

**After the Sermon and Beyond the Pulpit:  
Transformative, Power-Sensitive Homiletics of Polyphony and Hope<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** *This article considers the connection between preaching and power in search of a more inclusive understanding of preaching and more expansive modes of sermonic expression. As feminist and postcolonial theologians repeatedly emphasize, the pulpit, in both a concrete and symbolic sense, remains oriented toward white male preachers. German-language education also continues to be dominated by this perspective. Drawing on interdisciplinary theories of power and postcolonial theology, the concluding section of this paper introduces five dimensions of homiletical practice aimed at making preaching more sensitive to power dynamics: sharing interpretive power, starting from religious experience and lived theology; taking the body seriously (embodiment); daring polyphony; and imagining and acting together on the kingdom of God.*

**1. Introduction – The Heterosexual White Male Preacher**

I recently attended a church service that explored the theme of “Expectations.” The sermon was based on Luke 10 and the sending out of the 72. The pastor introduced the sermon and invited the congregation to engage in an experiment by saying the following:<sup>2</sup>

“After that, Jesus appointed 72 others and sent them, two by two, ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. In addition to the 12 men Jesus had already chosen, he now selects 72 more from among the people travelling with him. He sends them out in pairs to the surrounding areas. \*Pause\* It’s a challenge. But I would like to ask everyone to imagine the scene in their mind’s eye. What does Jesus look like? Who are the 72 whom Jesus sends out? Just imagine that. Let a picture form. \*Pause\* Now, honestly, who sees Jesus sending out 72 fair-skinned men with beards?”

Almost the entire congregation raised their hands. “Who among you might imagine the men with a darker complexion? Perhaps more like what is common in the Middle East?” After this question, about eight people raised their hands. The pastor then asked: “And who imagines not only men but people of different genders?” Now, only three hands went up.

So, most of those present imagined the disciples as white men while only a few

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<sup>1</sup>This paper was the first presentation for an international panel at the Academy of Homiletics in December 2023, focused on the theme “After the Sermon.” (One of two responses to this paper is also included in this issue of *Homiletic*; the other is not available for publication.) The comments presented here are based on the author’s presentation in that context and on her latest homiletical book, written in co-authorship, *Transformative Homiletics: Beyond the Pulpit. Preaching Power-Sensitively in a Changing World*, which was published in German in 2023 and is expected to be released in English by Brill Pub. in late 2024. See Sabrina Müller and Jasmine Suhner, *Transformative Homiletik - Jenseits Der Kanzel. (M)Achtsam Predigen in Einer Sich Verändernden Welt*, Interdisziplinäre Studien Zur Transformation 3 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlagsgesellschaft, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> The sermon was written by Pastor A. Bosshard from Wetzikon, delivered in Swiss German, and shared with me accordingly. The excerpts from the sermon quoted in this article have been translated into English. I have also translated all other German quotes into English throughout this article to make them comprehensible to English readers. The footnotes of the translated texts reference the locations of the original German texts from which the quotes have been translated.

considered men with different skin tones. The question about diverse genders led to an enlightening silence as only three hands went up in the entire church.

This example reflects the homogeneous structure of communities as well as the homogeneous faith and church images that predominantly assume a white, male, heterosexual paradigm. Those images are, of course, shaped by the everyday experiences of the congregation.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, these internal images are not surprising as they reflect the reality in many communities. On the other hand, they are highly problematic because they are exclusionary for all who are not white, male, and heterosexual.

In this context, theologian Sarah Vecera asks, “How did Jesus become white?”<sup>4</sup> Feminist theologian Liz Shercliff, an experienced homiletician, observes: “I don’t feel I have been taught to preach as myself. I’ve been taught to preach like a man.”<sup>5</sup>

Vecera’s question and Shercliff’s observation exemplify the colonial legacy of structural sexism and racism in churches and their homiletic practices. Furthermore, there is another factor that further drives these assumptions and practices: Despite all discussions and innovations that have been made since the 1990s,<sup>6</sup> including feminist, womanist, and postcolonial interventions,<sup>7</sup> the notion of a single type of preacher still dominates in homiletic discourses, leading to a theological concentration of power among individuals. HyeRan Kim-Cragg points out: “Yet, the pulpit is still often solely occupied by a single preacher rather than being a participatory place involving diverse people.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the pulpit and the act of preaching, which have both been shaped by centuries of tradition, remain a site of exclusion, reserved only for those with so-called theological expertise and spiritual authority. It is a space characterized by a traditional male pulpit consciousness, which is embodied spatially and institutionalized by church and society.<sup>9</sup>

This critique of the preaching event as a less pluralistic space is further elaborated upon here, evident not only through homiletical education (Section 2) but also through feminist critiques of the symbolic space of the pulpit (Section 3). Inspired by interdisciplinary theories of power (Section 4) and postcolonial homiletic designs (Section 5), this essay introduces elements for a power-sensitive homiletics (Section 7) based on the theological concept of *Ruach* (Section 6).

