

Introducing Homiletics with DEI Commitments: Challenges, Opportunities, and Options

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Abstract: *This article reflects on the introductory preaching course as a site of possibility for practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). In the two segments of the 2022-23 Academy of Homiletics study that surveyed teaching attitudes and practices of its members, researchers observed some shifts toward more diverse representation of authors in the course readings (required, recommended, and additional bibliographic citations) from the first period to the second period, which varied by social location of the syllabus authors. Also of note in the syllabi are example sermons and course assignments that seek to address DEI concerns. The central question of this article addresses how the introductory preaching course serves as the primary gateway to students' interaction with the field of homiletics and the challenges, opportunities, and options for diverse representation, equity, and inclusion, especially as it relates to the construction of the course syllabus. The article draws on examples from the anonymized syllabi submitted for the study and engages current studies in pedagogy and in theological education, particularly those which emphasize anti-colonialism and anti-racism, and offers recommendations for adding or enhancing commitments and practices for DEI.*

Introduction

In the 2022 study of DEI practices among members of the Academy of Homiletics (AoH), our research team focused on syllabi as representative artifacts in which DEI commitments are exercised. The call for syllabus submissions encouraged AoH members to offer four total syllabi from two different time periods: from 2016-2018 and 2019-2022, after the 2019 AoH annual meeting's theme of "Unmasking Homiletical Whiteness." In contrast to the 2022 member survey, which sought to understand self-reported attitudes, practices, and intentions, syllabus submission provided our research team the opportunity to understand the pedagogical realities on the ground across the guild. Syllabi were anonymized by a third party and coded by the research team, yielding tangible evidence of how AoH members demonstrate those commitments in pedagogical practice. AoH members might think and feel differently about DEI, but the research team wanted to know how members translated those values into practical commitments in their courses.

This article focuses on the introductory courses submitted for analysis. I first name some of the larger purposes of the introductory homiletics syllabus. Then I trace trends and examples in the data sample, focusing on various common elements that organize syllabi. I then describe pitfalls and possibilities for the introductory preaching syllabus using examples and trends we find in our data sample and in conversation with scholarship about DEI and pedagogy across other academic disciplines. Our research team's findings and preliminary presentations have thus far refrained from prescribing practices and dispositions in favor of relaying the data we received and offering initial interpretive analysis. However, now that we are some steps removed from the initial collection and analysis, parts of this article will offer recommendations and options for those who want to take further steps in building a DEI-attentive introductory homiletics course.

The Introductory Homiletics Syllabus and DEI

While our call for syllabi included both introductory and elective homiletics courses, this essay focuses on the syllabus for the introductory course. At the risk of being rudimentary, the introductory course syllabus accomplishes a few important pedagogical goals. First, it provides a foundational gateway, offering most students their first exposure to homiletics as an academic discipline. Second, although technology is changing students' primary interactions with a course via learning management systems (LMS), the introductory syllabus still functions as a primary artifact of the course. For many institutions of theological education, only one preaching course is required for graduation or completion of the course of study. Students who retain the syllabus have access to the singular homiletics course long after their study is complete. As such, this artifact is a record of their foundational study, both in content and method. Second, syllabi are artifacts that are often submitted to accrediting bodies as evidence of compliance with accreditation standards. As such, it is an institutionally significant document. This is less important from the student perspective, of course, but it does signal how the introductory syllabus integrates into the larger enterprise of teaching and learning, especially as it relates to curricular learning goals. Third, the introductory syllabus participates in what Laura Parson and Laila McCloud call a "genre of communication," meaning that there are stylistic conventions and shared expectations for this kind of document.¹ I suggest that the introductory syllabus would constitute a subgenre of sorts, with elective courses assuming prior knowledge provided in an introductory course. In the introductory syllabus (as with all syllabi), students detect the tone the instructor wishes to set for the course, as well as the course's expectations, parameters, and possibilities. This is often especially so as an introductory course. As a corollary to participation in a distinct genre, the syllabus represents the architecture of learning, informing students what, where, how, and why learning will happen in the course. An additional corollary, and one of particular concern for DEI-focused work, is that the syllabus functions as an expression of an instructor's power and knowledge and of their own self-representation.

