

Evaluating Preaching as a Communal and Dialogical Practice

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Abstract: *This essay argues that current forms of sermon evaluation tend to reinforce preaching as singular event of the isolated preacher, rather than as a communal, dialogical, and formational practice of the church. Our perception of preaching and tools for evaluation need to be revised in order for sermon evaluation to align with this emerging understanding of preaching as a church practice.*

An Anabaptist hermeneutic and homiletic of community

A study of Anabaptist history and theology provides a historical precedent for communal and dialogical forms of biblical interpretation and preaching. Anabaptist scholars speak of an “Anabaptist hermeneutic of community” as a form of interactive biblical interpretation located within the believing community.¹ Interactive forms of interpretation were practiced by 16th century Anabaptists through public disputations, openness to affirmation, communal consensus, mutual counsel and discipline, and informal charismatic worship settings.

Within these informal, charismatic, participatory worship services of the early Anabaptists, which were often impromptu and in makeshift settings due to persecution, dialogical forms of preaching were practiced through a type of “sermon evaluation” known as *zuegnis*,² which was grounded in the Rule of Paul.³ One of the main reasons the early Anabaptists did not attend the state churches was because they did not allow interaction and response to the preaching within the church service.⁴ These communal and dialogical forms of interpretation and preaching grew out of an Anabaptist understanding of the church.

Anabaptist ecclesiology and preaching

Anabaptist ecclesiology undergirds a more communal and dialogical understanding of preaching. Elements of Anabaptist ecclesiology that shape a corporate and interactive practice of preaching would include these characteristics:

1) *A Believers' Church*. The church is composed of a voluntary body of baptized believers distinct from the state and surrounding society who together share in the church's ministry.

¹ Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000), 157.

² *Zuegnis* was an Anabaptist form of response following sermons. John S. Oyer, “Early Forms of Anabaptist *Zuegnis* After Sermons,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 23 (July 1989), 292-295.

³ Anabaptists appealed to the “Rule of Paul” or *sitzrecht* based on 1 Corinthians 14 to justify participation of the whole congregation in interpretation and the practice of preaching.

⁴ Shem Peachey and Paul Peachey, trans. and eds., “Answer of Some Who are Called (Ana)baptists Why They Do Not Attend the Churches: A Swiss Brethren Tract,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 45 (1971), 5-17.

2) *A Nonhierarchical Church*. There is no hierarchy of persons or offices in the Believers' Church. Although some are called out to lead the congregation, everyone equally shares in the church's mission and ministry.

3) *A Missional Church*. Since all believers share in the church's mission, they have a key role to play in witness, testimony, proclamation, and preaching the good news. Anabaptists were among the first to hold that the Great Commission of Matthew 28 was binding upon all believers.⁵

4) *A Charismatic Church*. This is not to be confused with the encouragement of speaking in tongues and prophecy. Rather the emphasis is on the idea that all members of Christ's body share equally in the diverse gifts of the Spirit.

5) *A Disciples' Church*. A key role of the church and its practices is the formation of disciples through preaching, teaching, mutual care and accountability toward one another.⁶

An Anabaptist ecclesiology calls for an understanding of proclamation, testimony, and preaching as a shared ministry of the whole church and as means for forming disciples. This understanding of church encourages more participatory forms of worship and preaching. Therefore, from an Anabaptist understanding of preaching as a communal and dialogical practice that is formative of the church, types of sermon evaluation which are centered around the sermon as a singular event relegated to the isolated preacher prove to be inadequate.

Informal sermon evaluation

One of the most common forms of sermon evaluation that is directed toward the solitary preacher is the informal response occasionally offered following the worship service. The following scenario describes a typical sermon preparation routine and informal congregational response.

A preacher of a small suburban congregation spends all week preparing her sermon. On Tuesday she chooses one of the lectionary texts for the coming Sunday and reads it from several versions. By the end of the day she begins to reflect on the biblical text and jots down ideas that come to mind. On Wednesday she turns to her commentaries and looks up some key words in the text she is going to preach, again jotting down notes. From her own reflections and readings from commentaries the preacher begins to focus on one central idea from the text.