## 2. How About Diversity? The Homiletical Standard – A Continental European Reflection<sup>10</sup>

Feminist, postcolonial, and womanist reflections are rarely represented in German-language homiletics. Universities and theological seminars teach the so-called classical standard

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that I am writing from a continental European perspective, drawing primarily on experiences from German-speaking churches in Switzerland, Germany, and Austria.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Vecera, *Wie ist Jesus weiß geworden? Mein Traum von einer Kirche ohne Rassismus* (Ostfildern: Patmos Verlag, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Liz Shercliff, *Preaching Women: Gender, Power and the Pulpit* (SCM Press, 2019), XV.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. for example John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. for example HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching: Creating a Ripple Effect* (New York, NY: Lexington Books, 2021); HyeRan Kim-Cragg, “Probing the Pulpit: Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives”, *Liturgy* 34, no.2 (2019): 22–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063X.2019.1604028>; HyeRan Kim-Cragg and Donyelle McCray, “Playing in Church: Insights from the Boundaries of the Sermon Genre”, *Liturgy* 36, no.2 (2021): 11–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063X.2021.1895635>.

<sup>8</sup> Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching*, 58

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Müller and Suhner, *Transformative Homiletik*, 49–60.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 61–70.

works which, although advanced and highly reflective, entail a narrowing of perspectives regarding gender and diversity, mono-confessionalism, male authority, sociality, participation, and shared religious interpretive power.<sup>11</sup>

A small study exemplifies this. I compared seven seminar plans from six major German-speaking universities, three of which were developed by women and four of which were developed by men.<sup>12</sup> This analysis yielded the following picture:

| Course | Gender | Textbook | Article | Articles Written by women | Articles Written by PoC | Men in %    | Women in % |
|--------|--------|----------|---------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|------------|
| 1      | m      | 0        | 12      | 1                         | 0                       | 91.7        | 8.3        |
| 2      | m      | 1        | 27      | 1(2)                      | 0                       | 96.3 (92.6) | 3.7 (7.4)  |
| 3      | m      | 0        | 39      | 1(2)                      | 0                       | 97.5 (94.9) | 2.5 (5.1)  |
| 4      | m      | 0        | 14      | 0                         | 0                       | 100         | 0          |
| 5      | f      | 2        | 0       | 0                         | 0                       | 100         | 0          |
| 6      | f      | 0        | 12      | 1                         | 0                       | 91.7        | 8.3        |
| 7      | f      | 1        | 10      | 0                         | 0                       | 100         | 0          |

The seminars were structured in various ways. Some involved reading a textbook, while others primarily utilized articles. However, upon analysing the number of texts read in terms of gender and race, the seminar plans suddenly began to appear quite uniform. This is because few texts by women and no texts by people of colour were included in the readings. Additionally, explicitly queer, postcolonial, and feminist voices were completely absent. Thus, the reference literature through which students learn preaching practices is, at least in this context, still white, male, and heterosexual. The textbooks most frequently discussed in the seminars, namely those by Wilfried Engemann,<sup>13</sup> Albrecht Grözinger,<sup>14</sup> Ernst Lange,<sup>15</sup> and Martin Nicol/Alexander Deeg,<sup>16</sup> can be seen as central reference points in the German-speaking homiletic discourse, which is dominated by reception-aesthetic approaches.

Thus, even though many universities have gender and diversity policies in place, women and PoC involved in homiletic debates are rarely included.<sup>17</sup> These policies include provisions

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Ibid., 61–77.

<sup>12</sup> The methodology proceeded as follows: Seminar plans were provided by colleagues and students. The entire volume of texts for each course was marked with 100%, from which the representative percentage of male, female, and PoC (people of color) resources was calculated. Only required readings were considered. Both the universities and the creators of the homiletics seminars are discussed anonymously.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Wilfried Engemann, *Personen, Zeichen und das Evangelium: Argumentationsmuster der Praktischen Theologie*, Arbeiten zur Praktischen Theologie 23 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2003); Wilfried Engemann, *Einführung in die Homiletik*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: A. Francke, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Albrecht Grözinger, "Mit den Sinnen sprechen", *Homiletik: aktuelle Konzepte und ihre Umsetzung*, ed. Lars Charbonnier, Konrad Merzyn, Peter Meyer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 2012), 153f.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ernst Lange, *Predigen als Beruf: Aufsätze* (Stuttgart: Kreuz-Verlag, 1976).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Martin Nicol and Alexander Deeg, "Einander ins Bild setzen", *Homiletik: aktuelle Konzepte und ihre Umsetzung*, ed. Lars Charbonnier, Konrad Merzyn, Peter Meyer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 2012), 70. Martin Nicol and Alexander Deeg, *Im Wechselschritt zur Kanzel. Praxisbuch Dramaturgische Homiletik*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht 2013).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Ruth Conrad, *Weil wir etwas wollen! Plädoyer für eine Predigt mit Absicht und Inhalt*, Evangelisch-katholische Studien zu Gottesdienst und Predigt 2 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Theologie 2014).

stating that research findings and publications by women must be incorporated into the curriculum.<sup>18</sup> However, this diversity is scarcely reflected in academic study and training. Due to the situation just described, the pulpit, regardless of the preacher's identity, metaphorically remains a site of singular religious power.

### 3. The Pulpit as a Symbol and Site of Power<sup>19</sup>

Within the field of theology, the pulpit often appears as a metonymy for preaching.<sup>20</sup> The pulpit symbolises the church, homiletics, pastoral theological understanding, ministerial theology, and spiritual power.