The introductory homiletics course presents challenges and opportunities when considering how DEI commitments are woven into the syllabus. In the introductory course, instructors might feel keenly aware that they are establishing the boundaries and contours of homiletical knowledge and practice. Instructors are presenting "the field" to students in ways that draw lines and exercise certain commitments, whether those commitments are judged to be strictly disciplinary or are intentionally framed by aspects of culture and social location. Those who seek to incorporate DEI commitments into the syllabus go about this introduction to the field with a sense of ethical responsibility, knowing that homiletics as an academic discipline and preaching as an ecclesial practice are deeply shaped by a community representing diverse identity markers.

Thus, the introductory syllabus becomes a dynamic site communicating each instructor's commitments. It also frames how students perceive their own identities and expectations in relation to the course, including where their challenges and possibilities for learning, practicing, belonging, and flourishing might lie. These perceptions and expectations extend across the students' relationships to course material, to the discipline (and in this case, the practice), to other learners, to the instructor, to their sermon listeners, to the church, and to the academic institution.

From the instructor's perspective, the introductory syllabus also becomes a site of contention because of its inherent limitations. In constructing and evaluating the introductory

¹ Laura Parson and Laila I. and McCloud, "Exploring the Use of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity: A Critical Discourse Analysis of HESA Introductory Syllabi," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, May 2023 (n.d.): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2023.2203101>.

syllabus that attends to DEI concerns, major questions emerge: How do we help students from various social locations feel seen, known, and included in the syllabus? How do we help students experience the rich diversity of the discipline as well as the vibrant tapestry of proclamatory practices, including the various perspectives of culture, place, social location, and theology? How do we raise up minoritized voices (even when they are the instructor's own voice), experiences, practices, and examples while avoiding what might be perceived as tokenizing or exoticizing other voices? How do readings, assignments, class resources, evaluation/assessment, policies, and the language of the syllabus promote an environment in which DEI is practiced and experienced by the learning community? What needs to be documented in the syllabus as a matter of importance, recognizing that the syllabus is not the entirety of the course? And how do we do all this in a limited number of weeks, in in-person, online, and hybrid classrooms, depending on our institutional calendars and course formats? This list of questions is suggestive, rather than comprehensive. And these questions do not imply that the DEI-committed introductory syllabus is a burden. Rather, this list of questions simply suggests that for many, the introductory preaching course is a site of first encounter with homiletics as a discipline and, in a limited period, instructors who choose to construct the course with DEI commitments will invariably sense the limitations as well as the impact that their choices will have on the learning community.

Trends and Examples in Various Elements of Introductory Syllabi

In its 2023 special presentation to the AoH, the research team presented statistical data around race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other dynamics of social location as they related to our syllabus analysis. In addition, our research team of doctoral students assigned "grades" to each of the syllabi collected based on the appearance of authors of color and beyond the U.S. present in various course elements, DEI commitments evidenced in assignments and other syllabus elements. The team's analysis especially focused on a list of keywords that signal attention to race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and other DEI-related topics or perspectives. In this section, I want to note some general trends and examples among our data sample that emerge in some basic elements of the introductory syllabus in view – places we might expect to find DEI attentiveness to be on display. Since this article focuses on introductory courses, it will be helpful to know that of the 179 syllabi submitted, 84 can be identified as introductory homiletics syllabi, discernible either by the course title or course description. Thirty-nine are in the 2016-2018 set, while 45 are in the 2019-2022 set. Below, I analyze three categories of items that are included in the introductory syllabi samples: required reading lists, frames for the learning community, and assignments and class resources.

Required Reading Lists

Course reading lists offer an initial and important place for analyzing DEI-attentiveness. As a reminder, the research team analyzed course reading resources to determine if they included authors of color and/or outside the U.S. and/or addressed a DEI topic. This included required and assigned texts, recommended texts, bibliographies, and non-text sources. The research team did not separate introductory courses from elective courses in its data analysis, but of the 179 syllabi analyzed, it found that 79% of required texts in the early period addressed some aspect of DEI, while 83% of required texts in the later period addressed some aspect of DEI. Recommended

texts were 67% and 86% respectively, and bibliographies were 18% and 39%, respectively. Obviously, each category shows growth in these simple terms.²

One of the ways that we know to include introductory syllabi in this overall growth is that, with only two exceptions, no introductory syllabus used just one introductory textbook for the course.³ Every syllabus's required reading list identified multiple texts for students to purchase (or identified the text as available in physical or electronic form in the school's library), though the majority prioritized one or two texts in the course modules' required reading. Two syllabi (one each from different instructors) gave students a choice among multiple possibilities, depending on their interest or, in the case of one, supplied texts written in Spanish for Spanish language learners. Five required no textbooks, with various readings by different authors distributed via course reading packets or in online modules.⁴ Three required various books, but none would qualify as an introductory textbook. It is also worth mentioning that in many cases, two of the "Elements of Preaching"⁵ series were often found as required texts: Teresa Fry Brown's *Voicing the Sermon* and O. Wesley Allen, Jr.'s *Determining the Form*.⁶ Other books in this series appeared, but not in the number of instances that these two titles did. In only one syllabus did titles from this series comprise the entirety of the required reading list.⁷