At home while reading the newspaper she comes across a story that fits with her sermon's theme. On Thursday she arrives early at the church office and outlines a sermon flow that communicates her key idea from the text. By late morning she starts to put the flesh of words on the bones of her sermon structure and to add metaphors, images, and stories that give the sermon life. By the next morning she has a first draft of her sermon that she begins to tweak and question and ask herself how the teenager with the piercings or the old couple in the front pew in her church will hear it.

⁵ Franklin Hamlin Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism: A Study of the Anabaptist View of the Church* (New York: Macmillan Co.) 1964, 112.

⁶ On Anabaptist ecclesiology, see Franklin Hamlin Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism: A Study of the Anabaptist View of the Church*, and James Leo Garrett, Jr., ed., *The Concept of the Believers' Church* (Scottsdale: Herald), 1969.

By the end of Friday she has read through her manuscript checking for its flow and putting phrases and symbols in the margins to help her remember sections of the sermon without reading it on Sunday. Saturday morning she tapes the sermon and listens to it for tone, emphasis, movement, transitions, and clarity. By Saturday evening she has preached her sermon out loud several times, once in front of a mirror, while her family is in the living room watching a movie and eating popcorn.

Sunday morning she arrives at church early to pray over the sermon and look over her notes. Following the choir special she leaves her seat in the front of the church, steps behind the large wooden pulpit, and begins proclaiming the sermon she has spent all week preparing. As she preaches she looks at the faces of the members of her congregation trying to read their responses in their facial expressions and body language. When she sits down following the sermon, she feels it was one of her better ones.

After the service is over the pastor takes her regular place in the foyer of the church building to greet the people as they leave. She only hears one response to her sermon: “Nice sermon, pastor.”

Dr. Lori Carrell, in her study *The Great American Sermon Survey*, found that 78% of churchgoers never give their pastors any type of feedback for their sermons.⁷ Are the few informal remarks church members occasionally offer the best way to evaluate preaching? These informal mini-evaluations are immediate but too infrequent and not objective enough to be very helpful in evaluating preaching in a congregational setting.⁸ If we understand preaching to be a communal and dialogical practice of the church, we will have to look for better ways to evaluate preaching.

Formal sermon evaluation in the congregation

In order to move beyond occasional, subjective, informal evaluation of preaching, some congregations try to be more intentional, objective, and formal. Feedback from the congregation may be sought through a prescribed written survey of the congregation as an ongoing practice or during a set time period. A pastor may initiate sermon evaluation as a means of improving his/her preaching or leadership may use it to assess the congregation’s opinions about the pastor’s preaching. Preaching evaluation might be taken through detailed surveys of individual sermons or may seek more general information following a series of sermons.

These types of written surveys provide more information than the few informal responses a pastor might receive each week. Depending on the detail of the sermon evaluation these surveys can assist the preacher in improving various elements of the sermon, how the biblical text is communicated and applied, and the delivery of the sermon. Because these evaluations are more detailed and draw from a wider range of the congregation, they are more helpful in appraising the preaching in a congregation.

Another possible form for sermon evaluation is through a sermon feedback group. A small group, preferably a cross-section of congregational members, is enlisted to meet with the pastor

⁷ Lori Carrell, *The Great American Sermon Survey* (Wheaton: Mainstay Church Resources, 1999).

⁸ Feedback may be obtained through the preacher observing body language while presenting the sermon, though this is a very subjective assessment tool. On positive aspects of informal feedback, see John S. McClure, ed. *Best Advice for Preaching* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 138-142.

following the Sunday sermon to provide more direct feedback.⁹ The feedback sought might be obtained through informal conversation with a few directive questions to having the members fill out and discuss a more detailed sermon evaluation form. Including both written and verbal feedback provides for a greater depth of response from the congregation.

