

**You Can't Say *THAT* in a Sermon:
Social Issues, Preaching, and Dialogue During a Time of Societal Upheaval**

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***Abstract:** This paper explores the challenges of preaching in the midst of societal upheaval and how deliberative practices can assist preachers with addressing social issues. The research is based on a study of ten mid-central U.S. congregations in the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church) denomination. As part of the quantitative research, congregational questionnaires in 2019 and 2020 tested whether certain terms were perceived as “too political” when heard in sermons. Respondents also indicated which topics they wanted their pastors to address and which ones to avoid. The data offers a rare “before-and-after” picture when it comes to the attitudes, concerns, and opinions of parishioners about sermons and social issues in the pre- and post-COVID-19 periods. This study suggests that the sermon-dialogue-sermon process can help congregations be more willing to address controversial social issues. The author makes the case that further empirical research is needed to help preachers devise strategies for prophetic preaching in their contexts.*

Introduction

The Listening to Listeners Project, a Lilly Foundation-funded research project led by Ronald J. Allen from 2001–2002, focused on how parishioners listen to sermons. The research team interviewed 263 sermon listeners in 28 churches of various denominations, sizes, locations, and socioeconomic/racial compositions.² In the nearly two decades since this ethnographic research project, the church—and preaching—has undergone incredible changes, shifts, and challenges. The years of the Trump era saw the erosion of societal norms around civility, perceptions of reality, and even the veracity of facts. In particular, 2020–21 caused incredible stress on congregations and preachers alike with converging crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising racial injustice and protests, and accelerating environmental devastation due to climate change, as well as the unraveling of American democracy and descent into extreme polarization and political violence. Thus, listening to listeners in this time of societal trauma is critical for preachers and parishioners navigating this unprecedented time.

This paper will explore these societal contours through a study of ten congregations who participated in a grant I directed at Lexington Theological Seminary (LTS) in 2019–20 called “Dialogue in the ‘Purple Zone’: Pedagogies for Civil Discourse in Online and On-site Settings.” Methods of both quantitative and qualitative research were used in the form of surveys and interviews of congregants and clergy. One question in the congregational survey tested whether certain terms are perceived as “too political” when heard in sermons. Another part of the survey asked parishioners to indicate which topics they wanted their pastors to address and which ones

¹ I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. Amanda Wilson Harper, Tarleton State University, for her assistance in designing the research instruments for this project as well as consulting with me on the analysis of the data. Two other researchers also contributed to designing the surveys: the Rev. Dr. Katie Day, United Lutheran Seminary (emerita), and Dr. Wayne Thompson, Carthage College.

² See: *Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons* by Mary Alice Mulligan, Diane Turner-Sharass, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, and Ronald J. Allen (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005).

they wanted them to avoid. Because these surveys were conducted twice—in the fall of 2019 and again in the fall of 2020—the data offers a rare “before-and-after” picture when it comes to the attitudes, concerns, and opinions of parishioners about preaching and social issues in the pre- and post-COVID-19 periods. The study provides insights and raises questions for congregations, clergy, and homileticians about preaching during a time of societal upheaval.

Explanation of the project

The Purple Zone project was funded by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion under a grant program entitled Pedagogies for Social Justice and Civic Engagement. The purpose of this project was to explore the use of preaching and deliberative dialogue as a tool for facilitating difficult conversations and encouraging civic engagement in online, on-site, and congregational settings within theological education. One aspect of this project included bringing a cohort of ten clergy and one lay leader each from their congregations (twenty participants in all) to our campus at LTS to teach them the “sermon-dialogue-sermon” (SDS) process to use in their congregations, and then to follow this cohort for a year to track the results.³ The pastors were all MDiv graduates of LTS who had at least three years of ministry experience.

The SDS method is a longitudinal approach to preaching about social issues that includes an introductory sermon followed by a deliberative dialogue, and concluding with a second sermon. Developed by the Kettering Foundation, deliberative dialogue (DD) is a form of civil discourse characterized by individuals’ explicit engagement with multiple perspectives on an issue using a nonpartisan issue guide developed by the National Issues Forum Institute.⁴ The dialogue is moderated by a facilitator who models and encourages consideration of and listening to others’ views while also demonstrating receptiveness to movement in one’s own thinking. DD enables citizens from diverse backgrounds and political orientations to constructively talk with each other, support community building, and strengthen the democratic process. In a DD, participants engage in respectful discourse to weigh pros and cons of three different approaches to an issue, discern together the common values they share in the midst of their different standpoints, and determine next steps for social action as a community.