In terms of specific texts, *The Witness of Preaching*, written by Thomas Long (white male), was the dominant choice (27 total) but decreased slightly over the periods from 15 to 12. This is an important marker of DEI-attentiveness, as five other texts written by authors from historically marginalized social locations grew in this time period. Luke Powery and Sally Brown's (African American male and white female) co-written *Ways of the Word* is the next most used text, and appears 18 times, with 7 in the early period and 11 in the later period. Jared Alcántara's *The Practices of Preaching* (Latine male) was published in 2019 (a Spanish language version was published in 2022, but no Spanish versions were cited), and thus appears only in the later period, but does so 8 times. Gennifer Brooks' *Good News Preaching* (Afro Caribbean female) also shows a slight increase from 5 in the early period to 6 in the later. Justo González and Pablo Jiménez's *Púlpito: An Introduction to Hispanic Preaching* (Latine males) grew from 2 uses in the early period to 4 in the later period. This is especially significant since it was published in 2005, well before the time periods under consideration. These indicators reflect a trend among AoH members to incorporate texts from historically marginalized and underrepresented perspectives at the level of comprehensive introductory textbooks.

But the increase in texts does not tell the complete story, nor does it suggest that these trends are altogether a positive development. Two developments are worth noting. First, several

² Because each contributor also shared their gender, racial or ethnic identity, and sexual identity, the research team was able to be even more granular in its analysis of each syllabus. That data is available in Leah Schade's article in this issue.

³ It is important to note that I am singling out books intended as introductory textbooks. Other books may have been included as required texts, but they clearly addressed special topics rather than a wide-ranging, more comprehensive introductory text. The two exceptions were a course that used Troeger and Tisdale's *A Sermon Workbook* and a course that required a book outside the field of homiletics: Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*.

⁴ Of these, only one offered a DEI-attentive rationale. Another noted that students would receive copies of a textbook in development.

⁵ This series is comprised of 8 volumes written by various scholars and, taken together, aspire to function in the manner of a single introductory textbook.

⁶ Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon: Voice, Body, and Animation in Proclamation* (Fortress Press, 2008); O. Wesley Allen Jr., *Determining the Form* (Fortress Press, 2008).

⁷ It is worth noting that Ronald J. Allen's *Patterns of Preaching* appeared in several syllabi, but because of its focus on sermon form rather than a comprehensive introduction, I do not include it as an introductory textbook.

syllabi required two or more introductory textbooks. For instance, some require Long's *Witness of Preaching* as well as *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God* or *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching* both by Frank Thomas (African American male), with some requiring a third introductory textbook such as Paul Scott Wilson's (white male) *Four Pages of Preaching*, González and Jiménez's *Púlpito*, or Alcántara's *The Practices of Preaching*.

Logistically speaking, we might wonder how students could be expected to attend to this volume of reading across the semester. Second, and related, just because multiple texts are required does not mean they receive the same attention over the course of a semester. For instance, at least one syllabus that required *Witness of Preaching* and *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God* spread out the former across the semester, while Thomas's text was placed into one week of the course. All this is to say that discernible diversity in the required reading list may obscure a hidden pedagogical and homiletical segregation within the course.

I have yet to explore how these required readings are distributed among different demographic groups, and I have not detailed recommended readings or bibliographies, which the research team also analyzed and incorporated into its report at the wider level. But focusing on the introductory texts and their use even at this level is significant. These texts establish a guiding voice for students and center particular expectations, theological dispositions, cultural assumptions, and homiletical practices. When students are pressed for time, they may prioritize reading the course's main textbook or the one that is listed first if there are multiple readings assigned for a day. Required texts are also significant because students are *purchasing* these texts, indicating the financial impacts of DEI-attentiveness for authors. In addition to these trends, how the frames of the learning community shape and are shaped by DEI are worth exploring.