These more formal sermon evaluations are still centered around the preacher in isolation from the congregation as a preaching partner and do not assess the formative character of the preaching ministry as an extended practice.

Sermon evaluation in seminary preaching class

Sermon evaluations are most often modeled after those practiced in introductory preaching classes in seminaries. For four years I was one of several leaders of the practicum section of a seminary introduction to preaching class taught by the preaching professor. Each week my group would gather to preach their sermons in the seminary chapel, an empty church, or a classroom. We had seminary students preaching for academic credit and before the critical ears of others within these artificial settings, not a community of ordinary believers gathered for worship and preaching. I tried to be intentional in noting these elements as we participated in this preaching practicum together, especially in light of the point I want to make in this writing.

Before the students presented their sermons I would hand out a sermon evaluation sheet, which is similar to those used in countless seminaries.¹⁰ This tool assesses standards of excellence based upon what is taught in the introductory preaching class. Each preacher is evaluated upon a scale of poor to excellent using a number of these following elements of the sermon and performance: 1) introduction, body, conclusion; 2) structure, transitions, flow, focused theme; 3) exegesis, contextualization, practicality, and application of the biblical text; 4) language, grammar, metaphors, illustrations, clarity; and 5) delivery, voice, body, gesture, eye contact, passion. Improving a sermon in these areas is intended to lead toward better preaching in the congregation.

It should be acknowledged that this is a white, Western, academic approach to evaluating a sermon. In more spontaneous, grassroots, charismatic-oriented congregational settings, particularly in most African-American traditions, there is often an informal dialogue and evaluation of the sermon that takes place within the worship experience. Unlike the scenario of informal feedback presented at the beginning of this article, in these congregations you will likely find ongoing feedback, encouragement, affirmation, and celebration during the sermon in the call and response between preacher and congregation with an “Amen!,” “Well!,” “Help him, Lord!,” “Thank you, Jesus!” or “Hallelujah!”¹¹ Granted, this is not the technical and thorough sermon evaluation of a seminary classroom, but again the congregation is evaluating the sermon by different criteria than academic standards of excellence.

In my seminary preaching practicum class each student provided a written and verbal critical response to each student’s sermon. First, the student would share their own response to their preparation and delivery of the sermon. Second, the class and I as teacher would offer verbal

⁹ Peer sermon feedback groups can provide sermon evaluation from colleagues in ministry. Such groups can be formed among pastors in the same denomination or among ecumenical colleagues in ministry who meet regularly and offer feedback to written or recorded sermons. McClure, *Best Advice*, 144-148.

¹⁰ There are over 20 sermon evaluation forms listed in Don M. Wardlaw, ed., *Learning Preaching: Understanding and Participating in the Process* (Lincoln, IL: The Lincoln Christian College and Seminary Press), 1989.

¹¹ Evans E. Crawford, *The Hum: Call and Response in African-American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

responses to the sermon. Third, the student would be given all the sermon evaluation sheets. Although students were to preach a sermon in their own ministerial setting, the focus of the practicum section of the preaching class was upon evaluating and improving the students preaching skills as an isolated preacher.

Even with my caveats about the artificial setting, assessing preaching isolated from the church, being evaluated by colleagues, the focus upon several sermons, and the academic context ending in a grade, I felt that evaluating sermons in this rhetorical manner might be helpful in some senses, but was inadequate from an understanding of Anabaptist ecclesiology and preaching understood as a communal and dialogical practice of the church.