In the SDS process, the dialogue is bookended by two sermons. First, the “prophetic invitation to dialogue” introduces a social issue by framing it within biblical and theological perspectives and inviting congregants to participate in the DD. The second sermon follows the DD and is called the “communal prophetic proclamation.” In this sermon, the preacher addresses the same issue, but this time incorporates the insights and wisdom that arose from the DD. As with the first sermon, the issue is framed within biblical and theological perspectives, but for this second sermon, the preacher emphasizes how the participants discerned the Holy Spirit moving among them in the midst of the dialogue, helping them to find common ground and identify next steps for moving forward on the issue. This second sermon draws on the model of preaching proposed by John McClure in *The Roundtable Pulpit* in which the preacher engages parishioners around the study of biblical texts for an upcoming sermon and then weaves their perspectives

³ The sermon-dialogue-sermon process is developed and explained in *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide*, Leah D. Schade (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

⁴ See: <https://www.kettering.org/>. For a full description of deliberative dialogue, visit The National Issues Forum Institute: <https://www.nifi.org/en/deliberation>. The NIFI site has more than 40 issue guides for facilitating deliberative dialogue: <https://www.nifi.org/en/issue-guides/issue-guides>.

and insights into the sermon.⁵ In the communal prophetic proclamation sermon, however, the discussion focuses on a *social issue* examined from a faith perspective. In the consequent sermon, the preacher brings a biblical text into conversation with the issue as well as the group's engagement with it.

For this project, ten clergy and ten lay leaders participated in a two-day training at LTS to learn the SDS method.⁶ Key to the training was building in sufficient political diversity among the participants in order to bridge the “red-blue divide.”⁷ Therefore, I asked the pastors (whose political stances ranged from moderate to left-leaning) to invite a lay leader who was of a different political orientation than they were. As a result, the political spectrum of the lay leaders ranged from far right to moderate to far left. The training event consisted of the cohort participating in a DD, receiving training in moderating a DD, clergy being trained in the SDS process, and lay leaders engaging in conversation about how to be an “ambassador” of DD to invite fellow congregants to participate.

Following the training event in September 2019, the clergy-laity pairs were to carry out the SDS process in their congregations once before the end of the year and a second time before June of 2020. All ten pairs were able to do the first SDS process.⁸ However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic that caused church buildings to close for several months, only two were able to complete the second round. Also, one pastor left her congregation at the end of the year, so that church discontinued their participation in the project. Nevertheless, we were able to collect data via surveys and interviews with the clergy, lay leaders, and church members both before and one year after the training which has yielded a significant amount of data. For the purposes of this paper, I will share the data about responses to certain “political” terms in preaching, as well as topics that parishioners indicated they wanted their pastors to address—and avoid—in sermons.

General survey statistics

The ten Disciples of Christ (Christian Church) congregations were located within the mid-central United States of America in the states of Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia. One

⁵ John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership & Preaching Meet* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).

⁶ In addition to myself, the training team consisted of the Rev. Dr. Gregg Kaufman, retired ELCA pastor and Kettering Foundation research associate; Dr. Ronald Allen, homiletics professor emeritus at Christian Theological Seminary; the Rev. Dr. Amanda Wilson Harper, assistant professor of social work at Tarleton State University; Dr. Emily Askew, associate professor of theology at Lexington Theological Seminary; and Dr. Jerry Sumney, professor of biblical studies at Lexington Theological Seminary.

⁷ The Kettering Foundation has identified three groups of people who are generally suspicious of deliberative dialogue and hesitant to engage in this type of civil discourse, one of which is conservative folks. Generally, they suspect that the underlying motivation of dialogue is to shame them for their political position or to sway their opinions toward a liberal agenda. They need assurance that their opinions are valued and that there is no hidden agenda. A second group are those in historically marginalized demographics, such as LGBTQIA or immigrants, for example, who may be vulnerable in such public forums or have experienced being targeted, dismissed, or attacked through microaggression in past dialogues. They require assurance that the ground rules for discussion will be enforced and that the moderator is both trustworthy and skilled in shutting down hostility. The third group are those in communities of color who have been invited to dialogue in the past (for example, about how to improve their neighborhoods) but little accountability or follow-up results. For this group, dialogue is dismissed as “all talk, no action.” They require assurance that there are people dedicated to ensuring that there is follow through on next steps and that concrete, substantive change will result.

