group of listeners where the location of chairs has inordinate importance suggests that significant culture change would require great effort. B’s desire for a “soul-o-meter” is perhaps an offhanded remark, but also his recognition that a better responsiveness from listeners would be a welcome change.

Changes in approach to preaching

B’s significant change in his approach to preaching had been to adopt some of the exercises in attending and describing presented in Florence’s chapter “The wide-awake Sermon.”²²⁸ B’s participation also indicated that the meetings had provided a fresh opportunity to explore his attitude to preaching.

Participant D

Self-description

D had undertaken a transition in ministry from regular congregational ministry to aged care chaplaincy in the last decade. That move had brought with it the opportunity to listen to other preachers on Sundays because in aged care facilities worship is often conducted on week days rather than on Sundays. The change to being a listener had brought with it the difficulty that D’s theological education made listening to sermons presented by other preachers on Sundays more challenging – “at times that has been frustrating.”

For D being the preacher is also challenging. The experience in the past of regular preaching with a congregation has been difficult:

I think there are times in a congregation where I know, even during the sermon, I have almost said to myself ..., “I think you should just stop, ... just cut your losses now and let’s get to the cup of tea quicker.”

²²⁸ Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 131 – 158.

However, there have been gratifying occasions: “When it does come together it’s one of the most satisfying things in ministry.”

The change to aged care chaplaincy has brought new challenges: “I become a lot more focussed on what I say ... and try my darndest to connect.” Sermons are typically shorter and require greater concentration in preparation. This is amplified by the fact that there are “varying degrees of cognition.”

D approached preaching in the congregational context with a strong emphasis on the need for “hours and hours” of exegesis of the “God-inspired” Scriptures.

Nevertheless, doing the exegesis well still left the challenge of connecting the gospel with people’s lives and the desire to “not be a stumbling block for people and their relationship with God” with the prayer, “Lord, speak through me or in spite of me. Let only that remain which is of you.” He felt that often it was a struggle to present preaching which was more interesting and engaging:

I think that preparation for preaching feels like hard work. ... I feel like my preaching could be more interesting ... One of (my concerns) would be the appropriate use of anecdotes and illustrations – it has always been a struggle to me.

D’s candour was a welcome part of the discussions and his sense of struggle with preaching was somewhat relieved with the move to aged care chaplaincy.

Apparently, the need to connect had enabled a more relational approach in contrast to the heavy emphasis on an exegetical approach.

I have to sit on it a bit more ... all that stuff about social study, the what is the Greek saying – the nuances of that – does that lend itself to something; and in the midst of that to be open to this whole question – this whole thing about the here and now and what is God continuing to say ...

The result for D was a greater comfort and willingness to attempt a different approach. At the return meeting D was more positive in his approach to preaching. The feeling conveyed was that through the experience in aged care together with the input from the first research meeting he now had the confidence to approach preaching in an engaging way:

That has always been a challenge for me in my preaching (seeking to intentionally make connections from the text to contemporary life) ...I think I could do the biblical stuff OK; but then sometimes making the connections,

the “so what” stuff... it has changed the starting point a bit – like I’m ... tending to start from stuff that is happening to people ...

For D the entire research project had been a valuable experience – examining preaching with acceptable vulnerability, receiving instruction, and implementing it: “I found it really valuable, both the process and the content; and the opportunity to get together ... because I haven’t really done that post-college ... and that has been sadly missing in my experience.”

Critical examination

What is God doing?

For D the relationship between preaching and God’s action, particularly in his ministry before moving to aged care, was one of complete self-abasement: “Lord, speak through me or in spite of me. Let only that remain which is of you.” Such an expression has the curious detachment of God’s action and mission being strangely dissociated from the preacher and even possibly from the listener. The “hours and hours of exegesis” appear to be aimed at preaching and knowing God without a sense of personal engagement. In contrast, “When it does come together it’s one of the most satisfying things in ministry,” suggests that D does occasionally experience the relational aspect of the *Missio Dei* almost to his surprise.

What is the purpose, intent and meaning of preaching?

D’s reliance on an exegetical approach and his desire for personal detachment from expressions of God’s presence and action in preaching is evocative of preaching with a defined outcome and is thus weighted toward didacticism. However, D’s transition to aged care ministry has drawn him toward a non-didactic approach as he tries his “darndest to connect.” In the situation where cognitive impairment and decline is more likely he has found that a more relational approach is more effective. This was also expressed in his desire to make connections with people’s lives.

Preaching and the preacher

In his ministry with a regular congregation D apparently imagined that any recognition of his personal engagement – only God should be present, nothing of self – would be contrary to effective preaching. This apparent humility may be

laudable, but it fails to recognise the reality that the preacher will inevitably tell his own story.

I recall a story, presented in one of the many clergy meetings I have participated in, of the young and recently ordained preacher who spoke in a manner which showed no emotion or liveliness. When challenged about this approach, the response was that the preacher should keep themselves out of the picture and allow God to speak. The challenge in return was, “Surely you are presenting a deadpan and uninteresting God.” D’s move to aged care had, consciously or unconsciously, brought a corrective to this self-abasement.

It has to be hoped that D can adopt or grow into a spirituality of “friendship with God” which can be a lived experience of a relational faith and which is “the story” that determines his approach to preaching and to all aspects of ministry.

Preparation and delivery

In his earlier ministry the hours and hours of exegesis of the God-inspired scriptures indicate the sense of biblical preaching where D could only preach when he had gained mastery over the text. Then the delivery would apparently be a virtual imposition on the listeners of this mastery of the text and could imply his tendency towards coercion and hegemony, and was often less than satisfying. On the occasions when the preacher feels that he should “just stop, ... just cut ... (his) losses ... get to the cup of tea quicker,” he has virtually resigned himself to ineffectiveness; and wishing that there might be more times when it did “come together” in a satisfying way. D did express the desire to modify his preparation and delivery to a more relational approach, and the change to aged care chaplaincy was apparently requiring this approach from him.

Evaluation

This was effectively an alien concept in D’s ministry, and, apart from the requirement to participate in professional supervision, it would appear that it will not be a formal part of his preaching ministry.

Changes in approach to preaching

D's participation in the research project was a part of his yearning for a more effective approach to preaching. His dissatisfaction with an exegetical emphasis, except on the infrequent occasions when it did "come together," and his transition to aged care ministry was accompanied by a desire to be able to use anecdotes and illustrations to make connections. This movement was confirmed in his participation, though he felt that he needed to continue his quest further.

This change in approach had obviously brought about a revised understanding of D's intent and of himself as preacher. The imposition of a particular scriptural interpretation on listeners was no longer an effective approach. For D this was coupled with the desire to use story and anecdote to more effectively make connection with contemporary life and indicated a movement away from a didactic approach.

D welcomed an exploration of a non-didactic approach to preaching as it opened up possibilities for preparation which could give a better experience of preaching.

In the congregational setting D's usual self-evaluation was less than encouraging, and it is difficult to imagine that he would have engaged listeners in any form of evaluation. Evaluation in the aged care setting would call for alternative ways of reviewing his ministry effectiveness.

For D the research had proved helpful in two ways. It was welcomed as a form of in-service training which had been lacking in his ministry, and it also gave him added insight into an alternative, that is a non-didactic, approach to preaching.

Participant F

Self-description

F was recently ordained and had very limited prior experience of ministry, unlike other participants who had experience in youth ministry prior to ordination. Her initial reaction to the first meeting was: "Bring it on!"

This eagerness was reflected in many of her comments, albeit with a certain level of frustration. For example, in her response to listening to preaching she is clearly looking for greater depth, but typically not finding it:

Often, I can't find the take home message or how the message applies to my life ... I keenly try to be engaged with the preacher and often at the end of the sermon I don't understand what has gone on, and there is a lot of retelling the stories from the Bible just in a different (format)...

I find it difficult to focus if the preacher isn't engaging or hasn't prepared well and you can tell that – quite often.

F finds preparation gratifying, challenging, and even “hard work” on occasions: “personally I enjoy that hard work because to me, if I am not putting in that hard work, I am not doing what God wants me to do.” This means that where she encounters what she sees as poor preparation she is disappointed “because you can tell when a preacher is themselves bored or they are not liking (it) - you know they had ten minutes to prepare their sermon ... They are not enthusiastic.”

This strong commitment to good preparation and authentic preaching is further frustrated by F's perception of the response, or lack of response, on the part of listeners:

One of the issues I often think about is there are very few ... in our congregations ... (who) go home and get into the Word²²⁹ and read their Bibles – so often I think the people who come to church expect us to teach them those stories in the Bible because they are too lazy to go home and do it themselves and learn about it so on one hand I often think, well, I need to teach them what this story is about because they are not looking into it themselves; but that, in essence, is teaching to the lowest common denominator where there is a handful of people who do faithfully go home, get into the Word, try and understand it themselves, read the passages before Sunday services.

The possibility that preaching might be a divine encounter appeared to be occasional more than customary for F, who said that that it was a “sometimes” event. Further,

²²⁹ It is difficult to know whether to capitalise “Word:” but with the particular emphasis given to this concept by some preachers and listeners, the capitalised “Word” is used to attempt to capture the importance given.

her surprise at people's responses indicates that her preaching can at least come near to this quality despite her personal sense of below standard preparation:

I've had a couple of occasions where people come up to me afterwards and said you really spoke to me through that today and I sit back and go, "I don't feel like that I did anything – I didn't get time to prepare."

F responded to the challenge seeing herself as a "friend of God" in order to deliver authentic and life-giving preaching with reluctance and almost a sense of unworthiness. "God must come first and then the skill of preaching can be applied. If God isn't at the centre of our preaching, we'll likely only reflect our personal views." However, "It's almost like I am not worthy to be a friend (of God). We can be a child, but not an equal friend."

At the return meeting F responded that the whole exercise was a welcome undertaking early in her ministry with the comment: "I wish we had been taught this in college."

Critical examination

What is God doing?

F expressed a definite sense that God had called her into ministry and of participation in the *Missio Dei*, albeit with a definite burden of commitment to the hard work required. She finds great personal fulfilment in her strong sense of biblical application, of "getting into the Word." I want to add that the concept of "getting into the Word" has intrigued me for some time especially the force with which it is expressed in some circles. A quick scan of the web to explain the meaning of "getting into the Word" describes it as verse-by-verse Bible exposition, teaching and application.²³⁰

What is the purpose, intent and meaning of preaching?

For F preaching is reliant on "getting into the Word" and has to have a take home message with an application to her life. Thus, she was disappointed, even derisive,

²³⁰ See, for example, "Into the Word." accessed 22 October 2021, <http://www.intotheword.net/>.

of preachers who, in her estimation, failed to give adequate preparation or essentially were retelling the biblical story. She viewed some of these preachers as essentially uninterested in ministry: bored or disliking preaching.

An interesting contrast to this intensity was F's reaction to the occasions when after what she considered inadequate preparation some listeners had responded quite positively to her preaching: "you really spoke to me through that today." Apparently, she failed to recognise the twin possibilities that God can and will speak through her preaching even when she is not expecting that, and that with such limited preparation she may actually be speaking with a more authentic personal voice as a testimony to her faith.

Preaching and the preacher

F's sense of vocation expresses itself in a certain compulsion that demands the hard work "if I am not putting in that hard work, I am not doing what God wants me to do." This sense of obligation to do the "hard work" is evocative of a need to impart a correct message and thus of a didactic approach. This was also reflected in her reluctance to see herself in the spirituality of friendship with God, preferring the ascription of a child of God. Allied to this self-understanding is her view and frustration with listeners who do not apply themselves rigorously to "getting into the Word."

This raises the issues of pastoral care and spiritual leadership, and the inevitable telling of her own story. The description of listeners as "lazy" is effectively an attitude of condescension and almost disdain. This approach to listeners will inevitably leak into her preaching and relationships with listeners. Hopefully as F continues her ministry development, she will develop the skills and attitudes by which such pastoral relationships can be addressed.

Preparation and delivery

For F preparation is a God given responsibility that deserves her diligent attention by which she expects to provide a lasting impact and encourage listeners into their own diligent application of the biblical message. Comments like "I need to teach them

what this story is” indicate that her sermons are weighted toward a didactic approach as she endeavours to encourage or even cajole them out of their perceived laziness

Evaluation

F did not include evaluation into her approach to ministry.

Changes in approach to preaching

While F did not enunciate any specific changes in her approach to preaching, she did express warm appreciation for the research project with the comment that such teaching had been lacking from her degree and ministry formation and thus it was the opportunity to examine preaching at much greater depth including the possibility of non-didactic preaching.

Participant G

Self-description

G approaches preaching with a mixed sense of welcoming his call to ministry and the aspiration that he could deliver better preaching:

There are some days when I feel like that worked, that was good and some days when I feel like I could have done that better. But ... I still have a strong sense of well, here I am by God's grace, here I am preaching because God called me to do it, ... so whether I have a personal sense of satisfaction or disappointment it is still that underlying sense of this is God's business these are God's words I trust in that.

G acknowledged that time constraints for sermon preparation were a concern in his desire for effective preaching. He also recognised the transition from an earlier naivety to a more scholarly and questioning approach that came with entry into ministry and accompanying theological education, nevertheless, the simplicity of the past still had some attraction. Nevertheless, his response to preaching was similar to others in that, despite these concerns combined with his introversion, he enjoyed public speaking generally and preaching, in particular.

G recognised the mixture of motives within himself – both an egoic performance and a sincere desire to provide effective ministry:

Yes, there is something of my sense of ego or my sense of wanting control or my sense of wanting to be the big fellow with the knowledge. But at the same time there is a genuine, sincere desire to do it well – not for my sake, but for

the sake of those who around me, or for the sake of the church, or for sake of that person who does need to realise that God is actually alive and present and doing something in their life.

