

ABSTRACT

Adapting the Digital Pulpit: A Study of the Transition to Online Preaching

by

Robert Mike Bankston

The rationale for the project evolved from personal experience and research into the collective experience of South Georgia United Methodist preachers serving rural churches and their congregations during the pandemic of 2020 and their experience of the shift from in-person sermons in worship to online sermons. The shuttering of churches and mandates to shelter in place and quarantine necessitated the closing of churches to in-person worship across the country and the world. The experience of preachers and congregations has been lived, there are many clergy and congregants who state that the sermonic moment will become more and more digital in the future.

The research methodologies in this project utilized a combination of qualitative and quantitative research that involved the preachers and the congregations of rural churches in the South Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The combination research approach used surveys, interviews, and questionnaires to gather data. To answer the research questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight preachers and surveyed eight churches in the South Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.

The project resulted in six major findings, which the literature review and scriptures support. This study shed important insight about preaching and proclamation, both in-person and virtual. This study offers a foundation and framework for more research on virtual preaching as well as the art of preaching for the future.

Adapting the Digital Pulpit:
:
A Study of the Transition to Online Preaching

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of
Asbury Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

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May 2023

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Jeffrey Frymire, Dr. David Ward, and Dr. Teresa Fry Brown for their dedication to the art of preaching and for their instruction that inspired me to strive to be a better preacher. I would like to thank Dr. Scott Stephens for his encouragement and direction during this project. I would like to also thank my wife Jenny for her constant support during my work on this project and without whose encouragement I would not have been able to finish.

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CHAPTER 1

Overview of the Chapter

Chapter 1 provides the framework for investigating the shift during the pandemic of 2020 from in-person sermons in worship to online sermons in the context of rural churches in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. Chapter 1 provides a personal introduction of myself, a statement of the research problem, and the purpose of the project. Chapter 1 introduces three research questions the project addresses. Chapter 1 presents the rationale of the project, definitions of key terms, delimitations of the project, and a review of the literature that will be discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 1 also provides the research methodology, including the type of research, participants, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and generalization of the project. The Chapter concludes by providing a project overview.

Personal Introduction

I like to tell stories. My passion for stories began in the third grade at Merrick Moore Elementary School in Durham, North Carolina. The teacher said to me that I was a good reader, and because of that, I was selected to read a story before my classmates at an upcoming school assembly. I was asked to read Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. Little did I know then, reading a book to the class would later turn into a passion that is a part of God's calling in my life.

I love to tell a story, but not just any story. I love to tell the gospel story. I believe that preaching is the centerpiece of worship with a specific goal. That goal of preaching is, as David B. Ward posits, the ongoing formation of the Christian community, which

includes the preacher, into an increasing harmony with the gospel as a “being-saved community” in and for the world (*Practicing the Preaching Life* Loc. 138).

I am passionate about preaching and I work hard to make sure I deliver the best sermon possible at each opportunity. This work includes prayer, exegesis, listening to the parishioners, and working to improve the delivery of the sermon to engage the congregation to where they explore the biblical world and experience the revelation of the Triune God. The sermon is indeed a story, but it is more than just a story. The sermon is a divine encounter between God, the preacher, and the congregation.

During March 2020, in-person worship services in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church came to a halt due to COVID 19, a rapidly spreading virus that caused serious health concerns, particularly with older adults, and with people who have underlying health conditions. To curb the spread of the virus, in-person worship services ceased as churches transitioned to online worship. The transition from in-person to online delivery of sermons brought many challenges.

During April 2020, I participated in a virtual Zoom meeting with a small group of pastors. We continued to meet monthly as an accountability group and discuss a variety of topics from the challenges we faced as pastors to the different systems and programs we used. During our initial meeting, we discussed our ongoing transitions from in-person to virtual worship. One of the group member’s attempts at a humorous anecdote ended up as a powerful, thought-provoking statement. The comment my colleague made was, “It seems overnight we have all become televangelists.” The group laughed together for a moment, but then reality set in. Being perceived as televangelists was not the goal of my colleagues or myself.

Televangelists, like any other segment of culture contains good and bad people. I believe that televangelism began with the noble intention of spreading the gospel. I also think many good people with pure intentions choose to preach on television to reach a larger audience. However, the perception of a televangelist is often negative. This negative perception comes from several highly publicized scandals in recent history involving televangelists such as Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, and Creflo Dollar. Other negative perceptions can develop because of the continuous fundraising and lavish lifestyles portrayed by some who minister in this format. However, the fundraising itself is not what creates the negative impression, but the fact that many perceive that the money is used only to fund the televangelist's lavish lifestyle.

A reasonable concern for preachers in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church who transitioned to online or digital preaching is avoiding the negative perception of televangelists. This is a valid concern. However, the issue seemed to me to be digging deeper into a subject which helps establish the authenticity of the sermonic moment. During the discussion with my fellow preachers a couple of people proposed the notion that within the sermonic moment of in-person preaching a connection between the Holy Spirit, the preacher, and the congregation exists that gives the experience an authenticity that virtual preaching cannot produce. Considering the idea that virtual preaching cannot produce the same authenticity as in-person preaching, sermon delivery implies a disconnect created somewhere between the Holy Spirit, the congregation, and the preacher when not physically together.

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Holy Trinity. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is omnipresent which means that Holy Spirit is present with the congregation and guiding

the preacher during the sermonic moment regardless of whether the sermon is preached virtually or in-person. In the realization that the Holy Spirit is present during the sermon and if there is indeed a disconnection that creates a lack of authenticity in the sermonic moment, it would stand to reason that the disconnection would exist between the preacher and the congregation.

Statement of the Problem

The transition to online preaching in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church during the COVID-19 pandemic came suddenly. Many preachers were transitioning online with little or no technical experience and a brevity of material to help guide this transition. The transition to online preaching exposed other issues for rural and small-town preachers other than the possible restrictions of access to technology. One issue is the lack of clear metrics to measure the viewership of online preaching. For in-person preaching, multiple ways to measure worship participation are available. Particularly in smaller congregations, preachers typically have a relationship with the sermonic moment through feedback from the congregation, both in expressions and verbal cues. Through face recognition, the preacher knows when someone new is visiting or when a congregation member is absent.

Online the metrics are unclear on how to measure viewership or gain a sense of reactions from the congregation. Viewers might comment if they appreciated the sermon, but the viewers have a negative experience or are unclear of what the sermon is about, they will click off the sermon. In many platforms, names are not visible to the preacher, much less how they responded to the sermon.

The Barna Group did a pastor panel survey July 24-26, 2020. This survey found that pastors saw less engagement online when compared to in-person attendance, and just one in five said that their previous week's online attendance was higher ("COVID-19 Conversations: Nona Jones on Digital and Social Ministry"). Barna admits that the metrics churches used to measure online success during the pandemic were "blurry" at best, but studies showed that the pandemic has created the environment for people to "drop out" of attending worship. One-fifth of practicing Christians who have access to online and in-person worship and who participated in the survey study stated they have not participated in worship for at least six months ("What Churches Might Miss When Taking Digital Attendance").

With lack of adequate feedback mechanisms, a possible disconnection exists between preacher and congregation. A disconnection between the preacher and congregation does not mean the disconnection was not intentional, but possibly organic. As another in the preaching group pointed out during the April 2020 conversation, perhaps the issue of authenticity may have originated prior to the transition to digital preaching. It is possible that the preacher's exegesis, preferred sermon form, or delivery of the sermon could undermine the perception of the authenticity of the sermonic moment. This idea brought me back to my roots and my childhood desire to be a storyteller.

The ideas of how authenticity is related to exegesis, sermon form, the presence of the preacher identify an interesting problem because these characteristics shape the digital sermonic experience. The story of the Gospel can be effective in a digital format just as it can be during an in-person experience. The conversation with my preaching

peers led me not only to question my understanding of preaching during this unique transition to the digital medium, but I began to ask questions about how other in my same role, particularly in rural churches worked to overcome challenges and transitioned to digital preaching.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this research was to examine how rural/small town United Methodist Churches in South Georgia met the challenges of online preaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The shuttering of churches and mandates to shelter in place and quarantine necessitated the closing of churches to in-person worship across the country and the world. Preachers had to be nimble and think quickly in order to continue to deliver the Word of God to parishioners. However, now that the experience has been lived, many preachers state that digital preaching is not only the format for the sermon in the pandemic but that the sermonic moment will become more and more digital in the future.

Research Questions

The research questions posed, inquire about the methods and challenges related to the transition from in-person to virtual preaching.

RQ#1: In what ways did rural/small town churches transition to online preaching and what challenges did they face regarding knowledge, skill, technology, and deployment?

RQ#2: Did pastors adapt to new methods of sermon preparation and sermon form to accommodate a digital worship program: what did they do differently, and did they find that they would continue with new methods of preparation and form?

RQ#3: How did these pastors and congregations evaluate the virtual sermonic moments during the pandemic and did they utilize evaluation methods to envision the future of digital sermonic moments?

Rationale for the Project

First and foremost, this project matters because the Christian sermonic moment is the centerpiece of worship. Ward posits that a good sermon is more than just good structure, images, and stories. A good sermon gives a voice to what are good forms of life. In fact, good sermons are living, breathing, testimonies of God's grace (Loc. 125). The sermon is more than just an exhortation or moral teaching, although it can be both of these. A sermon is a call to the congregation to live in harmony with the gospel a community being saved by grace in and for the world. The sermon moment matters and as the centerpiece of worship, the preacher holds a great responsibility to deliver the best sermonic experience possible.

A second reason this project matters is that transitions are an authentic testimony to God's activity in the world. The world we live in is always changing. While the gospel message is unchanging, how we share that message can change and adapt to the present situations we face. Chapter 1 presented a negative perception televangelist. Although the critique is valid to some, the televangelism movement began as a way to respond to rapidly changing technology and find alternate media for spreading the gospel to a larger audience. The societal impact of these changes in technology gave way to an entirely new sermonic moment, one less personal and not nearly as connected as traditional face-to-face delivery.

Televangelism provided a transitional way to engage American culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The global pandemic that began in 2020 presented the preacher with a challenge not seen before in history, the necessity to transition to digital delivery of the sermon, but at the same time engage the culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel message does not change; instead, the method in which the witness of the gospel adapts to cultural transition changes. The transition to the digital sermonic moment illustrates God's willingness to meet people in their context with the Good News of salvation.

Thirdly, this research is relevant to aid preachers in finding value in applying technology in concert with the sermonic moment to reach an even broader audience. Technology has become ingrained in society. If you sit down in a restaurant, it would not be surprising to see a family at another table with each person looking at their cell phones. The father might be looking at the sports updates. The mother might be on Facebook. One child might be playing a game and the other texting a friend. While writing a research paper, the author may review literature on an electronic reader while listening to a streaming music playlist. These scenarios illustrate how common and unobtrusive technology has become and how seamlessly and almost naturally, it integrates with human lives.

Bible applications are easy to download and access on a phone or tablet and will present the user with multiple translations of the Bible. Information is available to people instantly through cell phones and tablets. This is even true as parishioners listen as preachers deliver sermons. Today, during the sermonic moment a congregant looking down at their phone is not an uncommon sight. However, preachers have come to realize

in this age of technology and the internet that congregants are not necessarily bored with the sermon or surfing social media. Instead, they are more likely following along with the biblical references or googling to verify what the preacher is saying. more than likely verifying what you are saying.

As the pandemic continued, many members of small/rural congregations chose to join in multiple online church services all over the nation each weekend. Listeners had the opportunity to seek and find what they were looking for in the sermonic moment being delivered in the medium which has now become an integral part of the culture. This helps demonstrate to preachers that it may be valuable to embrace technology as a tool for the delivery of the gospel. If not, preachers may find that the sermonic moments are ineffective in communicating the gospel in the digital culture.

A fourth reason this research matters is because of the sheer importance of the sermonic moment. Jesus tells the disciples in Mark 16: 15, to “go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation (NIV).” Preachers have many different roles in the church. In small and rural churches, the pastor is the chief business administrator, the chaplain, perhaps the handyman, the custodian, the Bible study leader, the spiritual counselor, the presider of funerals, the church’s ambassador in the community, and much more. Because of their busy schedules, preachers will often push sermon preparation to the bottom of the priority list, resulting in delivery of a mediocre sermon. A less than stellar sermon preached during in an in-person sermon can be forgotten, but a mediocre sermon preached on-line is often recorded and can be played back. More than ever, the transition to digital sermon delivery calls for, more than ever, the preacher’s best effort to prepare and deliver the sermon.

Definition of Key Terms

This research paper utilized several terms that are important to the reader. Virtual preaching can be defined as the sermonic moment as presented on any form of digital communication platforms. These forms of digital communication platforms can be Facebook live stream, YouTube, Vimeo, Twitch, Rumble, or through a local television station or local online streaming source. During the course of writing the research, virtual preaching, was at times used interchangeably with the term online preaching. Online preaching is a form of virtual preaching, but the term can be representative of the whole concept of digital preaching regardless of the platform.

Sermonic moment is a term used to express the moment the sermon is preached. The sermonic moment can be either a portion of the worship service or a standalone moment. The use of the term sermonic moment is used to differentiate between the preaching moment and the worship service because the research is focused only on the sermon and the delivery of the sermon. Some digital sermonic moments are part of a larger worship service where hymns might be sung, prayers said, and other aspects of worship incorporated. The focus of this research did not include any other worship activities outside of the preaching moment.

For the purpose of this research project, the term small church means churches with congregation sizes of seventy members in worship attendance or less. Most small churches, reviewed during this research project numbered between twenty and forty in worship attendance. The small church does not have a paid staff. In regard to technology, laity volunteers typically manage and operate any devices for virtual delivery during the sermonic moments.

Rural churches are churches that are located outside of towns and cities. The rural church is typically one with a small congregation and limited access to technology and even delivery methods because of the location of the church building. Many of the United Methodist rural churches came about, based on locations, due to camp meetings or as a result of stops made by traveling circuit preachers. Typically, the congregations of rural churches consist of relatives who have attended the churches from childhood.

The next term is “South Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.” An annual conference is a regional body that governs the life of the “connectional church.” The connectional church is comprised of clergy and laity from each charge or church in the regional boundaries of the Conference. The Conference is presided over by an appointed bishop. The South Georgia Annual Conference is the regional body where I am a clergy appointed to serve a congregation.

The last term is exegesis. Exegesis is the process of interpreting a passage of Scripture. Exegesis is a careful, analytical study to produce interpretation of those passages. The preacher uses the process of exegesis to enter into the biblical world to determine the true meaning of the text. Exegesis is not reading into the text with a bias or a preconceived notion. Instead, exegesis is allowing God’s revelation in the text to unfold through the process.

Delimitations

The geographic parameters of this project lie within the South Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. In particular, the concentration is on eight small and rural churches in this Annual Conference. The eight churches represent a researchable segment for this project and includes both the clergy and laity associated

with these churches. The eight churches are dispersed throughout the Conference to help represent the diversity of the region. My focus is on the small and rural churches because these churches typically hold firm to tradition, meaning that worship services have been conducted in the same manner over many years. I focused on clergy interviews and congregation surveys. The interviews and surveys included males and females. The surveyed congregants and interviewed clergy included a variety of ages over the age of eighteen. I chose to analyze small and rural churches because of the limited access to technology that may exist. Larger urban churches typically have access to and most already use technology during the sermon moments.

Review of Relevant Literature

This project consulted biblical, theological, and sociological literature to glean insights on digital preaching by defining what is considered “authentic preaching.” Few contemporary writings address a transition to digital preaching. However, I utilized several publications on the subject of digital storytelling. The concept of digital storytelling is relevant to the research because the preacher is telling the gospel story. Digital storytellers focus on how to engage a virtual audience and draw the listener into the story being told. The idea of engagement and drawing people into the biblical story is significant to the preacher.

Theologically, Jesus used parables to teach people about God in the Gospels. There are many reasons Jesus taught using parables. One of the primary reasons is Jesus desired to connect people with theology in ways that they could relate to. A parable is simply a story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. In other words, Jesus understood the power of telling a good story to reach people with the Good News of God.

The use of parables in Jesus' teachings in the Bible helps to theologically connect digital storytelling to the relevance of this research.

Other literature examined for this project explore what contemporary writing was available on digital preaching and preaching in general. The limited availability of resources for related to virtual preaching was expected by this researcher. The information that was available was found to be useful as a segment of it compared online worship and preaching to in-person worship and preaching.

During the literature review more scholarly articles emerged which offered some insight on the transition from in-person preaching to virtual preaching. However, the articles had a limited focus on the small and rural church. Most articles and other publications assumed a larger congregation with access to technology. The issue with literature addressing the approach to a larger church with technology access is that the methodology employed to give to give direction to the utilization of technology is lost on the small and rural churches where resources and access are limited. However, the resources that focus on good preaching are readily available and are extremely helpful for the digital preacher.

I utilized several writings about preaching that the preacher of small and rural churches can utilize to help craft sermons. The writings on preaching included information on sermon form. Other topics dealt with how to research and craft a sermon, sermon authenticity, and effective preaching. Some articles and studies were accessed that evaluated online sermons and effective in-person preaching. The process and importance of exegesis was analyzed in each of the writings on preaching. The importance of storytelling is emphasized in several of the writings, but not as one would

think. Telling a story in preaching is not an illustration, a humorous anecdote, or a recollection. Instead, storytelling in preaching is telling the story of grace.

Other literature included how technology can be used to convey ideas, reach groups of people, and capitalize on the use of social platforms. Literature on types of social platforms also included how to be productive in preaching on those platforms. The literature described the best techniques to effectively get a message across the platform. The writings related to these platforms stated that not all platforms were used to stream or present the sermon. Rather, those platforms were used to invite people to view the sermon on other platforms.

The literature reviewed for this project revolved around the subject of virtual preaching, while only a small portion of the literature directly addressed virtual preaching. The notion of virtual preaching falls into the category of good storytelling and this brings in multiple ideas outside of the virtual sermonic moment that come together to form a good virtual sermon. This is to say that the transition to virtual preaching means the preacher must broaden their knowledge to include technology and other subjects that contribute to the digital sermonic moment.

Research Methodology

The research methodologies in this project utilized a combination of qualitative and quantitative research that involved the preachers and the congregations of rural churches in the South Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The combination research approach used surveys, interviews, and questionnaires to gather data. This project is a pre-intervention, which means other researchers can do similar research.

To answer the research questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight preachers in the South Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The interviews were conducted with the preachers to discuss their experience of digital preaching during and after the transition.

I conducted paper surveys with eight congregations in the South Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. I distributed the surveys to the congregations and collected them via the pastor. The surveys were intended to be a blind survey, meaning that none of the congregant's names appeared on the surveys. This offered anonymity for the survey and thus allowed the congregation member responding to the survey the freedom to be honest about their virtual sermonic experience.

I used questionnaires with eight preachers and congregations to gain further insight to the virtual sermonic experience. The questions consisted of multiple-choice answers and measured broader aspects of the virtual preaching experience. The goal of this type of questionnaire's goal was to keep the participants focused on a narrower choice of answers than that of the semi-structured interviews and the surveys.