Frames for the Learning Community

Another place through which DEI-attentiveness might appear in the syllabus is what we might call "frames for the learning community." By this, I mean the ways that syllabi name the kind of dispositions, behaviors, and relationships that instructors hope will be operative throughout the semester. Instructors might include a "diversity statement" (variously named), name their identities/social location, establish learning goals, provide a statement on disabilities and accommodations, and/or a statement on inclusive and expansive language. The latter two (accessibility/disabilities and inclusive/expansive language) are often included under sections of the syllabus labeled as "policies" as required by an institution's syllabus template and often with institutionally-supplied language, while others seem not to be required to do so. As such, it is difficult to assess whether these frames are created at the initiative of the instructor. Regardless, they do communicate either the institution's and/or the instructor's commitments to DEI.⁸

Diversity statements in some form or another occurred in only 20 of the 89 syllabi, accounting for 10 different instructors (remembering that as many as 4 syllabi per instructor were submitted). One such statement operates under the heading of "Cultural Agility," appealing to Scripture in a preliminary sentence and following with, "The Belhar Confession teaches that 'unity is...both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ.' It is both a 'binding force' and 'a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought.' The kingdom's unity within its lavish diversity testifies to God's creativity and reconciling power. As <redacted> joins in this witness, its faculty aims intentionally to include diverse voices in the classroom through lectures and

⁸ Statements on disabilities and accommodations occurred in 71 of the 89 sample syllabi. 51 of the 89 syllabi included statements on inclusive language.

assignments such as required texts, reference works, reading lists, media, interviews, and case studies.” Whether this statement is part of an institutionally-supplied syllabus template or instructor-written, it suggests a wide array of pedagogical methods through which “cultural agility” might be practiced and gives a theological (biblical and confessional) rationale for its practice.

In another syllabus, a different instructor follows an institutionally-supplied diversity statement with their own:

While always seeking ways to further increase diversity in resources, speakers, and examples, the instructor has sought to offer materials in this course that give voice to a diversity of authors, theologians, viewpoints, and experiences. The instructor recognizes her own social locations as an American, white, cisgender female. The instructor intends that diverse voices (including gender diversity, racial/ethnic diversity, socioeconomic diversity, and international diversity, among others) are represented in the readings, resources, guest speakers, and through the contributions of student members of the course. The instructor always seeks to uplift and honor a rich variety of voices and experiences towards the pursuit of equity.

Compared to the “Cultural Agility” statement, this is noticeably less theological in nature, but it is more specific in terms of the kinds of diversity the learning environment engages. Additionally, this section of the syllabus is followed by a statement on “White Supremacy, Preaching, and This Course.” Notably, the 2018 version of the course did not include the same statement, which suggests that the professor increased their attentiveness to DEI over the span of this research period.

Other statements in various syllabi included the following headings: “Commitment to Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion,” “Culture of Respect,” “Acceptance of Diversity,” “Commitment of Maintaining Expansive Space,” and “Course Engagement with Diversity.” In a slightly different manner, 4 syllabi representing 3 different instructors identified the instructors’ pronouns, social location, and/or other identifiers such as their names and how they wished to be addressed. While these practices of self-identification are not explicitly statements about DEI, they do seek to create an atmosphere in which the learning community sees the identification of gender, social location, and naming as exercises of hospitality and community, and as instances in which stereotypes, naivete, culture, and power might intersect.

Finally, eight of the syllabi exhibited attention to diversity as it relates to culture in their learning goals. Most of these are somewhat softly stated, but one specifically states “cross-cultural competence” as a learning outcome, noting that students who succeed in the course will be able to

Exhibit cross-cultural competence by preaching sermons that demonstrate listening for a voice different from one’s own, finding one’s own voice, and learning how to engage those voices that reflect a difference from one’s own. By doing these things, students will become more aware of the ways that they preach, which are shaped by their respective social/ecclesial locations as well as differences. To exhibit cross-cultural competence, a student will understand and articulate his or her own social as well as ecclesial location; recognize and honor the social as well as ecclesial locations of others; discern as well as respect the values held and expressed by self and others from different cultural, biblical,

theological, hermeneutical and global perspectives; begin to understand systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, etc.; and adopt and employ anti-racism practices.

Such a statement is unambiguous about the nature of preaching as an exercise of one's culture, experience, and power. Further, it clearly acknowledges that the classroom is a space in which "systems of oppression" are understood in their homiletical manifestations while strategies of resistance are formulated, practiced, and refined.

These common elements are places where some instructors seek to explicitly name their commitments around DEI, even if they do not use DEI-centered language. What we can observe among these introductory syllabi is a variety of ways that some instructors are offering frames for the learning community about how the course will operate regarding DEI commitments.