In that sense he was willing to be innovative, and his description of a sermon based on Psalm 23 displayed qualities of non-didactic preaching:

This Sunday just gone, instead of a monologue sermon I had a dialogue sermon, which was effectively a conversation between an individual and God based on the 23rd Psalm. ... (A)s I was preparing ... I just had a strong sense of this is a personal ... psalm. I could talk about the shepherds and their activities and how does that relate to God and what does God do and all that kind of stuff. I just had a strong sense of this is a personal psalm. The Lord is my shepherd. So I turned it into a dialogue with God. I had another person be God and I was me. I had an about average number of positive comments afterwards that said, "I appreciate that." That was worthwhile doing, I really felt (its impact on me).

G has recognised the power implications of his ego intruding into his genuine desire to serve and preach effectively, but expressed a desire to preach without reliance on personal ego and to enable listeners to grow in their faith:

Ultimately ... it comes down to: that they get who God is ... [to] be amazed by who God is, that they catch hold of the vision God offers to us and so chase after that ... [That is], God being heard or recognised or honoured or revered or known.

G recognised that this intent carries with it the risk that listeners' responses could primarily be expressions of looking for something interesting, even entertaining, rather than for growth or intensification of their relationship with God. Thus, interesting preaching may not be an appropriate criterion for evaluating effectiveness, and G noted that in the heritage of the Old Testament prophets, some will not listen. Thus, G recognised his need for an awareness of the lived theology of listeners.

For G the concept of "friendship with God" was somewhat novel, and he began to surmise that such a way of expressing faith would have a wider implication for the church than simply applying it to preaching. This was resonant with his desire to gain a better appreciation of people's personal theology and with his agreement that

trickle down theology – theology from the expert theologian handed down to those less expert – is not an appropriate model of ministry.²³¹

G reported that participation in the two meetings and the period of application had been helpful, with the opportunity to use the different exercises in attending and describing as a fresh way of approaching the text. His response to the research proposal “Evaluating a non-didactic approach to preaching” raised two significant concerns for him about preaching in general. Firstly, G recognised that, while preaching was accepted as a customary, even necessary, part of the conduct of worship, typically it was rarely formally examined in terms of intent, desired outcome, and style. In consequence, G knew that informal commentary and critique – even “roast parson for Sunday lunch” – was inevitable, he saw that there had been minimal attempt to consider the issues of what made for effective or quality preaching.

G recognised that until at least some members of a congregation had themselves been educated in or had come to a considered approach to effectiveness in preaching, it would be very difficult to engage in any practice of evaluation.

Secondly, G valued the attempt by the research to address the underpinning theology, motivations, methods, and spirituality of preaching, but he wondered whether its impact would be similar to his experiences of attending one-off seminars for professional development and training. These typically provided a warmth of expectation and ministry competence at the time, but on returning to the life and demands of everyday ministry the warmth and good intentions engendered at such training seminars faded with very little, if any, resultant change.

(I)n my experience ... I go to attend something I go to attend a seminar or workshop ... and it is all lovely and good – and I get a nice buzz out of it, but then come home and get caught up all the chaos ... and try to actually discipline yourself to have the space to actually practice those new things that were discussed at that workshop or seminar. It flows right out the window without any sense of you know follow up or accountability and then it is hard to actually self-discipline yourself to that.

²³¹ Woodward, “Theological Reflection” 132-133. See also Jeremiah 31:31-34, and Acts 2.

Consequently, he hoped that the research would carry forward into some form of regular professional development.

Critical examination

What is God doing?

G's approach to ministry conveys a mixture of genuinely believing he is called by God into ministry which he happily accepts as including regular preaching. His desire for listeners: "that they get who God is, ... (to) be amazed by who God is, that they catch hold of the vision God offers to us and so chase after that," indicates the sense that the *Missio Dei* will be a lived experience for preacher and listeners. This was accompanied by his recognition that the concept of friendship with God, though somewhat novel, had wider implication for the whole church so that such an expression of faith cannot realistically be limited to the preacher.

What is the purpose, meaning and intent of preaching?

G's commitment in preaching is that the listeners have an encounter with God: "God being heard or recognised or honoured or revered or known." Thus, striving to make preaching interesting can run the risk of it becoming a form of entertainment rather than a hoped-for deepening of their faith. As indicated in G's sermon on Psalm 23, this intention in preaching will be closely related to scripture.

His acceptance of the importance of scripture and the scholarship accompanying the study of scripture did raise the complexity of a living faith which has moved on from the simplicity of earlier naivety about which he had some mixed feelings. Through G's journey of faith and his movement into ministry he has been maintained in his personal sense of God's call to preach. In G's exercise of this call he recognises that trickle down theology with its presumption of a superior position is an inappropriate approach to preaching.

Preaching and the preacher

As a preacher G presented a strong sense of his call to be effective. His approach to a spirituality of friendship with God as providing a perspective, not only for the preacher, but also for the whole church carried the sense that his ministry and preaching was expressive of belonging within the *Missio Dei* as a community of faith.

G's self-awareness in terms of the part played by his ego was refreshing. The recognition that in part he wanted to be the expert who dispensed wisdom, meant that he was keenly aware that a didactic approach to preaching was always a constant temptation, but that very awareness made it less likely and thus indicated that he was the more likely to adopt a preaching style which was weighted toward a non-didactic approach.

His desire for effectiveness meant that on occasions, as in the Psalm 23 sermon, he sought creative ways of delivering the sermon. This quest for effectiveness was balanced by a realistic self-awareness of the risk of his ego wanting him to be "the big fellow with the knowledge."

His reference to the Old Testament prophets whose message was not always heeded expressed two possibilities. Firstly, G is committed to his calling, and that sense of call is dependent on his faithfulness to God's faithfulness rather on his or others perception of his successes. Secondly. On occasions as the demands of ministry crowd in and as there are times when he feels jaded by the requirements of preaching, he wishes for an easier life – perhaps somewhat akin to Jeremiah 29:7 – 18.

Preparation and delivery

G did not report at length about preparation. However, his statement that, "Ultimately ... it comes down to that they get God," displayed a readiness to prepare in a manner which would invite listeners into a growing relationship with God. This approach together with his readiness to seek creative ways of delivery indicates that his is diligent in preparation and open to fresh and alternative ways of delivery. His intention in preaching of offering the opportunity for people to grow in their faith and his sense of engagement with the people indicates preaching which is weighted toward a non-didactic approach,

Evaluation

G's approach to the theme of the research project, "Evaluating a non-didactic approach to preaching," indicated a quite realistic approach to implementing a formal

program of evaluation. He believed that to be done well at least some members of the congregation would need education in the processes of preaching and evaluation. for it to be realistically implemented.

Changes in approach to preaching

G responded favourably to the research project. The exercises in attending and describing from Florence had further assisted him in his preparation of preaching which already indicated a weighting toward a non-didactic approach. His desire for a continuity or follow through of the project – otherwise the “warm fuzzy” effect will be lost in the demands of ministry – showed that he valued continuing professional development as long as it could have a lasting impact.

Participant J

Self-description

J had come to ministry as a mature age candidate and her eclectic experience of churches and her range of prior life experience, particularly in education, exhibited a quest for genuineness and enthusiasm in preaching:

I come from such an eclectic background when I reflect over more recent years, I found preaching that I was listening to was more about social justice, personal development, anecdotal stories, jokes – very little biblical application or engagement ... (B)ut where was God – where is Jesus – where is the teaching – the encouragement – the building - the uplifting – where is it and it wasn't there?

In her present situation J saw a need to educate the listeners:

There are people who have been sitting in churches for 20, 30, 40, 50, 60 years ... and they never really have heard the story ... at no more than Sunday School level... and they just turn up on Sundays and they don't really have an expectation –. ... I have told these people that God will meet their needs. ... If you think I have got all the answers – I haven't. It's God's business, and you need to be listening for what God is going to speak to you about; but then I have to engage the text – I have to educate – didactic teaching – I literally have to say, “This is the story.”

The challenge in J's approach is the mixture of seeking to liberate the listeners into a new, or renewed, experience of their relationship with God while offering the possibility that listeners can engage in their own discernment and discovery to

participate in the process of hearing and acting “what God is going to speak to you about.”

I want to have heard from God and deliver the message that he wanted ... (I want them) to have the sense of the Holy Spirit moving in the service and the people leave knowing they have been in God's presence through ... words, song or prayer; and that is what I want to see happen and sometimes I only realise I got the right message when I hear from the songs.

I often say to the congregation, “This is how I have perceived it – this is how I have understood it... but you have to take it away and make it yours – study it for yourself because you are only hearing one point of view ...”

Of all the participants J was nearest to the label of charismatic with her emphasis on the activity of the Holy Spirit and the expectation that the Holy Spirit should be active in her preaching, and in fact, in the entirety of worship. She regretted the lack of capacity among listeners to be able to express that reality:

I find a lot of people really can't articulate a sense of the Holy Spirit and we have to change the concept of coincidences into God incidents ... when they start looking at their lives and seeing how things just happen, they can see how God is actually moving in their lives. ... You know God is in control and that is the Holy Spirit moving and that's the divine moving in their lives and creating and working and empowering. I'd like more of them to understand that sense.

J encountered an unexpected demarcation on arrival at her ministry appointment: “I was told it is not your job to manage the church. ‘You do the preaching on Sunday and pray.’” She had disagreed with such a view and maintained her part in the leadership of the congregation.

During the three month interval between the first and second meetings J began the process of seeking written feedback by inserting a limited number of questionnaires randomly into the normal pre-worship handouts for listeners to answer and return anonymously. In this sampling method there were four questionnaires based on a very simplified approach to André Resner’s questionnaire²³² and composed with my support. The four different questionnaires were distributed on the same preaching occasion with the intention of providing an introductory experience of giving feedback (in contrast to Resner’s detailed examination of a sermon). The questionnaires do

²³² André Resner, “No Preacher Left Behind,” 342 – 343; also Appendix 1.

provide an introduction to the concept of evaluation and offer the opportunity for further development of J's approach to it. They are included in Appendix 5.

At the second discussion J retained her enthusiasm for preaching and with the intent that listeners were free to discover their own meaning in the text; and they were expected to engage in that exercise:

I just say we are all in this together – and I often, before I preach, (say), “This is my ideas. This is how I am understanding it. You might understand it quite differently, and I can tell you a bunch of theologians are understanding it differently. ... I am only sharing how I understand it. You read it and come up with your own understanding.” Straight away we are all on the same page.

This again illustrated the mixture of a didactic approach with offering listeners the opportunity to discover their own, and potentially different, expressions of faith.

Critical examination

What is God doing?

For J, the *Missio Dei* as expressed in her approach to preaching had a strong emphasis on leading a group of long-term church attenders out of a routinised view of faith with a “level of understanding of the Bible ... no more than Sunday School level” into a renewed condition of life and faith. Thus, she expressed an eagerness for listeners to recognise the Holy Spirit active in their lives. This did not appear to be accompanied by any introduction to spiritual discernment, especially for listeners routinised in their faith except that biblical literacy and application were seen to be key aspects of participating in the *Missio Dei*.

What is the purpose, intent and meaning of preaching?

J's eagerness to impart a sense of God at work in listeners' lives as well as her own life and using her approach to the Scriptures determines her intention and motivation for preaching:

I want to have heard from God and deliver the message that he wanted presented to meet the outcomes that he has desired because I don't know what they are and to have the sense of the Holy Spirit moving in the service and the people leave knowing they have been in God's presence through ... words, song or prayer.

J's response to her previous experiences as a listener gave a clear indication of her view of inadequate preaching. A mixture of social justice issues, personal

development and glib presentations which lack any clear biblical application or sense of God's direct involvement in people's lives was in J's understanding ineffective preaching.

Preaching and the preacher

J has a clear passion for preaching and, while enthusiasm of itself is an insufficient criterion for authentic and effective preaching, J's conversation in the discussions added a reassuring possibility, as she talked of encouraging listeners to engage in their own discernment. J's approach to the listeners expecting that they will determine their own responses and engagement with the evaluation process displayed a love for both the listeners and the act of preaching. As previously indicated J's intention was primarily educational which resulted in a form of didacticism in her preaching, but, as above, this is balanced by the noncoercive openness of encouraging listeners to determine their own responses to the messages she delivers.

For some preachers, the task of preaching to a group of routinised church attenders could lead to what is sometimes described as "palliative care" for a declining congregation, allowing the congregation to go to its natural demise and closure. However, for J, her own experience of faith and her concern and love for listeners, excludes such a possibility. A question that emerges is, without discounting God's capacity to transform, when a congregation has reached a point of routinisation and they utterly resist change, how does the preacher respond?

Preparation and delivery

J's approach to preparation and delivery carries the intensity of absolute trust in God's sovereignty: "You know God is in control and that is the Holy Spirit moving and that's the divine moving in their lives and creating and working and empowering." This same intensity appeared to apply to her readiness to embrace the possibility of evaluation as a means of improving effectiveness and as a participation in the research project.

Her delivery appeared to be weighted toward a didactic approach to preaching as she her preaching in term of: "you need to be listening for what God is going to

speak to you about; but then I have to engage the text – I have to educate – didactic teaching – I literally have to say, “This is the story.” This was moderated by the encouragement to listeners, having heard her sermon seeking to educate them, to then go and seek their own insights and understanding. This demonstrates that J has a didactic approach to preaching, but it also offers noncoercive encouragement to listeners to develop their own responses.

Evaluation

J was the only participant who attempted to engage in evaluation, albeit in a basic form – see Appendix 5. This readiness did indicate that the beginnings of an evaluation process could be entered into with the hope that it might be further refined.

Changes in approach to preaching

For J her calling to instruct, guide and evoke personal responses from listeners remained undiminished in both meetings. Her implementation of an evaluation process displayed her support for the research and the intention of improving the effectiveness of the preaching experience for both herself and the congregation.