The type of study conducted in this research was a pre-intervention study. It fell into this category because the transition to virtual preaching happened due to a global pandemic that forced churches to cease in-person worship for a period of time. With continued spikes in COVID-19 cases, churches that re-opened in-person worship continued to offer virtual preaching as an option for their congregations. Such a transition en masse to virtual preaching has never been experienced in the South Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church's history, so research of this type had not been conducted.

Type of Research

I utilized a mix of quantitative and qualitative lenses to address the project. The quantitative method will utilize surveys and questionnaires. The qualitative method utilized semi-structured interviews. As this study is a pre-intervention study, it was best served by mixed methods for data collection.

Participants

The participants in the research study included eight preachers and their congregations from across the South Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. Both the group of preachers and the congregations included men and women, diverse in race, age, and socio-economic status.

Instrumentation

The congregants who participated in this research project received blind surveys in order to preserve confidentiality. This researcher posits anonymity was critical in order to give the congregation participants the freedom to answer questions without fear of causing undue hurt or will. This research was not intended to be used as a critique of an individual preacher. Rather, the research was intended to examine the virtual preaching experience as a whole.

In the area of instrumentation, I utilized instruments of data collection to address the research questions. Research question 1 will utilize a semi-structured interview with the preacher to understand the challenges faced during the transition to virtual preaching. The second research question was addressed through the semi-structural interviews with the preacher, surveys with the congregations, and the congregational questionnaire. Research question 3 was addressed by the semi-structural interviews with the preacher.

Data Collection

In the area of data collection, the process of interviewing the eight preachers took the longest amount of time. I had hoped to conduct the interviews in a face-to-face format, but due to the interviewees' schedules, I used digital meetings. The process of interviewing eight pastors digitally took one hour per pastor over a ten-week period. Because the interviews were conducted digitally, the surveys were mailed to the preacher with a pre-paid return envelope and distributed to their congregations and collected for return by the preacher. Because the preachers were interviewed digitally, the process of mailing to preachers and receiving returned surveys took an additional four to six weeks.

In the area of data collection and analysis, the research was a pre-intervention design that utilized a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods. The quantitative method utilized surveys and questionnaires, while the qualitative method utilized semi-structured interviews to provide answers to the research questions.

Data Analysis

Analysis for the data collected through the quantitative method utilized statistical and mathematical analysis. Through this analysis, patterns can be determined helped understand the effectiveness of virtual preaching from the perspective of the congregation. This information served as the basis to for a hypothesis about virtual preaching that was further examined. The qualitative method involved analysis through recurring themes found in the interviews with preachers. Analysis of qualitative data is

often subjective. However, patterns of similar answers from the interviewees suggested the basis for a hypothesis for further study.

Generalizability

This research can be applied to other contexts such as the virtual worship experience outside of the sermonic moment. The sermonic moment is the central feature of the worship experience, and therefore other aspects of worship can be studied in the same manner. Further study of virtual preaching would possibly replicate the findings in this research thus adding to the credibility of this study.

This research could impact the practice of virtual preaching by providing the preacher with necessary information on how it is received by the congregation. The research could also help the preacher understand what is and is not effective in telling the gospel story to a virtual audience.

Project Overview

This project outlines the transition to and the experience of virtual preaching within the South Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. Chapter 2 discusses the most influential writings regarding virtual preaching, digital storytelling, sermon preparation, and sermonic form. Chapter 3 analyzes the data collected by the research methodology utilized in this project, which included semi-structured interviews, surveys, and questionnaires.

Chapter 4 discusses the analytical process by revealing the research questions utilized in the interviews, surveys, and questionnaires. Chapter 5 outlines the major findings of the project and how these findings impacted virtual preaching in the rural churches within South Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Chapter 5 also outlines how these findings can be the basis for future research into the areas of the virtual sermonic moment and digital worship.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

One could speculate if Paul had access to internet would he have debated in-person on Mars Hill or would Paul have opted for a Zoom or WebEx meeting to identify the “unknown god.” We can only guess at what Paul would have done. However, Paul does utilize the resources at his disposal to share the gospel. Paul confesses his adaptability to the church in Corinth, “I have become all things to all people, that I might, by all means save some. I do it for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings (1 Cor. 9: 22b-23, NRSV).” If Paul had internet access, he most likely would have adapted to use it to share the gospel.

The COVID-19 global pandemic of 2020 forced many rural and small-town ministers in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church to adapt to livestream preaching to share the gospel. Livestream is a live video feed of an event that people can access on a virtual platform such as YouTube or Facebook. The novel corona virus caused a pause in attending in-person worship. Once in-person worship was allowed to restart, some people continued to stay at home to avoid contact with others to prevent themselves from contracting the virus. Livestream worship is now a feature that is commonplace.

This chapter looks at available literature to address the subject of preaching authenticity in the transition to livestream worship in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. In this chapter, the literature is organized into three major themes dealing with the act of preaching. These themes are 1) Proclamation 2)

Preparation and 3) Presence of the Preacher. This chapter also uses literature to discuss authenticity as a theological concept and how the literature addresses the research themes.

Biblical Foundations: Proclamation

Some scholars attribute 2 Timothy to Paul while in prison near the time of his death. 2 Timothy is regarded as a “pastoral” letter that gives Timothy instruction on pastoral leadership in the areas of sound doctrine, preservation of orthodox ideas, and correcting false teachings. Paul’s instructed Timothy were to “proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; rebuke and encourage, with utmost patience in teaching (2 Tim. 4:2).” H.A. Ironside posits that Paul did not encourage Timothy to preach philosophically or preach a system of morals, nor should Timothy preach a political discourse. Instead, Timothy should preach the word (144).

A word study reveals the Greek word Paul used “kerusso,” translates to the English “proclaim.” Alternate translations of “kerusso” are proclamation, preach, preaching, and preacher. The English word “message” is a translation of the Greek “logos.” As used in the Scriptures, “logos” can be defined in multiple ways, such as spoken word, sayings of God, doctrine, teaching, Old Testament prophecy, and used in a variety of ways in respect of the mind. Most notable is John’s use of “logos” in describing the nature and person of Jesus Christ. In other passages from 2 Timothy “logos” relates to God’s truth as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. One could consider it reasonable to understand Paul’s instruction to Timothy to “proclaim the message” as to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Christian preaching is the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When a sermon is delivered by a preacher, the speaker is proclaiming the “Good News” of Jesus Christ. What is the “Good News” of Jesus Christ? Ephesians 2: 4-5 gives a great synopsis of what is the “Good News” of Jesus Christ, “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love in which He loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.” (NRSV)

In Ephesians 2: 4-5, Paul proclaims God is rich in mercy in responding to humankind's sin, indicating God could have not been merciful. Paul states that God's mercy comes from God's great love toward humankind. However, humanity has an issue called sin. Sin has caused the relationship between God and humanity, His own great creation to be severed. Sin is actions, thoughts, or attitudes that violate God's will (Powell 965).

The critical concept in Paul's statement to the church in Ephesus is grace. God's grace is the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit. Because of sin, human beings cannot reignite a relationship with God. God must initiate the relationship through grace. God's grace is universally present even though suffering, violence, and evil are present. Paul states in his letter to the church in Ephesus that even though the consequence of sin is death, God out of his great love gives humanity salvation from sin and death through Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Because of Christ, the faithful in Christ are alive together. By grace the faithful in Christ have been saved.

There is a link between grace to the proclamation of the gospel? John Wesley presents a good example of the relationship between grace and proclamation of the gospel. Wesley gives a broad definition of the “Good News” or “gospel” of Jesus Christ

in the sermon “The Way to the Kingdom.” Wesley stated, “the gospel (that is good tidings, good news for guilty, helpless sinners) in the largest sense of the word means the whole revelation made to men by Jesus Christ; and sometimes the whole account of what our Lord did and suffered while he tabernacled among men.” Wesley continues in the sermon to narrow the purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ stating it is to accomplish what humankind cannot do for themselves which is atonement for sin (Wesley 130–31). Therefore, for Wesley proclamation is central to a person’s spiritual life because the proclaimer is testifying to the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Dr Thomas G. Long defined Karl Barth’s understanding of proclamation as “human language in and through which God speaks (qtd.in Long, *The Witness of Preaching* 19).” Barth’s understanding of proclamation is aligned with the prevalent metaphor homiletics favored in the twentieth century called the “herald.” The “herald” is the image used to illustrate the preacher’s role during the sermonic moment. The preacher’s role is to speak the words while God does the proclaiming (19). Therefore, the purpose of preaching is not about the preacher. Instead, the purpose of preaching is about the proclamation, which is what God has done, is doing, and will do. The important factor that Long recognized in Barth’s understanding of proclamation is an inseparable connection between proclamation and authentic preaching.

Ward points to the connection between proclamation and preaching through Hughes Oliphant Old’s understanding that “all good preaching seeks to send a doxological community into the world through the proclamation of the gospel (qtd in Ward, *Practicing the Preaching Life* 23).” If the chief characteristic of “good” preaching is the inseparable connection to proclamation, then “bad” or “poor” preaching is void of

proclamation. Rather, perhaps “bad” or “poor” preaching consists of proclamation that is ambiguous or watered down. In either case, the preacher fails to achieve the purpose of preaching.

The connection between good preaching and proclamation is valuable not only to the individual, but to the life of the church. John Stott quotes E.C. Dargan, “Preaching is distinctly a Christian institution (qtd.in Stott, 2).” Jesus began his ministry through preaching repentance in Matthew 4 which set the foundation for Christian preaching. One can find examples of preaching throughout the New Testament. Peter preached at Solomon’s Portico after healing the lame beggar (Acts 3: 11-26). Phillip preached on the streets of Samaria (Acts 6: 6-8). Apollos proclaimed Christ in Achaia (Acts 18: 27-28). Paul preached on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17: 22-24). Preaching continued through the early church and preaching continues today.

As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and became established and accepted (helped through Emperor Constantine's conversion), preachers adapted to cultural hurdles that arose from the expansion to proclaim the gospel. For example, by the third and fourth centuries, preachers recognized the importance of form and delivery for sermons and adopted principles to help craft sermons (Robinson and Larson 64–65).

Early church preachers such as Origen and Chrysostom utilized careful exegesis of the text along with structured form to create sermonic moments. Augustus of Hippo wrote the first preaching textbook. However, as the Roman Empire crumbled, preaching also fell into disarray as preachers would often preach repetitiously preached older sermons (Robinson and Larson 64–65).

By the Middle Ages, a preaching revival took place through the influence of Franciscan and Dominican friars. Preachers often developed sermons on single Bible verses that included three points and subpoints. In addition, John Wycliff and Bernard of Clairvaux began to preach the Bible extemporaneously (Robinson and Larson 64–65).

In the Reformation, Martin Luther developed a style of preaching referred to as "herald preaching." Herald preaching continued throughout the years with preachers such as John Calvin, George Whitfield, and John Wesley. Some scholars note that the nineteenth century was the golden age for herald preaching with preachers such as Charles Spurgeon, Catherine Booth, and Dwight Moody (Robinson and Larson 64–65).

In the twentieth century, preaching forms became more diversified. Some preachers such as Billy Graham traveled across the United States and the world preaching in large venues. Martin Luther King captured the world's attention through his sermons to speak against racial inequality, poverty, and oppression. In addition, Fred B. Craddock and Eugene L. Lowry led a movement in inductive preaching. Most recently, scholars have helped lead a growing appreciation for traditions in women and black preaching (Robinson and Larson 64–65)

In 2 Timothy 4: 2-5, Paul connects preaching with sound doctrine. Ironside states that sound doctrine are the "great truths" of Scripture that the faithful learn in order to behave in accordance with the revelation God has given (Ironside, 146).

Based on the readings of Augustine, Ward lists four functions of preaching: healing, teaching, saving, and freeing (*Practicing the Preaching Life* 33). He lists healing because preaching seeks to attend to the needs of a fallen humanity and to heal their wounds with the proclamation of the gospel (Isa. 53:5). Ward cites teaching because

preaching aims to educate the nonbeliever, the immature believer, and the mature believer in helping them grow in their faith and discipleship of Christ (2 Tim. 3: 16). Ward includes saving because, 1) preaching seeks to witness to the listener the love from God that gave the world Christ, God's only Son so that humanity's sins are forgiven, and the relationship with God is reconciled (John 3:16); and 2) preaching invites the listener to participate in the love of God and the love of neighbor (Matt. 22: 36-40). The last function, Freeing, is because preaching sends the listener into the world to proclaim the gospel through mission and ministry (Mark 16: 15). For Augustine, good preaching is directed toward the same aim as all Christian activity: the enjoyment of God (20).

In modern times the way many people view the worship experience in the Church has greatly changed. While preaching is the centerpiece of worship, the sermonic moment has, for many churches, been distinguished as a separate piece. Today, scholars such as Jeffery W. Frymire indicate the change in worship experience is through churches now having a bifurcated view of the worship service with music being viewed as a main attraction for people attending church services. In response to the fact that music may attract people to church, many contemporary churches regard music as distinct from preaching. The worship service is broken into two categories. The first category is considered the “worship” category and consists of singing, prayer, specials, and an offering. Preaching is the second category (Frymire Loc. 131).

Paul writes to the church of Rome that the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ leads people to salvation, therefore without preaching, people would have limited access to the good news (Rom. 10: 14)? During the COVID-19 Pandemic, churches were forced to pause their in-person services and in response preaching moved to the internet.

The move to the internet could be antithetical to the idea of a two-category worship depending on the platform the church uses as the livestream platform. Some livestream platforms will not allow music to be streamed and will mute the sound. Streaming music online can be challenging because of copyright and streaming licenses.

The pandemic also limited the number of people in the sanctuary so choirs and praise bands could not gather for practice or sing during the service. Some churches opted not to include music during their livestreams and only streamed the sermons. Some churches decided to stream only music for digital worship, contrary to Paul's emphasis on proclamation. Other churches streamed both music and sermons. The diversity in the way churches treated the sermonic moment during the pandemic by having either a solo sermon, combining the sermon with music, or excluding the sermon seems to support Frymire's assessment that some churches treat preaching as a "secondary category." On the other hand, the way churches treated the digital sermonic moment highlighted that this was indeed new ground. Moreover, maybe some churches were unprepared for the transition and treated the transition to virtual worship as a temporary move done out of the moment's necessity.

David Sax posits that often people revert back to nondigital goods, services, and ideas because people in society see value in the predigital, even though the transition to digital was supposed to be permanent because people in society see value in the predigital. Sax explains that "the honeymoon with a particular digital technology inevitably ends, and when it does, we are more readily able to judge its true merits and shortcomings (Loc.xvi)." In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells the disciples to, "go into the world and proclaim the Good News." (Mark 15: 14). My understanding of Jesus directing

the gospel message to be proclaimed to the world, means the gospel is to be proclaimed where people are living. Therefore, preachers cannot discount the virtual world as not being a viable context for sharing the gospel because more and more people have virtual lives.

Jay Y. Kim argues that the Church spends a great deal of time, money, and effort to “sound and feel” just right. The church is on a never-ending search for the newest and latest trend to attract people to hear the gospel. Churches market themselves as “not your grandma’s church,” but what if grandma’s church is exactly what people are looking for. Kim states that people are not looking for relevance; people are looking for transcendence (7–8). Christian preaching proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the message of transformation. Paul states that if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation (2 Cor. 5: 17). The proclamation of the gospel allows people to hear about God’s grace and recognize that God’s grace is for them despite their transgressions.

Matt Schubert postulates that one might think a sermon on video or livestreamed might be perceived as impersonal and more generic (2). Yet, Paul did not have this attitude when writing letters to the church. Paul’s letters were relational, and Paul’s letters may give an insight on how digital preaching may be perceived. Schubert states that Paul’s letters addressed specific needs, issues, times, and even people in the congregations (96–97). The letters were not private. Paul intended the letters to be shared. The letters were communal. When a preaching video goes online, more than the congregation members can view it and receive the message, unless streamed to a private platform. The idea of anyone watching the sermon gives credence to the goal of the sermon as proclamation of the gospel.

Schubert suggests that the letters of Paul served the purpose of either preparing a congregation for a visit or serving as an alternate means of teaching a congregation when he was unable to visit. Paul writes to the church in Rome that he longs to be with them, but he is prevented from visiting the church (Rom. 1: 11-13). Physically being together is preferred, but circumstances barred Paul from an in-person visit to Rome. So Paul reverted to a letter as the best method of communication with the congregation (96). The pandemic which began in early 2020 created a pause for in-person worship, and virtual worship became like Paul's letters, an alternate platform for proclaiming the gospel.

Bryan Nash states, "The sermon is traditionally preached in a worship space, and the preacher hopes that the sermon will be brought into being in the home or workplace of the listener" (150). Nash posits the unique possibility that through video platforms such as Zoom and Skype, the listeners are already in the space the preacher intended to realize the sermon" (150). Preachers might consider the Book of Ezekiel where the Israelites are in exilic captivity outside of Babylon on the Char River banks. The Israelites are separated from their traditional worship spaces. Still, Ezekiel witnesses God's throne there with the people proving God is not limited to a specific geographical space, but God is wherever people are (Ezek. 1: 1-28).

Nash states that the listener can perceive the preacher as speaking just to them which can create a conflict between the listener and the preacher because technology has narrowed the space needed for safe interpretation for the listener (Nash 149–50). However, Nash suggests that if the preacher stares into the camera for the sermon's duration, it could allow the listener to perceive they are overhearing a conversation which

is not threatening. Nash is presenting the idea that digital sermons, like Paul's letters, can be relational and not impersonal.

While the pandemic forced churches to take their worship services online, there has previously been a trend over the past decade for churches to add online services as an option for their congregations. Tripp Hudgins cited a 2005 Barna Group study that found churches are moving toward "new ways" of expressing and experiencing faith. These "new ways" are house churches, marketplace ministries, and cyber or digital churches (70). The Barna Groups study agrees with Jay Kim's argument that churches always look for new and trendy ways of offering worship (7-8). Church innovations such as cyber churches, digital churches, and social media platforms used to proclaim the gospel are ways in which the Church lives into Jesus' call to proclaim the gospel to the world (Mark 16:15). These innovations are particularly beneficial during the pandemic, where public health concerns placed restrictions on physical gatherings.

Tripp states that pre-pandemic, many churches offered access to sermons online in one or more of five ways. First, preachers shared just the text of their sermons on the church's website or through an email to the congregation. This method is like a modern version of Paul's epistles. Other preachers shared a video of the sermon to an online platform after the conclusion of the sermonic moment. The sermon videos were posted to the church's website or a video-sharing platform such as YouTube.

Some preachers preached a livestreamed sermon on social media and then afterwards would upload a video of the sermon to other platforms. Many preachers offered their sermons in a worship service that is both an in-person and livestream service. Lastly, some preachers are preaching to virtual or cyber-churches (Hudgins 80).

Hudgins published his work “Preaching Online” pre-pandemic. Still, the paper is vital to churches during the pandemic and post-pandemic churches as it illustrates how some churches saw and began to utilize digital platforms as a means to proclaim the gospel.