This multifaceted significance has evolved over several centuries. The material pulpit emerged from the portable lecterns used by mendicant monks in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, as they needed an elevated location for their outdoor preaching. Before this, preaching was done from locations that served multiple other functions, such as the cathedra (the bishop's throne). The pulpit was permanently placed in later church buildings of the monastic orders and all other churches since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The exact placement has always been contentious – including today, with the location primarily being dependent on confessional aspects.<sup>21</sup> In the Middle Ages, the significance of the pulpit extended beyond the religious realm and served as a venue for public communication on important matters within a village community. Media scholar Jürgen Wilke observes that the church square was “a place for personal conversation [and the pulpit itself was] a site for official announcements.”<sup>22</sup> The pulpit established itself as a site of meaning-making and societal structuring that greatly informed what is understood to be of significance, authority, and power, which primarily afforded space to influential individuals who typically were white men.<sup>23</sup>

Feminist and feminist-postcolonial authors emphasize that the pulpit and thus the preaching event are not neutral. This is something that U.S. homiletician Leonora Tubbs Tisdale points out in her reflective book *How Women Transform Preaching*:

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. for example ‘Massnahmen zur Berücksichtigung von Gender-Aspekten in Lehre und Forschung’, accessed 22 November 2021, <https://ethz.ch/services/de/anstellung-und-arbeit/arbeitsumfeld/chancengleichheit/equal-tools/gender-aspekte-in-lehre-und-forschung.html>; ‘Leitfaden\_Gender\_Lehre\_Layout.Pdf’, accessed 22 November 2021, [https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/document/download/36012151f45f8bac44c146c88c4eb714.pdf/Leitfaden\\_Gender\\_Lehre\\_Layout.pdf](https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/document/download/36012151f45f8bac44c146c88c4eb714.pdf/Leitfaden_Gender_Lehre_Layout.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> The author is aware that the pulpit and preaching have always been places where prevailing power structures and those in power have been criticized, and unjust structures have been addressed. However, this article consciously follows the narrative of postcolonial and feminist theologians, who understand the pulpit as a site of colonialist and patriarchal power.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. for example Nicol and Deeg, *Im Wechselschritt zur Kanzel*; Kim-Cragg, “Probing the Pulpit”; Shercliff, *Preaching Women*.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Peter Poscharsky, “Kanzel”, *Theologische Realenzyklopädie Online*, accessed 22 November 2021, [https://www.degruyter.com/database/TRE/entry/tre.17\\_599\\_1/html](https://www.degruyter.com/database/TRE/entry/tre.17_599_1/html); Ulrich Bock, “Kanzel”, *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart - Online Publication*, accessed 22 November 2021, [https://referenceworks.brillonline.com:443/entries/religion-in-geschichte-und-gegenwart/kanzel-COM\\_11270](https://referenceworks.brillonline.com:443/entries/religion-in-geschichte-und-gegenwart/kanzel-COM_11270).

<sup>22</sup> Jürgen Wilke, *Grundzüge der Medien- und Kommunikationsgeschichte: Von den Anfängen bis ins 20. Jahrhundert*, (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2000), 11.

<sup>23</sup> Grammar simplifies communication by establishing rules that don't need to be communicated each time. However, religious grammar not only determines the structure, making its free discussion impermissible, but also regulates its application within the structure—not every believer can ascend to the pulpit and possess the same salvific authority. Just as with money, one cannot create religion oneself, as Jochen Weiss notes in his adaptation of Luhmann in: Jochen Weiss, *MammoN: Eine Motivgeschichte zur Religiosität des Geldes* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2007), 29.

“I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s hearing a lot of sermons preached by men – many of them very good sermons, I might add. They nearly all had a three-point framework, incorporated lots of interesting examples and illustrations, and held my attention even as a child. But in retrospect, I also remember how filled they were with examples from the then-male world: sports stories, war stories, stories about cars, stories about fatherhood. It was not until I first started teaching my Women’s Ways of Preaching course twenty-five years ago, and heard one of my students use the image of her grandmother quilting in her sermon, with the visual of a quilt spread on the Communion table as she spoke, or heard another student in that same class preach the first sermon I ever heard on the story of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael, and another preach on the Hebrew midwives in Exodus 1, that I realized how starved I had been to hear sermons that lifted up and highlighted women’s everyday experience.”<sup>24</sup>

The pulpit and the preaching event must be seen not only as a place and practice of communicating the gospel, but as sites of religious interpretive power.<sup>25</sup> Awareness of this power and being mindful of it is fundamental to power-sensitive preaching. The pulpit proves to be a sensitive index term with high symbolic significance which postcolonial and feminist theologians directly associate with white male normativity. For example, in her article *Probing the Pulpit*, HyeRan Kim-Cragg describes the pulpit as “[...] a historical site of white colonial memory and patriarchal authority.”<sup>26</sup> She refers to, among other things, statements by Austin Phelps, who writes in his book *Men and Books*: “The pulpit should be a battery, well-armed...The gunner who works it must know what and where the vulnerable spots are...He must be a *man*.”<sup>27</sup> By the way: the quote also provides another example of the synonymous use of the terms “pulpit” and “sermon.”

#### 4. Power Theories as a Resource for Power-Sensitive Homiletics<sup>28</sup>

In religious communication systems as well as in homiletics, power dynamics and relational dynamics play a crucial role on various levels. The form of preaching itself implies a claim to interpretive power, authority, and theological responsibility. Pulpits are supposed to be places of significance. Meanwhile, a preaching event without a claim to significance is, literally, meaningless. Thus, power is fundamentally part of life and of homiletics and is not simply to be evaluated as something that is negative per se. Rather, it is closely connected to questions of values and plays a role in preserving them. Power goes hand in hand with assuming responsibility, questions of competence, and decision-making ability. Furthermore, it is an indispensable part of every societal system. At the same time, it is important to critically question power to prevent it from being abused and to ensure that certain individuals, groups, communities, and ethnicities are not restricted by established power systems.