Assignments and Class Resources

While a great deal could be said about the wide variety of course assignments and resources found in these syllabi, I want to focus on one aspect of DEI-attentiveness with respect to assignments: English as a second language (ESL). In our research team's member survey of self-reported attitudes and practices toward DEI, we included questions about the student composition of AoH members' classrooms. In doing so, the research team discovered that more than 50% of responding members have at least "a few" students for whom English is a second language. One third of responding AoH members reported that "many" or "most" of their students are ESL. While it is hard to know or even estimate the number of students this represents across the representative institutions, the research team did identify this as a significant data point among the AoH membership. I noted above that only one syllabus provided the possibility of required texts in a language other than English (these were in Spanish). But in terms of assignments, only 3 syllabi of the 89 make provisions for ESL students. One of these three identifies institutional provision for additional time on assignments. The other two provide opportunities for ESL students to preach their sermons for the respective courses in their native languages, such as one that stated, "If English is your second language, you are welcome to record the sermon delivery in your first language as long as you turn in a manuscript in English for classmates and professor to follow along." There is a clear disparity between the reported reality in many classrooms and the ways in which some, "many," or "most" introductory homiletics students might experience additional challenges to their full inclusion in classrooms.

Concerning class resources, I want to focus on sermons made available to students within the syllabus. While not all introductory courses provide sample sermons in the syllabus, the ones that do are included in at least three different ways. For some syllabi, sermons are included in the same manner as generic bibliographic lists or suggested readings. Some sermons are included individually as foci for a particular course module for discussion, reflection, or as part of an assignment. Others function as a hybrid of the first two. For an instance of a hybrid example, one syllabus from 2017 provided a list of 32 sermons from 27 different preachers, and as part of the required work for the semester, students selected 12 sermons for which they were to write "Sermon Responses" according to the following instructions:

Preachers learn as much by listening to sermons as they do talking about homiletical theory. For each class session indicated, read/watch/listen to the assigned sermon(s), and reflect carefully on what each sermon is doing and saying—and how. Then write a

paragraph or so (250-500 words) in which you critically engage the questions for the class day (see the course schedule). There are 14 possible sermon responses.

To add more detail, this assignment is correlated to fulfilling “course objective #2,” which is stated earlier in the syllabus as “Facility with biblical and cultural interpretation for preaching in God’s changing world.” There are two important observations to make here, by which I want to note the complexity of constructing a DEI-attentive syllabus. First, I include the course objective because it suggests that the variety of sermons students will engage in these responses will help with “facility with biblical and cultural interpretation.” At the same time, a DEI-attentive commitment is not explicitly framed, either in theological or institutional terms (as above with diversity statements). A more specific rationale on why this kind of facility is important, and making a case for the significance of the diverse kinds of preaching students will encounter, is not explicitly stated. Related, none of the preachers in the list are identified by their social location, and while the 27 preachers come from a variety of social locations, diversity among the list is not clear from the names alone, especially considering that in an introductory course, this will be many students’ first exposure to many of the preachers. Second, I want to note that responses, while brief, are prescribed to be submitted in *written* form. In terms of how students demonstrate their learning and engagement with this semester-long assignment, student response modes are limited. DEI-attentiveness in the syllabus through the lens of Universal Design for Learning would suggest a more inclusive range of possibilities for how students might respond to the sample sermons.⁹

I point to this specific example not to offer critique, but, again, to note complexity. This instance of course resources and assignments laudably presents a diverse roster of preachers for students to encounter throughout the semester. At the same time, there is an opportunity for further clarification as to how and why DEI-attentiveness is at work here.

There are more categories and trends worthy of attention (grading policies or related sermon evaluation), and more examples could be included. The goal, however, is not to be exhaustive.¹⁰ Nor is it to single out exemplary or unsatisfactory practices or trends in our guild. Instead, these general observations function as openings to generate collective thinking about the kinds of syllabus elements to which we should grant our deepest DEI-attentiveness in the introductory homiletics course.

Pitfalls and Possibilities

Having analyzed just a few trends and examples in the collected syllabi, it is important to recognize some broad ways that DEI-focused efforts might go awry and what might constitute success. I have already alluded to some of these pitfalls and possibilities in the analysis above. Before I continue, however, I want to provide some qualification to the word “success” as it relates to DEI-attentiveness in the introductory syllabus. Success for instructors is a relative term. Each instructor comes from different institutional contexts with different constraints and expectations, different students (with their own expectations and needs), and teaches from different social locations and experiences. Although our research team attached “grades” to the submitted syllabi, this functioned somewhat as an artificial construct. There is no way to

⁹ “The UDL Guidelines,” accessed June 18, 2025, <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>.