⁸ Five of the pairs addressed the issue of food and hunger, three addressed the issue of the church's role in a divided society, one addressed the opioid crisis, and one addressed Social Security.

congregation was in a rural area, six were in small or midsize towns, and three were located within a suburb of a metropolitan area with a population over 100,000. The aggregate racial make-up of the congregations was 97 percent white.⁹

The age range of the respondents in the congregational survey tended to skew older (70 percent of respondents were age 55 and up), and female (68 percent). The majority of respondents (64 percent) were members of their church for more than ten years. In 2019, more than 70 percent of respondents reported attending church nearly weekly. But in 2020, we noted that respondents' reported weekly worship attendance (either remotely or in person) after COVID-19 dropped to 60 percent.

In terms of political views, the respondents represented a wide range of stances. Those identifying as "very conservative" to "moderate, lean conservative" made up 35 percent, while "very liberal/progressive" to "moderate, lean liberal/progressive" made up 50 percent. Fifteen percent identified as "independent/mixed." In contrast, almost all of the pastors in the project identified as moderate left-leaning to very progressive/liberal.

The size of the worshipping congregations ranged from small (under 50) to midsize (50–250) to large (more than 250).¹⁰ In the 2019 survey, the estimated number of worship attendance of all churches combined was 1035. Four hundred thirty-five parishioners responded to the 2019 survey, resulting in a response rate of 42 percent. The response rate was lower for the second survey (25 percent), which we attributed primarily to the factor of "screen fatigue" on the part of parishioners in the age of COVID-19.¹¹

Testing politically volatile terms in preaching

During our initial interviews with the lay leaders in August 2019, we discovered that the right-leaning participants had a negative reaction to a particular term we used in the first lay leader survey: social justice. We used this term because we were testing for the ways in which the participants conceived of, reacted to, and engaged in social justice issues. This was also the term that Wabash used in their grant program (Pedagogies for *Social Justice* and Civic Engagement). To these participants, however, the term was viewed as having "liberal bias" which they interpreted as skewing not just the survey but the entire project altogether. We assured them that the project was not intended to cast aspersions on their political convictions or convert them to a progressive stance, but instead was geared toward deep listening and the discernment of common values, which helped to allay their concerns. It was not until they experienced the deliberative dialogue process and received training and practice in moderating a dialogue, however, that they were convinced of its efficacy. Interestingly, by the end of the training the more conservative lay leaders became the most vocal proponents of DD and expressed eagerness to invite their fellow congregants to participate.

Because of the feedback from the lay leaders about the term "social justice," we removed it from the congregational survey we were about to launch and used simply "social issues" so as

⁹ Our intention was to include more clergy and congregations of color in this study. Unfortunately, the clergy of color whom we invited already had significant church projects underway or were not available for the training. While the congregations in this study were racially homogeneous, the data does give us insight into the attitudes of white DOC congregations in middle America at this particular time in American history.

¹⁰ We asked for typical Sunday worship attendance, not the number of members on the rolls.

¹¹ As noted, at the end of 2019, one of the pastors left the congregation to take a new position and the congregation discontinued their participation in the program. Thus, the survey population reduced to 960 in the 2020 survey. 2019 Congregational Survey overall confidence level = 95%; overall margin of error = 3.7%. 2020 Congregation survey overall confidence level = 90%; overall margin of error = 4.7%.

to avoid inadvertently creating a hostile response from right-leaning respondents. However, this incident pointed to another possible research question regarding politically volatile terms in sermons. Might preachers undermine their sermons by using particular words that “turn off” certain listeners? As O. Wesley Allen has noted:

(I)t’s important to remember that it is not the preacher’s job simply to preach the gospel; it is the preacher’s job to get the gospel heard, then believed, and then lived. This not only takes time and repetition. It takes approaching difficult subjects in a hospitable manner—inviting hearers into sermons as honored guests to converse about the topic instead of using the topic as a weapon against them (or against Trump) in the fashion of a take-it-or-leave-it-debate.¹²