Theories of power have been a major topic in sociology since the time of Max Weber. Current discourses can, in my opinion, also be useful for homiletics. It is important to understand that the ability to act and exert influence is the most fundamental form of power. This ability to act and to be self-efficacious is also defined as personal power, which can manifest as self-

<sup>24</sup> Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *How Women Transform Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2021), 60.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Martina Kumlehn, “Deutungsmacht”, accessed 14 December 2019, <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/200577/>.

<sup>26</sup> Kim-Cragg “Probing the Pulpit”, 22.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>28</sup> For this section, see also Müller and Suhner, *Transformative Homiletik*, 33–60.

referential power when directed toward oneself or social power when directed toward others.<sup>29</sup> Fundamentally, power refers to influencing (one's own or others') probabilities of thinking and behavior. As a result, power is always a relational and systemic concept.<sup>30</sup>

Recent discourses on power, like the very influential discussions from Hannah Arendt, can provide clues for power-sensitive homiletics. According to Arendt, power is a relational phenomenon that, even in its most negative form, acts to build communities (and is geared toward a common practice).<sup>31</sup> The power of an action is evident in the involvement of all those affected by said action. It manifests through the active support of the participants.<sup>32</sup> Arendt's approach is essentially based on a communication-theoretical understanding of power which states that all actions are ultimately aimed at power. While Arendt was mainly referring to political action, her considerations are equally relevant to social and religious contexts in addition to numerous transformative goals in general. She conceptualises power in a broad sense in relation to participation and empowerment which makes her an important figure in feminist theory.<sup>33</sup> Arendt, therefore, views power from the perspective of individual actors. She does not conceptualise the individual's ability to act but rather considers collective practice. "But an individual person has no specific interests; these only arise for him in the common space, in which he [...] participates."<sup>34</sup> Action occurs as an unbounded exchange among individuals, devoid of material intermediaries. Within this dynamic, what Arendt identifies as the cohesive force of power for building communities, resides the interplay among these actors. According to Arendt, genuine power arises only when it can rely on the active support of the involved individuals. This typically entails that the participants should ideally share a certain consensus regarding their actions.<sup>35</sup> Only through this does genuine active support arise, which, for instance, becomes particularly crucial when there are threats to an action or project, or when a participating individual is temporarily absent. This active support from all participants engaged in an endeavor effectively challenges the notion that a single person can sovereignly command, determine, or direct a larger system to act. According to Arendt, any seemingly sovereign power of individual actions ultimately relies on authorization from the many. Thus, individual agency is always understood as interactive empowerment. Crucial in this context is the non-instrumental relationship that participants develop toward collective action which enables a non-strategic conception of power. For Arendt, the essence of collective action lies in the primacy of the communal aspect from the outset. For a collective beginning to be possible at all, individuals must remain open to others while seeking to relativize their own preferences and the norms that guide them. The openness to a shared practice, which can only be developed collectively and surpasses what any single individual already plans and desires, presupposes that concerns of sovereignty theory and strategic action do not take precedence. Such a practice of acknowledging

<sup>29</sup> Cf. José Antonio Marina, *Die Passion der Macht: Theorie und Praxis der Herrschaft*, Schwabe reflexe 12 (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2011), 23–24.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Katharina Inhetveen, "Macht", *Handbuch Soziologie*, ed. Nina Baur et al. (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008), 256ff.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft. Antisemitismus, Imperialismus, totale Herrschaft*, 4th ed. (München: Piper, 1986), 27–28.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, 1970), 42; Cf. Müller and Suhner, *Transformative Homiletik*, 94–97.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Mirko Wischke and Georg Zenkert, eds., *Macht und Gewalt. Hannah Arendts „On Violence“ neu gelesen* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019).

<sup>34</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch 1950–1973*, ed. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann (München/Zürich: Piper, 2003), 335.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Macht Und Gewalt*, 6th ed. (München: Piper 1987), 42.

one's own dependence, being open to others, and relinquishing strategic interests necessarily demands the radical acknowledgment of equality. Thus, being open to the actions of others to collectively initiate something requires egalitarian relationships.<sup>36</sup>

A participatory understanding of power aligns with Christian theological narratives. For example, one might recall Acts 2, where a diverse gathering and multilingual speaking are emphasized, as well as the concept of the priesthood of all believers, or the sending out of the 72 in Luke 10.

### 5. Power-Sensitive Preaching: Postcolonial Homiletics

Reading Arendt in the context of homiletics could mean, for example, that listeners become participants and are empowered to act even in a traditional church service. This implies that control over the ongoing process, or even the worship event itself, must be relinquished. Metaphorically speaking, those who preach detach themselves from the pulpit, which is a place of overview and direction.

“It also means declaring voices on the (supposed) sidelines to be part of the center. In the homiletic context, it means sharing or completely relinquishing control over the pulpit event. This means, for example, taking people on both sides of the church or church community context seriously not only as recipients, but as co-creators of the sermon.”<sup>37</sup>

Participatory discourses on power, as led by figures like Hannah Arendt (and then subsequently by many feminist and womanist thinkers such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Cathy Cohen, etc.), call for a readiness to share, thus enabling power. For homiletic practice, this would mean developing the courage to embrace diverse voices and to tolerate the polyphony, or even cacophony, that ensues. However, it goes even further. Essentially, this approach is about continually questioning the perceived certainties and normativity, as well as one's own constructions of knowledge, and acknowledging that these are relative. Postcolonial homiletic designs pick up on these considerations and are, therefore, indispensable for practicing power-sensitive homiletics. Two such designs are presented below.