Aristotelian rhetorical principles for sermon evaluation

Academic sermon evaluations have elements drawn from classical rhetorical studies. In his writing *On Rhetoric*, Greek philosopher Aristotle analyzed three forms of rhetorical persuasion in communication: 1) *Ethos*- appeal based on the character of the speaker; 2) *Pathos*- appeal based on emotion or passion; and 3) *Logos*- appeal based on logic or reason. As a form of persuasion preaching can benefit from these three rhetorical forms outlined by Aristotle. They have even been utilized as a means of evaluating sermons¹²

William Roen's *The Inward Ear: A Sermon Evaluation Method for Preachers and Hearers of the Word* is one of the few full-length books on sermon evaluation available.¹³ Roen appropriates Aristotle's three forms of rhetorical persuasion for the task of listening to sermons. He elaborates on each of Aristotle's three rhetorical forms to serve as evaluative criteria for sermons. First, the listener should ask: what is the *ethos* of the sermon? How does the preacher's character shine through the presentation? Does the sermon draw the listener in? Does the preacher speak with authority? Second, the listener should ask: what is the *pathos* of the sermon? Does the sermon evoke excessive sentimentality or try to manipulate feelings? Does the preacher speak with authentic passion about his subject? Third, the listener should ask: what is the *logos* of the sermon? Does the sermon have a logical structure? Does the preacher exhibit knowledge of his subject?

Roen offers three guidelines for using these categories for critique in a congregation. These guidelines provide a practical means for implementing the three rhetorical forms in a process of sermon evaluation. First, Roen suggests that in the practical application of this rhetorical analysis within the congregational setting that the principles should be taught to a sermon critique group. Second, an evaluation form with questions that reflect these three principles can be handed out before the sermon for the group to take notes. He provides a sample form. Third, the sermon critique group meets with the preacher to discuss their responses to the sermon using these three criteria.

Roen's use of Aristotle's rhetorical categories can serve as a simple form for evaluating sermons, but is not as comprehensive as those usually found in seminary preaching classes. At the same time, it approaches the appraisal of sermons with a similar understanding of preaching and the church as the forms in seminary classes. And, as I propose, those evaluative forms are

¹² Aristotle's three rhetorical forms have been used to speak of the various "settings" (i.e., inner locations) through which a person listens to a sermon. Roland J. Allen, *Hearing the Sermon: Relationship, Content, Feeling* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004).

¹³ William H. Roen, *The Inward Ear: A Sermon Evaluation Method for Preachers and Hearers of the Word* (Washington, DC: The Alban Institute, 1989).

deficient when considering the communal and interactive nature of preaching as a ministry of the church more than as a singular rhetorical event of a solitary individual.

The problem of evaluating preaching as a singular event of an isolated individual

Although the previously presented forms of sermon evaluation have their benefits, they all have shortcomings in assessing preaching. Informal sermon evaluations are personal, but are too brief, subjective, and infrequent to be very helpful. Sermon feedback groups provide more frequent and detailed evaluations, but tend to leave out the dynamics of preaching as two-way communication. Spontaneous call and response can encourage a preacher, but focuses on a solo performance. Academic sermon evaluations are methodical, but focus upon the isolated preacher and singular sermon.

The major deficiencies of these forms of preaching evaluation are rooted in the fact that they are all grounded in similar assumptions about preaching and ecclesiology. One major assumption behind these types of preaching evaluations, implicit in the utilization of these various forms, is that preaching is predominantly a one-way communication by an isolated preacher for a singular event. A completely different theology of proclamation may be offered for preaching, but the evaluative form reinforces this assumption about preaching.

First, the preceding sermon evaluations assess just that - sermons, as singular presentations. Exceptions might occur when someone informally or through an assessment tool offers feedback on a sermon series or about a pastor's preaching in general. More formal evaluations appraise individual sermons as to structure, content, or delivery. Sometimes these evaluations seek to illicit feedback as to sermon impact, but most often as to the individual listener. Generally, sermons are not evaluated by their cumulative impact upon the collective body of listeners. Is there a consistency or improvement in the quality of the preaching over time? Is there a breadth and depth to the preaching? Are the hearers engaging in and being transformed by the theology taught through persistent preaching? Preaching as a ministry of the church is not effectively assessed through critiquing isolated sermons the preacher presents.