People in the American South were at one time considered “front porch” people. Front porch people would sit on their porches during the warmer months, particularly in the evening. Neighbors would stop by to visit and have conversations. Front porches were places of fellowship and an invitation to join their neighbors was always open. Anyone could come by and join the company. Over time, the culture changed and shifted from “front porch” people to “backyard deck” people. “Backyard deck” people do not offer an open invitation to their neighbors to join them. Instead, access to the backyard fellowship is through invitation only, and not everyone is allowed in.

Social media functions like the “backyard deck.” People are required to sign up before they are allowed access. For relationships to happen, a person must accept a “friend request.” Many people negatively use social media platforms. People will “troll” (negative or blatantly derogative comments) and “gaslight” (psychologically manipulating people) other people, not to mention the ease with which people can misinterpret what they read or listen to and become offended. Bullying is also a large online issue. Social media can be a very tough place for relationships. Kim warns that churches of all shapes and sizes are digitalizing at all cost to become relevant, but their good intentions are creating more issues (9–10).

Justin Wise suggests that because the proliferation of technology in society, the lines between online and offline have become blurred. Technology is embedded in every facet of society (87–88). Wise argues that the relationship between technology and social

relationships are normalizing. Meeting people online before meeting in person is now considered normal. Connectedness through technology is now the basis for relationships. Through cell phone technology, people can access social media relationships, and even apps such as Yelp, AroundMe, and Find My Friends that help people interpret the world (92–93).

The transition to online preaching should consider that social platforms online are like the non-virtual world in that online communities are complex and maybe even more difficult for proclamation to make inroads. Even though difficult, the opportunities for progressing the gospel of Jesus Christ are great. As with any endeavor, the possibilities for both failure and success exist. The apostles often failed in their mission. After siding with the Gentiles in the issue of circumcision, Peter pulled back from fellowshipping with the Gentiles (Gal. 2: 11). Although Paul’s preaching on Mars Hill did win over some, his sermon was not well received. However, this did not deter Paul from his mission (Acts 17: 22-34).

Preachers must be vigilant or at least aware of the complexities of preaching online. Preachers must not oversimplify the digital sermonic moment. Angela Lynn Craig oversimplifies the ease of creating online faith communities. Craig is correct in stating that there are real online communities, and she lists some helpful steps in creating online faith communities. Still, she fails to consider how to navigate the difficulties of online faith relationships and the resistance people will have to these groups (42–73).

Regardless of the difficulties, Wise posits that the Great Commission (Matt. 28) includes the church transitioning online to proclaim the gospel. Wise states, “It is time to grasp what an embodiment gospel looks like in a digitalized world” (120).

Whether in person or online, preaching seeks to share the Good News of Christ. The gospel message is even more relevant among all the access to information that technology gives people to information. People are searching for meaning. Chris Stedman states that the questions that brought him into the church- “Who am I? How do I live a life of meaning and purpose? What are my responsibilities in the world?”- are now questions for which people look for the answers online (40). Stedman warns that polemics often win out in online conversations, which leads people to a polarizing view of social media (40). Social media, like any other form of technology, has had its critics and its champions. Regardless of what side of the fence a person might find themselves, social media is probably here to stay; therefore, the opportunities to share the gospel online are many.

Stedman has a valid point in that people are looking for realness online. Social media and the digital communities that form on social platforms match the needs of non-digital communities. People want to be connected. People want to feel needed. People want to have a sense of meaning and purpose to their lives. However, the non-digital world is not black and white. People navigate through multiple shades of gray when it comes to truth. The online world is a reflection of the non-digital world and Stedman argues that the rise of the online world is the best chance human beings have of discovering what realness means (49–50).

Yet, the Bible states that realness and truth are found in the person of Jesus Christ. Thomas told Jesus that they, meaning the disciples, do not know where they are going. He asked Jesus, “how can they know the way?” Jesus responded that he is the way, the truth, and the life. The only way a relationship with God can happen is through Jesus

(John 14:5-7). The Bible states that a person's true meaning and purpose are found in their relationship with God, and the relationship with God is only possible through Christ (Eph. 1:4-14).

Stedman argues that humankind lives in a world where truth is convoluted, and the virtual world reflects the real world. More and more, people are entering the virtual world. Therefore, the virtual world gives people a platform to discover the truth and purpose of their lives. Because the world only offers a muddled confusing truth, then Stedman's argument makes a case for the virtual proclamation of the gospel being a necessity for the church because the gospel offers absolute truth and purpose to people through a relationship with Christ.

Stedman relates an illustration a friend of his used to describe social media. "Social media is a kind of fun-house mirror of society in that it warps some things and reveals others, which makes it confusing to navigate but also fertile ground for the work of better understanding ourselves and the world around us" (49). However, Stedman leaves people to parse truth and meaning on their own. Paul asked the church in Rome how people will have a relationship with Christ unless they first hear about Christ (Rom. 10:14-15)? Paul's question to the Roman church underscores why virtual preaching is vital because the proclamation of the gospel in preaching gives the world truth of God. Steven Roberts states that the virtual preacher presents the truth of Scripture as an offering for the people's benefit (17).

People who are looking for meaning and understanding online will often be met with polemics. In the Bible, Christ warns of the world's hostility towards him and the gospel message. Therefore, Stedman suggests that people looking for meaning and truth

online will often gravitate towards the simple, less complicated answers because the least complicated often feels the safest (40). People want meaning and understanding, but they also want to find meaning and understanding in ways that are uncomplicated. This means that preaching must be clear and authentic.

Kevin DeYoung states that authentic preaching is difficult to define and delivery of such takes a long time to acquire (“4 Indispensable Qualities of Good Preaching”). One aspect of authentic preaching can describe the personality of the preacher and how the preacher’s personality may surface during the sermonic moment. The preacher’s personality can connect or disconnect the sermon with the congregation. It might be perceived by the congregation during the sermonic moment that the preacher is uncomfortable or that possibly the preacher is deemed as acting not like his or herself and is regarded as acting. While the preacher’s personality can tie into the authenticity of the sermonic moment, particularly in a digital format, authentic preaching could be described as “faithful” preaching for the purpose of this research.

John MacArthur states, “true success is faithfulness. And faithfulness in the pulpit demands diligence in study. Those who are lazy in their study, undisciplined in preparation, and careless in proclamation will one day be ashamed. But not faithful workmen” (qtd in Ryken and Wilson 78). MacArthur’s point is that authentic preaching is faithful to the proclamation of the gospel. Faithfulness in proclaiming the gospel is what the preacher must abide by, whether preaching in-person or digitally. Paul reminds the church of Corinth that it is the gospel that saved them, and they must “hold firmly” to the gospel unless they believed in vain (1 Cor. 15:1-2).

The Pew Research conducted a study in 2019 of online sermons throughout the United States. They built computational tools that identified every institution labeled as a church in Google places. They were able to gather and transcribe sermons all publicly posted sermons over an eight-week period and analyze the content of those sermons. There were a total 49,719 of sermons analyzed from 6,431 churches. The amount of sermons collected during this study is just a small sample from the estimated 350,000 plus congregation nationwide (Pew Research Center, “The Digital Pulpit” 1).

The Pew Research Center study uncovered some remarkable information. The medium time for the preaching moment was 37 minutes. The shortest sermons were from Catholic churches and were 14 minutes in length. Sermons in Protestant mainline churches were 29 minutes. Evangelical Protestant churches averaged 39 minutes and the longest sermons, on average were 54 minutes were from historically Black Protestant churches. Pew Research Center’s findings provide evidence that sermon length varies with no clear consensus on the proper length of a sermon to which one might attribute authenticity through measuring sermon parameters.

Teresa Fry Brown gives some principles she uses to help her in the sermon moment, but indicates that ultimately, the preaching moment depends upon the authenticity of the preacher (Loc. 336). A sermon’s authenticity cannot be measured by length or word count.

Preaching is about the spoken word, and it is also about the preacher’s presence. Brown states that preaching presence is the “aspect or physicality of a person that commands respectful attention” (Loc. 1166). Preaching presence also is the quality of

self-assurance that establishes a connection between the preacher and their congregation during the sermonic moment.

Preaching presence is a concept that preachers must consider in preparing to preach in-person and online. Preaching presence is the culmination of mannerisms, distinguishing characteristics, peculiarities, voice, and expressions that make the preacher unique and help convey the gospel message to the congregation. Brown states that authentic preaching is "absent of caricature and stereotype" and authentic preaching is to be "conscious of one's unique presence." This allows the preacher to use it the authenticity of the message to fully proclaim the gospel (Loc. 1166).

In an article written for the Canadian Mennonite in 2010, Allan Rudy-Froese argues that a preacher need not be over-dependent on visual aids or technology. Rudy-Froese states that preachers need to develop the skill of telling the gospel story because in most cases, the preacher's simple imagination and incarnational telling of the story is better than any technological aid (15). However, Ezekiel mimicked a siege (Ezek. 4:1-17), baked bread over a fire of dung (Ezek. 4:9-16), shaved his head and beard (Ezek. 5:1-4), dug a hole into a wall (Ezek. 8:8), and other symbolic actions to bring God's words to life. While incarnational storytelling is crucial, technological aids could also help proclaim the gospel depending on the situation and application.

Stephen Smith agrees with Rudy-Froese that telling the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and revealing God's saving grace for the world is the crux of authentic preaching. Paul taught the church in Ephesus that the gospel reveals the truth of God's grace which makes people alive with Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:1-9). Smith reiterates Fred Craddock's views of narrative preaching in that the preacher need not be the

“authoritative expert on all things religious,” instead, the preacher’s impact is far more significant if they become the one who knows the gospel story (Smith 106).

Good preaching is good storytelling, but for the preacher, authentic storytelling is couched in God's love, mercy, and grace that is given to the world through God's Son, Jesus Christ. Thus, authentic preaching can be thought of as storytelling that is centered on the revelation of Jesus Christ. Joe Lambert advises that a good storyteller wants to pay attention to their choice of words and phrasing and the impact they will have (64). Lambert's idea is especially true in light of what Mary E. Hess postulates about digital spaces. Hess posits that internet naysayers thought people would go online and create multiple personas to inhabit digital spaces, but the opposite happened. People are not hiding away their true selves away online. Instead, digital spaces are increasingly spaces where people go to be themselves (Hess 14). Therefore, regarding Lambert’s and Hess's works, the preacher must choose wording that proclaims the gospel in order for the preaching to be authentic.

While some churches incorporated digital preaching before the COVID-19 pandemic, for many churches preaching online is a new endeavor, especially for small-town and rural preachers who may have never considered preaching online as an option for themselves or their congregations. Preaching online can feel awkward for one who is used to an audience in the same room. Jeff Robinson writes that the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated preachers to move to social platforms like Facebook, YouTube, or another platform to proclaim the gospel, but for some preachers, digital preaching is uncomfortable (3).

Since the pandemic also necessitated that the parishioners move out of the sanctuary and watch from home, preaching to a camera in an empty room most likely felt awkward for many. The feeling of awkwardness could come from the relational aspect of preaching where the preacher receives feedback from the congregation through worship exclamations like “amen” and “hallelujah,” which help to affirm to the preacher that the sermon is going well. The preacher could also look for visual clues in the congregation, such as fidgeting, nodding, smiles, eyes closed, looking at phones, and yawns as feedback to the preaching moment. Preaching to a camera without a physical congregation present to give verbal and visual feedback can cause uncomfortable and awkward feelings in the preacher.

Robinson argues that online sermons are a necessity of the pandemic. Even though they are necessary for a period of time, he suggests that online churches and virtual sermons as a "lifestyle commitment" are not warranted by Scripture and are not healthy for the Body of Christ (6). The writer of Hebrews encourages the church not to neglect meeting together (Heb. 10:25). However, during the pandemic, technology has offered the platform where people can meet safely and still worship. Paul longed to meet in person with certain churches. Still, circumstances would not allow for physically meeting, and the epistles became the platform by which Paul could fellowship and proclaim the gospel.

Will Brawn interviews Tyndale Seminary professor and former Mennonite pastor Arthur Boers, who states that churches have put too much emphasis on technology without considering the implications. Boers is not calling for churches to abolish the use of technology. Instead, he wants churches to carefully consider how engagement with

technology affects the church's identity. Boers wants church leaders to examine the concept of the church's identity being based on the "delivery of content," so the church can maximize information exchange and accommodate the online generation. Boer is connecting the concept of "delivery of content" with incarnational relationships (Brawn, 5–6).

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused most preaching to transition from in-person worship services to online sermonic events. As the pandemic restrictions eased, many churches have transitioned back to in-person, and others have opted for both in-person and online worship. However, the aim of a good sermon is still the same. The internet, just as the physical world we live in, is difficult and disorienting. The online world is an echo chamber for all the voices in the world claiming this is truth or that is truth. Long states that the lack of truth and clarity is the reason for bold preaching:

"I call for a bold and joyful approach to preaching, a preaching that stands out in the full force of the cultural gale, unafraid of the storm, preaching that can lovingly tell the story of God's people, courageously announce what God is doing among us, and confidently invite people to lean forward in hope toward the promise of God." (*Preaching from Memory to Hope* xi).

Preparation

Paul not only instructed Timothy to preach the gospel but also to be prepared to preach the gospel. Paul states that there is a reason for Timothy to prepare for preaching. Paul states that there is a time coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine and will look to other philosophies and religions, abandoning God's truth. This is why Paul emphasized the importance of being prepared to preach. Paul encouraged Timothy

to endure suffering, to do an evangelist's work, and to carry out his ministry (2 Tim. 4: 2-5, NIV). "Ephistemi" is the Greek word Paul used that translates to be prepared, be ready, and to stand by. Good preaching and being prepared are inseparable.

The Apostle Peter writes that Christians should always be prepared to answer everyone who asks us to provide a reason for the hope we have (1 Pet. 3:15). Being prepared means doing the work of preparation. The Boy Scout motto is "Be Prepared." Scout founder Robert Baden-Powell defined "Being Prepared" as being "always in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your duty" (Wendell). Throughout their membership, scouts work diligently to develop a wide range of skills to "Be Prepared" for whatever task may arise. Preachers can understand what the Apostle Peter advised, "being ready" through Baden-Powell's definition of "Be Prepared," by being ready in mind and body to proclaim the gospel.

MacArthur's position is that authentic preaching is preaching faithful to the proclamation of the gospel (Ryken and Wilson 78). Ward's argument that he based on Old's understanding of preaching is the aim of good preaching is "all good preaching seeks to send a doxological community into the world through the proclamation of the gospel" (Ward 23). Taking both MacArthur's and Ward's positions on authentic and good preaching, the development of preaching skills through preparation in study and praxis is essential for the preacher.

Preparing the congregation or the doxological community (the community praising God) to go into the world to proclaim the gospel is a scriptural duty. Jesus gives the apostles and the Church the "Great Commission," to go into the world and make disciples for Christ (Matt. 28:16-20). The task of disciple making starts with the gospel.

The task is imperative because the Scriptures teach that time is waning. Matthew 24:22 tells the Church to be ready or prepared because Christ's return is imminent. Proclaiming the gospel invites people to say yes to Christ and for grace to work in their lives, saving them from sin and reconciling their relationship with God. The responsibility of proclaiming the gospel means the preacher's work is a critical facet before the sermon is ever preached.

One preacher posted on his social media that they had woken up at 4 am on Sunday to write his sermon. The preacher never posted whether he had prepared earlier in the week or even attempted an exegesis. By the wording of the post, the sermon was put together that morning. The preacher gave no indication on how the sermon was received by the congregation. The Book of Proverbs tells us to be like an ant. An ant has no overseer or commander, yet the ant works hard each day. The ant's work is not only for that day, but the ant stores up in preparation for another time. (Prov. 6:6-8, NIV).

Sermon preparation is “storing up” God’s word for the sermonic moment. Without preparation, the sermonic moment could be like being hungry and grabbing the jar of peanut butter from the pantry to make a sandwich, opening the jar only to find it nearly empty. To make the sandwich, a person takes a knife and scrape off any peanut butter remaining in the jar. A preacher’s sermon will be like the sandwich; poor and not satisfying.

Preparation is vital to a good sermon. It might be tempting with technology because of video editing to not prepare as diligently for the sermonic moment. However, preachers must fight against this temptation because of the perception of authenticity.

The sermon should be polished, but not over-produced. Preparation for the online sermonic moment is just as important, if not more than the in-person sermonic moment.

The preacher in the in-person sermonic moment is faced with several boundaries between the text, the congregation, and their uniqueness. The boundaries in the sermonic moment are not exclusively related to words and delivery, but also preaching the biblical text. There are boundaries are those of time and culture, boundaries from theological revelations, such as sin, guilt, assurance, and others that can create tension and resistance in the sermonic moment. Those boundaries are present in the digital sermonic moment as well.

David Mosser states that the Postman critique of technology reveals that “public discourse has come to prize form over substance. In, other words, if what one has to say is not entertaining, then it is likely not to be heard (30). Postman’s revelation lends more credence to being prepared to preach because the better prepared preachers are to preach, the more they are likely to become the bold and joyful preacher proclaiming God’s gospel as Long calls preachers to be.

It is important to understand how a preacher prepares for both the in-person sermonic moment and the digital sermonic moment. While sermon preparation is a critical task for the preacher, the consideration of the preacher’s time and other pastoral duties makes each preacher unique in how they approach the process of sermon preparation. The preacher may have an older congregation that requires more chaplain visitations. The preacher may be bi-vocational as many rural and small-town preachers are. The preacher may be involved with community activities, such as being a member of the local school board, chamber of commerce, or involved with local civic organizations.

Regardless of the preacher's schedule, to preach good sermons, as Peter advised, they must prepare.

Long's process for sermon preparation is regarded as one of the best methods available. Long himself states that although his exegetical method is in-depth in practice, over time the process can be accomplished in a reasonable amount of time (*The Witness of Preaching* 70). Craddock claims that exegetical methods will become fruitful when they become as comfortable as an old sweater (*Preaching* 99). Long states that the aim of the exegetical process is to move beyond biblical interpretation to a place where the preacher critically, attentively and faithfully dwell within the Scriptures (*The Witness of Preaching* 70).

Long's outline for the exegetical process is as follows:

- I. Getting the text in view
 - A. Select the text
 - B. Reconsider where the text begins and ends
 - C. Establish a reliable translation of the text
- II. Getting Introduced to the text
 - D. Read the text for basic understanding
 - E. Place the text in larger context
- III. Attending to the text
 - F. Listen attentively to the text
- IV. Testing what is heard in the text
 - G. Explore the text historically
 - H. Explore the literary character of the text

- I. Explore the text theologically
 - J. Check the text in the commentaries
 - V. Moving toward the sermon
 - K. State the claim of the text upon the hearers (including the preacher)
- (The Witness of Preaching 70)*

While the exegetical process is, in essence, a process, exegesis is not just a mechanical endeavor. Craddock thought the exegetical process is, for the preacher an exciting journey of discovery. The problem with bad preaching is the shift of the preacher's thought process during the transition from exegetical discovery to sermon moment (Craddock 124–25). Long states that Craddock's solution to the transitional issue is to craft a sermon that invites the listener to experience the inductive discovery experienced by the preacher during the exegetical process.