¹⁰ By way of reminder, this data belongs to the AoH, not to the research team. Those who are interested in exploring the data samples further are welcome to contact Leah Schade or me.

construct a universal standard for the DEI-attentive syllabus. Each instructor starts from a different place and will have different goals.¹¹

In describing the ways that DEI-attentive syllabi in higher education and student affairs (HESA) might fail to accomplish its intentions, Parson and McCloud, citing Derrick Bell, describe how “diversity discourses in higher education often center ‘the self-interest of Whites rather than the racial injustices suffered by Blacks,’ reinforce the outsider status of non-White and man-identifying individuals, and render structural and systemic causes of oppression invisible.”¹² This means that the syllabus cannot simply tout efforts toward “diversity” (and here we might also add “equity” and “inclusion”) as a meaningful signifier.¹³ In categorizing these misfires, Parson and McCloud suggest five possibilities (which may work separately or in tandem) for the ways in which diversity language might fail:

1. Competitive advantage, suggesting that engaging diversity offers students a benefit in the workforce or economy.
2. Institutional excellence. By this, Parson and McCloud assert that diversity provides “evidence of institutional excellence where minoritized students are commodities to be fought over because of the benefits to majority students that students from minoritized identities bring to the educational process of ‘all’ students.”
3. Inclusion, wherein the use of language around inclusion obscures the causes of systemic and structural inequalities that necessitate strategic efforts toward inclusion.
4. Globalization. According to the authors, globalization language entails a push for “a unified whole that omits or ignores differences and histories.” In a sense, the value of diversity flattens the unique cultural histories, traits, and gifts that students bring to the classroom as it “creates global citizens with skills that are competent across cultures.”
5. Non-performative. Diversity functions as a non-performative when it is used as a positive “without indicating what the word or associated actions mean.” We might think of this as using buzzwords related to DEI without explaining them or indicating how they impact the course. In essence, they are for show.¹⁴

Applying these possible pitfalls to the introductory homiletics syllabi, a competitive advantage of DEI might signal that students can effectively preach to a culturally diverse world or congregation, thus benefiting their church and their own career. Or for those who identify as white, male, cisgender, and/or heterosexual, instructors should avoid using DEI language in such a way that it centers their own self-interests or reinforces an insider status. A diverse reading list or sample sermon list that goes unexplained might run the risk of globalization that flattens homiletics into a mere amalgamation of “diversity.” Instructors should also take care to avoid language that names DEI without spelling out how this manifests in the course, which turns toward the non-performative. Parson and McCloud suggest that learning communities would benefit if instructors took the time to define what they mean in syllabi, operate with transparency

¹¹ Having more textured conversations with instructors on these matters is part of the next phase of the research team’s agenda.

¹² Parson and McCloud, “Exploring the Use of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity,” 5.

¹³ Wing Yi Wong’s article “Expanding Homiletic Pedagogy Beyond Colorblindness” in this issue helpfully explores issues that are related to what Parson and McCloud articulate here.

¹⁴ Parson and McCloud, “Exploring the Use of Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity,” 5.

about systemic and structural inequalities, and trace how DEI-attentive values and efforts in the course work toward justice (and invite students to do the same).

On the flip side, there are some significant possibilities for practices that clarify and bolster the DEI-attentive syllabus. As a matter of first importance, it is critical for instructors to be honest about their social and demographic location regarding matters of DEI in the introductory syllabus. While it is tempting to keep things the same for years on end, there is a risk to one's pedagogical integrity by continuing disciplinary and pedagogical allegiances without deeply discerning how they relate to DEI-attentiveness. Even instructors who have made strides in their syllabi over the years can mistakenly think that they have "arrived" and become lax in the diligence needed for DEI work. Fuentes, Zelaya, and Madsen encourage educators to develop and continually refine their cultural competence and how that integrates with their pedagogy. They call this "developing an EDI mindset in syllabus development."¹⁵

In considering syllabi in psychology, Fuentes, Zelaya, and Madsen offer a helpful corrective to the possibility of thinking that designing the DEI-attentive syllabus will look the same for all instructors when they say, "Given the fact that faculty are a heterogeneous group and in various stages of their cultural consciousness, we advise educators to adopt the considerations that are most aligned with their level of proficiency."¹⁶ Some instructors might be uncomfortable with what a DEI-attentive syllabus might mean in their institution or what it might reveal about their level of cultural consciousness and competence. Recognizing that each instructor's attention to matters of DEI in syllabus development comes from different situations and different starting points can help place this work in perspective and work from there.