Participant K

Self-description

K was unable to engage in the return meeting because of illness. Nonetheless, his comments in the initial one-day meeting do offer insights into his approach to preaching. In his case, his length of time in ministry means that he has become more relaxed with preaching:

I used to focus so much on the mechanics of getting it all right, what you'd been taught, and consequently I never had much freedom in preaching and it was always a bit of a chore. Since then, I've learned to chill out a bit more and let God do what he wants with the words that I preach whether I always follow the notes or not.

His change in preaching was expressed as: “I've looked back over some of my old, old sermons and I thought, ‘Good grief, did you preach that? I couldn't believe that – horrid.’”

He naturally expects that among listeners there is a range of responses. While some see sermons as “a necessary interlude in worship,” others expect “to pick up something that will help them with an issue they are facing, perhaps, or help them get through the week.”

K acknowledged the risk, even grave risk, of didactic elements in preaching and pastoral relationships, especially when it is injurious and pastorally inappropriate:

I've seen some horrendous things. Even recently with my son's mother-in-law who died of cancer and was told by the elders of her church that she was going to be healed – absolutely. And it's just the heartache that went across the whole family was devastating.

K's response to such absolutist and pastorally insensitive pronouncements in the context of a discussion on preaching was that any presentation “has to be firmly rooted on God's word (the Bible) and presented in a reasonable way.” At the same time, he expressed strong distaste for televangelists who manage to derive misguided concepts by using Scripture well out of context. For example, he recalled that Derek Prince had stated that, because Sarai, wife of Abram, was so attractive in her older years, if you have enough faith, you will not grow old! (Genesis 12).

K's theological position belongs within his Calvinist self-understanding, with its emphasis on the total depravity of humanity so that without the grace of God humanity is always misguided.

[I]n my preparation I ask God to inspire me, teach me so I that can teach some others as well. So, what I look for is for myself is to gain new insights and move more in the direction that I think God is moving me over time and then also for others that in hearing what God is saying to them that their lives can be changed in practical ways in the areas of their lives where they live in their relationship to others, in their relationship with God, in their Christian service.

Further into the conversation he sought a balance between leadership in which we assume responsibility for shaping people's lives and faith which risks moving toward cultic and schismatic understandings, and leadership that acknowledges people's freedom to the extent that we are apparently “free-wheeling” or “anything goes”.

While others found the concept of “friendship with God” to be an overstatement of the nature of a relationship with God, K readily agreed with Fagan's statement that

The skill, the craft and the tools of preaching do not make the preacher. These are important elements of preaching. However, it is the preacher's relationship with God as friend that gives life, power, authority and authenticity to the preaching moment. In other words, it is friendship with God that helps to define the preacher.²³³

For K, preaching is demanding in three ways. Firstly, when delivered with intent "it will take it out of you". Secondly, the sermon is a whole-of-worship undertaking, from entering the church property to the last conversation. Thirdly, the familiarity that comes with long term church attendance can produce a form of inoculation to the message: "They have heard it all before." Thus, with his listening group, as with many other congregations, creating a process for deliberate feedback and evaluation is "going to be a bit of a trick."

Critical examination

What is God doing?

K's view of the *Missio Dei* is that preaching contributes to enabling listeners to "be changed in practical ways," that is, "in the areas of their lives where they live in their relationship to others, in their relationship with God, in their Christian service." K's emphasis on action raises questions of his understanding of a relationship with God. Do the right actions arise out of a sense of obligatory behaviour, or are they generated from a heart and mind that are attuned to God in a living and vital relationship, being lost in wonder, love and praise?" How does the preacher find the appropriate balance between the practical aspects of the life of faith and the invitation to worship in the mystery of God's loving presence?

K raised the issue of some misguided approaches to participation in the *Missio Dei*. Listeners had brought some disturbing approaches to the question of the practical expression of their relationship with God. The excesses of Derek Prince's claims about ageing and those who caused unnecessary pain to the family of a person dying of cancer indicate that there is a plethora of unhelpful and misguided pronouncements that purport to have the authority of the knowledge of what God is doing. This inevitably poses questions of how preachers can speak to these issues with compassion and integrity.

²³³ Fagan, "Towards a Spirituality of Preaching," 6-7.

What is the purpose, intent and meaning of preaching?

K recognised that for some listeners preaching was virtually an obligatory – “a necessary interlude in the worship – aspect of ministry. However, he saw it as the opportunity to provide helpful approaches to practical ways of living a personal faith. His approach always required a solid foundation in scripture.

K mentioned on a couple of occasions in the discussion his aversion to and his disgust at preaching which lays claim to special or particular understandings which do easily become injurious to personal and corporate faith.

Preaching and the preacher

K’s self-awareness of the development of his preaching over the years of his ministry was gratifying in that he could readily see that he had changed in his expression of faith: “I’ve looked back over some of my old, old sermons and I thought, ‘Good grief, did you preach that? I couldn’t believe that – horrid.’” This has been accompanied by a more relaxed approach of not being so tied to the mechanics of preaching. The changes in preaching which K reported raise questions about the effectiveness of his earlier preaching and whether he was receiving guidance, mentoring, supervision, and spiritual direction and in those years.

K’s self-awareness continues in his insight into the demands of preaching: that, when preaching is effective “it will take it out of you and it belongs in the whole of the worship as a package, and that with some listeners the routinisation of having heard it all before requires a special effort at remaining “fresh” This perceptiveness by K was consistent with his readiness to accept Fagan’s concept of friendship with God as foundational to preaching.

Preparation and delivery

K expects that God will inspire him in his preparation for preaching. The discussion, at that point, did not lead on to the nature of that inspiration, and, while K expressed a degree of satisfaction self-awareness in his approach to preaching, the questions emerge of whether he currently accesses the support of mentoring, supervision, and spiritual direction.

K's intention of providing practical help for listeners and the capacity to cope with the week ahead is suggestive of the didacticism of instructing the listeners, but this weighting in his preaching appears to have moderated as with years of ministry experience, he has adopted a more relaxed approach.

Evaluation

For K a formal approach to evaluation had not been part of his ministry practice, and it seemed unlikely that he could easily contemplate moving in that direction

Changes in approach to preaching

Illness prevented K attendance at the second meeting and thus changes could not be assessed.

Participant M

Self-description

M has decades of prior experience in youth ministry which required that youth group activities maintained the members' interest through a mixture of entertainment and guidance. This approach to youth ministry appears to continue in his ministry in general, and to preaching in particular:

We are supposed to be theologians ... in regular preaching to similar groups of people ... you start to know your audience. ... You do start to know their level of theology and what they will accept and what they won't. ...
Again, on Sunday I said, "We go from this place to sow seeds ..."

His attitude to listeners reflected an obligatory approach to preaching, whether it is effective or not: "So there is an imperative there that it is expected that they will hear a sermon. They may not hear it, want it or understand it, but it is a given." This obligation was tempered by M's sense of his own limitations: "I think the idealised expectation is that we are supposed to be the expert, and in no way, shape or form are we." In his approach, M has a sense of the responsibility to offer advice and direction to listeners, even if they choose not to accept it:

... [once one] of the Lectionary readings really grab[s] me ...:
after becoming familiar with the passage and knowing the audience, ...

[I] try to offer a challenge, suggest a change or present a point of action or response, but they don't have to do any of those.

This resonates with his view that preaching can achieve only limited results, which will apparently be primarily a matter of slow development of understanding:

... in a sense God works with trickle down theology because, if he gave it all to us at once, our humanity wouldn't understand it. We need to grow in our own understanding which then opens another door that God can give us the next vista that we have to look at ...

This sense of limitation is also expressed in M's experience of preaching as a divine encounter:

There have been five times when I actually feel like I preached with divine inspiration – and where my dot points went straight out the window and it was a moment and God said, “These people need this.”

Particularly because the research discussions focussed on preaching and not on spiritual direction, this comment did not lead to examining M's process of spiritual discernment.

In the second discussion session, M returned with reports of his mixed reception of some of the exercises from Florence which did not appear to resonate with his particular preparation practices, but his consciousness of his preparation and preaching was now more deliberate. He reported that he meets regularly with two lay preachers as an opportunity for reflection, preparation, and feedback on his preaching; but he did not express a desire to move beyond this approach to feedback to structured and intentional evaluation. Finally, M did indicate the hope that future similar occasions of professional development might be a possibility.

Critical examination

What is God doing?

For M the relation between preaching and the *Missio Dei* is about providing the “audience” with “a challenge, suggest a change or present a point of action or response” which they may or may not accept. The exception was that on five occasions, he felt constrained to abandon the material he had preferred because “God said, “These people need this.”” Such a divergence from his regular practice raises questions. Firstly, how was the discernment of this direction from God

confirmed through prayer, spiritual direction, or consultation with another support person? Secondly, his definite memory of precisely five occasions had obviously significantly impressed him. What was his sense of ministry and preaching at other times? Thirdly, to what extent did his regular preparation have any sense of being a message from God or did it belong in another category of ministry? Fourthly, assuming that such a direct communication from God is a desirable quality in ministry, are there ways of cultivating it with greater frequency?

What is the purpose, meaning and intent of preaching?

M saw preaching as an expected component of worship in which he was responsible to give to the listeners support, advice and direction which matched his determination of what they might find acceptable or at least consonant with their stage of spiritual awareness or growth. This directive approach shows a weighting towards didacticism, and was consistent with his understanding that God works through a trickle-down theology: “if he gave it all to us at once, our humanity wouldn't understand it.” The exception mentioned in the previous paragraph expresses the possibility that God could offer a different approach on infrequent occasions.

Preaching and the preacher

M accepted the obligation to preach, but was quite reluctant to accept the descriptors of theologian or expert. Rather he appears to have seen himself as something like being about a step ahead of the audience – or maybe half a step ahead – and thus able to offer encouragement, support and advice to move forward and “to sow seeds” in their own faith journey.

M's description of listeners as audience, apparently places them in the category of recipients of instruction or entertainment. This tends to objectify the listeners seeing them as “other,” creating an apparent distance between himself and the listeners.

Preparation and delivery

M uses the lectionary as his dominant resource for preaching and is dependent on which of the readings is most suitable to him. Presumably, his reading of the lectionary readings brings a moment or state of mind that means he can derive sufficient inspiration to be able work on it – “becoming familiar with the passage” –

and then offer listeners the challenges or points from this approach. M does not expect the listeners or audience to always find these presentations readily acceptable or important to them.

M's description of listeners as audience and his expectation that his preparation will equip him to offer challenges and points of instruction suggest that his preaching is weighted in the direction of a didactic approach, but with a somewhat *laissez faire* understanding that they may or may not find it acceptable.

Evaluation

M's regular meeting with two lay preachers as an opportunity for reflection, feedback and preparation did indicate that he was open to critique, but that was apparently as far as he was likely to take the issue of evaluation.

Changes in approach to preaching

While M reported little or no change in his approach to preaching at the return meeting and even that Florence's exercise did not suit his approach. His desire for a further extension of the project and of professional development which he hoped could be implemented within the Presbytery showed a welcome openness to examining attitudes to and practice of preaching and all ministry.

Participant N

Self-description

N views preaching as transformational and enlivening both as preacher and as listener, even if there are times when it fails to connect. His sense, on occasions, of not achieving the desired goal is tempered by his striving to give it his best attempt:

Yeah, I actually feel like I've almost given birth in the process of preaching - really enjoy it - I really think this is great - it is flowing - it just writes itself - ... Then in the process of delivering the sermon [I] feel very much that it is an awesome responsibility; and often at the end you know you are going: "Great ... I have to get pregnant again." ...[A]nd in terms of my preaching, [it] has the character of divine encounter sometimes. There are times when I know this has connected - this has fed people; [but] there are other times I know [this has] wasted twenty minutes of people's lives. But all I can do is promise them that I have given it my best effort and that I have never turned up half arsed.

In the conversation on preaching as a divine encounter for which life could never be the same again, N offered the observation that John O'Donohue, Irish Catholic Priest, had said that when people engaged in deep conversations their lives could never be the same again.²³⁴ By implication, effective preaching will engage preacher and listeners in a similar process to deep conversation.

This recognition of the strong relational quality of effective preaching did not appear to be fully consistent with N's emphasis on "the truth" as a requirement of preaching. For him the subjectivity expressed in post modernism is challenging. In a discussion on the importance of a relational approach to preaching, the question of the absolute truth on which to build preaching appeared to exclude the reality of mystery in relationships, with God and within the human community:

N: "These are the things that we are absolutely true and certain about, but don't call them truths, call them relational."

...

PW: But we will perceive them differently.

N: Well, that's irrelevant. Your perception is irrelevant in terms of whether they are truths – that is your bedrock belief system, right there.

While along with most participants N had not engaged in formal assessment or evaluation of his preaching, he did have the benefit of a supportive if sometimes critical father who offered this observation of one of his sermons:

I preached a couple of Sundays ago. My father was in the congregation and he said, "Oh N. I love giving you compliments, but that really wasn't very good, ... you lost me." ... I thought I had a good point ... a really good point – a knock out. For me ... it is about the meaning, and not just the message.

During the presentation on non-didactic preaching, which by its nature necessitated an open and invitational approach, N apparently began to move beyond an absolute truth approach. He made the observation based on his viewing of Martin Scorsese's movie "The Silence" that preachers should be comfortable to leave a sermon open to interpretation, "not to deal with all the loose ends." In that way listeners can go away and process the material. N concluded this part of the discussion with the comment:

²³⁴ See John O'Donohue Home Page, 2 August 2021, (johnodonohue.com) accessed
See also Jenn Granneman, "Why We Need to Have Deeper Conversations" Psychology Today, 2017, 20 October 2021, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-secret-lives-introverts/201706/why-we-need-have-deeper-conversations> accessed.

Yeah, if we want God to keep doing work with people and for them to own it, we can't push full stop at the end of the sermon. It needs to be commas or dot, dot, dot ... We want this to be the beginning of the work that people are doing not the end.