Craddock felt that the process of discovery was to be shared by both the preacher and the listener of the sermon. He also thought some preachers do not give proper diligence to biblical material because they perceive that people had heard it before. Craddock realized that if the preacher invites the listener into the excitement of exegetical discovery the listener becomes excited when they recognize their stories in the message (qtd. in Eslinger Loc. 386).

Eugene Lowry, a colleague of Craddock, stated that upon the publication of *As One Without Authority*, Craddock gave birth to a new era in North American homiletics (Craddock, et al. *Listening to the Word* 93). Craddock thought that "preaching by its nature is an acoustical event, having its home in orality not textuality" (qtd in Eslinger Loc 195). Therefore, in order to bring the excitement of the exegetical process to the

listener, preaching should return to its oral roots and return the “word to its oral/aural immediacy because preaching is by its nature and acoustical event” (Eslinger, 206). Craddock believed “responsible exegesis of the text is not an option.” (Loc 814). The transition from exegesis to sermon would be inductive, meaning the sermon form would not consist of three points with subpoints. Instead, the sermon is a vehicle for the listener to discover what God is revealing in the text.

The exegetical process begins with selecting the text. Long gives several ways to select a passage of Scripture for preaching. One way is called *Lectio Continua* which is preaching through the Bible, book by book. Another method is using a lectionary. A lectionary is a list of biblical passages assigned to days in the church calendar. A third way to select a passage is based on events within the congregation or in their community, When the churches plan sermons in such a way to select, this is, in effect making a local lectionary. Lastly, passages for sermons can be the choice of the preacher who chooses them based on congregational needs of the moment. The preacher’s choice is usually a week to week method (Long, *The Witness of Preaching* 71–73).

Regardless of the method used to choose Scripture for preaching, the preacher must spend time with the passage. Authentic preaching, whether online or in-person conveys scriptural truth, and scriptural truth can only be understood and proclaimed through spending time with the text. If preachers consider Stedman's understanding of people online, they will recall that people are looking for meaning and understanding by gravitating to the "simplest and least complicated answers (Stedman, 40)."

By spending proper time with the Scriptures, the preacher is more likely to share the Scriptures easily and in a relatable way. Paul teaches the church in Romans 10 why

the proclamation of the gospel is essential. Faith comes by hearing the gospel and Paul posits that preaching is the means by which people hear the gospel proclaimed (Rom. 10:15-17). Long's exegetical process invites the preacher to spend time with the text to discover what God is saying to the preacher and their congregation. Lowry and Craddock invite the congregation into the process of discovery through the sermonic moment which gives authenticity to preaching because the listener is a part of the discussion between God, the text, and the preacher.

Henri J.M. Nouwen posits that people read the Scriptures for more than edification; people read the Scriptures for spiritual formation (11)." Nouwen's advice is beneficial to the preacher's exegetical process because the Scriptures provide the spiritual formation for both the congregation and preacher. Paul writes to Timothy that all Scripture is written by people inspired by the Holy Spirit and that Scripture is good for teaching, reproof, correction, and discipleship (2 Tim. 3:16). Paul's application of the scriptures in his writings teach the importance of scripture as being the foundation and building blocks for discipleship and ministry. If preachers synthesize Nouwen's position that reading the Scriptures is formational with Paul's applications of the Scriptures, they can surmise that Paul's scriptural applications are vital to spiritual formation.

Furthermore, the exegetical process helps develop the spiritual formation of the preacher because the scriptural applications of teaching, reproof, correction, and discipleship apply to the preacher.

Eugene H. Peterson suggests that when people read the Bible, they come to realize that what we need is not primarily informational, telling us things about God and ourselves, but reading the Bible is formational (Loc. 216). Therefore, preaching begins

and ends with the Scriptures and not just the passage for Sunday. Thus, the preacher, to be prepared to preach, must not only be familiar with the passage they are preaching on Sunday, but they must also be familiar with the Bible, and that requires reading more than just for the Sunday sermon.

Scripture is highly regarded in Black preaching. Cleophus Larue states that in the Black church, the Scripture is the essence of the sermon. In fact, for preaching to be considered authentic, the preacher uses the text as the driving force to shape the context and purpose of the sermon (3). With the emphasis Black preaching places on the authority of the Bible, preachers will vary greatly on the exegetical process. Some preachers will use a rigid process like Long's and others will utilize a less structured process.

T. David Gordon states that Robert Lewis Dabney's understanding of the importance of the exegetical process for sermon preparation; he notes that for Dabney the preacher is an "ambassador," who represents God and is declaring the will of God. Therefore, Dabney believes that authentic preaching is not preaching personal insights, opinions, and convictions. Instead, the preacher is "entitled only to declare the mind of God revealed in Holy Scriptures (Gordon Loc. 177)." By Dabney's account, the only way preaching is authentic is for the preacher to maintain fidelity to the Scriptures. Peterson and Nouwen would say that fidelity with the Scriptures starts by reading the Scriptures to allow the Scriptures to form and shape the preacher.

Mary Hinkle Shore agrees with Dabney in her understanding of the primacy Scriptures. Shore believes the gospel message is not a piece or a single idea extracted from the biblical text. Instead, the gospel is a complete story that does not reflect the

preacher's ideals; it is God's story that the preacher faithfully proclaims (61). Klyne Snodgrass approaches Scripture in a contextual manner, noting that modern readers cannot approach the Scriptures as if it is written in the present. Instead, the reader must approach the Scripture in the context in which it was written (4).

Snodgrass posits that the purpose of the exegetical process is to discover the author's intention in writing the material. Furthermore, the exegetical process helps the preacher determine as nearly as possible the precise meaning the author intended. From that point, the preacher synthesizes the author's context and theological principles to form the sermon (4). Thus, the aim of Snodgrass' exegetical approach is to immerse the preacher and subsequently the congregation in the biblical world.

Brown states that exegesis is not just limited to the Scriptures, but covers the exegesis of self, of congregations, of community, of the world, and of the reception of the Word (Loc. 357). A preacher knowing their congregation is scriptural. Paul told the elders of the church in Ephesus to watch over their flock and he told the elders to be shepherds of the God's Church (Acts 20:28). Brown stresses the importance of the preacher knowing their congregations to not only minister to them, but to also to be able to understand the needs of the congregation to address those needs with the Good News.

Paul Brown states that the preacher should begin and end each exegetical stage with prayer (Loc. 357). If the preacher does their due diligence in these exegetical stages, they will be successful in inviting the listeners, both as individuals and as a community, to self-examination and a fuller examination of the Scripture (Loc. 357). A deeper examination of the Scripture allows the congregation to draw closer to God and experience God's grace. The writer of Hebrews advises the reader to draw, in confidence,

near the throne of grace that they may receive mercy and find grace in their time of need (Heb. 4:16).

P. Brown's statement that exegesis is more than just limited to Scriptures and that a good preacher must utilize several exegetical stages to bear fruit in preaching is certainly applicable to preaching online. If the preacher is prepared for the sermonic moment, the perception is that the sermonic moment is authentic. The statistics seem to agree. The Barna Group performed a study in December 2020 that revealed 2 in 5 churchgoers are open to inviting others to digital church services and 62 percent of Christians hope that churches will keep using digital means of gathering people together even post-COVID-19 (Barna, *2 in 5 Church Goers Are Open to Inviting Others to Digital Church Services* 3). The Barna Group's December study demonstrates that the reception to online worship has improved over its mid-2020 perception. The improvement in statistics may be due to better preparation among preachers for the digital sermonic moment. This is an area discussed later in this research paper.

Wired, a technologically- oriented magazine *quoted*, William Vanderbloemen. Vanderbloemen is a former pastor and founder of The Vanderbloemen Search Group, an executive search group for churches. Vanderbloemen as he speculated on the pandemic's effect on the future of preaching, "You're going to have the top 40 preachers that everyone listens to, and the regular everyday preachers are not going to be able to compete (Pardes, 3). In Vanderbloemen's current role, he now leads an executive search group for churches and warns that while preaching may not be viewed as competitive, people will tune out bad preaching. Additionally, what the church will look like post-pandemic has led to a great deal of speculation. Still the fact remains that good preaching

is critical and it begins with the preacher preparing for the sermonic moment. Paul tells Timothy to be prepared both in season and out of season (2 Tim. 4:2), ultimately proving that a robust exegetical process is essential.

Lowry notes that most preachers have the wrong perception of sermon preparation. Lowry states that most preachers start with “scraps of notes-all generally relating to a particular theme” and preachers hope to make those notes into a sermon (5). Preachers treat sermon preparation as a Ford assembly line worker reaching for “interchangeable nuts and bolts which to construct a car “(6). Instead of nuts and bolts, the preacher reaches for “interchangeable anecdotes and biblical proof-texts” to construct the sermon. Preachers see sermons as a thing (5–8), but the writer of Hebrews reminds us that the God’s word is not inanimate and monolithic. Instead, the Word of God is living and active (Heb. 4:12).

Lowry posits that preachers should see sermon preparation in a different way. In his preaching seminars, Lowry asks participants to play a word association game with the words construct and develop. Lowry states that a composite picture emerges from the game. The words that are typically associated with construct are terms associated with a building site. Words such as brick, lumber, and iron are presented. These terms indicate pieces that need to be put together to produce a finished product. The words associated with develop are terms that indicate living organic matter. Words such as grow, form, and mature often emerge in this word associated exercise. Lowry uses the result of this game to come to the conclusion that, “a sermon ought not be a collection of parts constructed by a preacher, the sermon has its roots in the truth of the gospel which indeed has a life of its own” (8–10). Lowry’s conclusion transitions to the task of the exegetical process and

the sermonic moment. He states, “our task in preaching is to facilitate the homiletical birth and development of such an idea grounded in the gospel” (11).

Presence

The presence of the pastor is vital to the sermonic moment, and the preacher’s presence is a link to the perception of authenticity of the preacher. A preaching presence can be a lot of things. Presence might be the physicality of the preacher. Presence might be the preacher moves. Presence might be how the preacher stands at the pulpit, or how they move around or away from the pulpit. Presence might be whether the preacher has a big voice that fills the room, or if the preacher is soft-spoken. T. Brown states that the presence of the preacher is physical and emotional, meaning sometimes it is the physical aspects of the preacher that allows the preacher to achieve a rapport with the congregation. However, sometimes, the preacher establishes a connection with the congregation through the way they convey emotions (Loc. 1153-1252).

T. Brown adds another layer to the understanding of authentic preaching. Authentic preaching is preaching meant to be faithful to the gospel (Ryken and Wilson 78) and Brown posits that authentic preaching is also absent of stereotype and caricature (Loc. 1164). Simply put, each preacher has their own physicality, voices, idiosyncrasies and, at times, eccentricities that are unique to them. T. Brown adds that authentic preaching involves the preacher being conscious of the unique preaching presence they possess and use to proclaim the gospel (Loc. 1162). T. Brown’s position is authentic preaching is not just that preachers are faithful to the gospel, but that they must also be faithful to the unique person they are.

Congregants might recognize that sometimes preachers are misperceived.

Preachers are prone to sin and make mistakes just like any other human being. All sorts of tangible and intangible things that aggregate the presence of the preacher. Some are fair assessments, while other evaluations may misconstrue the preacher's presence. The physical aspects of the preacher while preaching can be addressed by reviewing the sermonic moment and observing idiosyncrasies and listening to the way the sermon is delivered. Maybe the preacher tends to keep his hands in his pocket while preaching. Perhaps the preacher makes little eye contact with the congregation. Maybe the preacher uses a monotone voice while delivering the sermon. While there can be numerous other tangible things to look for, there are also intangible parts of the preacher's presence. A preacher's spiritual formation could also be a factor in their preaching presence.

The Psalmist says, "Blessed are those people who don't listen to the advice of people who will lead them astray. And happy are those who read, study, and live out the scriptures in their lives" (Ps. 1:1-2)." Preachers are not perfect. As with all people, preachers are in need of grace. Ward states that grace is for flawed people. The preacher is a participant in God's grace. Ward means that the preacher is intentionally living out the Word of God and this principled living transform them into a voice of hope (Loc. 122).

Being principled does not mean that one is perfect. Ward notes that preachers do not have to be perfect examples of Christian practice, "Instead, good preachers long to be well-practiced participants in the life of God" (Loc.122). Preachers who are well-practiced participants in the life of God will naturally have their spiritual formation reflect in his or her preaching. The intangible aspect of spiritual formation in preaching

may be perceived through the preparedness of the preacher for the sermonic moment.

Peterson argues that preachers abandon spiritual practices because they are tedious and frequently difficult. Preachers who abandon spiritual practices will often replace them with something else that fits their busy schedule (*Working the Angles*).

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he teaches the church about spiritual formation, stating that Christians take their whole lives, even the most ordinary, mundane parts and present them to God as an offering. Paul goes on to advise the Church to not succumb to the culture but instead focus attention on God, and God will respond by helping people's faith mature (Rom. 12:1-2). Dallas Willard posits spiritual formation is an "orderly process", and although God can triumph in disorder, God does not choose to do that. Instead, God wants the faithful to "humble ourselves and to accept the ways He has chosen to work with us" (10).

T. Brown states that "preaching reveals the innermost parts of who we are and how we personally stand in relation to what and with whom we are proclaiming (Loc. 1222)." James K.A. Smith states the significance of Augustine's use of the Greek word for heart, "kardia" in describing humankind's telos or ultimate end. Smith says, "that human beings are made by and for the Creator who is known in Jesus Christ (Smith, 8)." Essentially Smith reiterates Augustine's claim that to understand what it means to be fully human is to be in a relationship with the one who created us and for whom we are made. Human beings find the true understanding of their humanity through a relationship with God. Smith states that the gospel is the way "we learn to be human (qtd in Smith 8)."

The gospel is as essential for the preacher's life as it is for the life of an individual, and the life of the congregation. Willard writes, "the revolution of Jesus is in the first place and continuously a revolution of the human heart" (15). Paul tells the church in Corinth that if anyone is in Christ; they are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). Christ changes a person from the inside, and Willard states that Christ's change is a revolution of character (15). The revolution of character is a change that penetrates to the deepest layers of a person's soul and as a result of this inner change the external social structures of the person will also be transformed (Willard, 15).

Good preaching comes out of the change God is working in the heart and life of the preacher. Henri Nouwen postulates that Jesus looked at the state of humanity with love and mercy and in his mission on earth, he tried to teach human beings to look at themselves and others "from above and not "from below" (8). Nouwen bases this idea on the Gospel of John chapter 3, verse 3, where Jesus responds to Nicodemus' assessment that the signs Jesus had performed could not be done apart from God. Nouwen notes that people "born from above" are so "caught up" in God's love that everything else in their lives receives meaning and purpose in the context of love (9).

John Wesley wrote, "I do indeed live by preaching (Wesley 13). Long lends some understanding to Wesley's admission of the preaching life by stating, "when a preacher delivers a sermon, that act is embedded in some larger framework of ministerial self-understanding (*The Witness of Preaching* 18)." Wesley and Long are expressing the synthesis of the Holy Spirit, the preacher's spiritual formation and the sermonic moment.

The synthesis of the Holy Spirit, the preacher's spiritual formation and preaching appear to be an intangible touchstone that leads to the congregations' perception of

preaching authenticity. One might say about a preacher, "he preached from the heart," or "she brought it today!" Paul offers an explanation to why people might make those statements. First, Paul indicates that spiritual formation gives confidence to the preacher to proclaim the gospel (2 Tim. 2:15). Second, the Holy Spirit is vital to spiritual formation (2 Pet. 1:4-7). Third, Paul attributes the power of his preaching to the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:4-5). Fourth, Luke writes that Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit's power as he preached (Acts 4:8-12).

J. Ellsworth Kalas notes that the preacher's relationship with other people affects the sermon because preaching is a relationship (151). Kalas theorizes that part of who the preacher are comes from their relationships with others. Therefore, the preacher must spend time with other people and build relationships. The time spent with others feed into the exegetical process because these shared experiences help both the preacher and congregation build a relationship. The gospel is relational. Therefore, the sermonic moment is relational as well.

Encouragement is a task of preaching that is also a task that Christ-followers must take on. 1 Thessalonians 5:12 advocates encouraging one another and build one another up. Hebrews 10:24-25 encourages people to consider how to stir one another up in love and not neglect to meet together but encourage one another. And Ephesians 4:29 reminds the faithful in Christ to not talk negatively to others. Instead, disciples are to use words to encourage another. John Wesley echoed the biblical call of encouragement in his General Rules by spelling out the expectations for the Christian life by first "doing no harm, and by avoiding evil of every kind, and by doing good in and every way as far as possible (United Methodist Church (U.S.) 52).

Howard A. Snyder states, “the central task of leadership is to build an apostolic ministering community” (*Decoding the Church* 91). Snyder notes that while the preacher has many tasks, equipping the whole faith community for mission is the foundation for the preacher’s other tasks. Preaching is one of the essential tools for equipping others to become an “active agent” for the kingdom of God (*Decoding the Church* 91). Snyder’s argument reiterates Ward’s definition of the aim of preaching and calls attention to encouragement being a principal task of the preacher.

To understand the gospel as relational and to claim Ward’s aim of preaching as sending a God-praising community into the world to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, one of the preacher’s principled characteristics is humility. Preachers are servant leaders. Howard Snyder underscores this point by asking the question, “must the preacher be a superstar?” (*The Problem of Wineskins* 80–85). Snyder’s question highlights many preachers’ demoralizations when comparing themselves to other preachers they deem more successful. Humility is a product of spirit formation because humility underscores the relationship of the preacher as a servant of Christ and Christ’s church.

In Philippians 2:3, Paul tells the church to do nothing out of rivalry or out of excessive pride, but in humility, regard others as better than yourself. Irenaeus writes about Ignatius of Lyons and how he expressed repeated humility by stating that “as a bishop, he, unlike the apostles, is not in a position to give orders or to lay down the precepts of the teachings which come from the Lord and the apostles alone (9–10).” Ignatius’ humility is acknowledging the gospel is more important than his own desires. Henri Nouwen notes that when disciples continually strive to live in the Spirit, they will

be at least willing to confess their weakness and limitations in humility. In confessing in humility, they place our trust in God (170).

Even though humility is a virtue, the world values power and dominance. J. Smith writes, “a narrative or worldview will see Christ’s meekness and humility as a vice. In contrast, Christians see Christ as the very exemplar of virtue, Christians evaluate his meekness and as virtues to which we aspire” (4). J. Smith posits the end goal or the “*telos*” for the Christian is Christ. Therefore, for the Christian, particularly the Christian preacher, their spiritual goal is to be humble as Christ was humble (4–5).

Ward states, “prayer is not a footnote in preaching (*Practicing the Preaching Life* 5).” Ward argues that one important path to an “authentic” way of preaching is by “engaging the sacramental nature of prayer (Ward, *Practicing the Preaching Life* 5).” Ward notes that prayer is life-giving and is not just supplemental to the preacher who practices the exegetical process; prayer is essential to the preacher’s character which empowers the preacher spiritually and manifests in the sermonic moment (*Practicing the Preaching Life* 5–7).