Second, sermon evaluations tend to evaluate the preacher as an isolated individual. The preacher is assessed in isolation from the congregation. Preaching is not simply a one-way monologue from preacher to listener as a herald might announce the news of the kingdom.¹⁴ Monological, one-way preaching, in which the preacher communicates the truth to passive listeners, has been prevalent in the church for centuries. It has been constructed and reinforced in the traditional design of church buildings with the raised pulpit in the front and the pews lined in rows like a theatrical performance with passive audience. We provide assistance in the persistence of the monological model of preaching through assessing the preacher as an isolated individual charged with proclaiming the Word. Preaching that is located solely with the preacher is missing the congregation as partners in the preaching ministry.¹⁵

¹⁴ The herald image emphasizes the unidirectional message to be communicated from God through the preacher to the congregation. See Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 24-30.

¹⁵ For a full bibliography of resources on collective and interactive preaching see my book; Leo Hartshorn, *Interpretation and Preaching as Communal and Dialogical Practices: an Anabaptist Perspective* (Edwin Mellen, 2006).

Besides assumptions concerning the role of the preacher as isolated individual, assumptions behind these types of sermon evaluations reflect an underlying ecclesiology.¹⁶ When assessing the particular sermons by an isolated individual there is often an ecclesiology that assumes: 1) a sharp division between clergy and laity; 2) preaching is the sole responsibility of the pastor of a congregation; and 3) laity are passive recipients of preaching. With these assumptions the clergy will be evaluated concerning preaching with little or no assessment of the role of the congregation.

Preaching as a formational ministry of the church

If we understand preaching to be a ministry of the whole church and not simply a responsibility of the lone preacher, then our assessment of preaching will need to move beyond evaluating the preacher using singular sermons. That is not to say that preaching cannot be improved by assessing the form, structure, content, language, purpose, and performance of sermons. These forms of sermon evaluation can be understood as elements among whereby to assess standards of excellence in preaching as a practice. But, critical elements are left out of these appraisals of preaching.

One key element has to do with preaching as a form of communal spiritual formation.¹⁷ Preaching forms and is formed by the congregation.¹⁸ The collective formational character of preaching requires examining the cumulative impact of preaching upon the congregation. This type of evaluation can be done on a yearly, tri-yearly, or over a five or ten year period. Reflection questions can be created to assess to some degree how preaching over the long haul has shaped the spiritual lives of individual members of the congregation and how the congregation as a whole has been shaped by the preaching ministry.

The following questions can be part of a small preaching evaluation group.

- *In what ways has the preaching formed, challenged, and confirmed the theology of this congregation?*
- *How has the congregation shaped the preaching over time?*
- *How has the congregation embodied the teachings from the preaching?*
- *Do the sermons call to church to public responsibility?*

Using these types of questions in an indicative mode with a rating scale or as a conversational tool with members the congregation can help assess the cumulative impact of the preaching as a practice for communal spiritual formation.

Another area for evaluating the cumulative nature of preaching is for preacher and/or congregation to consider the breadth and depth of the cumulative preaching. If preaching shapes congregations over time, it would be a good idea to appraise whether there is a balance in the

¹⁶ O. Wesley Allen Jr. presents a conversational ecclesiology in his book on interactive preaching. O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 2005.

¹⁷ One question I raised in my doctoral study that relates to reshaping the evaluation of preaching as a practice of the church was this: If preaching is a corporate practice, should not there be communal standards of excellence related to assessing congregational listening and enacting the Word? Hartshorn, 172.

¹⁸ Thomas G. Long and Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, eds., *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 188.

character of the preaching. Again, some key questions may be helpful in ascertaining this kind of information.

- *Have the sermons covered the breadth of Christian doctrine?*
- *Have both testaments been preached?*
- *Have there been appeals to both mind and heart in the preaching?*
- *Is there a balance between being and doing?*

These types of evaluation questions help to analyze whether or not there is a balance or imbalance in the preaching over time.