In the return meeting N identified three points of interest: firstly, the privilege of listening to quality preachers in the recent past; secondly, the privilege of following an effective preacher in his ministry appointment; and, thirdly, his strong desire to have his preaching well scripted.

Critical examination

What is God doing?

For N preaching and concomitantly faith are intimately connected to absolute truth. Thus, the *Missio Dei* will be best known and preached in terms of knowing truth as absolute truth. In the conversations the possibility that openness and the relational quality of life were discussed, but the sense that N conveyed was that absolute truth was of paramount importance as a bedrock belief system.

What is the purpose, intent and meaning of preaching?

Preaching the absolute truth N saw as life-giving and thus transformative. When the conversations challenged his view of preaching to consider it as divine encounter in which preacher and listeners could never be the same again, N recalled the work of John O'Donohue to indicate that deep conversations were similarly transformative. Similarly, the movie "The Silence" reminded N that preaching might be most effective when it allows listeners to develop their own conclusions: "We want this to be the beginning of the work that people are doing not the end." At the conclusion of the one-day discussion it was apparent that N continued his quest for absolute truth, but also a view of relational truth was beginning to open for him.

Preaching and the preacher

N had a particular passion for preaching using the metaphor of pregnancy as his approach to preaching and that his expectation for the next preaching event was the opportunity to get pregnant again. However, to continue the metaphor it did seem that some preaching occasions sometimes has the quality of a misconceived pregnancy: "there are other times I know [the sermon] wasted twenty minutes of

people's lives." Nevertheless, N was determined that he would continue to pursue the possibility of delivering effective preaching which actually did connect with the listeners.

Preparation and delivery

N expresses the strong desire to be well prepared so that he could present the absolute truth as he was discerning it. For this purpose, he reported preaching from a well scripted manuscript and avoided going off script having great reluctance to *ad lib*. The intensity of this approach indicates that his preaching is strongly weighted toward didacticism.

This same intensity was also expressed in the strong vernacular of sporting imagery: "a knockout point." Thus, he imagines that on occasions his preaching will have the force to convince, even coerce, the listeners into accepting the bedrock truth.

Evaluation

N's father had on one occasion provided some negative feedback, albeit in a most supportive manner, but it appeared that N was reluctant to enter into any formal approach to feedback and evaluation.

Changes in approach to preaching

For N preaching as the delivery of absolute truth remained a strong passion, except that his comment: "if we want God to keep doing work with people and for them to own it, we can't push full stop at the end of the sermon," did show the possibility he could allow listeners to go on to determining their own truth. Along with other participants in the research project, he valued the opportunity the project had presented clarifying both his attitudes and practice as a preacher.

Participant R

Self-description

R brought a cross-cultural perspective to the research and discussion. He indicated that his mother tongue or “heart language”²³⁵ came easily to him; but that thinking, writing, and preaching in English is a challenge. Though R’s contribution to the discussions was predominantly listening, he did bring useful insights, including the reminder that belonging to a dominant culture too easily brings a blinkered approach to faith, preaching, and, indeed, to the whole of life. Additionally, at the conclusion of the research process – first meeting, implementation period, and second meeting – he valued the experience and welcomed the opportunity for further sessions if that was possible.

Consistent with other participants, R has a positive expectancy of preaching: “I am always expecting when I am listening to a sermon to hear a message of hope and good news.” For R expectation is too often not met. The discussion at that point moved on to the fact that “good news” can take time to be realised and that we may have to face hard situations before reaching the ultimacy of “good news.” His response to the researcher’s comment “suffering is the crucible for revelation” brought a strong, “Yes.” This was given added strength later in the discussion as he expressed the difficulty of living in the text when facing extreme difficulty. He offered that living in the text and seeking to know God’s purpose and direction can be “really tough – tough on me and my family.” He shared that in his close family and cultural group, the death of close family members in tragic circumstances was deeply troubling, causing enormous grief. His heartfelt response was deeply challenging: “God’s plan (is) hidden somewhere there and I can just be faithful and keep on – well – walking the journey.”

R’s cross-cultural experience was a constant reminder that understanding concepts in different cultures and languages can be demanding. For example, as in Greek

²³⁵ “Heart language” is a term used by Wycliffe Bible Translators, among others, to indicate a person’s native or first language so that it is the best language for expressing their deepest feelings and thoughts.

there are multiple words for “love,” similarly in his heart language several words are used to describe relationships of differing levels of intimacy.

In the discussion on evaluation, R presented two issues. The first was the responsibility of having a lay preacher who was clearly inadequate for the position: “when he preached, there’s hardly any people coming to church.” It was clearly a difficult problem and it seemed that R was struggling to find a solution – “my biggest challenge in ministry.” The other was his burden of bridging the cultural and language divide. He had been able to gain the support of two trusted lay people who could support him with honest feedback. Such feedback is inevitably invaluable. However, it is noted that such an arrangement has the potential to become an exclusive or special relationship; and the Uniting Church “Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice”²³⁶ offers careful instruction about how such circumstances may lead to favouritism.

Critical examination

What is God doing?

R’s highly challenging experience of the tragic death of several family members gave the question of God’s presence and action a stark existential edge. It is not surprising that R responded to deep tragedy with “God’s plan (is) hidden somewhere there and I can just be faithful and keep on – well – walking the journey.” R’s continuance in ministry and his faithful journey brought a salutary moment to the discussion.

R’s desire that preaching should be an expression of the good news and thus of the *Missio Dei* expressed the hope that God can and should be active in preaching. Unfortunately for him this hope was not always realised in some of the preaching he had listened to.

²³⁶ Uniting Church in Australia, “Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice,” accessed 6 October 2021, <https://www.assembly.uca.org.au/images/assemblies/appendixdcoe.pdf>.

What is the purpose, intent and meaning of preaching?

R's desire that the good news would be heard in preaching was given added force in recognising his cross-cultural experience. Concepts and assumptions in one culture – typically the dominant culture – are not always easily transmissible into a different culture. R's presence in the group he attended and in the research reinforced the need to be constantly aware of cultural bias.

Preaching and the preacher

R's ability to span two cultures was testament to his commitment his preaching ministry.

Preparation and delivery

It is difficult to imagine preparing in one particular language's thought forms and simultaneously translating it into a second language. R is thanked for highlighting this issue.

Evaluation

There is a sense in which R's capacity to bridge the cultural gap is sufficient evaluation in itself. The support of two trusted lay people has to be invaluable in this process. However, the support of culturally sensitive professional supervision or spiritual direction would surely enhance this process. The problem encountered by R in offering evaluation to a lay preacher gave added poignancy to the question of effective feedback and evaluation.

Changes in approach to preaching

R's contribution as a non-Anglo participant encouraged the other participants in his group to think outside their usual approach to preaching; and R valued the opportunity to explore his own approach to preaching.

Participant T

Self-description

T has a mixed experience of preaching as both listener and as preacher. As listener his best experience was to be totally engaged and this occurs when "the preacher connects to me and my story." In contrast, there are occasions when he has been

bored and even embarrassed. When preaching, T strives to achieve a “knockout point”, but recognises the risk of losing people on the way. The term “knockout” is somewhat perplexing, as it connotes control and violence, even giving the sense of inflicting wounds on listeners. Thus, consciously or unconsciously, for T the ability to win, through an apparently didactic approach has greater importance than a relational and invitational approach to preaching.²³⁷

T has experienced the mixed results of sometimes sensing that God is actually speaking through him but at other times the response from listeners has been the inverse of his expectations. T posed this perplexity in terms of less than enthusiastic responses to what he had thought was a good sermon, and excited acceptance at what he described as a “dog’s breakfast.” He also experiences mixed responses in the expectations of listeners. Some want a comforting, even soothing, presentation, whereas others are looking for a challenge for life: “relevant now, not 40 years ago, not some future period, but when I walk out of this building.” These expectations from listeners are (at best) partially aligned with the outlook derived from his ministry training with T’s perceived prescription of “three main points ... with some kind of application within 20 minutes and having everyone tearfully say(ing), ‘Amen, Lord,’ at the end.” This apparent sarcasm about college expectations was testament to T’s perception that ministry preparation was inadequate at this point.

T’s desire to be an effective preacher was to see people connected to God:

God is speaking both to us and through us, and often despite us, to God’s people in ways that connect God’s story to their stories. And for me effective preaching is about doing enough for that connection to occur and not enough to get in the way – just finding the right amount.

The wisdom of hindsight is that the issues raised in the likes of this comment could have been further probed with questions such as: “How do you know when you are ‘just finding the right amount?’”

²³⁷ See, for example the critique of Philip Jensen and Paul Grimmond, *The Archer and the Arrow* ...in Chapter 1, footnote 46.

With T's comment, "There is no excuse for slackness in preparation," he expressed his intention to be diligent in his preparation. His aim is always to be faithful to God, the text, and the people.

(The aim is to) learn something about myself in the process, learn something about God ... about Scripture, history, theology ... it is more an aspirational thing. It is great to know that you have connected with someone – you don't always know that, it is good to know when it does.

Thus, T posed the question: "Is it possible to preach so that it means that life can never be the same again, in the manner of 'deep conversations?'" He was encouraged by the memory of attending a Global Leadership Summit and the impact that Brené Brown²³⁸ had as she spoke with depth and vulnerability: "She just spoke like she was talking to you at a coffee shop; but she could have said anything after that because I was hooked, because she was speaking to me, not to the crowd." It appeared that, while T admired such presentation skills, he knew that his delivery was at least sometimes not of that quality.

For T the desire for effective preaching seemed a real possibility, but at times elusive – simultaneously filled with expectancy and hope and a type of dread that it might be an unfortunate failure:

... there are times it feels like I just managed to get through the service – phew it has finished – another is I know God has been speaking to and through me. There are times when I have thought it was a complete dog's breakfast and other people have said, "Wow that was awesome," and times when I thought I hit it out of the park and people go. "OK, you lost me."

In the return meeting T was keen to present his preaching plan for the following six months, "I took a weekend off ... and we prepared the preaching plan until Advent." In the context of T's desire to achieve a "knockout point" it appeared that a preaching plan was another structure by which he could "stay on the front foot" – to use another sporting metaphor.

²³⁸ Casandra Brené Brown (born 1965) is an American professor, lecturer, author, and podcast host, see Brown, Casandra Brené, "Brené Brown," accessed 31 July 2021, <https://brenebrown.com/about>

In summary, both in the first and second meetings T expressed a strong desire to deliver preaching weighted toward a didactic approach and engaged both himself and the congregation, but at the same time being somewhat aware of both his limitations and vulnerability in that endeavour. Nonetheless, he was quite appreciative of the opportunity provided by the research to take time for serious reflection on preaching.

Critical examination

What is God doing?

For T the *Missio Dei* as an expression of connectedness with God is central to preaching except that he experiences a “hit and miss” outcome. That is, sometimes he senses that his preaching, and the preaching of others, is effective, but at other times it fails to achieve the desired goal: “God is speaking both to us and through us, and often despite us.”

What is the purpose, intent and meaning of preaching?

Connectedness with God is central in T’s understanding of preaching. However, for T this intention can be expressed in an overpowering delivery: “a knockout point.” This coercive language sits alongside the sense of the mystery of a “dog’s breakfast” delivery which T observed may be more effective. The dissonance of this mixture of intent and outcome is also expressed in T’s concern that in the process of connectedness he and his delivery may be an impediment to listeners’ reception of the message. “for me effective preaching is about doing enough for that connection to occur and not enough to get in the way – just finding the right amount.”

The risk of “getting in the way” raises the questions of whether T sees his personal ego as an impediment to effective preaching or whether his relationship with God may be a hindrance for others. T’s preaching, where he is inevitably telling his own story, that is, his understanding and experience of faith is both implicitly and explicitly being expressed, appears to have a level of doubt when he imagines that it might possibly “get in the way for listeners. The question arises: is it possible to invite people into a relationship with God where all can grow in the love of God and of the shared life, faith and love of the community of faith?

This concern about possible interference in people's relationship with God calls for the exercise of discernment. The preacher, together with the listeners, requires the capacity to discern the connectedness between the preacher's words and presence and their relationship with God and with each other. Typically, such discernment will need the support of others including a spiritual director. By implication the preacher's personal relationship with God is pivotal to any preaching event,²³⁹ and concomitantly with all ministry encounters. As T aptly expressed it in the context of life's most challenging situations: "theology that means nothing to the grieving family is equally useless in the congregation."

T's consciousness of the listeners' expectations was simultaneously encouraging and challenging. The recognition that some want comfort and ease while others want relevance to their current situations demonstrate T's connectedness with listeners and his readiness to endeavour to find the most effective way of preaching to such diversity. It appears from his cynical comment about his ministry training: "three main points ... with some kind of application within 20 minutes and having everyone tearfully say(ing), 'Amen, Lord,' at the end," was not particularly helpful for this purpose.

Preaching and the preacher

T's desire for connectedness is quite evident, as expressed in his memory of and warmth toward Brené Brown's presentation at a Global Leadership Summit as she spoke with depth and vulnerability. However, for T this connectedness is not always achieved in his preaching. His desire for a knockout point – "I thought I had hit it out of the park" – can result in apparent bewilderment: "OK, you lost me." Conversely, his perception of a muddled or dog's breakfast delivery can bring a quite positive response.

T's desire to achieve a highly convincing delivery is evocative of a didactic approach to preaching, and, though he seems unaware of it, his apparently less than professional approach is more likely to include the vulnerability and authenticity of an

²³⁹ See the secondary cycle of Theological Reflection in Chapter 2 which concluded that in preaching: "You only ever tell your own story."

invitational or non-didactic approach. This also raises the possibility that T's production of a preaching plan for the months ahead was expressive of a desire to achieve effectiveness and to be in control of his preaching.