Preachers are human and are prone, as all Christians are, to abandon spiritual practices. Wheeler writes about abandoning spiritual practices, saying:

“To abandon the life of prayer is not only to fall silent before God, mute in adoration and gratitude as well as in petition; it is in effect to stop one’s ears, to close off awareness and attention to the continual presence of God within the soul. This is to undertake to live a religious life on one’s own, guided by one’s own judgment, and supported by one’s own goodness” (113).

A robust prayer life is critical for sustaining the life of the Christian; even more so, prayer is essential for the preacher's life.

Prayer is to be practiced by the preacher privately and together with others. In equipping the God praising community to go into the world to share the gospel, the preacher must teach the value of prayer. Frymire states, “when we teach the value of prayer, we stress the importance of listening for God’s voice (Loc. 2143).” N.T. Wright posits that prayer is a “humble, Christlike, Holy Spirit-led activity” where the love of God is poured into the heart of the prayer by the Spirit so “the extraordinary and unbelievable” hope that comes from Christ is firmly and securely entrenched in our faith (93).

Prayer regarding the life of the preacher should be practiced at all times, even in mundane daily tasks. Brother Lawrence states, “it was a great delusion to think that the time of prayer ought to be different than other times (Lawrence 6). Wheeler writes, “prayer is how we enter into communion with God and how we discern the meaning of scripture for our lives” (114). Prayer is vital to the life of the preacher for discernment, but so is the hard work of exegesis. The exegetical process and prayer go hand in hand. Peterson states exegesis is “rigorous, disciplined, intellectual work” and it rarely feels “spiritual” (*Eat This Book Loc. 593*). Prayer can bring the perception of spiritual work to the exegetical process.

Ward on works of piety states that they are the “instituted means of grace that bear with them the character of unending command and focus on the love of God (*Practicing the Preaching Life* 91).” For the Christian, receiving God’s love does not prompt an inertial response. Instead, the reception of God’s love initiates the action of

love in response. Jesus, when asked what the greatest commandment is, responded with an answer that contained two directives. First, he said, “love God with all your heart, soul, and mind.” Then Jesus added, “The second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:26-40, NIV).” Love of God and neighbor are intertwined. By his answer of the two commandments, Jesus is stating that a person cannot love God and not love another person because the other person that bears the image of God. Our acts of compassion spring from our love of God.

Regarding love and compassion, the preacher must also heed Jesus’ call to proclaim the good news to the poor. In Luke 4:18-21, Jesus began his ministry and validated his ministry by reading the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” In Matthew 11:5, Jesus sent word to the imprisoned John the Baptist, that the poor have good news brought to them. Access to online preaching may not be available to some people because of their economic status. However, taking into consideration Ward’s aim of preaching as sending a God praising community into the world to share the gospel, preaching should inspire and empower the congregation to mission and ministry of the poor.

Snyder states that today the call to preach to the poor is just as relevant as in Jesus preaching to the poor. Snyder advises that the church, just as Christ, must place special emphasis on the poor and the church’s primary concern is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin and a reconciled relationship between the listener and God through the blood of Christ (*The Problem of Wineskins* 42). He reminds the

church that the responsibility to the poor is not only evangelism. In addition, the responsibility to the poor must be an expression of love and compassion.

Some preachers are not sure what expressions of love and compassion looks like beyond sharing the good news, but they can be sure that love will identify those needs and make possible for the community of faith to meet those needs (*The Problem of Wineskins* 46). Love of God and neighbor are the driving force in the life of the preacher and in the life of the church which produces actions of love and compassion in mission and ministry.

As with any Christian, to be faithful to the principles of humility, encouragement, prayer, and compassion, the preacher must be grounded in Scripture. Wesleyan theology affirms that teaching and preaching are grounded in Scripture (United Methodist Church (U.S.), 47). Wright states that the reading of scripture has always been central to Christian worship (222). It might seem strange to point out that the reading and study of Scriptures are important activities for the preacher who preaches, in some cases multiple times a week from the Scriptures. However, Long, Ward, T. Brown, and others point out many preachers fail to properly exegete.

Failure to perform a proper exegetical process may also provide insight on how those preachers treat the Scriptures in their private lives. If the preaching life is not properly scripturally grounded, then this would indicate a failure of achieving the ultimate goal of preaching. Ward states, “Augustine’s view of Christian wisdom is measured not merely by knowing about the canon of scripture (*Practicing the Preaching Life* 53).” He continued by stating the preacher must have a deeper relationship where the preacher “attaches and importance to the attendance of the scriptures, not only

intellectually, but also with the lived life of the preacher” (*Practicing the Preaching Life* 53). Failing to attach any importance to attending to the Scriptures results in a preacher who has not yet “fully grasped or gained wisdom from the gospel” (*Practicing the Preaching Life* 53).

David Tue writes on his online blog:

“This past week I’ve had the agony of witnessing two Christians speak about their beliefs. I say agony because it was devastating to see the ignorance of Christians today, including pastors. As I write that, I wonder if it is these same pastors who are teaching their flock this ignorance after all, so goes the shepherd so goes the flock”

Tue discusses people’s Ignorance have about the Scriptures, including pastors and his main concern is the perception of the unchurched. He is particularly concerned with people who do not exegete but eisegete the Scripture. Eisegesis is interpreting the Scriptures in a way that the interpreter adds his or her own presuppositions, biases, and agendas to the interpretation.

Preachers who have or will transition to online preaching must remember Stedman’s assessment of people looking for understanding and meaning online; they will gravitate to “the simplest, less complicated, and easiest answers because these answers feel the safest (and most sellable)” (40). Massive amounts of information are available online to people on a vast number of topics that are readily and quickly accessed through cell phones and computer tablets. In addition, through their technological devices, people who listen to sermons online and in-person can access information related to the sermon during the sermonic moment. The issue is how to discern scriptural truth amongst the

copious data? The preacher is, in effect, the chief theologian who helps the congregation discern scriptural truth.

Ronald J. Allen writing about a preacher's theology states:

"In the same way my glasses sit between my eyes and the rest of the world, the preacher's theology sits between the preacher and the sermon. The preacher does not simply preach the Bible but interprets the Bible through a theological lens"

(4).

Allen's statement about the preacher may indicate a relationship between the preacher's presence and exegesis. The exegetical process is vital because exegesis helps the preacher stay focused on the text and the theological context. While preparation may build confidence that manifest in the preacher's presence, between the preacher's preparedness and the preacher's presence in the sermonic moment may have a correlation. This may lead to the authenticity of the preaching and increase its palpability to the congregation.

Theological Foundations

As a United Methodist preacher in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church, I will discuss the theological foundations of authentic preaching, online and in-person, by utilizing scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. This method is commonly known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. While this method has four components, they are not equal. Scripture is the primary means of theological discernment.

Scripture

To begin, 2 Timothy 4:2 says, "preach the word" (NIV). Preaching is found throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Paul, in his letter to his friend and mission

partner, Timothy, Paul's advised his friend to preach the word. By word, Paul means the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus began the practice of Christian preaching. In Luke chapter 4, he enters the synagogue and reads Isaiah's scroll, announcing his ministry in a moment of proclamation. In the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew verse 17, describes Jesus beginning to preach, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near."

In the passage from Isaiah that Jesus referenced, the writer of the passage stated that the Lord had anointed him to proclaim good news to the poor. In the passage, the writer uses the word anointed (Hb. Mashiakh) to indicate that God consecrated him for a holy purpose. The holy purpose referred to is the proclamation of good news to the poor. Thus, use of the scroll by Jesus sets the precedent for his ministry as anointed to preach good news to the poor. Yet, what is this "Good News?"

The Good News is the proclamation of salvation. Jesus told the disciples that what was written is that the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness will be proclaimed in his name to all nations (Luke 24:46-49). According to Edward Loane, Jesus linked the saving work of his death and resurrection in fulfilling the Scripture to the proclamation of the gospel. Preaching was an essential feature of apostolic ministry (qtd. in Kuhn and Grimmond 207). Paul stated to the church in Corinth that he was sent to preach the gospel (1 Cor. 1:17, 9:16). Peter told Cornelius that Jesus commanded him to preach the gospel (Acts 10:42-44).

Salvation is a theological aspect of authentic preaching because the Scripture supports it. Paul proclaimed, "woe to me if I do not preach the gospel (1 Cor. 9:16)." Jesus also places preaching the gospel as a priority above all others. Luke writes in his Gospel about how Jesus responded to a would-be follower who told Jesus that he would

follow him after he attended the funeral of his father. Jesus replied to the request saying, “let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God (Luke 9:59-60).” Loane notes that Jesus stressed the urgency of the gospel and that even the noblest of human activity was to take second place (qtd. In Kune and Grimmond 206-207) .

Paul wrote to the church in Rome that if a person confesses that Jesus is Lord and believes in their heart that Jesus was resurrected, they will be saved (Rom. 10:9-10). Paul emphasized that the necessity of preaching and faith by stating that faith comes through hearing the gospel of Christ and that salvation is only possible through faith in Christ. He asked the church in Rome, “how are they going to believe unless they hear, and how are they going to hear without someone to proclaim the gospel?” (Rom. 10:14-17) Paul’s emphasis on professed faith comes from Joel 2:32, where the prophet Joel quotes God, saying that all those who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

In a later passage from Romans, Paul writes that it is his ambition to preach the gospel to places where people have not heard of Christ (Rom. 15:20). Paul’s writings have a sense of urgency for the proclamation of the gospel in that reflecting the urgency Jesus had in sharing the Good News. Mark’s Gospel records Jesus saying that the time has been fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:15). The Scriptures show a correlation between the theological components of salvation and faith in Christ alone with preaching, and an emphasis on the immediacy of proclamation in the Scriptures. The theological components and the emphasis of urgency scripturally undergird the concept of authentic preaching.

Tradition

The church has diverse views on preaching. Regarding salvation, Calvin stated that preaching was the instrument for effecting salvation. However, preaching is only the instrument and is nothing without the Spirit of God whose inward work produces the most potent effects on the listener (220). Calvin emphasized the Holy Spirit's work in preaching to underscore that preaching is the vehicle that opens the door to faith, yet the Holy Spirit that brings salvation.

John Wesley also stressed the importance of faith in justification, but Wesley differed from Calvin as he saw justification as the beginning of salvation. Sanctification, Wesley emphasized, is where fundamental transformation occurs. Outler writes that salvation in Wesley's understanding was a total restoration of the deformed image of God in a person and where the reign of sin in the justified is broken (Outler introductory comment 69). Wesley preached about sanctification as a continuation of God's saving grace. Wesley understood the goal of sanctification as holiness, which he called "Christian perfection." Wesley's understanding of sanctification adds to the understanding of authentic preaching because Wesley addressed the question of what happens after a person accepts Christ as Lord. Wesley saw the salvation as a continual process that broadens the understanding of the gospel.

Wesley made the comment, "I do indeed live by preaching (9)." Preaching became the primary means by which the good news was spread in the Methodist Revival. We might consider what Wesley or Calvin would think about digital preaching. Wesley and Calvin placed a high regard on the sermonic moment. Wesley even saw benefit in the printed sermon as a means of spiritually nurturing his congregations (9). One might

safely assume that because of their view of preaching, Wesley and Calvin would embrace the opportunity to utilize digital platforms to share the good news.

Experience

The Scripture establishes the Apostolic tradition of preaching, beginning in Acts and continuing through Revelation. The Apostles utilized preaching as a means of evangelism, edification, correction, and worship. There are examples of Stephen, Peter, and Paul preaching. The Apostles centered their preaching on Jesus Christ. Chapter twenty-eight verse 31 of the Acts of the Apostles states that Paul, boldly and without hinderance proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ. Graeme Goldsworthy stated, “Jesus exercises his kingly power through the scepter of his preached gospel” (55). The literature suggests that the proclamation of the gospel on a digital format is in keeping with the Apostolic tradition.

The Church’s experience of digital preaching is not extensive in comparison to in-person preaching. However, digital preaching is a modern vehicle for evangelism that can reach more people with the gospel. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus commissioned the disciples to go into the world and make disciples (Matt. 28:16-20), a process which has evangelistic and didactic components. Therefore, the Holy Spirit’s transformative work of love through proclamation can be experienced digitally.

Claire Smith states that in the New Testament, preaching has two purposes. First, preaching had an evangelism purpose directed at unbelievers. Second, preaching had a didactic or teaching purpose directed toward the faithful. However, teaching and preaching are not mutually exclusive as preaching happened in believing communities (qtd. in Kuhn and Grimmond 54). Given the long experience of the church in evangelism

and teaching, it would stand to reason that these two components should make a natural transition to digital formats. However, resistance to virtual transitions by the church occurred. Kim argued that the church has already too much dependence on technology and that the Christian church has always been about transcendence, not cultural relevance (12)

The Church's experience with preaching includes eschatology, which the gospel addresses the matter of eschatology. Eschatology deals with the issues of death, God's judgment, the final destination of humanity, and the soul. Peter Jensen states that the Scripture presents the "dynamic, forward looking promise of God and the announcement that the Kingdom of God is at hand (Mark 1:14-15), and thus revealing the gospel is eschatological (qtd. in Goldsworthy 232)." Authentic preaching conveys eschatology because the proclamation of the gospel addresses the issues of sin, judgement, and death by delivering the powerful answer that God has resolved these issues through his Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, Christian eschatology conveys God's hope.

The preaching experience of the Church also reflects a Trinitarian conviction. The Christian faith believes God is one in essence or nature and three in persons (Ware 41). The Father, Son, and Spirit are equal in essence, but unique in person revealing that there is both unity and diversity in the Triune God. The relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit provides humankind with the greatest example of love, fellowship, humility, joy, and unity (Merida 19).

Peter said that whoever is speaking should speak from God's word, and whoever serves should do so with the strength that God provides so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 4:11). Tony Merida, on preaching, states,

“according to Peter, if one is to speak, they should do so from God’s word by God’s power, through God’s Son, for God’s glory”(20). Merida’s conclusion is that preaching in the Church’s experience is Trinitarian (20).

Reason

Authentic preaching is a combination of many theological concepts. However, the primary means of discerning Christian theology is the Scripture. The Scripture gives the world the story of the Triune God who gives salvation to the world. Therefore, Scripture that supports authentic preaching is Trinitarian, with a central Christology which serves as the way Christians understand and relate to God. Authentic preaching also contains elements of soteriology (the Doctrine of Salvation), evangelism, eschatology, grace, faith, and would at times include didactic components. All these theological themes are transferable to virtual preaching. Given the potential for digital platforms to reach more significant numbers of people than in-person settings, the Church might do well to explore in greater depth the power of sharing the gospel through virtual preaching.

Research Design Literature

Sensing states that qualitative research, such as in-depth interviews produce “culturally specific and contextually rich data” that contributes to the design, evaluation, and continual health of institutions like churches (58). The in-depth interviews used in this project were essential to garner sufficient understanding of clergy perceptions of the virtual sermonic moment. The clergy’s perceptions gathered from the interviews were necessary to compare and contrast the congregants’ perceptions of the virtual sermonic moment.

Sensing states that while qualitative methods are preferred for Doctorate of Ministry projects, quantitative methods are sometimes required (62). Surveys were a necessary methodology for this project for two reasons. Firstly, surveys allowed a large number of people to provide feedback. Secondly, surveys were also blind, allowing for a feeling of confidentiality and freedom for congregants to answer questions without reproach.

Summary of Literature

Moving forward to the study of the transition small and rural churches made to online preaching in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church during the COVID-19 pandemic, the literature defined the aim of preaching as sending a doxological or God praising community into the world to share the gospel. This definition helped to understand the sermonic moment through the preachers' and congregations' thoughts in the small and rural church in South Georgia. This definition aided in forming survey questions for the preachers' and congregations. The preachers' and congregations' questions helped determine if the sermons were evangelistic, missional, and transformative.

A theme that emerged in the literature was that of sermon preparation. During the study of small and rural churches in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church, a survey on how preachers prepare their sermons compared to the rubrics provided in the literature helped evaluate whether adequate space was given to prepare for the preaching moment. The study also indicated if the preachers made any adjustments to process for online preaching compared to in-person preaching.

The study also showed a correlation between sermon preparation and the listeners' reception of the sermon. For example, in the congregational surveys, a percentage of church x's congregation perceived that the sermons online did not inspire them to pray or participate in ministry. An analysis of the preacher's sermon preparation indicated that they could add to an area of the sermon or key in on the biblical passage to inspire the listener to action in prayer or ministry or empower the sermon to be evangelistic.

An argument that emerged in the literature is that people online who seek meaning and understanding will often seek the least complicated, most simplistic answer because it is typically the safest. This argument is one that many preachers may not be aware of, but it may help transition to online preaching. Less complicated and simplistic in the context of preaching does not mean rudimentary or underdeveloped. The literature builds the case that less complicated means to stay faithful to the Scripture and preach the gospel truth.

In the digital world, the concept of truth can be shifting and unclear. Often the idea of truth depends on the person who is claiming truth and their agenda. Today, online, people find the concepts of truth changing daily because how people define truth is politicized. For example, one day, a politician or the government might deem that apples are the best fruit to eat. Some online pundits will claim that the revelation that apples are the best fruit is untrue and a conspiracy. Other pundits will place great emphasis on how apples are the best fruit. Then, after a few days or weeks, the position that apples are the best fruit is reversed because that position meets political expediency.

The gospel presents the unchanging truth that God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, Jesus, to the world. Faith in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection brings

salvation from sin and eternal life in relationship with the Triune God. The truth of the gospel never changes. The literature supports the truth of the gospel and that authentic preaching is centered on the gospel.

Another theme that emerged is the unclear metrics in measuring the online sermonic moment. The lack of a clear metric is unfortunate and illustrates the urgent need for refining the methods of measuring what churches do online. However, one benefit to the preacher for not having an exact measurement is in the area of morale. Measurements, while needed, can demoralize a preacher, particularly in transitional situations. The numbers could cause a preacher to stop the transition to online.

While surveys such as the ones conducted by the Barna Group conducted are helpful, the preacher should understand that numbers, studies, and surveys are snapshots of moments in time. While the use of metrics may result in demoralizing the preacher; it could also help encourage the preacher to become better at the preaching craft and utilize technology to reach more people for Christ.

Another theme that emerged from the literature is that the theological concepts that shape authentic preaching are transferable from in-person preaching to online preaching. Because the venue for proclamation changes, this does not mean that theology changes. Transitioning to digital preaching may lead to new and innovative ways to proclaim the gospel, but innovation does not mean the core message is altered. The research uncovered some innovative ways preachers in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church innovate virtual preaching.

The Barna Group states that churches must develop better ways of teaching, mentoring, and mission in the pandemic and post-pandemic world ("How Young Adults

in Digital Babylon” 4). The literature revealed that the sermonic moment is the centerpiece of worship where God’s love and grace are proclaimed. The Barna Group has not necessarily revealed something new in that the Church can do a better job at teaching, mentoring, and mission in the post-pandemic world; however, Barna does indicate is that Church needs to take digital platforms seriously to convey the gospel. A serious dedication to sharing the gospel through digital platforms would include a focus on authentic preaching.