Applied to this study, we wondered: might preachers be putting up obstacles to “getting the gospel heard” by inadvertently using terms that repel some listeners and shut down engagement? This was a question I began formulating some years earlier based on my research about clergy in my 2017 survey of mainline Protestant pastors, “Preaching about Controversial Justice Issues.” Clergy indicated that just mentioning certain words in a sermon can elicit negative pushback from some parishioners.¹³ So in the 2019 congregational survey, we decided to give the respondents a list of 19 terms and ask them to indicate whether hearing these in a sermon would be “too political” or “okay.” The terms were listed alphabetically: Advocacy and/or Activism, Capitalism, Climate change, Community, Corporations, Dialogue, Economy, Environment, Equality, Gender, God’s Creation, Government, Guns, Immigration/refugees, Injustice, Privilege, Race/racism, Rights, and Sexuality. In the September 2020 survey, we asked the same question, but added two additional terms: Black Lives Matter and COVID-19, coronavirus. Table 1 compares the volatility of these terms in 2019 and 2020, listed in descending order according to their weighted average.

Table 1. Comparing parishioners’ perceptions about the volatility of terms heard in sermons, 2019 v. 2020. The “hotter” terms are at the top; the “cooler” terms at the bottom. Stars indicate terms added for the 2020 survey.

¹² O. Wesley Allen, *Preaching in the Era of Trump* (St. Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 2017), 20.

¹³ See chapter 1 in *Preaching in the Purple Zone* for details about the 2017 survey.

practice a kind of rhetorical “code-switching” to avoid turning off certain listeners?¹⁴ Or would this “homiletical correctness” violate the authenticity and integrity of the minister’s call to preach prophetically?¹⁵ These are questions that can guide conversations in both seminary classrooms and churches as homileticians, preachers, and congregants consider the implications of language and rhetoric during a time of social upheaval.

Topics parishioners most want their preachers to address

In addition to testing the volatility of simple words and terms, we also gave parishioners a list of topics (17 in 2019, 20 in 2020) and asked them to pick the top three they wanted their pastor to address in a sermon. Listed in alphabetical order, the topics in 2019 were: Abortion/Reproductive health, Crime/Victims’ rights/Incarceration/Capital punishment, Domestic abuse or violence/Bullying, Economic issues (debt/poverty, inequality/homelessness), Education issues, Environment/Climate change/Pollution, Gender/Sexuality/Sexual identity/LGBTQIA issues, Gun rights and/or Gun violence, Healthcare, Human trafficking/Slavery, Immigration, Interfaith relations/Hate crimes/Intolerance, Mental health and/or Emotional health/Suicide prevention, Physical disabilities, Race/Racism/White privilege/supremacy, Substance abuse/Addictions/Opioid crisis, and War/Terrorism/Militarization/Veterans issues. In 2020 three additional topics were added: Black Lives Matter, COVID-19 pandemic response, and Fiscal responsibility.¹⁶ Table 2 shows how the two years compare.

Table 2. Topics parishioners MOST WANT their pastors to address in sermons, 2019 v. 2020. Topics in light grey moved higher in 2020, while the topics in dark grey moved lower. The starred topics were added for the 2020 survey.

¹⁴ “Code-switching” is the “process of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another, depending on the social context or conversational setting” (“Code-switching,” by Carlos D. Morrison, Britannica.com, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/code-switching>, nd., accessed Sept. 21, 2020). Originally studied in the context of second-language acquisition among Spanish-speakers switching to English and vice versa, and among African Americans who shifted between standard English and African American English, the term has come to refer to any instance whereby one customizes their style of speech to a particular audience or group being addressed.

¹⁵ In his essay, “Code-switching and Preaching: When ‘preacher voice’ means leaving our selves and God behind,” the Rev. Mike Angell notes: “If we don’t bring our full selves, if we don’t represent the realities of our community, we are making a statement by our omission.” (Angellmike.com, Feb. 14, 2015, <https://angellmike.com/2015/02/14/code-switching-in-the-pulpit-when-preacher-voice-means-leaving-our-selves-and-god-behind/>, accessed Sept. 21, 2020).