An outstanding example of a participatory understanding of power in postcolonial feminist homiletics comes from HyeRan Kim-Cragg who describes postcolonial homiletics as a “circular multidimensional movement, with the purpose of creating a ripple effect in people's hearts and minds for the sake of the Kin-dom.”<sup>38</sup> In this short description, Kim-Cragg integrates a participatory understanding of power and the transformative dynamics of postcolonial homiletics. This is evident from her use of certain terms. The term “movement” emphasizes the relational dimension to foster collective progress and engagement. The idea of “ripple effect” illustrates the transformative dynamic, aiming to bring about sustainable changes in the thinking and actions of participants. A holistic human perspective is stressed by emphasising “hearts and minds” while addressing the participants' emotional and intellectual dimensions. Finally, the reference to the “Kin-dom” underscores the theological goal of power-sensitive and transformative homiletics, aiming to promote justice and well-being for the entire creation. Kim-Cragg's approach demonstrates how postcolonial and feminist perspectives in homiletics can promote a participatory understanding of power.

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<sup>36</sup> See Müller and Suhner, *Transformative Homiletik*, 94–98.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>38</sup> Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching*, 6.

Cláudio Carvalhaes also deals with pulpit power in homiletics and liturgics. He emphasizes the disruptive and transformative potential of homiletics and liturgy “from below” that is critical of power and the overall system.<sup>39</sup> According to Carvalhaes, colonial practices lead to the levelling of diverse views in homiletics and liturgics, so that “the multiplicity of the sacred [turns] into cultural uniformity and monotony.”<sup>40</sup> A central concern of his work is to develop a postcolonial practical theology that makes these power structures transparent, detaches itself from a Eurocentric perspective and increasingly refers to subjugated knowledge.<sup>41</sup> He attempts to focus on these “often hidden, forbidden, made negative and shameful treasures”<sup>42</sup> in his work. For Carvalhaes, pursuing postcolonial practical theology means “to search and use subjugated knowledges, practices, vocabularies, and sources of the people at a certain place, which might lead us all to unforeseen [...] theological possibilities.”<sup>43</sup> Similar to Kim-Cragg, Carvalhaes also argues in favor of questioning the lone preacher’s model and, thus, the theological centering of power on individual theological experts. Instead, he argues for promoting participatory and collaborative approaches that strive for shared power: “[...] the preaching of a sermon [is] to be understood in expanded ways, going from the image of a lone pastor/preacher and understanding preaching in expanded ways, as a part of entire communities and social movements that preach with their actions, gestures, and wrestling with and within public spaces.”<sup>44</sup>

As shown in the two aforementioned examples, postcolonial homiletics aims to share theological power, empower people, and transform communities and society as a whole.<sup>45</sup> Homiletical approaches that focus on power-sensitive communication have similar paradigms. The focus is often on collectivity and polyphony, perspectivity and contextuality, imagination, social and communal empowerment, sensitivity to structural disadvantage and intersectionality, criticism of the status quo, and a Kingdom/Kin-dom of God perspective, in which the importance of the Ruach (the power of the Holy Spirit) is emphasised.

The Ruach is also the theological foundation for the power-sensitive considerations of this article and will, therefore, be examined more closely in the following section.

## 6. The Ruach as a Theological Foundation for Transformative, Power-Sensitive Homiletics<sup>46</sup>

The Ruach is particularly important from a theological framework as this part of God stands for aspects considered important for power-sensitive homiletics: female and non-binary images of God, multilingualism, dynamism, as well as lived and experienced theology. “Ruach or pneuma always opens up new ways of perceiving, hearing, or speaking, and new possibilities and vitality. From a biblical perspective, there is no immovable Ruach.”<sup>47</sup> The Ruach sets things in motion. She leads from narrowness to breadth and brings life. The Ruach is not simply audible breath or wind itself, but rather the vitality, energy, and power that becomes and is effective.

<sup>39</sup> Cf., Claudio Carvalhaes, *Liturgies from Below: Praying with People at the End of the World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020); Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Praying with Every Heart: Orienting Our Lives to the Wholeness of the World* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021).

<sup>40</sup> Cláudio Carvalhaes, "Liturgy and Postcolonialism: An Introduction", in *Liturgy in Postcolonial Perspectives. Only One Is Holy*, ed. Claudio Carvalhaes, Postcolonialism and Religions (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 9.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Cláudio Carvalhaes, "Forms of Speech, Religions, and Social Resistance," *Cross Currents* 66, no. 2 (2016): 138.