Another set of possibilities centers on what I will simply call "clarifying commitments," drawing on the work of Courtney Buggs. In reflecting on Womanist pedagogy and teaching preaching, Buggs describes two characteristics of exemplary Black women teachers filtered through the work of Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant.¹⁷ While these characteristics are rooted in Womanist values, they have salience across social locations and identities. The first is "political clarity," which Buggs describes as "awareness that education occurs in the context of competing social priorities and systems."¹⁸ For example, an instructor might begin the syllabus (re)design process by taking an inventory of the priorities and systems that shape their own ways of knowing, being, doing, and belonging, as well as those that are shaping the current socio-cultural context, the history and current context of the institution, and the students who will be in the course (inasmuch as this is possible). Since "sexism, classism, and heterosexism, for example, are frequent visitors in the preaching classroom," instructors do well to explore these and other "isms" that persist as a manner of pedagogical honesty and integrity.¹⁹ Instructors might also find ways to name these in the syllabus itself, perhaps in an instructor's statement of identity. For example, instructors might briefly state how they have been shaped or affected by various priorities and systems and/or how they seek to expose them and root them out in pedagogical methods focused on introducing homiletics.

¹⁵ Milton A. Fuentes et al., "Rethinking the Course Syllabus: Considerations for Promoting Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion," *Teaching of Psychology* 48, no. 1 (2021): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628320959979>.

¹⁶ Fuentes et al., "Rethinking the Course Syllabus," 4.

¹⁷ Courtney Buggs, "Womanist Pedagogy and Teaching Preaching: Black Women Preachers as Sources for Pedagogical Reflection," *Sermon Studies* 8, no. 1 (2025): 58–66.

¹⁸ Buggs, "Womanist Pedagogy and Teaching Preaching," 60.

¹⁹ Buggs, "Womanist Pedagogy and Teaching Preaching," 61.

Similarly, instructors might construct the various components of the syllabus with a statement that explains the intention or emphasis of the course, as in: “While there are many ways to introduce the field of homiletics and the practice of preaching, since Black and other women of color have and are experiencing multiple, intersecting forms of oppression, this version of the syllabus emphasizes the voices, experiences, knowledge, and practices of Black and other women of color from across the globe.”

The second practice of clarifying commitments is what Buggs, through Beauboeuf-Lafontant, calls “an ethic of risk.” This entails “engaging with ‘oppressive realities...in spite of an educator’s recognition that social injustice is deep-seated and not easily dismantled.’”²⁰ I read this in two ways. Primarily, Buggs wants readers to see how Womanist pedagogy embraces a willingness to confront “deeply held beliefs about the Divine, the world, scripture, and humankind,” pushing the learning community to wrestle with matters of utmost significance, often beyond what is comfortable.²¹ There will be resistance in and beyond the learning community to this wrestling, but this aspect of Womanist pedagogy leads to deeper wisdom and collective liberation.

But there is a secondary aspect to the ethic of risk that offers a critical acknowledgment that the work will be both incomplete, fragmentary, or partial (“not easily dismantled”) and that risk entails the possibility of failure. These risks are important and worthy of naming in the introductory syllabus. Remembering that syllabi help set the tone for courses, and that the introductory syllabus builds a foundation for future engagement, an “ethic of risk” might be invoked through a statement like this:

In this course, we will wrestle with our deeply held beliefs that manifest in preaching. We will ask hard but generous questions of ourselves and our colleagues in order to grow as preachers and as those who confront social injustices. Because this work is difficult, fragile, and faces resistance from a number of places (chiefly, ourselves!), there might be moments in which we feel that our work has not lived up to our collective hopes or even that we might have failed. In these moments, we will endeavor to operate with honesty, integrity, and grace, and then engage in the work of repair and renew our efforts.

These clarifying commitments might help instructors foster a learning community that proceeds with honesty, integrity, and depth, allowing students and instructors alike to step into DEI commitments while avoiding the pitfalls named above. Also, noting these commitments in a syllabus should offer credit, citation, and acknowledgment of Womanist wisdom.