Preparation and delivery

T seeks to be most conscientious in his preparation with the very positive aims of learning about self, God, scripture, history and theology. His desire to learn "about" these issues raises the questions of whether the learning is predominantly an intellectual exercise rather than the deeper consciousness of relational and spiritual understanding and personal insight that Brueggemann, Dykstra, and Florence express respectively as prophetic imagination, being discovered by the sermon, and living in the text.

Evaluation

While T received and even welcomes informal feedback, up to the conclusions of the meeting formal evaluation apparently did not fit into his approach to ministry. If T were to engage in a feedback and evaluation process, he and his listeners would need a significant cultural shift away from an implicitly coercive or didactic approach to preaching toward a shared invitation to live in God's love through a non-didactic presentation of shared growth in faith and spirituality.

Changes in approach to preaching

T welcomed the research project with its examination of attitudes and practices. His decision to take time off to produce a preaching plan of themes for the months ahead indicated that he valued the practice presented in the discussions of engaging an intentional schema of preaching themes. His practice in preaching had undergone little change, but the exploration of non-didactic preaching had widened his view of preaching.

Participant V

Self-description

V began with the comment, "One of my strong giftings is in the area of being a pastor, and so a lot of my preaching is shaped by the pastoral needs of the people." He spoke of preaching as a "relational thing – not a purely functional thing." It would

include a prophetic element, even “a word of challenge where there is a sense of being complacent or stuck in our thinking or practice,” and a word of comfort for those needing support and reassurance. Challenge, comfort, and encouragement belong together in his preaching. He recognised that this raises challenges for him as preacher – “meeting the diverse needs” of the people on “the different stages in their journey of faith.” He understood that this would inevitably require hard work, which is “not necessarily a negative,” rather “there is fruitfulness or reward about that.” Not surprisingly, V yearns for, and even expects,

The sense of the message coming alive within me as I proclaim the word. That’s when I know that authenticity and integrity ... that sense of my whole self being animated and even consumed in the expression of the message.

Interestingly, for V the “sense of the message coming alive within me” did not, or had not, been seen or expressed as “friendship with God.” He made it clear that his faith development readily accepted the idea of “a relationship with God;” but friendship suggested an unacceptable familiarity with God. With the unpacking of “friendship with God” in terms of benevolence, mutuality, and becoming another self for the sake of the other, and being sacramental, relational and transformational, and also its consistency with John 15:15 he found the idea of friendship instructive:

I just found [that expression] incredibly helpful ... [with] the sense [of] friends share things with each other. But that is different to the context of other relationships ... that sense of God whispering the truth to be revealed. ... [This reminds me of] the Walk to Emmaus [Luke 24:13 – 33] ... that companion, journeying together, the enlightenment wasn’t realised until the breaking of bread.

V’s understanding of the relational quality of faith and of preaching was also expressed in terms of the gospel being a dynamic reality. He saw the gospel as a continuing story: “We say that Genesis to Revelation is the *logos*, and then we have the *rhema*, which is the ongoing revelation of God to us. ... That takes them [the listeners] beyond the four gospels and is their lived experience.” For V this ongoing story has its climactic moment in personal “salvation.”²⁴⁰ In discussing varying

²⁴⁰ In this context I take “salvation” to mean the consequences of personal post-death experience.

responses to the creation narratives, six literal days or other interpretations, his response was:

One of the questions that turns over in my mind, ‘Does this affect my salvation or your salvation – our shared understanding or different perspective on this matter – does it have any bearing on our salvation?’ No.

V’s mode of presentation has changed from preaching without notes to having a scripted sermon. He did not explore the reason that he “lost confidence in his ability to do so;” but he strives to be so familiar with his sermon text to be able to “provide good eye contact across the congregation, knowing what is coming next.” This endeavour to relate well – good eye contact – with listeners was also reflected in his further reflection on friendship with God and on the concept that you only ever tell your own story

That reflects (on) ... we tell our own story, which I think comes down to ... this key thing of being friends with God (of) undergoing that constant transformation, because we have a fresh story or fresh dimension to tell all the time. If we are stale on that relationship, we tell the same story because we are stuck or stagnated ...

While V is still developing a process of evaluation, he is implementing the practice of engaging a group from the congregation who will “evaluate the worship as a whole ... including the sermon ... on a three-weekly basis (because longer than three weeks meant that too much is forgotten).” The effectiveness of this process has not yet been determined because it is in its early stages.

For V the second meeting after several months for implementation indicated that the first meeting had brought an added quality to his preaching with, a fresh approach which was non-didactic:

A sermon I preached ... around the story of Ruth, but taking some of the principles you gave us ... in terms of “we place ourselves in the text.” ... I actually shared the story of Ruth as if it was Ruth telling her life story to her grandson, David; and that freshened a whole lot of things up.”

...

It certainly made a difference for me in approaching the text and thinking, “Okay, so there are multiple ways I can enter into this;” and I think as a preacher it very easy to be caught in a rut ...

Though V initially expressed some reluctance to participate in the research, he was very grateful for the insights provided and for enabling him to grow further in his capacity as a preacher.

Critical examination

What is God doing?

For V the *Missio Dei* had two main foci, pastoral care, arising from his self-description of “my strong giftings is in the area of being a pastor” and personal salvation, presumably the assurance of a correct relationship with God both in this life and beyond. His understanding of “logos” and “rhema” as respectively the word of God spoken through the Scriptures and God’s direct communication in present circumstances reflects a particular understanding of faithful reception of God’s word, though the biblical use of the two words appears to be equivalent.²⁴¹ Nevertheless, V’s expression raises issues of inspiration in preaching and the reception of God’s word in the present context as “that sense of God whispering the truth to be revealed.” Further, the appropriate discernment and validation of God’s communication inevitably require a community of faith where spirituality and spiritual direction are valued components of their common faith.

What is the purpose, intent and meaning of preaching?

V’s strong emphasis on pastoral care and the pastoral impact on preaching expresses itself in his desire to preach relationally giving support and comfort for those in difficulty, and presenting challenge to those who are complacent. V views scripture as having continuity to God’s word (rhema) which is received in the present life of believers. Thus, the scriptures are not a static resource, but must be accompanied by a strongly relational approach to God’s action and presence in life. That relational quality is also expressive of V’s emphasis on salvation with the result

²⁴¹ See, for example, Mark and Patti Virkler, *4 Keys to Hearing God’s Voice* (Shippensburg, Destiny Image Publishers, 2010), Chapter 4, “Key #1: Recognize God’s Voice as Spontaneous Thoughts.” However, Gerhard Kittel (Ed.) and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Ed. And Trans.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol IV* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmanns Publishing, 1967), makes the point that in reference to the sayings of Jesus “there seems to be no distinction between (the two words),” 105.

that the understanding and interpretation of scripture is determined by its salvific impact

V accepts the challenge of preaching to address listeners and pastorally meet their needs at differing stages in their Christian journey. This conveys an apparent soft and indulgent approach to the grace of God similar to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of cheap grace.²⁴² V's strong pastoral approach appeared to give priority to pastoral support – "a lot of my preaching is shaped by the pastoral needs of the people" – over against responding to what God is doing in the lives of preacher and listeners.

Preaching and the preacher

V's desire as preacher that the message should "come alive" within himself is resonant with the concept that if the sermon does not speak to him or feed him, he cannot expect that it will do anything for listeners. The confidence expressed in coming alive invites spiritual discernment to determine whether this state of mind, preparation and readiness is alive to what God is doing or some other expression of the preacher's personal passion or even a misguided theological position.

With his strongly relational approach, it was somewhat surprising that for V the spirituality of friendship with God conveyed an excess of familiarity. Upon explanation V did find the concept acceptable and instructive. It is interesting that for a preacher with an undeniable pastoral intimacy and familiarity with his congregation, that the idea of friendship with God should have been strange and even difficult to accept.

Preparation and delivery

For V preparation can be challenging, even hard work, but that was not a point of discouragement. Rather for V it was the point at which the message could "come alive" within him. V's admission that he had moved from speaking without script to now having fully scripting his sermons was interesting. While he ensures that he is so familiar with his sermon that he can speak and "know what is coming next," the question remains of why he had made the change. Had he lost confidence in his

²⁴² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London, SCM Press, 2001), 3 – 6.

ability to recall the material he had prepared, or was there another impediment or critique that caused him to change?

Evaluation

V was the only participant who was already in the process of implementing a systematic program of evaluation – on a three-weekly basis. Future research might provide opportunity to review the effectiveness of this program.

Changes in approach to preaching

At the return meeting V was enthusiastic about the way in which the project had enabled him to add to his ways of preparing and presenting a sermon as in the example concerning Boaz and Ruth. His emphasis on a strongly pastoral approach had remained, and was consequently complimented by a deepened insight into this approach.

Participant W

Self-description

W's attitude to listening to other preachers was instructive and refreshing. He stated that his experience of preaching had moved from critical, even judgemental, to accepting personal responsibility for worship and preaching either as preacher or as listener:

When I listen to someone else's sermons, my question is, "What does God want to say to me?" ... The person might have been traditionally boring; but (with) a line they would say, (I) would just go: "Oh!" ... and I'd allow myself to jot notes in (my) book.

Similarly, his approach to preaching expresses a similar intent:

(M)y aim is for people to have had an encounter with the living Lord, that is, helping them to love God, neighbour, self a little better in heart, soul, mind and strength; and from time to time for that to be a tipping point in their life.

I was nearly bored out of the church and so one of my passions is to not bore people. ... "(W)hen did the good news become boring?" ... (O)ne of my passions in life is to make sure that the good news is good news – and good news is compelling ...

W recognised the limitations of his position and status and the concomitant social privilege – male, middle class, well educated, and embedded in an Anglo culture – as having the risk of compromising his ability to preach to others in the community. He reported that some of the listeners from more working-class circumstances and others from a range of ethnicities commented that the children’s sermons spoke more to them, and they responded with a: “we get that.” His story telling in sermons does include personal references referring to the way in which preparation – “how I have wrestled with this scripture” – has changed him. In that way he sees his preaching as having authenticity even when preachers from a previous generation are critical of his approach:

older, retired ministers (who) were taught you never talk about yourself - it's about God - to talk about yourself is to promote yourself; but if it is not authentic for me, if people can't see how it has changed me, ... how can it change them?

W clearly engages with enthusiasm and is very conscious of listeners and their differing responses. As indicated above, he always wants to preach in ways that avoid boredom in his listeners, but some of the feedback he receives says that his energy in presentation tends toward overwhelming.

My mentors have actually said, “It is best W if you don't take the whole service because you come with such energy (that) people are exhausted by the end. It is actually better to – say – get someone who is the opposite to do the other bits, but then you come on with your energy ... Whereas, if we have some slow, reflective prayers, then, OK we have these so and that has been a good reflection ...

Nevertheless, W reports that he wants to avoid a sense of being domineering. In the discussion of a non-didactic approach to preaching, W found the concept of non-didactic preaching was different, even strange, to him. The poem “Word of God” quoted as the opening of the Introduction, offered W insight into the concept of non-didactic preaching:

Word of God²⁴³

Word of God,
leafing through my Bible
seeking a proof text out of context.

²⁴³ Peter Woodward, *Poetry*.

Word of God,
the preacher demands
all should follow his interpretation.

Word of God,
you have made us for yourself.
Help me to hear the cries of pain
felt deep down
in myself
in others
and in your love.

W described a sermon where he had preached on trusting God with your finance which was full of advice and (uncommon) common sense: “it was very pragmatic – avoid gambling – avoid debt as much as you can – and so that was telling people what to do – but from some of my people I got the feedback – ‘Oh that was so good.’” In reflecting on the sermon W pondered whether it was didactic or non-didactic. In seeking to resolve this dilemma, W accepted that his presentation had been instructive and thus didactic. Nevertheless, he recognised that it avoided the coercive elements that are in many cases linked to didacticism: “I was fairly straight with some things; but I suppose I wouldn't say, ‘You must do this or you must do that.’”

At the return meeting, W continued to express his enthusiasm for preaching, and, because the concept of non-didactic preaching had not been explored with him before, he was interested to explore the issue further in relation to his current practice. Further, while he has mentors who provide feedback and he receives informal feedback, he had not yet discovered the means of achieving formal and intentional feedback.

Critical examination

What is God doing?

For W preaching is integral to the *Missio Dei*. His observation that both listener and preacher have a responsibility to be open to God's message indicate his expectation that preaching will invite listeners – and the preacher – into a place of divine encounter. This expectation was also expressed in terms of “good news” as being inimical to boredom and having personal relatedness for both preacher and listeners.

What is the purpose, intent and meaning of preaching?

For W the purpose of preaching is a personal relationship with God which will be life changing – “an encounter with the living Lord ... helping them to love God, neighbour, self a little better in heart, soul, mind and strength; and from time to time for that to be a tipping point in their life.”

This aim included the practicalities of life, such as the use of finance. In that description W indicated that his purpose was instructive which tended toward a didactic approach, but it avoided the compulsion of direct imperatives usually expressed as must, ought or should.

Preaching and the preacher

In W's personal experience of preaching as listener, he reported that he had moved to the expectation that at some point he would receive a sense of God's word for him. This recognition by W that, even in listening to boring preaching his responsibility was to be open to God, has impacted his own preaching in which he wished to avoid boredom and invite listeners into their encounter with God.

For W his recognition of his status of privilege and influence and his readiness to include personal references to his own wrestling with scripture indicated a concern for authenticity and a vulnerability consistent with preaching weighted toward a non-didactic approach. Possibly, W's approach had elements of being overbearing as he reported that for some listeners his energy was “too much.” The support and helpful critique which W happily reported and accepted had brought a corrective to this apparent excess by the inclusion of others in worship leadership to bring a more reflective approach in other parts of the worship.

The question of discernment can be raised. How do W and his mentors determine that the messages from God are authentic and not the product of a fertile imagination or some level of egoic posturing? W's reporting of and responses to mentors indicate his readiness to engage these questions even if evaluation was not formally undertaken.