<sup>45</sup> "Preaching in the congregation ends so that service in the world can start." Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching*, 14.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. for this chapter Müller and Suhner, *Transformative Homiletik*, 159–76.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

Moving air and moving energy that is “[...] not as something essentially present, but as the force encountered in the breath and gust of wind, whose whence and whither remains mysterious.”<sup>48</sup> It is, among other things, a breath that is only slightly perceptible to many others (Isa 57:13), a hurricane-like storm (John 1:4; Hi 1:19), a sign of God’s dynamic presence and God’s messengers (Ps 104:4), a sign of God’s creative power (Gen 1:2), the breath that God breathes into all living things (Gen 2:7), and much more. This is precisely what characterises the Ruach. It is dynamic and cannot be summarised in an adynamic concept or in a rigid, immovable idea. The Ruach cannot be dogmatically defined either as a Hebrew word or as a theological concept. The transitions between the Old Testament’s ambiguous Ruach, which also fills the prophets, and the spiritual power of *pneuma* are fluid. *Pneuma* is the power that people experience as bringing them into contact with the realm of the divine. Jesus was announced as one who baptises with *pneuma* (spirit) and fire (Mt 3:11 par Lk 3:16; probably a cleansing/destructive act; cf. Isa 30:27 f.). Finally, reference to the Acts of the Apostles is formative for the church’s self-image. The story of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is described in Acts 2:33. This Spirit gives power for mission, among other things (1:8). According to the interpretation, the divine *pneuma* gives direction to the young church (Acts 8:29.39; 10:19), guides decisions (Acts 15:28), and appoints leaders of the church (Acts 20:28). A striking element of this New Testament narrative, which is formative for church history, is the polyphony of voices. This represents the multilingualism that *pneuma* triggers and, at the same time, makes it possible to understand this polyphony. The diversity of voices implies the participatory element of the Spirit’s activity. It is not a single person who is chosen as a prophet and empowered by the Spirit to speak prophetically but a large number of people, each with their language, who receive a share in this Spirit which only expresses itself in this relational event of the many who are gathered and gains its power and effectiveness from this.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Kim-Cragg, for example, also associates postcolonial homiletics with the Ruach: “The lofty and humble task of postcolonial preaching will, it is hoped, contribute to the church’s witness to God’s love in the face of the deadly winds of our time, as it is inbreathed by the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit, the Ruach of God’s creative possibility for all people and creation.”<sup>49</sup> Kim-Cragg emphasizes that a homiletic rooted in the Ruach reveals that this energy is fed by the dynamic relationship between God, man, and creation, that it lives from this inspiration, and, at the same time, must remain fluid, polyphonic, and sensitive to power. Sermons and religious communication processes that follow this view carefully point out instances of injustice. This may be illustrated by Isa 61:1, for example, in which the Ruach is seen as a driving force that leads to the unheard being heard. Another example can be found in Micah 3:8, where the Ruach gives us the strength to raise our voices against unjust superiors (i.e., exploitative systems of leadership and power). Overall, the Ruach stands for the critical voice that does not fall silent in the face of oppressive structures but instead calls for and inspires transformation or, as Rudolf Bohren puts it: “The spirit denounces the injustice of the world and laments the suffering of the world and gives voice to the misery. This is a way of beginning to change the world.”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Rainer Albertz and Claus Westermann, “Art. Rûah - Geist,” *Theologisches Wörterbuch Zum AT II* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2004), 726.

<sup>49</sup> Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching*, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre*, 3rd ed., Einführung in Die Evangelische Theologie Bd. 4 (München: C. Kaiser, 1974), 87.

## 7. A Way of Beginning to Change the World – Dimensions of a Transformative Power-Sensitive Homiletics

What implications do these considerations and theories have for a power-sensitive homiletics that aims to transform traditional white homiletics? What aspects of the work of preachers must change when knowledge of transformative, power-sensitive homiletic discourses is reflected in practice?

In principle, such approaches should lead to an increased sensitivity to power dynamics and claims to interpretive power, which equally looks at who and how diverse voices, perspectives, and images of God are heard (or silenced) in the sermon (work).

Five dimensions—sharing (interpretative) power; starting from religious experience and lived theology; taking the body seriously (embodiment); daring polyphony; imagining and acting together on the Kingdom of God—can guide concrete action in practice. Each of these dimensions is briefly explained below.<sup>51</sup>

The first dimension, *sharing (interpretative) power*, promotes the diversity of theological discourse and joint theologising. It encourages us to recognise and take this form of shared theology as a preaching event seriously. The perspectival nature of theological knowledge-building is emphasised. Power and knowledge are closely linked. Sharing interpretative power would mean giving equal centrality to practical knowledge, or as Tubbs Tisdale puts it (when referencing the work of womanist homiletician Donyelle McCray):

“McCray urges us to expand our usual definitions of preaching to recognize that there are many people today – including many laypeople – who [...] are not preaching in pulpits in church sanctuaries or in modes and forms we usually associate with ‘preaching,’ but who nevertheless are preaching through their lives and their oral and written witness.”<sup>52</sup>

An example of this comes from Switzerland. In the Protestant Reformed parish of Straubenzell in the canton of St. Gallen, an experiment was carried out in which no sermons were preached for a month. This was publicised under the slogan “No sermons here in May” or “No sermons in May.” The parish’s pastoral team decided to ban themselves from preaching for a month after being inspired by an article in a magazine. The author of this article, Pastor Hanna Jacobs, called for an end to preaching and argued that the monologue sermon was no longer in tune with the times. She asserted that discursive spaces were needed instead. The Straubenzell pastoral team was inspired by this article, which led them to scrutinise traditional preaching practices and decide to try preaching without a sermon. As a result, no sermon was preached in the Straubenzell parish in May. Instead, other forms of preaching were chosen such as creative and participative ways of organising the sermon. Parishioners were able to choose between various activities, such as practicing songs, meditating, sharing the Bible together, or engaging in kitchen discussions. The aim of the sermon-free month was to create discursive and participatory spaces in what was otherwise a rather monological setting, such as the reformed church service. Most members of the congregation welcomed the experiment with sermon-free services, although a general renunciation of sermons was not an option for the congregation. The parish team considered the experiment to be a success, as it led to a great response and a variety of conversations during the service.