¹⁶ The topic Fiscal responsibility was added at the urging of several respondents in the 2019 survey as well as the conservative lay leaders in the cohort who suggested this be included to “balance” the topic of Economic issues (debt/poverty, inequality/homelessness).

2019			Pick 3 topics you MOST WANT addressed in sermons.			2020		
1	Interfaith relations/Hate crimes/Intolerance	31%	1	Interfaith relations/Hate crimes/Intolerance	33%			
2	Environment/Climate change/Pollution	26%	2	Race/Racism/White privilege/White supremacy	26%			
3	Mental and/or Emotional health/Suicide prevention	26%	3	Economic issues (debt/poverty/inequality/homelessness)	25%			
4	Substance abuse/Addictions/Opioid crisis	24%	4	Environment/Climate change/Pollution	24%			
5	Domestic abuse or violence/Bullying	21%	5	Mental and/or Emotional health/Suicide prevention	19%			
6	Economic issues (debt/poverty/inequality/homelessness)	21%	6	Domestic abuse or violence/Bullying	16%			
7	Immigration	17%	7	Black Lives Matter	13%			
8	Race/Racism/White privilege/White supremacy	15%	8	Immigration	12%			
9	Gun rights and/or Gun violence	12%	9	Substance abuse/Addictions/Opioid crisis	12%			
10	None of the above	11%	10	Education issues	11%			
11	Education issues	10%	11	Gun rights and/or Gun violence	10%			
12	Human trafficking/Slavery	9%	12	Covid-19 pandemic response	10%			
13	Gender/Sexuality/Sexual identity/LGBTQIA issues	9%	13	None of the above	10%			
14	Healthcare	7%	14	Human trafficking/Slavery	9%			
15	Crime/Victims' rights/Incarceration/Capital punishment	7%	15	Gender/Sexuality/Sexual identity/LGBTQIA issues	9%			
16	Abortion/Reproductive health	3%	16	Healthcare	8%			
17	Physical disabilities	3%	17	Fiscal responsibility	6%			
18	War/Terrorism/Militarization/Veterans issues	3%	18	Crime/Victims' rights/Incarceration/Capital punishment	5%			
			19	Abortion/Reproductive health	3%			
			20	Physical disabilities	1%			
			21	War/Terrorism/Militarization/Veterans issues	1%			

Analysis of Table 2: Shifting priorities

In both years, the number one issue parishioners picked as the topic they most want to hear in sermons is Interfaith relations/Hate crimes/Intolerance. We surmised that this choice may have been due to concern about recent attacks on other-than-Christian houses of worship, such as synagogues, temples, and mosques, as well as concern about the general attitude of intolerance among some Christians toward people of other religions.

Another point of interest are the two topics that saw significant jumps in their rankings: Race and Economic issues. Race/Racism/White privilege/supremacy rose from eighth place with 15 percent to second place with 22 percent. Keeping in mind that these are predominantly white congregations (97 percent), the fact that Race was in the top 10 in 2019 and rose to #2 in 2020 is worth noting. This is undoubtedly due to the murder of George Floyd and the ongoing media coverage of police brutality and murder of unarmed Black men and women. Yet, the term Black Lives Matter (BLM) ranks significantly lower than Race. In fact, as seen in Table 3, it is ranked #2 as the topic parishioners *least* want to hear in a sermon. And as noted above regarding the politically-volatile terms, BLM is “hotter” than that of Race. We may surmise that the news around the BLM protests, together with the portrayal by some commentators of BLM protesters as lawless “thugs” who destroy property, businesses, and government buildings, may help explain why the term BLM is so controversial.¹⁷

Coming in just below Race in 2020 was Economic issues (debt/poverty, inequality/homelessness) which ranked sixth in 2019 at 21 percent and rose to third with 25

¹⁷ The questions around Race and Black Lives Matter will also be addressed with the training cohort at the September 2020 symposium.

percent. Meanwhile, two topics were in the top five in both years: Mental health and Environment, indicating that these issues remain important to the parishioners in this study. While Domestic violence, Immigration, and Substance abuse remained in the top 10, all three dropped in percentage points: 5 percent, 5 percent, and 12 percent, respectively. All of these changes indicate the shifting priorities of parishioners in these congregations over a twelve-month period.