Preparation and delivery

W's enthusiasm was quite obvious. He is committed to avoiding boredom, he knows the need for a careful and heartfelt approach to scripture, his acceptance of his position of privilege is balanced by his awareness of the range of listeners in his congregation, and his readiness to concede the need to include more contemplative parts in the worship together indicate a readiness to accept critique and a strong desire for authentic preaching and worship. Thus, the entire delivery sought to accommodate all listeners with a sense of engagement. This indicated preaching which was weighted toward a non-didactic approach.

W's report that the children's stories were often readily accepted by those of more working-class circumstances and those non-Anglo background was also indicative a non-didactic weighting with the narrative inviting listeners into the plot. "Good stories build familiarity and trust, and allow the listener to enter the story where they are, making them more open to learning."²⁴⁴ When an explanation is provided it is likely to be at least partially didactic; but this is balanced by the openness which is basic to storytelling.

Evaluation

W was very conscious of the feedback offered by a range of people – mentors, retired clergy who critiqued his personal reference, some feeling his energy was "too much," those appreciating the children's stories, and the general affirmations he received as in the case of his sermon on personal finance. However, a deliberate program of feedback and evaluation are not (yet) in place.

Changes in approach to preaching

W continued to report his enthusiasm for preaching and did not indicate any changes in his practice of preaching. However, the exploration of his attitudes to preaching and their underpinning theological content confirmed for him that his approach was largely appropriate and also gave him opportunity to further explore his preaching

²⁴⁴ Vanessa Boris, "What Makes Storytelling So Effective For Learning?", accessed 30 December 2021, <https://www.harvardbusiness.org/what-makes-storytelling-so-effective-for-learning/>

style and content. His desire to further extend the project in critiquing his preaching expressed a readiness to be open to greater effectiveness in his preaching.

Participant Y

Self-description

As is the case with AR the not quite expected can eventuate. Y is an occasional preacher who was invited by another participant to join one of the research groups and in the invitational spirit of AR his contribution was accepted. His experience as a supply preacher and his eclectic background across several denominations enabled him to provide some useful commentary about preaching and about ministry in general.

Y expressed a particular interest in being a biblical storyteller; and that the stories of scripture well told can be very effective in making faith a living reality. His passion for biblical story telling caused him to question the need to use other stories outside the scriptures. It appeared his particular giftedness in which story telling was apparently innate may have caused him to underestimate the difficulty faced by others not similarly gifted.

Of particular import was Y's comment on the moment of grace:

More is not always better – stop at the moment of grace. So, if during the preaching ... there is a moment of grace, then don't keep saying, "I want to listen to more and more." Stop at the moment of grace and allow that engagement to happen.

His comment carries with it the assumption that the preacher or story teller has the perceptiveness that recognises this "moment of grace" and how to follow that with appropriate concluding commentary. In short, he was saying that it was inappropriate to prolong the listening experience and thus to conclude with minimal additional words.

Y's passion with his story telling ministry was given added force with his quest: "How do I be (or become) a sacred minister more so than a minister of sacred things?" That is, he expressed the desire to avoid being a mere church functionary, and that he would engage in his ministry, particularly his preaching and biblical story telling

from a place of spiritual depth with the concept of being a sacred minister etched into his personhood.

Critical examination

What is God doing?

Y provided the important reminder that faith in God's activity – in the *Missio Dei* – is typically expressed in story, and that preaching will often include such narration.

What is the purpose, intent and meaning of preaching?

Again, for Y the importance of stories, especially biblical stories, cannot be overstated. It may be most effective with those who are gifted as story tellers, but that may also mean that others should practise and rehearse because stories are always an invitation to engage at the listeners' point of connection. Of equal importance is the discernment to "stop at the moment of grace," to use Y's wording.

Preaching and the preacher

Y's desire to be a sacred minister (story teller) rather than minister of sacred things was one of the more profound insights expressed during the research project, because he clearly saw the importance of his sacred calling as providing the impetus for his ministry and storytelling.

Preparation and delivery

While Y did not particularly mention his preparation for storytelling, it was clear that for him it had to be accompanied by a passion for the story, the familiarity with the narrative which enabled the story to become deeply embedded in his heart and mind, and the capacity to connect with the listeners in the delivery.

Evaluation

Y was not dismissive of the concept of evaluation, but it was not part of his regular practice. Nevertheless, his desire to be a sacred minister does suggest an openness to participation in any evaluative process.

Changes in approach to preaching

Y's passion for storytelling continued through both meetings and his engagement in the project was quite helpful, but while he did not report any changes in the practice of his preaching or storytelling, his ready engagement in the project was indicative of the intent to enhance his preaching in general and his story telling in particular.

Research Summary

The data provided by the thirteen participants, for which they are warmly thanked, provided an illuminating range of responses in terms of their underpinning assumptions, motivations and practices around preaching. The analysis of data will be summarised under the five key categories and the changes that occurred for the participants.

What is God doing?

Participants responses ranged from preaching as a regular, even obligatory, part of church life through to an expectation that God is active in the worship of the church and should be anticipated in the preaching. Among those whose dominant outlook was a sense of obligation in ministry, the expectation and hoped for outcome was that the gospel would get through or that people would be persuaded through convincing argument made as a result of typically careful preparation. Among those who saw preaching predominantly as an expected responsibility in ministry the preaching was usually weighted toward didacticism. For those who approached preaching with the expectancy that God would be active and with the anticipation and hope that listeners would know God as inviting them into a living relationship, their preaching was weighted toward a non-didactic approach.

What is the purpose, intent and meaning of preaching?

Participants' responses ranged from a sense of difficulty with preaching, so that ironically Balaam's ass might be a more effective agent in the process, to the conviction that preaching should not be boring because that would be a contradiction of the concept of preaching as good news. Those whose preaching tended toward a didactic weighting typically expected that their preaching either would provide guidance or practical assistance, or would offer convincing expression of the gospel and in the case of one participant the absolute truth of God.

In contrast the participants who reported preaching weighted toward a non-didactic approach expected that listeners would know themselves in an encounter with God which, to use W's words, it might on occasions be "a tipping point in their lives." Some of their sermons did include instructive elements, but not in a coercive manner, rather with the intent that listeners were given the invitation to make their own response.

Preaching and the preacher

The participants range of motivations in ministry and preaching reflected the motivations for ministry discussed in chapter 2: escape and pleasure, keeping the rules, pastoral care, and response to what God is doing. The following examples illustrate the differing motivations. One participant saw his responsibility as that of being the expert addressing the "audience" even though he felt unqualified for that role. Those who strive to convince or even cajole listeners to accept the message (to "get into the Word") tend to exhibit a motivation aimed at getting their preaching right as it conformed to the gospel in order to convince the listeners. One other participant clearly sees his pastoral ministry as paramount and that his preaching provided support and guidance for listeners. Those participants with both a clearer self-awareness and an expectation that preaching should have the potential of a divine encounter were typically aware of their limitation and yet expectant of encountering God in the ministry of preaching.

Preparation and delivery

All participants spoke of approaching their responsibility as preacher with diligence and care. Four are used here to illustrate differing aspects of preparation and delivery. For D the change from congregational ministry to aged care had taken him from "hours and hours of exegesis" to trying his "darndest to connect" particularly with listeners at differing stages of cognitive decline. His transition to a more liminal ministry had apparently facilitated the insight that the foundation for effective preaching is not singularly careful exegesis, but a more comprehensive engagement with listeners. Further his feeling during some sermons of thinking he should cut his losses and get to morning tea earlier was no longer applicable.

Secondly, for N preparation was expressed as being akin to getting pregnant – an intriguing metaphor for a male. With his emphasis on absolute truth, N apparently felt that in preparation he could gain new, even exciting, insights into the expression of this truth which he could then preach. This mode of preparation and delivery were not always effective as evidenced by his father’s comment. It has to be hoped that more preachers have the support of respectful, even generous, relatives and friends who love to give compliments and offer genuine feedback.

Thirdly, J presented an interesting mixture of didacticism and non-didacticism in her approach to preaching as she expected to hear from God what should be presented and taught, and then added that listeners should go away and give their own attention to the Scripture. Her expectation that she would receive a message from God and that the Holy Spirit was and is active in the act of worship and preaching carried the hope that preaching should actually participate in a divine encounter. Thankfully, the encouragement to listeners to do their own searching and study did provide a balance to what might otherwise have been a strongly didactic and egoic approach in which she became the singular conduit for receiving God’s message.

Fourthly, for Y his need for strong familiarity with the narrative in his preparation could enable him to “stop at the moment of grace” for the listeners, thus providing the reminder that in storytelling and in preaching sensitivity and discernment are key enablers of effective delivery.

Evaluation

Except for participant V who had begun the process of regular evaluation with his congregation before his participation in the research project, and J who began an initial evaluation procedure during the research project, feedback and evaluation were not a regular practice for the other participants, and did not become so throughout the course of the project. This reflected the fact that for formal evaluation and feedback to become a normative practice there would need to be a significant culture change for both preachers and their congregations.

Changes in approach to preaching

All the participants engaged in the research project with ready involvement with no withdrawals (apart from K, who withdrew for health reasons) which indicated that they found the process quite acceptable. Their ready involvement in examining their own attitudes to and practice of preaching suggests that they found the authenticity, vulnerability and non-judgemental procedure conducive to developing their own openness to changes in their approach to preaching. The fact that all participants who completed the project were grateful for the process, and that three participants expressed the desire to continue in exploring their own practice of preaching indicates that the research project facilitated opportunity for attitudinal change. While changes in the practice for each participant were limited, it remains to be seen what will be the lasting impact of the research project.

Additional and unexpected issues

The research project was designed using an AR methodology to evaluate a non-didactic approach to preaching by working with groups of Uniting Church ministers to examine their attitudes and approaches to preaching, to introduce them to the concept and practice of non-didactic preaching, and to receive their reports on the changes in their attitudes to and practice of preaching as a result of this process. AR can by its open and exploratory approach open topics and areas of concern outside the scope of the initial enquiry. These additional issues will variously relate to the research topic, and will typically provide opportunity for further research and discussion and can often give a wider understanding of the area of research.²⁴⁵

Critically important among the additional items is the issue of dissonance.

Dissonance in the context of ministry, spirituality, and theology arises from any tension or disjunction in the beliefs, attitudes, or practices of the person or faith community. Typically, it will involve espousing a particular theological position in one situation, but acting in a manner which differs, even contradicts, that position in another context.

²⁴⁵ Anne Burns, "Action Research," 188-9; and S. Michael Putman and Tracy Rock, *Action Research ...*, 3-19.

A key expression of the dissonance expressed by the majority of participants was the desire that the gospel should “get through,” but their preaching carried the expectation of speech being imposed on the listeners. For example, Participant B approached his preaching for funerals by an intense conversation with the grieving parties – “I pump them for information (sometimes to the point of annoyance) when I visit them” – in order that the gospel is not compromised. He seems to be quite unaware of the dissonance contained in this approach. Additionally, F’s description of those who go home and do not get into the Word as lazy carries the sense that she wishes to direct listeners into this form of response or that she passes negative judgement on those who fail to match this desired outcome. The coercive expression in these two examples cannot be consistent with an invitation to be joined with the *Missio Dei* and to experience preaching life-giving.

Among the participants questions of self-awareness and self-understanding were not directly addressed, but it is noted that the greater a participant’s self-awareness the greater the congruence in their preaching. The lack of this congruence was displayed in a variety of ways. For Participants F, N and T the disjunction between preparation and expected reception of their preaching was obvious. For example, T spoke of being perplexed by delivering what he considered a “dog’s breakfast” and receiving a favourable response as contrasted by his best effort at convincing argument sometimes missing the mark: “I didn’t get that.” Several possibilities emerge in this form of dissonance. It is possible that in their perceived inadequate preparation their preaching had greater authenticity and naturalness because they were unable to compose a more complex argument or contrived speech. It is also possible that they missed the opportunity to recognise that God does act both with and without the preacher’s best efforts. In this form of dissonance, it appeared that the participants lacked a clearly expressed theology of preaching, and were similarly unable to critique the situations of incongruence in order to gain a deeper understanding the way they had prepared, or failed to prepare, and the ensuing outcomes.

Of particular concern in these expressions of coercive speech is the use of competitive, even violent, language. Participants N and T spoke using the sporting images of “knockout point” and “hitting it out of the park”, and B included the term

“Chinese water torture” as an occasional description for preaching. Some might argue that the first two examples are simply Australian vernacular in a nation which is often seen as obsessed with sport. However, the intention to win, and to win convincingly, even if it takes prolonged effort, cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to their preaching. This apparent lack of self-awareness in using such expressions is an issue of concern. The pressing of a convincing argument and/or prolonged “torture” are expressive of power over the listeners rather than the intention to invite all those involved, the listeners and the preacher, into the prophetic imagination of God’s “imaginative or” to use Brueggemann’s terms.

The dissonance associated with lack of or limited self-awareness and understanding is also related to the need for spiritual awareness and discernment. Participants indicated that their intent was to deliver a message from God, but the capacity to determine the validity or reliability of that message was not well articulated. For example, B’s comment: “I throw my personality into it hoping that somehow, I will connect people to God, knowing that my theology says that is rubbish,” expresses a level of uncertainty, the likelihood that he has not experienced “living in the text” to use Florence’s words, and the rarity of experiencing being discovered by the sermon to use Dykstra’s concept. Participant F with her emphasis on “getting into the Word” – a virtual objectification of the scriptures – and her disappointment at those who do not adopt that practice had indicated she had adopted this as the dominant approach to theological and spiritual discernment. Participant W spoke of expecting to receive a message from God even when listening to what he perceives is a typically boring sermon, but did not describe his process of discernment.