The second dimension, *starting from religious experiences and lived theology*,

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<sup>51</sup> For a more detailed description of these, see Müller and Suhner, *Transformative Homiletik*, 183–218.

<sup>52</sup> Tubbs Tisdale, *How Women Transform Preaching*, 40.

emphasizes the relevance of individual faith experiences for homiletics. Lived theology, as an experienced and reflective practice of faith, is considered one of the guiding aspects for homiletic action.<sup>53</sup> For the individual and the community, the experience of the Christian perspective of hope, which initiates a transformative process in the service of freedom, is at the center. The focus is on forms of worship and liturgical expression that promote participatory and contextualized spaces of experience. In this way, the task of homiletic practice is changing in such a way that creates spaces where people can enter into dialogue about spirituality, theology, their experiences, and their lives. The prioritization of contextual religious experience brings homiletics right into the heart of life. According to feminist theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “theology is about the messy particularity of everyday lives examined with excruciating care and brought into conversation with the great doctrines of Christian tradition.”<sup>54</sup> This leads to the existential, meaningful, and liberal hopeful perspectives of human life. These, in turn, are the central objects of transformative homiletics.<sup>55</sup>

There are many concrete methods and examples of this. A well-known practical example of how homiletical theologizing can be done is Bible sharing (or the seven-step method), which completely replaces the single-person sermon. This method was developed in South Africa. It is intended to encourage people to enter into dialogue with each other about Bible texts and their lives.<sup>56</sup> Another example from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ) is from Herbert Moyo who describes the process of moving the church and worship toward an experience-oriented, participatory church by shifting from a colonial to a postcolonial worship service:

“The postcolonial ELCZ has transformed and adapted liturgical practices to the African worldview. [...] Musical instruments have now become holy and are allowed in the liturgy. Traditional African drums, jingles, Amahlwayi, guitars, and any form of musical instrument is welcome, while still accommodating Eurocentric instruments, such as the organ and the piano. In terms of holy things, the church has shown a high level of hybridity. The unholy are made holy by the holiness of God. Having introduced instruments to the liturgy, dancing became a reality in the church. Africans are naturally charismatic, and singing choruses, playing drums, and dancing *isitshikitsha* during liturgy allow people to be themselves before God. Congregants no longer watch the minister doing liturgy, but do liturgy with the minister.”<sup>57</sup>

This example leads directly into the next dimension, which is about *taking the body seriously (embodiment)*. In classical Protestantism in particular, the body still has little place in homiletics and, depending on the denomination or tradition, is even categorised as bad. However, as the

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Sabrina Müller, *Lived Theology: Impulses for a Pastoral Theology of Empowerment* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021).

<sup>54</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Feminist Theory in Pastoral Theology", *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Brita L. Gill-Austern (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 86.

<sup>55</sup> For the connection between religious experience and hope, see Chapters 8 and 9 in Sabrina Müller, *Religious Experience and Its Transformational Power: Qualitative and Hermeneutic Approaches to a Practical Theological Foundational Concept*, (Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2023).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. "Bibelteilen.Pdf", accessed 16 August 2022, [https://www.erzbistum-koeln.de/export/sites/ebkportal/kultur\\_und\\_bildung/schulen/.content/.galleries/downloads/schulpastoral-downloads/pdf\\_schulliturgie/Bibelteilen.pdf](https://www.erzbistum-koeln.de/export/sites/ebkportal/kultur_und_bildung/schulen/.content/.galleries/downloads/schulpastoral-downloads/pdf_schulliturgie/Bibelteilen.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Herbert Moyo, "Liturgy and Justice in Postcolonial Zimbabwe: Holy People, Holy Places, Holy Things in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe", *Liturgy in Postcolonial Perspectives: Only One Is Holy*, ed. Claudio Carvalhaes, Postcolonialism and Religions (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 99.

example of Herbert Moyo shows, it is precisely the body that is central to communal worship. In deed, worship is, therefore, about the essential connection between faith, homiletics, and physicality. The fact that experiential knowledge is knowledge of the body has long been discussed in numerous disciplines. This is often referred to, in general terms, as *embodiment*. The common point of view is the assumption that living beings always have a body and, therefore, both the cognitive and mental states as well as the processes of living beings are fundamentally embedded in a world.<sup>58</sup> The body can be integrated into religious communication or even become a sermon in and of itself. This is the case with the dancing Jesuit, Prof. Dr Saju George SJ, a Catholic priest from India, who shared biblical stories and his faith through dance in church services and in workshops with children, young people, and adults.<sup>59</sup>

The fourth dimension is *polyphony*. The aim of this dimension is to establish a transformative-participatory preaching practice. Compared to conventional approaches, this polyphonic perspective emphasizes the inclusion of different voices and experiences. Feminist-postcolonial approaches argue in favour of understanding the sermon as a polyphonic event. Various elements are mentioned: participation in the preparation and follow-up of the sermon, dialogue-based forms of preaching, such as those proposed by John McClure in his 1995 *Roundtable Pulpit* designs,<sup>60</sup> as well as alternative communal forms in which the sermon is integrated into meals and conversations, as suggested by Donyelle McCray.<sup>61</sup> McCray criticises the classic preaching model by saying:

“[...] when this Moses model of preaching stands alone...it presents enormous hurdles for the Miriams and Aarons among us who preach in different ways. Such a narrow conception of prophetic voice hinders the sermon from functioning as emancipatory discourse in the fullest sense, and the sermon becomes a medium for propping up tired conceptions of God and authority.”<sup>62</sup>

As an alternative to an authoritarian model in which only one person preaches, McCray proposes the following, also for the role of the preacher:

“Because we integrate forms of expression that African-American women and laypersons have used to express their spirituality in and out of the pulpit, the sermons are not beholden to the typical discursive frame of the preacher as a singular spokesperson. More often, the preacher emerges as a sage who bears witness by drawing from an archive of communal stories, songs, symbols, dances, and templates for survival. Preaching emerges as a mode of faith-sharing. In other words, the messages consist of less telling, explaining, and informing, and more stirring, imagining, reinventing, and eliciting.”<sup>63</sup>

In McCray's reflections, the preacher functions as an enabler of polyphonic, homiletical, and worship events. She creates space for experiences and the diverse voices of all. In this

<sup>58</sup> Joerg Fingerhut et al., *Philosophie der Verkörperung: Grundlagentexte zu einer aktuellen Debatte*, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 2060 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013), 9.

<sup>59</sup> See for example: "Saju George SJ – Der Tanzende Jesuit – Performance & Interview" [https://youtu.be/UWh9\\_X1VDdQ?feature=shared](https://youtu.be/UWh9_X1VDdQ?feature=shared). Accessed 13 March 2024.

<sup>60</sup> McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership & Preaching Meet* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).

<sup>61</sup> McCray, "Playing in Church," 11-17.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 12.

manner, the worship service becomes a participatory space for everyone—or vice versa. If this also goes hand in hand with a broad understanding of homiletics, the participatory religious-communicative space can become a worship space.

The final dimension is *imagining and acting together on the building site of God's kingdom*. German-language homiletics is strongly focussed on the individual, which has continued from Schleiermacher to the present day. In contrast, power-sensitive and postcolonial feminist approaches emphasize a homiletic program that is aimed at relationality and social effectiveness. This is particularly evident in the emphasis on preaching as a communal act that builds community and has a caring effect. To pick up on Kim-Cragg's idea of the Kin-dom of God: preaching means practicing and rehearsing the Kin-dom of God. It is the rehearsal of a new perspective of a just world:

“[...] preaching as rehearsal points to what the community of faith does, in anticipation of the coming realm of God. Preaching as a rehearsal of the realm of God anticipates a Kairos moment and engages a foretaste of the new reality. Postcolonial preaching as rehearsal helps to expound the goal of preaching as a kind of anticipation of the realm of God in a Kairos sense.”<sup>64</sup>

Words and action, especially communal action, belong together.<sup>65</sup> A very practical example of a place where the idea of the kingdom of God is the guiding principle is the Open Place. The Open Place was launched in 2014 as a project of the Evangelical parish of Kreuzlingen to create a new form of church focusing on encounters, social justice, and offering assistance to others.<sup>66</sup> It provides various services and activities, including free food in the *verwertBAR*, catering in the café, a clothes exchange, an art studio, educational events, as well as communal cooking and eating. Although the project was initially met with resistance within the church, it eventually established itself as a new form of church community. Open Place is an inclusive setting that offers help for mentally impaired and financially needy people. It is also a meeting place for the neighborhood and people from different cultural and religious backgrounds. In short, Open Place is a refuge that provides hope to many people. It is a place where the message is proclaimed less through words and more through deeds.

Of course, these homiletic approaches may be accused of being overly idealistic. They are not neutral or objective but contain assumptions and normativity, just like all other approaches. In principle, however, power-sensitive approaches are, first and foremost, an invitation to experiment together, to dare to do something together, to experience theology in discourse and to experience religious communication, including the pulpit, as a joint activity.

## Conclusion

The processes of change beyond the pulpit described here are based on changes in the attitudes of theologians, ordained ministers, church employees, and church members. The ordained ministry has the central task of creating space to imagine and act together in order to build the site of God's kingdom so that, for example, the charisma of a congregation can develop and unfold. The process of moving toward dialogue-based preaching formats is traditionally

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<sup>64</sup> Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching*, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. "Wir Als Open Place...", Evangelische Kirche Kreuzlingen", accessed 3 March 2022, <https://www.open-place.ch/wir-als-open-place>.

described metaphorically as a process from the pulpit to the round table. The round table is often used as a metaphor for joint, participative, and sometimes even interreligious settings.

But we may need to go further than this in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially if many diverse voices are to be integrated into homiletic teaching and practice. Perhaps we also need to renegotiate the image and place of the pulpit completely. Perhaps the image and place should be determined by polyphonic practice. Perhaps there will suddenly be many round tables, but even more, perhaps we will be standing together on many homiletic testing spaces and building sites, where we can engage with the unknown that is still to be discovered. “If the future is to remain open and free, we need people who can tolerate the unknown, who will not need the support of completely worked out systems or traditional blueprints from the past. Never believe that a few caring people can’t change the world. For indeed, that’s all who ever have.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Margaret Mead, *The World Ahead: An Anthropologist Anticipates the Future*, Margaret Mead-the Study of Contemporary Western Cultures (New York ; Berghahn Books, 2005).