Anabaptist preaching as a communal and dialogical practice

Constructing a preaching model as a communal and dialogical practice encourages us to reconsider current forms of preaching evaluation. To consider preaching as a communal practice is to go beyond the oratorical skills of the isolated preacher in defining standards of excellence. Traditional standards for evaluation of excellence in preaching have most often been based upon preaching as a monological event performed by the preacher. Preaching is evaluated according to the preacher's skill in the construction and presentation of a particular sermon. This evaluative methodology is standard in most seminary preaching classes. These rhetorical and performative criteria for evaluation of excellence in preaching tend to reinforce the understanding of preaching as a solo performance of the skilled preacher.

Although preaching evaluation can utilize elements of the more traditional approaches, it will need to be reframed within an understanding of preaching as a practice of the church. This is what Leonora Tubbs Tisdale and Thomas G Long's book, *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice*, seeks to do. The book argues for understanding and teaching preaching as a practice.¹⁹ James Nieman defines a practice as "a constellation of actions that people have performed over time that are common, meaningful, strategic, and purposeful."²⁰ Preaching fits this description of a practice. Practices have standards of excellence by which they can be evaluated.²¹ It follows that there are standards of excellence whereby preaching can be appraised as a practice.

The chapters of Tisdale and Long's book elaborate on various elements of the practice of preaching, such as interpreting texts, exegesis of the congregation, interpreting the larger social context, the use of language, imagination, historical vision, and voice and diction. These traditional elements are reframed within an understanding of preaching as a communal practice and can be utilized as standards of excellence to assess preaching.

Included in the book is a chapter by Daniel E. Harris on methods of assessment of preaching as a practice. Since the focus of the book is upon homiletical pedagogy, the chapter on assessment of preaching centers upon the classroom and laboratory settings and the preacher's self-assessment. At the same time, there is a section on getting feedback from the congregation. A suggested evaluation form is provided which is concentrated on the response of the listener. In

¹⁹ Although it was unavailable at the time of the writing of my doctoral study, this book shares some of the concepts that were part of my project.

²⁰ Tisdale and Long, 12.

²¹ Alistair McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 187.

my view this is a move in the right direction for evaluating preaching as a communal practice, but could be supplemented by other elements.

It is my contention that even with an understanding of preaching as a practice, there are elements of preaching as a communal and dialogical practice that are missing or receive less attention because of the artificial setting of the classroom, the timeframe of the class, and a tendency to focus on isolated sermons of the solitary preacher. The communal and dialogical nature of preaching calls for highlighting these elements in the assessment of preaching.

Supplementary elements for evaluating preaching in a congregational context

If we understand preaching as a communal and dialogical practice of the whole church, such as was practiced among early Anabaptists, there are certain elements that are being left out or receive less attention in standard forms of preaching evaluation. Also, they are difficult to practice in a classroom setting. I propose bringing those elements to the forefront of the assessment of preaching within a congregational context. I would include among those elements for evaluation: 1) the cumulative effect of preaching; 2) communal formation of and through preaching; and 3) roles and responses of collaborators in the preaching ministry. Each of these areas overlaps and connects to one another. Thus, these threads interweave into a communal tapestry for assessing preaching.

First, the cumulative impact of preaching upon the congregation over time needs to be emphasized in assessment.²² Little attention has been given to this aspect in appraising preaching as a practice, though the “over time” feature is inherent in the definition of a practice. Whatever form of evaluation is utilized and over whatever period of time, dialogue and assessment concerning the balance and breadth of subject and sources (e.g., Old and New Testaments, themes, theological topics), the impact of preaching in shaping personal and congregational theology, and the extent and quality of engagement of the congregation in biblical interpretation and preaching over time would move assessment toward the communal and dialogical nature of preaching as a practice.

Second, preaching as communally formed and forming are features needing renewed emphasis in preaching as a practice. Preaching is shaped by the stories, life experiences, and contexts of the congregation. Preaching assessment tools can include questions about the extent and quality the preaching ministry exhibits in connecting with issues faced by congregational members and what’s happening in the community and world. Also, questions can be designed to directly address the extent of congregational involvement in the preaching ministry (e.g., informal feedback, sermon preparation and response groups, interaction during dialogue sermons). If there are no avenues whereby members share in actual preparation, performance, and feedback to the preaching, it will be difficult to view the preaching ministry as truly collective and conversational.