The participants who expressed a more developed self-awareness were found to have an appropriate openness and congruity in their approach to preaching. For example, Participant G expressed a refreshing authenticity in recognising that part of him is egoic: “my sense of wanting control or my sense of wanting to be the big fellow with the knowledge,” which is balanced by a “sincere desire to do it well – not for my sake, but for the sake of those who around me, ... the church, or for (those needing) ... to realise that God is ... present and doing something in their life.” Those with a more cogent self-awareness exhibited a more consistent theological and spiritual perceptivity. Nevertheless, the apparent dissonance exhibited by

participants in a variety of ways raises questions about the extent to which they engage at significant personal depth in the analytical and supportive practices of theological reflection, professional supervision, and spiritual discernment and direction, processes which have particular applicability in a postmodern era in which the old certitudes may or may not carry the same weight as in past generations.

Implications and possible future research

The research project raised issues that may have implications for the teaching of homiletics. This thesis has given particular emphasis to a non-didactic approach to preaching and recognised that preaching will be located on a spectrum between didactic and non-didactic. It might well be helpful for those preparing to and developing their preaching skills to be able to assess the preaching of others on this continuum, and similarly to locate their preaching style within that range.

One of the critical issues that has emerged has been the reality of dissonance in the lives and ministries of preachers as a significant contributor to less than effective preaching. The capacity for preachers to clarify and to deal creatively with the sources of dissonance that are possible in their self-understanding and spirituality, their theology of preaching, and the constraints that ministry inevitably places on them is an important factor in assisting them with the quality of their preaching.

The research project was welcomed by the participants and began the process of changes in their attitudes to their ministry as preachers. It also opened the possibility for the research to be taken further in several ways. Some of the participants looked for the opportunity to carry the process forward and receive critical assessment and to enable greater effectiveness in their preaching. This suggests a longitudinal project with volunteers to support and improve their preaching. The concept of evaluation was not practiced in the preaching of the majority of participants. A research project that worked with preachers and their congregations to implement a culture of intentional evaluation and feedback would surely be challenging and a worthwhile undertaking.

Evaluation of the research project

The research project emerged from my expectation and experience, supported by the literature review, that non-didactic preaching is a most effective approach to this ministry and is consistent with the *Missio Dei*. In the presentation of the literature review the five key issues were identified: 1. What is God doing? 2. What is the purpose, intent and meaning of preaching? 3. Preaching and the preacher; 4. Preparation and delivery; and 5. Evaluation, provide a comprehensive basis for examining and for developing a non-didactic approach to preaching.

The research project was set up as a vehicle for presenting a non-didactic approach to preaching by inviting Uniting Church ministers who preach regularly to explore their approaches to preaching, to respond to a non-didactic approach to preaching, and to evaluate their experience of implementing a non-didactic model if they chose to do so. Participants were sought from the South East Queensland Presbyteries of the Uniting Church and their willingness to participate gave the assurance that research of this type had a good level of acceptability within the church. The thirteen participants, as volunteers for the project, were a representative sample of the from the total population of clergy invited into the project.

The initial administration via the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form assured the participants of the confidentiality of the process and of their voluntary status including the right to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. The fact that only one participant withdrew and failed to attend a session for health reasons indicated that the research project was readily accepted by the participants. The single negative comment was that the project risked being yet another form of professional development which had limited ongoing impact because of the lack of follow through. This indicated that of itself the project was worthwhile, but for best effectiveness in professional development programs there is a need for an extended process which would sustain the impact of seminars and the like.

The participants' involvement spanned a period of several months commencing with an one-day discussion session examining participants' preaching and introducing them to a non-didactic approach to preaching. After an interval of two to three

months participants returned to a second half-day meeting to review their experience of the preaching model and of the entire process. The non-judgemental atmosphere of the discussions together with the assurances of confidentiality and the provision of lunch as a shared meal enabled open, trusting and authentic responses by the participants. In order to facilitate the discussions handouts arising from the five key issues were prepared and proved useful prompts in the free flow of the treatment of the issues.

The discussion groups provided the primary source of data (one participant's initial attempts at evaluation with her congregation did add that element to the data) and the use of an unobtrusive recording device was a valuable tool in the data collection. At this point I must again thank my wife for her valuable contribution in transcribing the recordings to text for ease of analysis. The participants had been assured that she would observe the required privacy and confidentiality protocols.

The recorded data was approximately 36 hours of discussion which required that key commentary from each participant was selected as representative of their attitudes to preaching and their responses to the issues offered in the group meetings. Selections of this nature always carry the risk of being filtered by the researcher's bias, and the recognition of this potential heightened the need for careful attentiveness in the selection made and the analysis of the data.

The range of comments made and the ease with which the conversations flowed indicated the open involvement of the participants and thus gave a strong sense of the integrity of the project, and the validity and reliability of the qualitative data collected. The immediate impact of the project was demonstrated in movement in attitudes made by the participants and the thanks received from them together with the desire expressed by some that there might be an extension of the project to offer further support in their preaching ministries. This response does illustrate the limited nature of the research and suggests that ongoing professional development and potential research should be considered by both the researcher and the presbyteries involved. The long-term impact of the project is yet to be determined, but with the confidence generated in the discussion groups. It is reasonable to expect that

participants will continue the process of reviewing their attitudes to and practice of preaching.

Conclusion

This thesis has involved research into a non-didactic approach to preaching. The impetus for the research is set out in the Introduction indicating my passion for preaching and the perceived need to seek ways to enhance the quality of preaching in the life of the church as an expression of the *Missio Dei*.

The body of the thesis covers three chapters. Chapter 1 examines the literature and uses five key issues as a basis for this consideration. 1. What is God doing? 2. What is the purpose, intent and meaning of preaching? 3. Preaching and the preacher. 4. Preparation and delivery. 5. Evaluation. It establishes the case for a non-didactic approach to preaching, that is, a preaching paradigm which values openness, vulnerability, living in the text, attentiveness to God's presence and action in the lives of preachers and listeners and an invitational approach to preaching biblically. By implication this approach eschews the dogmatism of assumed power and correctness in interpreting and applying the text, instead expecting preaching to be evocative of God's always in process of being revealed salvatory relationship with creation.

Chapter 2 provides the approach to and the setting up of the research project. My quest throughout my ministry for authenticity and deepened faith is presented as a continuing process of Theological Reflection. In that process the research project emerges as a cycle of Action Research to engage participating Uniting Church ministers in the process of exploring their attitudes to and approaches to the practice of preaching, to be introduced to a non-didactic approach to preaching, and after a period of months of implementation, if they chose to, to review the whole process.

Chapter 3 presents and analyses the qualitative data gathered in the project where meetings with ministers of the Uniting Church volunteered to participate to discuss their preaching and the issues of preaching non-didactically. The data revealed that the participants ranged across the scope of possibilities of an obligatory, even

doubtful, approach to a deep sense of engagement in God's presence and action in the church and in the world. In the nature of Action Research additional issues emerged, particularly dissonance in the practice and self-understanding of the participants which clearly was an impediment to effective preaching.

The research project, though limited in the length of the interaction with participants was effective in opening for them the possibilities of reviewing their understanding of preaching, and in enabling them to consider new attitudes to the ministry of preaching. It also provided insights into the difficulties posed by dissonance in attitudes towards and practices of ministry. It is hoped that teachers of homiletics will be able to take these findings and use them profitably to enhance the practice of preaching in the life of the church.

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Appendix 1

André Resner's Questions for Evaluating a Sermon

André Resner's questions for evaluating a sermon are quoted here:

1. What is the **gospel** that this sermon proclaims? How does this sermon answer the question, "What in the world is God doing about our world?"
2. What is the **bad news** for which this sermon is good news? Was the bad news of true significance for its hearers? How did the preacher help the hearers identify with the bad news? How does this sermon answer the question, "What in our world is at odds with what God wishes to be?"
3. What is the **focus** of this sermon? What was the sermon basically about?
4. What is this sermon's **function**? What did the sermon do to you in the hearing of it? What is the missional impulse of the sermon, its ultimate rhetorical intent and effect?
5. How did the preacher make the sermon **concrete** for the hearers? Were the concretizations **theologically and experientially adequate to the gospel** being proclaimed in this sermon? Evaluate the fittingness of the concretizations.
6. Were any key **assertions** not followed up with (backed up by) **concretizations**? Can you think of concretizations that would be appropriate as backing for the abstract assertions in the sermon?
7. What theological **doctrine(s)** does this sermon treat? Does it treat the doctrine adequately?
8. Evaluate this sermon's use of the **biblical text**. Did the sermon give evidence that the preacher truly wrestled with this text exegetically, with pertinent and appropriate secondary sources? Did the sermon give evidence of the preacher's personal/existential wrestling with the text? Was there appropriate **congruence** between text and sermon?
9. What **images** worked well in this sermon? Why did they do so? What theological implications are there in the use of these images?
10. How does the sermon participate in God's desire for **justice and shalom**? How so? How not so much?
11. How did the sermon participate in the **apocalyptic** nature of the Gospel?

12. How did the preacher help you experience the **emotional process** of the gospel through the sermon? How did the preacher bring “**head**” and “**heart**” together in the sermon?
13. Did the sermon create an appropriate level of **anxiety** so that the hearers could encounter the gospel? How so? How not?
14. If the preacher moved to “**celebration**,” what was celebrated and did it appeal to **core belief**? How did the celebration reinforce the sermon’s gospel message?
15. Did the sermon **title** create anticipation before the sermon was heard and will it reinforce memory after the sermon is heard?
16. How would you evaluate this sermon’s use of the **English** language?
17. What **other elements** of this sermon stand out to you, for better or for worse?
18. What could be **cut** from this sermon and not missed? Does anything seem to be **missing**? Where would the preacher need to go, or what would the preacher need to do, to provide this missing piece?
19. In the case of a recorded sermon, did the **scripture reading** create anticipation for the sermon, and, did the sermon set up a good hearing of the text? Was there anything in the text that raised **questions** in the hearers’ minds that the preacher did not answer?
20. What is the “**growing edge**” of this sermon?
21. To be filled in at the end of this week’s class session: **What did you learn about preaching this week** from the reading, the reflection, and the in-class discussion? ²⁴⁶

²⁴⁶ André Resner, 342-343.

Appendix 2

Information Sheet and Consent Form



School of Theology

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

“Boring or Divine Encounter - evaluating the effectiveness of a non-didactic approach to preaching.”

Researcher: Rev'd Peter Woodward (BSc, BD, BEdStud, MMin)
undertaking research for a Doctor of Ministry

Supervisor: Rev'd Dr Cathy Thomson, Academic Dean, St Francis College

Co-Supervisor: Dr John Roulston, AM, Chair Bremer Brisbane Presbytery

Invitation

You are invited to participate in a research project on preaching. The study is being conducted by Rev'd Peter Woodward, student of Charles Sturt University, as part of his Doctor of Ministry studies. Before you decide whether or not you wish to participate in this study, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish.

1. The **purpose** of the study is:
 - a. to examine ministers' practice of and attitude to preaching;
 - b. to offer them a “non-didactic” approach to preaching;
 - c. to evaluate with them their experience using a non-didactic paradigm; and
 - d. to offer the results to inform the methods of teaching homiletics in the Uniting Church.

2. **Selection process:** Ministers of the Word and Deacons will be sought from the following Presbyteries -Bremer Brisbane, The Downs, Moreton Rivers and South Moreton, who:
 - a. are volunteers for the research project on improving the effectiveness of preaching,
 - b. preach regularly, and
 - c. are willing to discuss, implement and evaluate a non-didactic approach to preaching.

3. The **research schedule** will be:

- a. Phase 1 - a one (1) day seminar type meeting for exploring effectiveness in preaching by means of a Focus Group, followed by an interactive presentation of non-didactic models of preaching, aimed at improving its effectiveness;
 - b. Phase 2 - a 2-3 months' period of implementing a non-didactic model of preaching adopted at the one-day seminar (During the implementation phase the researcher will be available for support.);
 - c. Phase 3 - a 1–2 hour Focus Group on your experience of the chosen preaching paradigm introduced at the seminar; and
 - d. Phase 4 - analysis and writing up of the research data obtained during these stages.
4. The **research methodology** is Evaluation Research using an action reflection cycle to evaluate a non-didactic approach to preaching.
5. **Risks and Benefits:**
- a. The only potential risk is that some assumptions about preaching could be challenged, hopefully, in a helpful manner.
 - b. The potential benefits are that preaching will move to a greater effectiveness for the participants; the experience of preaching will improve for both listeners and preachers; and that in the longer term the teaching of homiletics will also benefit.
6. **Costs:**
- a. The research is being undertaken at the researcher's personal expense. The meetings in Phases 1 and in Phase 3 will be arranged in locations that would be considered part of the participants' normal travelling.
 - b. Participants will be expected to give their time and may be asked to make a modest contribution to lunch on the meeting days.
7. **Voluntary Participation:** Participation in the research will be voluntary at every point. A participant may withdraw at any stage without having to give any reason. Additionally, in keeping with ethics of research Informed Consent will be obtained in writing at the beginning of the research. If you choose to withdraw, the recordings made in the Focus Groups, containing responses you have made, will be retained and treated confidentially.
8. **Confidentiality** will be maintained throughout the research as both a protocol for the University's ethics requirements and in accordance the "Uniting Churches' Code of Ethics":
- a. Participants will be requested to maintain the confidentiality of the meetings in Phases 1 and 3;
 - b. All data – written, recorded and electronic - will be stored at the home of the researcher in a locked filing cabinet or on a password protected computer;
 - c. The writing up of the data will remove all identifying criteria either by assigning numerical identifiers or by assigning random initials; and
 - d. The researcher's wife, Mrs Joan Woodward, will provide some administrative support, and will have access to the identifiable data.

9. When the data has been analysed, the written up version will be included in the DMin thesis of Rev'd Peter Woodward. All identifiable records – written, electronic or recorded – will be erased, deleted or shredded after the required 5-year retention of research material. Any subsequent publication emerging from the research will observe the same confidentiality indicated above.