Gordon writes that when he interviews congregations and asks them what they think about their preacher, he often hears, “he or she is not a great preacher, but they are good pastors/ministers” (Gordon Loc. 156). Gordon states that these admissions reveal that while the preacher is faithful at visitations, compassionate in their care for their congregations, or great administrators, their preaching is poor. Gordon states that he would like to hear, at least one time, the opposite (Loc.156).

The literature reviewed identifies the relationship between proclamation, preparation, and the preacher’s presence during the sermonic moment. Authentic preaching is the hallmark of the proclamation of the gospel. Therefore, proclamation requires dedication to preparing the sermon. Regardless of which method for exegesis is used, the work of preparation is vital to authenticity. Preachers must also be aware of their preaching presence, which requires evaluation methods to help the preacher understand how they are perceived by their congregants during the sermonic moment. The research methodologies for this project will address the areas of proclamation, preparation, and presence.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter addresses the research methodology of the project: what methods it used to collect data to analyze the transition to virtual preaching in small and rural churches in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church during the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020? This chapter reviews the ministry context of this project, and discusses the criterion utilized to determine the participants of this project.

This chapter reviews the research questions this project seeks to answer. This chapter discusses the use of surveys to analyze congregational response to virtual preaching. This chapter also reviews interview methodology with preachers in small and rural churches in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. This chapter presents why these surveys and interview methodologies are reliable to answer the research questions.

Nature and Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this research was to examine how rural/small town United Methodist Churches in South Georgia met the challenges of online preaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. This project was a pre-intervention study and utilized a mix of quantitative and qualitative lenses to address the project. The quantitative method utilized surveys and questionnaires. The qualitative method utilized semi-structured interviews.

The mixed research methods best served the nature of this project because the necessity for vast numbers of churches to switch to virtual preaching was sudden. While

the practice of virtual preaching is not a new phenomenon, the effects of the large transition during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 to virtual preaching within the context of small and rural churches in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church are not understood. Qualitative and quantitative research methods provide a broader selection of data to utilize for analysis of the transition to virtual preaching and can serve as a foundation for further studies.

Research Questions

RQ #1. In what ways did rural/small town churches transition to online preaching and what challenges did they face regarding knowledge, skill, technology, and deployment?

Interviews with the pastors of the churches and with persons who were either staffed or volunteer as media personnel in the church addressed this question. Media personnel were people who worked with the church's technology and were critical to helping the sermonic moment transition to an online medium. Media personnel participated in the recording, editing, uploading, and/or streaming of the sermon. In most small and rural churches, the pastor played the dual role of preacher and media person.

The interview questions with the pastors and/or media personnel began with establishing the technical capability of the church. Question one asked if the church had existing technology that gave them the capability of streaming the sermonic moment. Question one further asked if any changes had to be made by the church to their technology to enable virtual preaching or improve already existing capabilities. Question two asked if there were any existing geographic limitations that cause challenges to a transition to virtual preaching,

Other questions in the interview helped answer this research question by addressing any skills that they needed to be acquired in the transition to virtual preaching. Any time technology is deployed, issues arise that require the person overseeing the technology to have a set of skills to resolve the problems. Sensing states that the main purpose of an interview is to obtain a specific kind of information, because the researcher cannot observe behaviors, feelings, and the way a specific event occurred that precludes the interviewer (104). Question three asked, “Did you or members of your staff or congregation need to learn any new skills or techniques to make a transition to virtual preaching?” Question four asked “What were some expected challenges you faced using the technology?” Question four also asked, “Were there any unexpected challenges that arose during the transition to virtual preaching?”

In the context of skills needed to resolve technical issues, the interviews gathered information that helped determine whether the person overseeing the virtual sermonic moment had the necessary skills to address issues or if they had to acquire new skills. Question five asked, “Did you request any feedback from your congregation during the transition that prompted addressing issues they might have experienced during the virtual preaching moment, i.e., sound quality, video disruptions, or other technical issues?” Question five further asked, “Did the feedback inspire confidence in the practice of virtual preaching? How so?” Question six asked, “Did you have to make any adjustments from the feedback?” and question six asked, “Did those adjustments resolve any issues?”

The interviews allowed insight into the preacher’s feelings of transition. Sometimes, frustration resulting from the lack of skills needed to address issues can cause people to forgo using technology. These questions helped me to understand if churches

responded in similar or different fashions to the challenges of technology. Question seven asked, “Did you seek help from others to address any issues? If so, did you receive the help you needed or do you feel you are still lacking help in resolving an ongoing issue?”

RQ #2. Did pastors adapt to new methods of sermon preparation and sermon form to accommodate a digital worship program: what did they do differently, and did they find that they would continue with new methods of preparation and form?

Interviews with pastors answered this question. Specific questions asked during the interviews were as follows: Question eight, “Did you make any changes in your preparation to preach virtually?” Question nine, “How did preaching to a camera instead of an in-person congregation feel and did you change your preaching form?” Question eleven, “Did you survey your congregation to see what worked and what did not work during the online preaching moment?” Question twelve, “Do you believe you will continue to pursue virtual preaching along with in-person preaching?” Question thirteen asked “What are the areas of virtual preaching that are challenge for you? What are some benefits you see?” Question fourteen asked, “If you were to give advice to another preacher who was about to undertake virtual preaching, what advice would you give?”

The purpose of this line of questioning served a two-fold purpose. First, questions eight, nine, and eleven sought to establish what methods of sermon preparations the pastors utilized before the transition to virtual preaching. What were the methods of exegesis? How much time did the pastors commit to sermon preparation? Understanding the pastor’s exegetical process gave insight into the pastor’s view of the preaching moment. Thomas Long states that “responsible biblical preaching does not come easily. It requires time, study, and hard work” (*The Witness of Preaching* 67). Long states that

“once the process becomes familiar it can be accomplished in a reasonable length of time” (70). The exegetical process is crucial and regardless of the preacher’s schedule, time needs to be set aside for the process. Some preachers may even divide the process into smaller blocks of time to accommodate the demands of their schedule.

The second purpose of this line of questioning— particularly questions eight, nine, and eleven— was to determine if the pastors altered their exegetical process and sermonic form to meet the needs of virtual preaching. This part of the interview questions sought to understand whether virtual preaching was the same as in-person preaching, and if so, whether exegetical process was sufficient. If virtual preaching was perceived more like viewing a television program, did the pastor need to change their exegetical process and sermon delivery to tailor it more toward a virtual audience?

Questions twelve, thirteen, and fourteen sought to determine the pastor’s feelings toward the sustainability of online preaching. Did the pastors alter their exegetical processes because they perceived longevity of virtual preaching? Did they anticipate they would continue to preach virtually after the pandemic had ended or was virtual preaching a short-term endeavor brought about by the shuttering of churches during the pandemic? What advice would they offer to a person transitioning to online preaching?

RQ #3. How did these pastors and congregations evaluate the virtual sermonic moments during the pandemic and did the pastor utilize evaluation methods to envision the future of digital sermonic moments?

Interviews with pastors and surveys with small and rural congregations in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church answered this question. The

survey questions sought to understand how congregants viewed the virtual sermonic moment. The survey questions were the following: 1) Did you watch the virtual preaching moment at your normal church's weekly worship time? 2) Did you watch the virtual sermon alone or with others? 3) Did you watch the sermon in one sitting, or did you break the viewing up? 4) Was the livestream accessible or did you have complications viewing the sermon? 5) Did you watch multiple virtual sermons or just one? If only one, why?

Questions 1-5 determined how often the congregation members viewed the virtual sermonic moment. Did they view the virtual sermon by themselves or did other people watch with them? Did they watch during the normal church worship time, or did they watch at another time? Question 5 helped to determine the reception of the virtual moment by exploring whether the congregant viewed one or multiple sermons and if only one, why.

Questions 6-10 determined how the congregation members assessed the sermonic moment? Survey questions 6-10 were these: 6) Did the sermon challenge you to an action such as a spiritual discipline like prayer or reading the Scripture or giving your time or resources to ministry? 7) Did the sermon inspire you to read the Scripture further? 8) Did the sermon cause you to have theological questions that needed further discussion? 9) Do you feel the sermon addressed the passage of Scripture used for the sermon adequately? 10) On a scale 1 to 10, 10 being the best and 1 being the worst, rate the following: a. How prepared do you feel the pastor was in the sermon? b. How good was the video quality? c. How good was the sound quality? d. Would you recommend another person to watch the virtual sermon?

Ministry Context

Small and rural churches in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church served as the setting for this study. These churches can be in locations with either good access to technology, or limited access to technology. Access to existing technology in the local church or whether new technology was needed to transition to virtual preaching was ascertained in the interview process.

While there are many churches that have memberships of over a one hundred-fifty (some churches can be considered mega churches with membership in the thousands), most churches in the South Georgia Conference have memberships below one hundred. Some churches have memberships less than twenty. Some rural churches in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church are placed in circuits. Circuits are when two or more churches are grouped together under the care of a single or possible more ministers working together.

The South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church is an area comprised of cities, small towns, military bases, and unincorporated towns. However, much of the region is rural forest and agricultural areas. The people who live in the South Georgia Conference are made up of a variety of political leanings. Technology is becoming more widespread in the United States. Pew Research conducted research and found that more than eight in ten adults in the US go online at least daily. The same research revealed that 48 percent of adults surveyed say they go online multiple times a day. Pew Research attributed the rise in online connectivity to the widespread use of smartphones and other internet-connected devices (Perrin and Atske).

One demographic of interest is whether the congregations in the survey held a favorable or an unfavorable view of technology in worship. Questions utilized were as follows: “Do you prefer a hymnal, lyrics on a screen or both?” “Do you believe technology hindered or enhanced your experience of the sermon?” “Do you believe that technology will be more prominent in the future of preaching?” This information could provide an understanding of how the congregation’s view of technology factor in how congregations received the virtual sermonic moment.

Some congregations had male pastors and others had female pastors. Some preached virtual sermons in the church sanctuaries and others were preached from other places such as church offices, outdoor settings, and even from areas in the pastor’s home. During the virtual sermons some pastors dressed as they would typically dress for an in-person setting. Other pastors dressed differently. For example, if the pastor normally dressed in business attire, they may have dressed casually.

Participants

Criteria for Selection

A spread sheet was acquired from the Administrative Service Office of the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church that contained statistical data for the churches in the Annual Conference. Data included church size and attendance. The criteria gathered from the statistical data used for selecting the churches for this study were as follows: 1) churches must be considered small, meaning membership should be under one hundred (this information was gathered from the South Georgia Conference and the Conference collected this data from local church statistical reports), 2) churches must be located outside metropolitan areas, 3) churches can be located in small towns or

suburbs (population under five thousand), and 4) the churches must be members of the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Description of Participants

During the interview and survey process I discovered that the churches were diverse in their congregational makeup. Some were older congregations. Some were younger congregations. Some had a mix of young and old. Most of the congregations were Caucasians, while others had African Americans, or Hispanics as members. Participants varied in economic and social status. Some were white-collar workers, while others worked in blue-collar jobs. Some were teachers, lawyers, farmers, law enforcement, and some were retired.

Ethical Considerations

A consent form was used in the interviews with the pastors. The congregation surveys were anonymous. No names were required. This was done for two reasons. First, the surveys were anonymous to protect the integrity of the participants. Secondly, the surveys were anonymous to allow the participants freedom to answer the survey questions without the possibility of repercussions. The surveys and interviews provided data to help understand the transition to virtual preaching were not a platform for unnecessary criticism.

Instrumentation

I conducted the interviews in a face-to-face format. If face to face was not possible, then this researcher used another means, such as a digital meeting. The process of interviews was an hour long and took approximately ten weeks. The interviews were conducted digitally, and the surveys were mailed to the preacher with a return envelope

and distributed and collected for return by the preacher. The process of mailing the surveys and the preacher returning the surveys took approximately four to six weeks.

Reliability & Validity of Project Design

Interviews and surveys followed protocols to insure reliability and validity. The interview protocols were as follows: 1) Opening statements were made by the interviewer along with instructions, 2) The interviewer stated the goal of the interview by reviewing the research questions to be asked, 3) The interviewer stated that some answers may prompt follow up questions during the interview to help add clarity, 4) Space was allowed for the interviewer to make notes, 5) A summary of the interview was completed immediately following the interview 6) The interviewer secured permission to contact the interviewee with follow up questions or clarification of an statement.

The surveys followed protocols outlined by Sensing, (118–20). These protocols were designed to insure the validity and reliability of the surveys. Some questions consisted of multiple-choice answers and others allowed space for the participant to write answers. I asked the same questions to all participants in all participating congregations.

The research can be duplicated by other researchers. Small and rural churches exist throughout the United States and these churches experienced pauses in worship during the COVID-19 global pandemic of 2020. Many of these churches transitioned to virtual preaching during the pandemic. The research can also be conducted across denominations. While this study focused on the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church, the focus of the research was not on specific aspects of a denomination or theology. Instead, the research focused on the aspect of preaching as it transitioned from in-person to virtual settings.

Data Collection

This research was pre-intervention; interviews with eight pastors appointed in small and rural church in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church yielded the data collected. Robert J. Weiss stated that qualitative interviews “are always constrained by the goals of the study.” (Loc. 3725). The interviews for this study sought to understand the process of sermon preparation in the context of virtual preaching and the challenges of technology experienced in the transition to virtual preaching. The interviews followed protocols outlined in Sensing (105–12).

This research also utilized surveys to collect data. A survey design provides “a quantitative description of trends, attitudes, and opinions of a population, or test associations among variables of a population” (Creswell and Creswell 207). The surveys followed the protocols outlined in Sensing (118–20). During the face-to-face interviews with pastors, the congregational surveys provided an explanation of the requested dissemination process and an addressed, postage paid envelope. For the interviews conducted digitally, I mailed the surveys the preachers with a return envelope; the preacher distributed and collected them for return. This process took approximately four to six weeks.

Data Analysis

Analysis for the data collected through the quantitative method utilized statistical and mathematical analysis which determined patterns to help understand the effectiveness of virtual preaching from the perspective of the congregation. Data analysis also provided insight into the preacher’s sermon preparation, sermon form, and delivery to help better

understand if there is a difference in how a preacher prepares for an in-person sermon and virtual sermon.

The method for analyzing data from the interviews utilized categorizing the answers. One category analyzed whether the preachers had experience with using technology for virtual preaching. A yes, or no response was assigned to each preacher. A percentage was calculated. Another category analyzed the answer as to whether the preachers held a favorable, unfavorable, or indifferent view of technology as a tool for preaching. A percentage was calculated.

Another category was whether the preacher changed their sermon preparation for virtual preaching. The category was either yes or no and a percentage was calculated. The next category analyzed whether the preacher changed their sermon delivery for virtual preaching. This category also utilized the answer of either yes or no and a percentage was calculated.

Another category analyzed how the preacher felt about the future of virtual preaching. This category sought to determine if preacher felt that they would continue to utilize virtual preaching. This was categorized as yes or no, and a percentage was calculated. Other answers from the interviews were outlined in a summary.

A spread sheet was used to categorize the congregants survey answers. Categories include Virtual Preaching Favorability, Quality of Technology, Inspiration of Sermon, Perception of Preacher's Preparation, and Perception of Preacher's Delivery. For each category a positive response was marked as yes, and a negative was marked as no. The categorized data was used to calculate percentages that summarized the findings.

The final survey question that asked the congregants to rate aspects of the virtual sermonic moment on a scale from 1 to 10 was tallied. Percentages were calculated. The percentages calculated from the analysis of the survey data were summarized. A comparison was made between the data summary from the interviews and the data from the surveys. In the comparison determined a positive and negative correlation in the areas of Technology Quality, Sermon Preparation, Virtual Preaching Perception, and The Future of Virtual Preaching.

CHAPTER 4

EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter presents the data collected for this project. This chapter will include a description of the participants who provided the data for this research along with their demographics. This chapter will also look at the data in evidential relationship to the three research questions this project sought to answer. This chapter presents major findings that yielded by analysis of the data.

During the COVID-19 Global Pandemic, churches paused in-person worship and many churches transitioned to online preaching to provide a means of worship to congregants. While some churches utilized online or virtual platforms to stream virtual preaching before the COVID-19 pandemic, many churches made the transitions quickly because of the pandemic. Of particular interest is how the transition to virtual preaching affected smaller congregations. The purpose of this research was to examine how rural/small town United Methodist Churches in South Georgia met the challenges of online preaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants

The participants of this study were small congregations (under 70 in worship attendance). The participants in this study included churches outside Savannah Georgia, in rural areas such as Twin City, Montezuma, Tennile, Irwinton, Ashburn, Laurens County, Wilkinson Count, and outside Columbus Georgia. The preacher distributed the surveys to the congregations during worship times and while the surveys were blind requiring no names or personal information, the participants were understood to reflect the

congregation's demographics, meaning that— based on the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church's 2020 statistical data report—participants ranged in multiple age groups, included both males and females, were of diverse economic status, were married and single, and the participants were Caucasian.

Research Question #1: Description of Evidence

Research Question #1 asked “In what ways did rural/small town churches transition to online preaching and what were the challenges faced regarding knowledge, skill, technology, and deployment?” The evidence gathered for this question came through surveys done with the participating congregations and through interviews with clergy serving the participating churches.

The first question asked in the Zoom interviews with clergy sought to discover if the church had existing media technology that allowed for streaming the sermonic moment. If the clergy answered no, a follow up question sought to discover what technologies the church added to be able to stream the sermonic moments. Another follow-up question asked if the church made any changes to the existing technologies to improve streaming capabilities. Thirty-three percent said that their church did not have existing streaming technology. Sixty-seven percent did have some form of streaming capability.

The interviews uncovered that 50 percent used cell phone cameras as the principal technology to stream sermonic moments. Thirty-three percent used a camera system. Seventeen percent used a livestream camera system called Mevo. Seventeen percent of the participants prerecorded their sermonic moments and uploaded them to stream during normal church worship times. Eighty-three percent livestreamed on a social media

platform during normal worship times. While livestreaming the sermonic moment virtually, 17 percent simultaneously streamed on local radio. 83 percent improved their livestreaming capabilities during the pandemic.

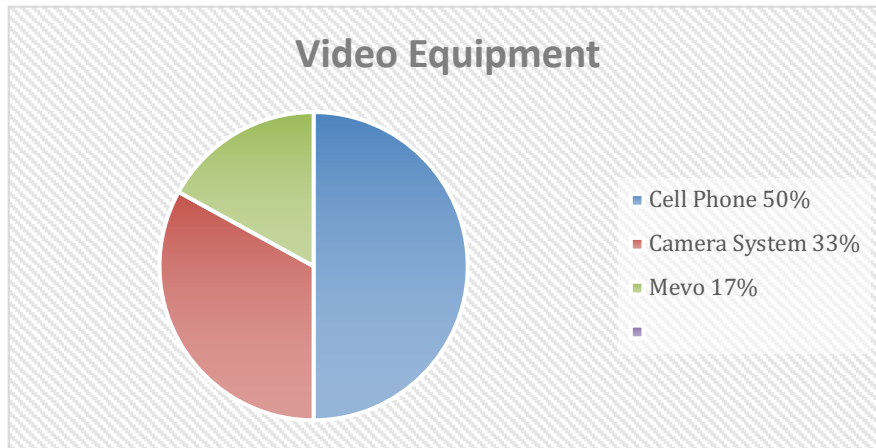


Figure 1. Livestreaming systems utilized by surveyed churches

Participants in the surveys yielded evidence about the technologies their churches utilized for streaming. One hundred percent of congregants surveyed recognized their church offered weekly opportunities to view virtual sermons. Eighty-eight percent stated that the virtual opportunities were offered during their church's traditional worship times. Ninety percent viewed the sermon with other people in their household. Six percent viewed the virtual sermon alone.