Preaching as a form of corporate spiritual formation calls for assessing the extent and quality of preaching as a formational practice. Preaching can shape collective worldview, theology, ecclesiology, and practice. Assessment would not seek to evaluate how well every member of the congregation has been conformed to the preacher’s viewpoint. That would reflect a monological, one-way understanding of preaching as a formative tool. Questions for an assessment tool may

²² Lucy Rose, who proposes a conversational homiletic, briefly mentions the need for a shift to the cumulative effects of preaching. Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 112.

seek to discern how preachers and members together have shaped each other's worldviews, theologies, understandings of the church, and practice of faith). Also, since congregations act from out of who they have been formed to be, assessment questions can be constructed to ascertain the correlation between the church's action and understanding of faith.

Third, the roles and responses of collaborators in preaching clearly need to be accentuated with preaching as a communal and dialogical practice. As active participants in the preaching ministry of the church the congregation becomes part of the assessment, not simply as persons who evaluate the preacher's sermons. Preaching as a communal and dialogical practice calls for evaluation of the extent and quality of the congregation as active participants in the preaching ministry. If preaching is truly a collaborative ministry in which the congregation, and not just the preacher, participates through sermon input, interaction, and feedback, then these aspects of their engagement in the preaching ministry can be assessed and improved.

Also, if preaching is understood and practiced as a multi-voiced collaboration, then not only the preacher and congregation become part of the dialogue of preaching, but also voices outside the church, voices of the oppressed, multicultural voices, and the voices of those on the margins of society.²³ Whether through conversations of personal or ministry contact, the preaching ministry of the church can find ways to include these voices in the homiletical conversation. And the width and breadth of this widening circle of dialogue can be assessed for its extent and quality, just as the rhetorical skills of the isolated preacher can be assessed.

Rarely, if ever, do preaching evaluations assess these aspects of preaching (See addendum below for sample questions that address these concerns). If the church moves away from an understanding and practice of preaching as a solo performance of the trained minister toward preaching as a communal, dialogical and formational practice of the church, then these supplementary elements that I have suggested will need to be included in our evaluations of preaching.

Addendum

The following sample questions could be utilized by a representative group from the congregation as a conversational tool for evaluating the church's preaching ministry:

Sample Questions for Evaluating the Preaching Ministry as a Participatory, Formational Practice of the Church

Has the congregation been sufficiently taught how to participate in the church's preaching ministry? If not, what can be done to transform the hearts and minds of the members toward and understanding and practice of preaching as a participatory ministry?

What does the preaching ministry of the congregation provide means and mechanisms for congregational members to offer input, sharing, response, feedback, and critique of sermons? How can these forms be of greater quantity and/or quality?

²³ John S. McClure, "Collaborative Preaching from the Margins," *Journal for Preachers* (1996): 37-42.

Is the congregation ever engaged in actual dialogue in sermon preparation or presentation? How might this be improved in our particular congregational context?

How do congregational members participate in testimony, witness, and proclamation within our social context? Describe the needed improvement.

What have been some of the cumulative effects of the preaching ministry upon the congregation's mission and its members' lives as followers of Christ? Share some stories and examples.

Over time has the preaching ministry been balanced in its presentation of Old and New Testaments, Christian theological themes, ethical concerns, spiritual practices, appeal to heart and mind, personal and pastoral issues? How can any imbalance be addressed? Describe some ways in which the church has engaged in the practical implications of these issues?

Have church members or the church as a whole participated in some form of public action, community ministry, or service to others as a result of a sermon or sermons over the past few years? What were the connections between sermon and service?

To what extent have the voices and concerns of the oppressed, marginalized, people of color, practitioners of other faith traditions, and other conversational partners beyond the walls of the church building been reflected in the preaching?

Share some examples of how the preaching ministry is engaged in conversation and conversion in the community and world?