Topics parishioners *least* want their preachers to address

In the 2019 and 2020 surveys, the exact same list of topics was presented in a separate question asking respondents to pick three that they *would not* want to hear addressed in a sermon. As with the previous question, the topics of Black Lives Matter, COVID-19 pandemic response, and Fiscal Responsibility were added to the 2020 list. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3. Topics parishioners *LEAST WANT* their pastors to address in sermons, 2019 v. 2020.

2019			Pick 3 topics you LEAST WANT addressed in sermons.			2020		
1	Abortion/Reproductive health	33%		1	Abortion/Reproductive health	31%		
2	Gun rights and/or Gun violence	22%	★	2	Black Lives Matter	22%		
3	Gender/Sexuality/Sexual identity/LGBTQIA issues	22%		3	Gender/Sexuality/Sexual identity/LGBTQIA issues	20%		
4	Race/Racism/White privilege/White supremacy	15%		4	Gun rights and/or Gun violence	16%		
5	War/Terrorism/Militarization/Veterans issues	9%		5	Race/Racism/White privilege/White supremacy	13%		
6	Environment/Climate change/Pollution	9%		6	War/Terrorism/Militarization/Veterans issues	9%		
7	Immigration	7%		7	Environment/Climate change/Pollution	8%		
8	Healthcare	5%		8	Immigration	4%		
	Crime/Victims' rights/Incarceration/Capital punishment	3%			Crime/Victims' rights/Incarceration/Capital punishment	4%		
9	Economic issues (debt/poverty//inequality/homelessness)	3%		9	Substance abuse/Addictions/Opioid crisis	4%		
10	Substance abuse/Addictions/Opioid crisis	3%		★	11 Fiscal responsibility	4%		
11	Human trafficking/Slavery	3%		12	Human trafficking/Slavery	3%		
12	Education issues	2%		★	13 Covid-19 pandemic response	3%		
13	Physical disabilities	2%		14	Physical disabilities	3%		
14	Domestic abuse or violence/Bullying	1%		15	Education issues	2%		
15	Interfaith relations/Hate crimes/Intolerance	1%			Economic issues (debt/poverty//inequality/homelessness)	1%		
16	Mental and/or Emotional health/Suicide prevention	1%		16	Interfaith relations/Hate crimes/Intolerance	1%		
17	No problem with any of these	41%		17	Mental and/or Emotional health/Suicide prevention	1%		
				18	Domestic abuse or violence/Bullying	1%		
				19	Domestic abuse or violence/Bullying	1%		
				20	Healthcare	0%		
				21	No problem with any of these issues	39%		

Analysis of Table 3

We must note that the results of this question are not an inverse of the previous question about what social issues parishioners *do* want to hear in sermons. For example, Abortion/Reproductive health tops the list as the sermon topic least desired, but it ranks third from the bottom of topics that parishioners *want* their pastors to address. In other words, there are some parishioners who would like to hear their pastor speak to this topic in a sermon. But when set amongst other topics that congregations want to see avoided in the pulpit, Abortion/Reproductive health ranks highest.

As previously noted, the subject of Black Lives Matter, new in 2020, came in at #2, displacing Gun rights/Gun violence, which dropped 6 percentage points from the previous year. This “cooling” of the topic of guns as a controversial topic may reflect either a growing awareness of the need to address this issue, or the fact that mass shootings decreased as COVID-19 sent the country into quarantine, thus reducing its prevalence in the news compared to 2019.¹⁸

Gender/Sexuality/Sexual identity/LGBTQIA issues occupied the #3 position in both years, which may be surprising for some given that the DOC is perceived to be fairly progressive and welcoming denomination. However, we learned in interviews with the lay leaders of these congregations that issues around homosexuality caused a great deal of conflict in many of their churches in recent years. A desire to avoid further controversy on this issue may be the reason for this topic registering so high.

Two issues saw a notable drop in percentage points: Immigration and Health care. While Immigration remained in the top ten of topics parishioners least want addressed in sermons, it dropped three percentage points from 7 percent to 4 percent. It may be the case that BLM and racial issues absorbed some of the lightning-rod energy that was focused on immigration just two years ago.¹⁹

Remarkably, Healthcare was not chosen as a controversial topic by a single person in the 2020 survey, whereas in 2019 it was in the top ten with 5 percentage points. This change is likely due to the stark realities that have been revealed about the need for a just and comprehensive healthcare system in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the subject of COVID-19 itself registered at 3 percent, indicating that there are some parishioners who are, perhaps, weary of hearing about the topic. More likely is the possibility that the politicizing of masks, whether or not to have in-building worship, and the controversy around social distancing for churches had become a source of contention in many congregations. In fact, according to nearly all of the pastors we interviewed in September 2020, issues around COVID-19 threatened the unity of their congregations in ways they had never before experienced.