Ninety-eight percent said that the platform to view the virtual sermons were easily accessible. Seventy-five percent had difficulties with the streaming platforms (Facebook Livestream, YouTube, Vimeo). Eighty-four percent of congregants surveyed rated the

video quality on a scale of one to ten, ten being very good and one being not good at all, an eight or higher. Seventy-six percent of those surveyed rated the sound quality an eight or higher.

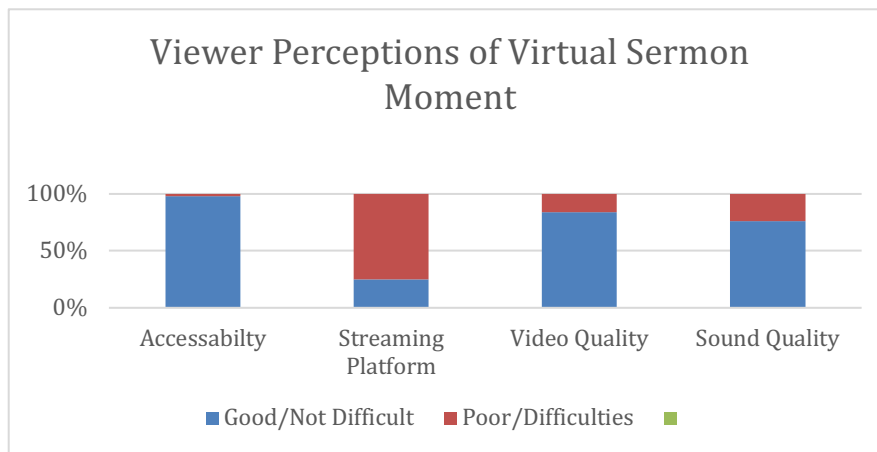


Figure 2. Perceptions of surveyed. congregants of the virtual sermonic moment

All the clergy interviewed stated that they did not survey their congregants on technology. However, all interviewed clergy disclosed that they received unsolicited feedback on video, sound, and streaming quality. One clergy interviewed stated that a congregant from time to time would make a statement such as, “Pastor, we couldn’t hear all your sermon Sunday.” This congregant’s comment was the only method by which he realized he had sound issues. Eighty-three percent of the clergy said they sought outside help with technology. Fifty percent of clergy said they, or their staff had to learn a new skill for streaming virtual sermons. One clergy stated, “It was trial and error on how to set

up the microphones so that the service's sound would pick up cleanly on the video.”

Another clergy said their congregants stated that the sound on part of their service was muted and they investigated and found out that when they used programmed music on Facebook livestream that Facebook would mute that part of the service for copyright reasons.

Although all those interviewed stated they did not survey their congregations for feedback on the quality of the technology used for streaming and instead relied on unsolicited feedback from congregants, 100 percent stated they did attempt to correct issues that were brought up to them.

When asked about issues with technology because of the church's geographic location, 67 percent of the surveyed clergy stated that they did not experience any issues. However, 50 percent stated they had unexpected issues with technology, such as issues with streaming platforms and sound quality. The majority interviewed expressed the major challenge came from preaching to an empty sanctuary. One clergy remarked that the experience of preaching to an empty sanctuary was awkward. Another clergyperson stated they had to learn to focus on objects in the sanctuary to help them move past the “weird” feeling of preaching to an empty room.

The interviewed clergy stated that preaching to a camera and watching their sermons was difficult but fostered a desire to improve their virtual preaching. One interviewee stated the camera made them aware of how much they walked or paced back and forth while preaching. Another stated they became aware of the importance of camera and microphone position. Another interviewee stated they became aware of the

importance of making eye contact with the camera and trying to connect with the congregants viewing the sermon.

Research Question #2: Description of Evidence

The second research question this study sought answers to was, “Did pastors adapt to new methods of sermon preparation and sermon form to accommodate a digital worship program: what did they do differently, and did they find that they would continue with new methods of preparation and form?” The interviews with clergy offered direct evidence to this question. The congregation surveys offered indirect evidence based on their viewing of the sermonic moment.

None of the interviewed clergy stated that they made any changes to their exegesis in preparation for virtual preaching. Sixty-seven percent stated they intentionally considered others outside their congregations would view the sermonic moment and the considered sermon illustrations that would be received by a broader viewership. One clergyperson stated that the illustrations they used for in-person preaching were contextual and they realized the unlikelihood of a people outside their context viewing their preaching. Whether the clergyperson did or did not consider people outside their context viewing their virtual sermon, none of the clergy stated they made any changes to their exegetical process.

All clergy did state that preaching to a camera did make them aware of issues with their presence. One clergy remarked about how much they walked around the pulpit during their sermon. Another clergyperson stated they felt like they made a better connection to the viewer of the virtual sermon if they made eye contact with the camera.

Another clergy person remarked about how they used considerable hand motions and realized it was distracting.

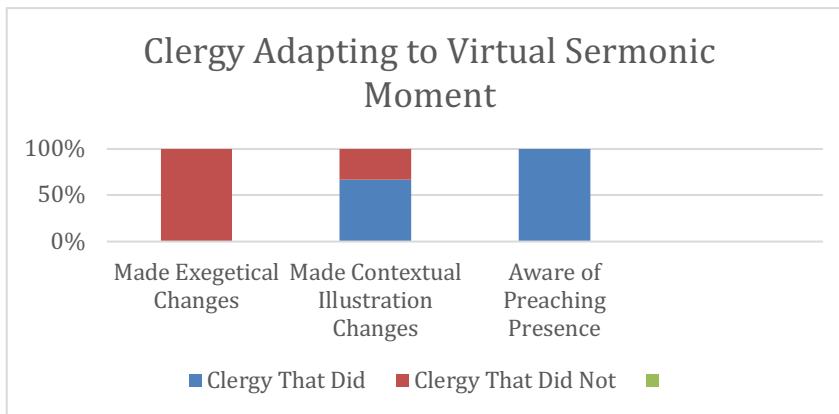


Figure 3. The areas clergy adapted to the virtual sermonic moment

The surveys revealed that 98 percent of the congregants perceived their preachers as being prepared for the sermonic moment. This survey answer indicates that clergy's exegetical process is adequate. However, evidence for evaluation of the content of the sermons and whether the sermons inspired response from the congregants is presented in Research Question #3.

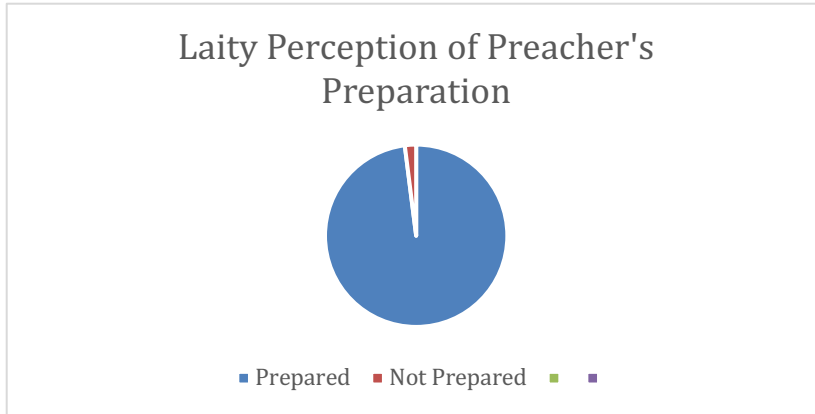


Figure 4. Laity perception of the preacher’s preparation for the sermonic moment

Research Question #3: Description of Evidence

Research Question #3 was, “How did these pastors and congregations evaluate the virtual sermonic moments during the pandemic and does the pastor utilize evaluation methods to envision the future of digital sermonic moments?” All clergy interviewed felt that virtual preaching will continue in the future; 78 percent of congregants surveyed feel that virtual preaching will continue into the foreseeable future.

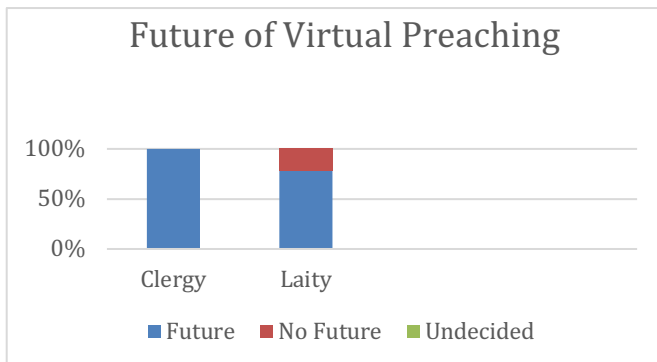


Figure 5. Clergy and laity perceptions of the future of virtual preaching

One hundred percent of the clergy surveyed stated that they did not utilize an evaluation method with their congregation to evaluate sermonic moments. Survey question eight was divided into two parts. Part one asked the congregant if the sermon caused them to have a theological question about any number of subjects such as sin, identity, grace, forgiveness, and assurance of salvation. Seventy-eight percent said that the sermon did not cause any theological questions.

Part two asked if they discussed theological questions with their pastor. Eighty-two percent marked no they did not discuss theological questions with their pastor. Out of the ones who said they did have theological questions, 6 percent stated they did talk with their pastor about their theological questions.

Survey question 9 asked if the congregant thought the sermon addressed the passage or passages of Scripture used for the sermon adequately. Ninety-four percent state yes, they thought the passage or passages were adequately addressed. Thirty-nine percent of those surveyed said the sermon did not challenge them to an action of change in their lives. The same percentage, 39 percent stated the sermon did not inspire them to reread the passage preached upon or explore the Bible in a deeper manner.

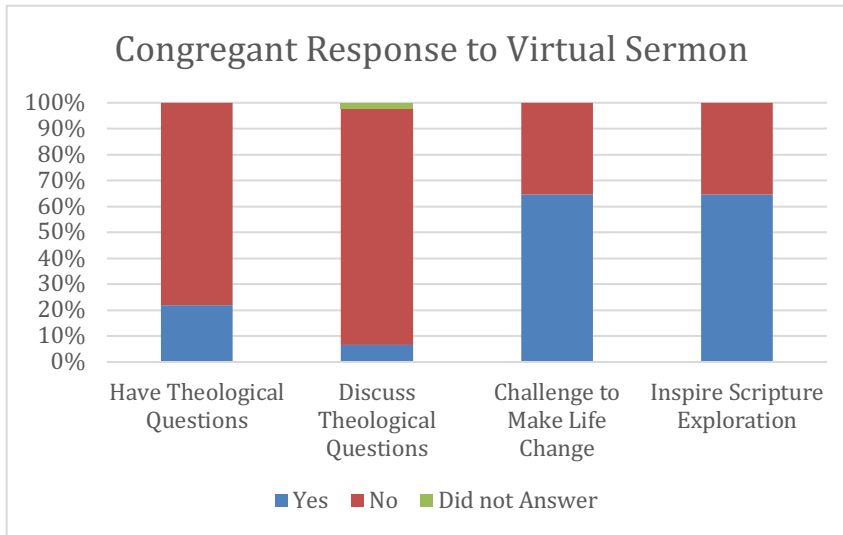


Figure 6. How congregants responded to virtual sermons

Question 10 asked how likely on a scale of one to ten, ten being very likely, would they recommend another person to watch their church's virtual sermons. Eighty-four percent rated their answer an eight or above as it is very likely they would recommend another person to watch their church's virtual preaching offerings. Some of the congregants wrote on this question that while they would recommend their church's virtual preaching, their preferred method of worship participation would be to have people join them in-person rather than virtually.

Eighty-two percent of the survey participants said they would view a future virtual sermonic moment. During the pandemic, 59 percent of the surveyed state they watched more than one of their church's virtual preaching offerings. Some surveyed congregants stated that their church offered additional opportunities to participate virtually such as Wednesday night virtual Scripture readings and prayer times.

Summary of Major Findings

The surveys in combination with the clergy interviews yielded several major findings. While the interviews by themselves and the surveys alone yielded evidence, the combination of the two yielded major findings. These findings were more about the preacher's preparation, the preaching moment, and the congregant's perception of the sermon rather than the technology. While issues with technology can be distracting, most congregants surveyed stated that they were able to watch the sermonic moments. The major findings from the research are as follows are discussed in detail in Chapter 5:

- 1. Virtual preaching's future is subjective**
- 2. Lack of feedback mechanisms lead to limited discernment**
- 3. Sermon preparation results in some life changes**
- 4. Sermons move some to deeper exploration the Bible**
- 5. Sermons inspire limited theological reflection**
- 6. A small majority will invite others to participate in online sermons**

CHAPTER 5

LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

The following chapter addresses the six major findings from the data collected from the surveys and interviews conducted in this project. With each finding I will discuss my personal observations, whether the findings were supported or not supported by the literature reviewed for this project and will also discuss how the finding relate to the biblical and theological framework in this project. I will also discuss how the findings relate to the three research questions. The three research questions are:

1. In what ways did rural/small town churches transition to online preaching and what were the challenges faced regarding knowledge, skill, technology, and deployment?
2. Did pastors adapt to new methods of sermon preparation and sermon form to accommodate a digital worship program: what did they do differently, and did they find that they would continue with new methods of preparation and form?
3. How did these pastors and congregations evaluate the virtual sermonic moments during the pandemic and does the pastor utilize evaluation methods to envision the future of digital sermonic moments?

This chapter looks at the possible ministry implications that emerge from the findings. This chapter also discusses the limitations of this study and I will present any unexpected observations that arose during the project. Finally, in this chapter, I will present my recommendations for the future of this research.

Major Findings

First Finding: Virtual preaching's future is subjective

The first major finding revealed that all surveyed clergy believe virtual preaching will continue in the future: However, their belief is based on their own opinion since none of the surveyed clergy utilized any feedback mechanism to discern the thoughts of their congregation. This finding address adds clarity to Research Question #3 which asked how did the pastors and congregations evaluate virtual sermons during the pandemic and did the pastor utilize evaluation methods to envision the future of digital sermonic moments?

I entered the research with these assumptions that most clergy would utilize some evaluation tool, such as surveys, feedback cards, etc. to evaluate the congregation's response to virtual preaching, and that most would believe virtual preaching will continue in the future. However, during the research I discovered none of the clergy interviewed utilized a feedback mechanism to discern the thoughts of their congregants. While the interviews supported my second assumption that most clergy believed virtual preaching would continue in the future, the disclosure that none utilized a feedback mechanism undermined my assumptions at the close of the interviews, because they held their views without any supportive data.

The literature supports the finding in several ways. First, Tripp Hudgins cited a Barna Group study that found churches utilize technology to move towards new ways of expressing their faith (70). Justin Wise argues that technology is embedded in every facet of society (87–88). Wise also posits that technology is the basis for relationships in

society (92–93). Therefore, the assumptions that virtual preaching will continue is reasonable. However, Kim argues that the Church spends great amounts of resources for the newest and latest trends to attract people (7–8) and Sax argues that the “honeymoon with digital technology inevitably ends (xvi).” Therefore, the clergy’s view of the future digital preaching is opinion and not based on research.

The Bible supports the future of virtual preaching or at least the concept of preaching in a new context. Ezekiel 1: 1-28 describes the exiled Israelites living along the Kebar river in the land of the Babylonians. The “glory of the Lord” appeared to the prophet Ezekiel demonstrating God’s transcendence of geography and space. This certainly speaks to digital preaching because the God of the physical and spiritual worlds is also the God of the virtual world. In Mark 16:15, Jesus commissions the disciples to “go into the all the world and preach the gospel to all of creation.” Therefore, because we live in a world in which Wise states “the lines between online and offline are blurred” virtual preaching is living into the call to preach the gospel to all of creation (87–88).

The second major finding will further explore the third research question on evaluation and feedback mechanisms. The first and second findings are connected in context, but each addresses different facets to form a more complete understanding of the research question.

Second finding: Lack of feedback mechanisms lead to limited discernment

The second major finding is that the lack of mechanisms for congregations to give feedback in response to sermons limited the clergy’s ability to discern the value of the sermonic moment. This finding, like the first major finding addresses the third research question.

Prior to this project I have personally experienced value from using feedback mechanisms with congregants. I have used surveys or questionnaires before my congregants undertook mission projects and in evaluating congregants for potential leadership roles. From time to time, I have surveyed my congregation for feedback on the worship service and sermon series. With my experience in using feedback mechanisms, I was surprised when all the interviewed clergy disclosed that they did not use feedback mechanisms with their congregants. Post clergy interviews, I find myself troubled by the clergy's limited ability to discern the value of the sermonic moment.

Ward underscores the importance of evaluating the sermonic moment by listing the four functions of preaching, which he based on the readings of Augustine. The four functions are healing, teaching, saving, and freeing (*Practicing the Preaching Life* 33). Without feedback from the congregation about the sermonic moment it will be hard for the preacher to assess whether the sermonic moment is effective in these four functions.

Nash cautions preachers who utilize technology for virtual preaching because in-person preaching is perceived to be more relational. Nash posits the reason for this perception is that with in-person preaching provides needed space for the listener to safely interpret the sermonic moment and technology narrows that space thus making the sermonic moment impersonal (151-152). Lack of feedback undermines the preacher's ability to evaluate personal connection. Feedback could be something simple, such as, "I wish the preacher would look at the camera more." Simple critiques could help the preacher develop more relational sermonic moments.

1 Thessalonians 5: 12 states "acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for the Lord, and admonish you." Clergy need to recognize what their congregation

is doing and thinking, Feedback is essential for relational preaching, and is particularly important for virtual preaching because of the impersonal effect of technology. Feedback, both positive and negative is constructive. Proverbs 15:22 states, “Without counsel, plans fail, but with many advisors they succeed.”

Third Finding: Sermon preparation results in some life change

The third major finding revealed that congregants who listened to virtual sermons felt the preacher was prepared and adequately addressed the Scripture and most (54 percent) stated that the sermon challenged them to make a change in their lives. The third major finding addresses Research Question #2 which asked if pastors adapt to new methods of sermon preparation and sermon form to accommodate a digital worship program: what did they do differently, and did they find that they would continue with new methods of preparation and form?