10. **Further information:** If you have any concerns or wish to discuss the research further, please contact:

Rev'd Peter Woodward	0400 323 060
Rev'd Dr Cathy Thomson	0400 407 735
Dr John Roulston, AM	0411 475 193

Charles Sturt University's Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this project (Approval No. 100/2016/01). If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through:

Lisa McLean,

Executive Officer Faculty of Arts and Education Human Ethics Committee

Charles Sturt University FOAE-FHEC@csu.edu.au

02 6338 4966

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

Thank you for considering this invitation. This information sheet is for you to keep.



School of Theology

CONSENT FORM

“Boring or Divine Encounter - evaluating the effectiveness of a non-didactic approach to preaching”

Researcher: Rev'd Peter Woodward (BSc, BD, BEdStud, MMin)
undertaking research for a Doctor of Ministry

Supervisor: Rev'd Dr Cathy Thomson, Lecturer in Systematic Theology, Charles Sturt University

Co-Supervisor: Dr John Roulston, AM, Chair of Bremer Brisbane Presbytery

I agree to participate in the above research project and give my consent freely.

I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Participant Information Sheet, a copy of which I have retained. I understand that I can withdraw from the project at any time and do not have to give any reason for withdrawing.

I consent to participate in Evaluation Research in the following phases:

- a. a one-day seminar type meeting involving a Focus Group, and a period of interactive instruction on a “non-didactic” paradigm for preaching;
- b. an implementation period of 2 – 3 months when the researcher will be available for support; and
- c. a Focus Group of 1 – 2 hours to evaluate the use of the “non-didactic” paradigm;

I understand that the research will involve the collection of data, recorded and written, from the meetings with the researcher; and that the data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet or on a password protected computer.

I understand that my personal information will remain confidential to the researcher and the Administrative Assistant. I also understand that, if I choose to withdraw, my data obtained in Focus Groups will be retained.

I understand that in the writing up of the research thesis all names and other means of identification will not be used and that I will be given access to the final report.

I have had the opportunity to have questions answered to my satisfaction.

Name: _____ (print)

Signature: _____

Date: ___/___/___

NOTE: Charles Sturt University's Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this project (Approval No. 100/2016/01). If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through:

Lisa McLean

Executive Officer Faculty of Arts and Education Human Ethics Committee Charles Sturt

University FOAE-FHEC@csu.edu.au 02 6338 4966

Appendix 3

Proposed Program “A non-didactic approach to preaching”

0900 – 0930	Devotion and Admin		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Scripture passage, meditative comment, prayer.</i> 2. Information Sheet and Consent Form. 3. Including introduction to non-didactic preaching.
0930 – 1030	What is your experience of preaching? and What is God doing ...?	Handout 1 Handout 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus Group exploring preaching 2. “What is God doing?” to lead to discussion of: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. God at the centre and God is active – dependence on God. b. Letting go of the addiction to rationality. c. God’s mission and your church/ministry, Hamilton, Stanley & Taylor. d. Call to a counter cultural faith – “God’s imaginative or,” Brueggemann.
1030 – 1050	Morning Tea		
1050 – 1200	Preaching: aims and intention	Handout 3 Handout 4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. May raise questions of their training. 2. Testimony (Florence), witness (Long), confession (PWT Johnson), bridging the gap, hegemony, preaching the gospel, aesthetic. (non-didactic). 3. Whose needs are you meeting? 4. “Living in the text”. 5. Trickle down theology.
1200 – 1240	Lunch		
1240 - 1320	Preaching and the preacher	Handout 5	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Whose voice? 2. You only ever tell you own story. 3. Heart and soul.
1320 – 1430	Preparation and delivery	Handout 6 Handout 7	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “Put away your sword.” (non-didactic). 2. Finding your method of discovering the sermon “within” you. 3. Why “boring?” 4. To preach with or without notes.
1430 – 1440	Break		
1440 - 1540	Evaluation of our preaching	Handout 8 (2 versions)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A call to vulnerability. 2. Can you describe what you are hoping “to achieve” in your preaching? 3. Does the sermon have a desired outcome? 4. Training your people to provide honest and helpful feedback.
1540 – 1600	Evaluation of the day		

Appendix 4

Handouts 1 to 10

Handout 1

1. What is your experience of preaching as a listener?

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2. What is your experience of preaching as a practitioner?

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3. What is your perception of congregational attitudes to preaching?

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4. What is your perception of the “idealised expectations” of preaching?

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5. What would greater effectiveness in preaching mean for you?

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Handout 2

“What is God doing in relation to preaching?”

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Handout 3

What is your experience of being a preacher?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Preparation for preaching feels like hard work.					
I have a particular routine in my approach to preaching.					
My congregation seems to enjoy my preaching.					
I receive positive feedback about my preaching.					
I receive negative feedback about my preaching.					
I feel satisfied that I preach well (effectively).					
I feel that my preaching could be more interesting.					
My preaching has the character of a divine encounter.					
I would value the opportunity to improve my preaching.					
I believe that preaching has power implications (the power of the preacher over the congregation).					

Handout 4

When I preach, the best outcome would be, i.e., my aim is –

a. for you

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b. for the congregation

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c. for God

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Handout 5

“The skill, the craft and the tools of preaching do not make the preacher. These are important elements of preaching. However, it is the preacher’s *relationship with God as friend* that gives life, power, authority and authenticity to the preaching moment. In other words, it is friendship with God that helps to define the preacher.”

Paul R. Fagan, “Towards a Spirituality for Preaching: The Preacher as Friend of God,” DMin Thesis, Aquinas Academy, St Louis, 2012, pp 6-7.

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Handout 6

Florence, A.C., 2007, *Preaching as Testimony*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville. In Chapter 7 “The Wide-awake Sermon – Preaching in the Tradition”

Exercises for attending

1. Write it	2. Pocket it
3. Memorize it	4. Underline it
5. “Soccer Mom” it (read it wherever you are)	6. Dislocate it
7. Subtext it	8. Block it
9. Body it	10. Push it
11. “Other” it	12. Counter it
13. Create it	14. Study it

Exercises for Describing

1. Image it	2. Rewrite it
3. Slang it	4. Character-sketch it
5. Monologue it	6. Dialogue it
7. Text-jam it	8. Letter it
9. Dream it	10. Journal it
11. Change it	12. “If-only” it

Handout 7

Brueggemann, Walter, 2007, *The Word Militant: Preaching a Decentering Word*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis.

Bearing witness to God's "imaginative or" (p 67)

Dally, J.A., 2008, *Choosing the Kingdom: Missional Preaching for the Household of God*, The Alban Institute, Herndon.

Moving from "Exegesis/Illustration/Application" to "Proclamation/Implication/Invitation" (pp 113-7)

Dykstra, Robert C., 2001, *Discovering a Sermon: Personal Pastoral Preaching*, Chalice Press, St Louis.

Playing with the text beginning with up to 4 hours of brainstorming or free association followed by playing with the scholarship on the text and with the outer world in relation to the text.

Lathrop, G.W., 2006, *The Pastor: a Spirituality*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis.

"Attentiveness" to the text, that is, to feeling the impact of the strangeness or "otherness" of the text, and, in particular, as it relates to the pastoral situation, to the life context, and to the cross-cultural challenges that it brings. Thus, preaching requires attention and imagination with regard to the import of the prophetic, liturgical, exegetical and cultural dynamics of text and context. (Chapter 2)

Taylor, B.B., 1993, *The Preaching Life*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge.

Spending time reading and rereading the text "hunting for God in it, God for me and for my congregation at this particular moment in time." (p 85) "I am hoping for a moment of revelation I can share with those who will listen to me and I am jittery, because I never know what it will show me." (p 86)

Finding the sermon, or letting it find you, in which God, as presented in the Scriptures, is active in your world and theirs and bearing witness to That Presence.

Handout 8

1. What is the **focus** of this sermon? What was the sermon basically about?
2. What is the **gospel** (good news) that this sermon proclaims? What is the **bad news** for which this sermon is good news? How does this sermon answer the questions, “What in the world is God doing about our world?” “What in our world is at odds with what God wishes to be?”
3. What is the **missional impulse** of the sermon, its ultimate rhetorical intent and effect? What **change in faith and action**, individually and corporately, does the sermon invite; and how will we pursue that change?
4. How did the preacher make the sermon **concrete** for the hearers? Were any key **assertions** not followed up with (backed up by) **concretizations**? Evaluate the fittingness of the concretizations.
5. What theological **doctrine(s)** does this sermon treat? Does it treat the doctrine adequately?
6. Evaluate this sermon’s use of the **biblical text**. Did the sermon give evidence of the preacher’s personal/existential wrestling with the text? Was there appropriate **congruence** between text and sermon?
7. What **images/illustrations/stories** worked well in this sermon and which ones appeared “disconnected?”
8. How did the preacher help you experience the **emotional process** of the gospel through the sermon? How did the preacher bring “**head**” and “**heart**” together in the sermon?
9. If the preacher moved to “**celebration**,” what was celebrated and did it appeal to **core belief**? How did the celebration reinforce the sermon’s gospel message?
10. Comment on the sermon’s use of **language** – strengths and weaknesses.
11. What could be **cut** from this sermon and not missed? Does anything seem to be **missing**? Where would the preacher need to go, or what would the preacher need to do, to provide this missing piece?
12. What is the “**growing edge**” of this sermon?

Modified from Resner, A., “No Preacher Left Behind: A new Prerequisite for the Introductory Preaching Course,” *Teaching Theology and Religion*, Volume 13, Issue 4, October 2010, pp 339 – 349

Handout 8A²⁴⁷

1. What is the **focus** of this sermon? What was the sermon basically about?
2. What is the **gospel** (good news) that this sermon proclaims? What is the **bad news** for which this sermon is good news? How does this sermon answer the questions, “What in the world is God doing about our world?”
3. What **change in faith and action**, individually and corporately, does the sermon invite; and how will we pursue that change?
4. In what ways did the sermon apply to the everyday lives of the listeners and what were the implicit and explicit messages?
5. What theological **doctrine(s)** does this sermon treat? Does it treat the doctrine adequately?
6. Evaluate this sermon’s use of the **biblical text**. Did the sermon give evidence of the preacher’s personal/existential wrestling with the text?
7. What **images/illustrations/stories** worked well in this sermon and which ones appeared “disconnected?”
8. How did the preacher bring “**head**” and “**heart**” together in the sermon? Was the use of **emotion** congruent with the gospel?
9. If the preacher moved to “**celebration**”, what was celebrated and did it appeal to **core belief**? How did the celebration reinforce the sermon’s gospel message?
10. Comment on the sermon’s use of **language** – strengths and weaknesses.
11. What could be **cut** from this sermon and not missed? Does anything seem to be **missing**? Where would the preacher need to go, or what would the preacher need to do, to provide this missing piece?
12. What is the “**growing edge**” of this sermon?

²⁴⁷ Two versions of Handout were provided to indicate how Resner’s question might be put into a “manageable” form for use with lay people.

Handout 9

1. What have been your main learnings today?

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2. What changes, if any, do you expect to implement in your preaching?

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3. What questions do you still have?

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4. In today's presentation, what needs improvement?

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Handout 10

Recalling the key issues:

- “What is God doing?”
- What is our intention when preaching?
- Preaching and the preacher
- Preparation and delivery
- Evaluation

What has been your experience of preaching since we met in October?

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1. What areas in your preaching would you like to continue to work on?

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2. Evaluating the process: – What have been the beneficial aspects of it?

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3. What areas need improvement?

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Other comments (please use back of the page).

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Appendix 5

Feedback Questionnaires Used by Participant J

Congregational questionnaire – Sermon (A)

Thank you for taking time to complete this short questionnaire on the sermon today. This will help the speaker today and the research of Rev'd Peter Woodward. The questionnaires are anonymous unless you wish to sign your name. Please complete the questions during the "Pastoral Care Cards time" and place in the offering bag as it comes around.

1. What did the sermon seek to achieve? What was the impact on you?
2. How does this sermon answer the question, "What is God doing in our world"?
3. What was the focus of the sermon? What was the sermon basically about?
4. Was there anything in the Bible reading that you feel was inadequately dealt with?

Any further comments?

Congregational questionnaire – Sermon (B)

Thank you for taking time to complete this short questionnaire on the sermon today. This will help the speaker today and the research of Rev'd Peter Woodward. The questionnaires are anonymous unless you wish to sign your name. Please complete the questions during the "Pastoral Care Cards time" and place in the offering bag as it comes around.

1. How did the preacher make the sermon easy for hearers to understand?
2. Were there any key statements not backed up with solid information?
3. Did the sermon show that the preacher wrestled with the text – evidence of research and understanding?
4. Evaluate the sermon's use of the biblical text.

Any further comments?

Congregational questionnaire – Sermon (C)

Thank you for taking time to complete this short questionnaire on the sermon today. This will help the speaker today and the research of Rev'd Peter Woodward. The questionnaires are anonymous unless you wish to sign your name. Please complete the questions during the "Pastoral Care Cards time" and place in the offering bag as it comes around.

1. What images worked well in this sermon?
2. How did the sermon participate in God's desire for justice and peace?
3. Did the preacher bring head and heart together in the sermon?
4. What elements of this sermon stand out for you, for better or worse?

Any further comments?

Congregational questionnaire – Sermon (D)

Thank you for taking time to complete this short questionnaire on the sermon today. This will help the speaker today and the research of Rev'd Peter Woodward. The questionnaires are anonymous unless you wish to sign your name. Please complete the questions during the "Pastoral Care Cards time" and place in the offering bag as it comes around.

1. Did the sermon flow well and was the language easy to follow?
2. How did the sermon participate in the Good News of God's love as – both a present reality and future promise?
3. What lessons about God does this sermon treat? Was the information adequately covered?
4. In what ways was the message of Christ's life and death and resurrection expressed in the sermon?

Any further comments?