The case for dialogue and preaching

It is notable that in Table 1 nearly all the “hot topics” in 2019 got “hotter” in 2020 (i.e., the weighted averages increased). I believe the case can be made that such a change indicates the heightened level of sensitivity that congregations are experiencing around controversial issues in light of the ongoing and intersecting societal upheaval mentioned in the introduction. Like a damaged or infected tooth that needs repair, just touching the area elicits a painful reaction unless it is first desensitized with an analgesic.

For this reason, it is encouraging to see that the term Dialogue registered “cooler” in 2020 than it did in 2019. Granted, it was not a “hot topic” the previous year. But the fact that the weighted average dropped when many other terms saw an increase may indicate that exposing congregations to the SDS method and participation in DD may have helped parishioners be more open to civil discourse. We may posit, then, that continued exposure to DD or other forms of intentional civil discourse may help congregations be more willing to address controversial social issues in the future.

¹⁸ It must be noted, however, that while mass shootings decreased in 2020, overall gun-related deaths jumped 25 percent from the previous year, with more than 19,000 people dying due to gun-inflicted wounds.

¹⁹ When training students in the sermon-dialogue-sermon method in courses I taught in 2017–2018, immigration was the most popular choice among the preachers to address. This is reflected in Chapter 9 of *Preaching in the Purple Zone* which featured case studies from numerous preachers addressing the topic of immigration.

Other data points from the surveys indicate that an intentional integration of preaching and dialogue may be an effective tool for helping congregations navigate difficult social issues. For instance, an important thing to notice about Tables 2 and 3 is not the topics themselves but the comparison between those who think *no* social topics should be addressed and those who have *no problem* with any of the listed topics being discussed in a sermon. In both 2019 and 2020 there was virtually no change in the numbers, with those who think no social topics should be addressed registering only around 10 percent compared those who had no problem with any of the topics registering at about 40 percent. In other words, the pushback that a pastor may receive for preaching about social issues likely comes from a small minority within the membership. Unfortunately, some of these members may also be the most vocal and/or have the strongest influence over church finances and they may exercise their power using coercive or bullying tactics. Nevertheless, the fact that 4 in 10 parishioners are open to hearing sermons on such a wide range of topics should be heartening to preachers in these congregations weighing whether or not to speak to contemporary issues in their sermons.

In fact, the surveys indicated that in both years, 60–65 percent of respondents agreed that they look to their congregation to “think biblically and/or theologically about social issues.” And nearly half (47–49 percent) indicated that they see their congregation as a place to “talk about social issues in a healthy and constructive way.” In other words, the majority of parishioners in these churches saw their churches as a resource for dialogue and biblical/theological reflection about contemporary issues that affect their lives and the lives of their friends, families, and communities.

Further encouraging data from the survey was the response to a question about whether or not the church should “help members discuss social issues and host community dialogues.” The number who agreed or strongly agreed in both years remained strong at 86–87 percent. Even more heartening was the increase in percentage of those who agreed or strongly agreed that their church should “work to make changes in community and society.” In 2019, that number was 87 percent. In 2020, the number rose to 92 percent. While correlation cannot be confused with causation, it may very well be the case that the sermon-dialogue-sermon process conducted in these congregations contributed to this increase.

Conclusion

As the Listening to Listeners researchers noted nearly twenty years ago, the need for empirical research in the field of homiletics is ongoing. The Purple Zone research project sought to contribute to that body of knowledge through generating both quantitative and qualitative data to aid in the study of preaching. Surveys such as these can be used to quantify attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of parishioners who listen to sermons. The data may also help identify ongoing or emerging patterns in social issues as they manifest in congregations which can guide preachers as they are considering sermon topics. Finally, surveys of parishioners may be conducted in the future to aid in the task of helping homiletics professors, students, and practicing clergy devise strategies for prophetic preaching within their particular contexts.