Prior to the research I have encountered many preachers who emphasize the importance of exegetical preparation for the sermonic moment. Interviews with the clergy revealed that they have an exegetical process and sermonic form. However, all clergy stated they did not alter their exegetical process or sermonic form to preach virtually. Nevertheless, the surveyed congregants stated they felt their pastor was prepared to preach and adequately addressed the Scripture. Moreover, most congregants (54 percent) stated the sermons challenged them to make a life change. After the interviews while contemplating Ward’s four functions of preaching, I considered the 46 percent of congregants who stated that the sermon did not inspire them to make a life change,

John McArthur states that true success in preaching is faithfulness and faithfulness demand diligence in study. Those who are lazy in study, undisciplined in

preparation, and careless in proclamation will one day be ashamed (Ryken and Wilson 78). Preparation for preaching is critical. Ward states that the aim of good preaching is “to send a doxological community into the world through the proclamation of the gospel (*Practicing the Preaching Life* 23). Ward’s aim can only be accomplished through faithful exegesis.

The surveyed congregants stated that they felt their preacher was prepared and 54 percent stated the sermon challenged them to make a change in their life. Both the literature and the survey data support the findings about preparation. However, the findings do not adequately answer question two because none of the surveyed clergy made a change in their exegetical process or sermonic form for virtual preaching. While the literature does not directly address an exegetical process specifically for virtual preaching, the literature does discuss the relational aspect of preaching and knowing your congregation’s needs and context. Knowing the congregation’s needs and context connects back with having feedback mechanisms.

Biblically, the finding is supported. Paul writes to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2, telling him to be prepared both in season and out of season. Paul not only instructed Timothy to preach the gospel, but also to be prepared to preach the gospel because there is a time coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine. The Apostle Peter’s advice is always be prepared to answer everyone who asks for a reason for the hope the faithful have (1 Pet. 3: 15).

Most surveyed congregants stated that the sermons they listened to challenged them to make a life change, which is supported in the Scripture. Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:16 that the Scripture is good for discipleship. Therefore, considering teaching

is one of the four functions of preaching expressed by Ward (*Practicing the Preaching Life* 33), preaching is vital to spiritual formation. Hebrews 4:12 teaches us that God's word is not inanimate or monolithic. Instead, the Word of God is living and active. The teaching function of preaching instructs people how to know Jesus and live their lives in obedience to God's commands and seek God for their best lives.

Fourth Finding: Sermons move some to deeper exploration of the Bible

The fourth major finding reveals that most (53 percent) of congregants surveyed stated the online sermons inspired them to read and explore the Bible. This finding lends more insight to Research Question #2 which asked whether the clergy modified their sermon preparation to accommodate a digital worship program. This finding also connects to the teaching function of preaching in that preaching aims to educate the nonbeliever, the immature believer, and the mature believer to grow them in their faith and discipleship (2 Tim. 3: 16).

Before the survey results, I was confident that many congregants rarely read Scripture outside the church setting. This assumption developed over time through teaching Sunday School classes, Bible studies, and conversations with congregants about the Bible. While I did encounter people familiar with the Bible in those settings, I was skeptical of just how much people engaged the Bible. As I reviewed the surveys, I grew in my optimism because more people than I assumed do attempt to read the Bible. The surveys did reveal that 47 percent said the sermons they listened to did not read or explore the Bible. This statistic revealed to me that going forward, more work is needed to inspire people to read and explore the Bible.

As stated previously one of the functions of preaching is teaching people to develop and grow in their faith and discipleship. Going back to sermon preparation because during the preachers' preparation for the sermonic moment, they must keep in mind the four functions of the sermon. Fred Craddock states that sermon preparation should be done in such a way that the transition from exegesis to sermon invites the listener into the excitement of exegetical discovery. This means that the listener recognizes their stories in the message (Eslinger Loc. 386). When a listener recognizes their story in the message, the four functions of the sermon (healing, saving, teaching, and freeing) become organic.

Nouwen speaks about how reading the Scriptures transcends edification because through the work of the Holy Spirit reading the Scriptures becomes spiritual formation (11). Nouwen underscores the beneficial relationship between the preacher's exegetical process and spiritual formation because the Scriptures provide spiritual formation for both the preacher and the congregation. While 53 percent of congregants stated the sermons inspired them to read and explore the Bible, the 47 percent who claimed that the sermons did not inspire them to read and explore the Bible indicates a need for greater emphasis on spiritual formation.

In 2 Timothy 3:16 Paul writes Timothy that all Scriptures are written by people inspired by the Holy Spirit and that the Scriptures are good for teaching, reproof, correction, and discipleship. Paul's words to Timothy underline the importance of reading and exploring the Bible for spiritual formation, as well as the necessity of preaching that inspires exploration of the scriptures. Paul writes to the church in Rome that spiritual formation is an essential part of the Christian life. Paul teaches the church

that Christians take their whole lives, even the most ordinary and mundane parts and present them to God as an offering (Rom. 12: 1-2).

Fifth Finding: Sermons inspire limited theological reflection

The fifth major finding states that online sermons did not give rise to theological questions from a vast majority (78 percent) of surveyed congregants. Only a small percentage of congregants (6 percent) who had questions sought an answer from their pastor. This finding does not speak to one research question, but it does relate to all three questions.

While the finding does not directly answer question one, because a majority of the surveyed congregants stated they experienced few issues with the technology used to stream the sermonic moments, the finding may indirectly speak to the impersonal perception that technology can convey. The literature suggests that clergy awareness of their preaching presence may help overcome the impersonal effects of technology. The finding also indicates that there may be a breakdown in the four functions of the sermon which may point to sermon preparation issues. The finding also indicates a need for feedback mechanisms that established a relationship between the preacher and the listener.

Before this finding, I was unaware of how many congregants may have a lack of or a failure to recognize theological questions in their lives. During the data review, the lack of theological questioning became apparent. The data also revealed to me that a small percentage sought out their pastor with their theological questions.

Eugene Lowry argues that preachers treat sermons as bits and parts they put together around a particular theme in a sort of exegetical assembly line Lowry states that

preachers see sermons as a thing (5–8). Instead, Lowry states that in preaching, the birth of the sermon should be grounded in the gospel (11). Grounded in the gospel gives birth to the four functions of preaching, which in turn facilitates in the listener a desire to seek God and understand their relationship with God. Thus, the few of theological questions from the congregants indicate possible issues with the sermons.

T. Brown indicates that the presence of the preacher, their physicality, voices, idiosyncrasies, and at times, their eccentricities add or detract from their perceived authenticity in the sermonic moment (Loc. 1162). Brown's understanding of presence lends to the idea of how the preacher is perceived during the virtual sermonic moment, because if the pastor has a perceived negative presence, it could create a barrier to the desired functions of preaching.

Virtual preaching is typically streamed to social media platforms and viewed on television, computer, tablet, or phone screens. The cameras used to produce the stream are focused on the preacher. It is possible for the screen itself to create a barrier to the relational aspect of preaching. The literature indicates there are many difficulties in creating online communities of faith. Some difficulties are relational and others come from some peoples resistance to technology and doing church differently than what they are accustomed to. No matter, Wise states that "it is time to grasp what an embodiment gospel looks like in a digital world (120).

The Bible talks about how the Apostles would sometimes fail in the mission of the gospel. Paul's preaching at Mars Hill did not win over many in the crowd who listened to his sermon (Acts 17: 22-34). Peter pulled back his fellowship with the Gentile Christians after the circumcision dispute (Gal. 2:11). However, the Bible is clear that the

Church should continue its efforts in virtual preaching. The Great Commission is given by Christ, directing us to go into the world to make disciples (Matt. 28). Wise posits that because of the proliferation of technology, the lines between online and offline are blurred (87–88). Therefore, the virtual world is abundant with opportunities to proclaim the gospel.

Sixth Finding: A small majority will invite others to participate in online sermons

The sixth major finding states that just over half of the congregants surveyed would tell another person to watch their church's online service. These finding addresses two of the three research questions positively. With question one, the finding signifies the perception that the online sermonic moment is relatively difficulty free for people to access and view. The finding addresses question two positively if the preacher is prepared and the sermon adequately address the Scripture. The finding is inconclusive in addressing Research Question #3 because the clergy did not utilize any feedback mechanisms to help understand the sermonic moment.

The major finding stating that over half (53 percent) of the congregants would recommend their church's online sermons is a statistical improvement over the Barna Group's study in December 2020 which stated that two out of five church goers would invite others to digital church services. However, that same study revealed that 62 percent of Christians hoped that churches will keep using digital means of gathering people post COVID-19 pandemic (Unknown, "2 in 5 Church Goes Are Open to Inviting Others To Digital Church Services" 3). This improvement may be attributed to better preparation among preachers for the sermonic moment or it could be that digital sermons are becoming more normalized.

The Bible gives us a possible clue for the finding of an increased desire to invite people to view the digital sermonic moment. In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul indicates spiritual formation gives confidence to the preacher to proclaim the gospel and this confidence lends to the preacher's presence. Secondly, in 1 Corinthians 2: 4-5, Paul attributes the power of preaching to the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Holy Spirit transcends technology and is active even in the virtual world. Scripture verifies that the Holy Spirit empowers the preacher to proclaim the gospel message.

Ministry Implications of the Findings

The ministry implications of this study are two-fold. First, the study revealed that virtual preaching will continue for the foreseeable future. Most congregants, clergy, and literature support this perception. Future studies are applicable to verify whether perceptions have changed about the sustainability of virtual preaching and to study the impact of future virtual preaching. Another area of future study would be to compare whether a difference exists between in-person preaching and virtual preaching in the area of inspiring people to make life changes, read and explore their Bibles, and in seeking answers to theological questions.

The second area of impact is that the research indicated feedback mechanisms are not being utilized by clergy to measure the effectiveness of the sermonic moments. Clergy need to be aware of whether their sermons are actively expressing the four functions of preaching (saving, healing, teaching, and freeing). Technology offers several methods of collecting feedback. One good platform for feedback collection is Survey Monkey. Feedback will allow the clergy to make needed changes to increase the effectiveness of the sermonic moment.

This study can be used to further the Church's understanding of virtual preaching and be the foundation for future research on how to proclaim the gospel virtually. This study also offers literature resources that will help preachers develop and maximize their exegetical process as well as understanding the virtual listener they plan to engage with the proclamation of the gospel.

Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations. First the study was limited geographically. The study only looked at United Methodist Churches in the South Georgia Conference with congregations of less than seventy congregants in average attendance. This study occurred during the time of church disaffiliations from the United Methodist denomination, and this limited the access to some of the churches that was to be included in the study. However, I was able to replace most of the churches I lost access to because of disaffiliation.

If I were to do this study again, I would open the study up to churches outside the United Methodist denomination. This would possibly give data that would increase our understanding of the transition to online preaching during the Global Pandemic of 2020. I would employ the same instrumentations of congregational surveys and clergy interviews to collect the data. I would also maintain the same procedures of administering the instrumentations and data analysis. The surveys were blind, and the interviews were conducted through virtual means.

Unexpected Observations

This study also resulted in a few unexpected observations. First, the I had anticipated that many of the interviewed clergy would have utilized some means of collecting feedback from their congregations. I was surprised to learn no clergy utilized any type of feedback mechanism. The second surprise was I expected a higher number of congregants to say they were inspired to make life changes in response to the proclamation of the gospel. I was also surprised that a higher number of congregants stated they read and explored the Bible than what I assumed.

The biggest surprise was the congregant's answer to the question about theological questions. I did not anticipate 78 percent of the congregants to say they did not have any theological questions in response to the sermonic moment. To add, the very low percentage (6 percent) that stated they asked their pastor about their theological questions surprised me.

Recommendations

With the findings of this study, I offer these recommendations. First, more research with a broader range of participants is recommended. To better understand the impacts of virtual preaching, more research to discover if the data holds true in a larger context is also recommended. Research in other denominations and in other geographic regions could provide data to better understand if the data this research provided is limited to the experience of the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Further research can also bring insight and understanding to the virtual presence of the preacher and how his or her presence affect the virtual sermonic moment.

Numerous resources that discuss the in-person sermonic moment and the presence of the preacher, but the transition to virtual has added new challenges and layers to the presence of the preacher being relational and contextual.

Another recommendation is that clergy need more training about how to utilize and understand feedback mechanisms. If clergy are to connect with people through proclamation of the gospel message, then to understand the impact of the sermonic moment, clergy need to understand how to gather and process that data.

Clergy, denominations, and non-denominational churches can benefit from studies such as this because the lines between the physical and virtual world are blurring. The gospel message is relational and therefore the Church must understand how people connect in this technological age. This study is beneficial because it offers both resources and opportunities to better understand preaching, technology, and spiritual formation.

Postscript

This study has helped me to grow in my personal understanding of preaching and preparing to preach. I have discovered areas I do well in, and areas I need to improve. This study has reinforced my understanding of feedback from my congregation. I also am grateful for the opportunity to engage in conversation with my peers about preaching and to receive feedback from congregations about the sermonic moment. I have learned that technology changes and expands rapidly and because of this I have learned that preachers must learn and grow in their understanding of technology to engage people with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

APPENDIXES

A: Survey Questions

1. During the Global Pandemic of 2020 and 2021, did your church make available weekly opportunities to view preaching on a virtual platform (a virtual platform in an online accessible platform such as Facebook livestream, YouTube, Vimeo, etc.)? **Yes or No.**

2. Did your church provide a virtual means to view the weekly sermon? **Yes or No**

Was the opportunity offered during the church's traditional worship time/times?
Yes or No

Did you view the sermon alone or (if applicable) did other members of your household view with you? **Yes or No**

3. Did you view the sermon in one sitting, or did you break the viewing of the sermon into segments? **One sitting/Two or multiple sittings**

If you answered two or multiple settings what prompted your action?

4: Was the virtual platform easily accessible? **Yes or No**

Did you experience difficulties while viewing? **Yes or No**

If yes, briefly describe some of the difficulties you experienced?

5. Did you watch additional virtual sermons offered by your church or just one?

Additional virtual sermons/Just one

If just one, briefly describe what prompted your decision.

6: Considering the sermons you viewed did the sermon/sermons challenge you to an action or to make a change in your life? **Yes or No**

If yes, can you please give an example?

7. Did the sermon inspire you to read the Scripture passage that was preached upon or explore the Bible in a deeper manner? **Yes or No**

If yes, describe briefly how you were inspired.

8. Did the sermon cause you to have theological questions (sin, identity, grace, forgiveness, etc.) that need further discussion with your pastor? **Yes or No**

If yes, have you discussed your questions with your pastor? **Yes or No**

9. Do you feel the sermon/sermons addressed the passage/passages of Scripture used for the sermon adequately? **Yes or No.**

If no, why did you feel the sermon was lacking something? Would you briefly offer a suggestion to help address the inadequacy?

10. On a scale from one to ten, ten being the best and one being the worst, rate the following:

a. How prepared do you feel the pastor was in preparing to preach?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not prepared
At all

Very prepared

b. How good was the video quality?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not good
at all

Very good

c. How good was the sound quality? _

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not good
at all

Very good

d. How likely would you participate in future virtual sermon moments?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not likely
at all

Very likely

e. How likely is it that you would recommend another person to watch your church's virtual sermons?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not likely
at all

Very likely

e. How strongly do you feel that virtual preaching will continue into the foreseeable future? _

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not strongly
at all

Very strongly

B. Interview Questions

1. During the Global Pandemic of 2020-2021, did your church have existing media technology that gave the capability of streaming the sermonic moments? If the answer is no, what technologies did the church need to add? What if any changes did the church make to improve already existing capabilities?

2. Were there any challenges to virtual preaching due to the church's geographic area? Was there internet accessibility? If the answer is no, how did the church overcome that obstacle?

3. Did you or members of your staff or congregation need learn any new skills or techniques to make a transition to virtual preaching?

4. What were some expected challenges you faced during the transition to virtual preaching? Did any unexpected challenges arise during the transition to virtual preaching?

5. Did you request any feedback from your congregation during the transition that prompted addressing issues they might have experienced during the virtual preaching moment, i.e. sound quality, video disruptions, or any other technical? Did the feedback inspire confidence in the practice of virtual preaching? How so?

6. Did you make adjustments from the feedback you received and did your adjustments resolve the issues?
7. Did you seek help from others to address any issues? If so, did you receive the help you needed or do you feel you are still lacking help in resolving an ongoing issue?
8. Did you make any changes in your preparation to preach virtually?
9. How did preaching to a camera, instead of an in person congregation make you feel and did those feelings prompt you to change your sermon form or delivery?
10. On a technological basis, how would rate your experience with the transition to online preaching?
11. Did you survey your congregation to get a feel for what worked and what did not work during the virtual preaching moment?
12. Do you feel that virtual preaching is a practice that you will continue pursuing along with in person preaching? If you will continue the practice of virtual preaching, do you think that you might seek information, advice, or opportunities to grow in your understanding and skills of virtual preaching? What are some areas of information and skills that you might find helpful?

13. What are the areas of virtual preaching that challenge you? What are some benefits that you see?

14. If you were to give advice to another preacher who was about to undertake virtual preaching, what advice would you give?

C. Consent Form

Adapting the Digital Pulpit: A Study of the Transition to Online Preaching

You are invited to be in a research study being done by **Robert Mike Bankston a doctoral student** from Asbury Theological Seminary. You are invited because your church fits certain criteria, such as church size and context (small congregation less than 70 members in attendance and rural locations including small towns and unincorporated communities).

If you agree to be in the study, clergy will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher that will be conducted on an agreed upon time and setting. Congregants will be asked to fill out a brief, anonymous survey, which they will return to the researcher through their pastor. An envelope will be included with each survey and once completed the survey is to be placed in the envelope. The envelope will be collected by the pastor and returned together with other surveys from the congregation to the researcher.

For interviews, the researcher will be using a voice recorder and laptop to record the interviews. These interviews will be stored in a password protected laptop with only the researcher having access to the content. The surveys will be stored in a locked file in a locked office with the researcher having access. Names of interviewees will be kept anonymous in the research. Once the study is completed, interviews and surveys will be destroyed after one year.

Interviews may cause psychological stress and discomfort. These stresses may cause physical symptoms.

If something makes you feel uncomfortable in any way while you are in the study, please tell **Robert Mike Bankston**. You can refuse to respond to any or all of the questions, and you will be able to withdraw from the process at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact **Robert Mike Bankston** at mike.bankston@asburyseminary.edu .

Signing this paper means that you have read this or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the paper. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be upset if you do not sign this paper or even if you change your mind later. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do.

Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Study

Date Signed

D. Confidentiality Agreement Form

This form may be used for individuals who will be assisting the researcher with a variety of research tasks (e.g., audio or video recording, transcribing data, etc.)

I, _____, will be assisting the researcher by _____ (specific job description, e.g., being an interpreter/translator)

I agree to abide by the following guidelines regarding confidentiality:

1. Hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual(s) that may be revealed during the course of performing research tasks throughout the research process and after it is complete.
2. Keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the Researcher(s).
3. Keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession (e.g., using a password-protected computer).
4. Return all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) to the Researcher(s) when I have completed the research tasks.
5. After consulting with the Researcher(s), erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the Researcher(s) (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive) upon completion of the research tasks.

_____	_____.	_____
(Print Name)	(Signature)	(Date)

Researcher(s)

_____	_____.	_____
(Print Name)	(Signature)	(Date)

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