Options for (Re)Designing the Introductory Homiletics Syllabus

There are some smaller, more discrete practices for implementing DEI-attentiveness in homiletics syllabi that are also worth highlighting. Again, these are not comprehensive, but I offer them as important possibilities for the introductory syllabus.

1. Start small.

While a complete overhaul of the introductory syllabus might be warranted for some instructors, even small changes in syllabi can have a big impact. As James Lang describes, there is power in “small teaching, an approach that seeks to spark positive change in higher education through small but powerful modifications to our course

²⁰ Buggs, “Womanist Pedagogy and Teaching Preaching,” 61.

²¹ Buggs, “Womanist Pedagogy and Teaching Preaching,” 61.

design and teaching practices. Small teaching as a fully developed strategy draws from the deep well of research on learning and higher education to create a deliberate, structured, and incremental approach to changing our courses for the better.”²² This is not a half-hearted or gradualist approach but an intentional one to maximize positive changes in courses without being overwhelmed by massive changes that outpace an instructor’s own learning curve, drain energy, and diminish effectiveness.

Given the data of this study, we might characterize what AOH members did during this period as making “small teaching” adjustments in response to the 2019 annual meeting theme and related initiatives. In the next iteration of the research team’s study, we might hope for even more progress, given the areas of growth we have identified among multiple constituent groups.

2. *Construct the syllabus with a DEI-centered approach.*

Fuentes, Zelaya, and Madsen suggest that “given the relevance and influence of culture and related diversity factors on behavior, faculty could explore their influence and impact from the outset and continuously consider their relevance. These efforts promote a ‘diversity-centered’ approach to syllabus development.”²³ The authors contrast this with a “siloe” approach, in which instructors attend to matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion in a way that is isolated from the rest of the course.

The classic example of a siloe approach would be instructors dedicating a class session of the introductory course to “Black preaching.” Instead, instructors can assess how the syllabus might center historically minoritized groups or create a lively intercultural conversation through various course components throughout the semester. I personally do this in a very tangible way as I develop the course reading list. As I construct the syllabus, I often stack physical copies of books, articles, and essays on top of one another or spread them out on the floor, asking myself, “Who is in the room this semester? Who is missing? How are these voices talking to one another? Who is or has been louder, and why? Can my students see themselves among these authors? Who do students need to hear from?” Weaving DEI-attentive concerns throughout different aspects of the syllabus, such as the student learning objectives, objectives for a particular course module, a diversity statement, and an instructor’s self-identification, also contributes to an approach that avoids silos.

3. *Decolonize the introductory syllabus*

There is a much larger discussion to be had about decolonization, so offering it as a subpoint in this article might raise concerns that I am minimizing the gravity of colonial legacies or the need for decolonizing practices in our syllabi. I am also mindful of the possibilities of decolonization becoming an all-too-easy non-performative or collapsing DEI-attentiveness with decolonization. None of these is my intention.²⁴

Rather, my point is to recognize that decolonization has important distinctions from DEI and that DEI is not the ultimate goal for many. Decolonization has a specific focus on the power of minoritized, subjugated groups and dismantling dominant,

²² James M. Lang, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* (Jossey-Bass Inc Pub, 2016), 5.

²³ Fuentes et al., “Rethinking the Course Syllabus,” 5.

²⁴ For a fuller exploration of anti- and decolonial pedagogies, I would suggest starting with Christine J. Hong’s *Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious Intelligence for Theological Education* (Lexington Books, 2021).

supremacist ways of thinking, being, doing, and belonging. DEI has more to do with representation and has been the operative language for this research project, a language widely shared in contemporary culture.

One way we can see decolonizing the syllabus at work is in the course reading list that centers historically underrepresented and marginalized perspectives rather than using them as supplements. One of the observations of the research team was that texts required for purchase were often authored by white scholars, but sample sermons for courses were from scholars of color. Assigning course texts for purchase has a real, tangible effect for minoritized scholars whose preaching traditions and communities have been historically marginalized from what counts as legitimate scholarship. While this is a small step, it is an example of decolonizing efforts that consider the boundaries of what constitutes scholarship and the financial impacts of course reading lists.

4. *Reassess and explain policies and practices*

Policies and practices are often added to syllabi in an unreflective manner as “boilerplate” language often required by institutions. This is apparent among most of the inclusive language statements in the sample syllabi. As noted above, only a handful of the syllabi in our sample included diversity statements. It stands to reason that adding such statements is an important step for instructors who do not currently use them. For those who have institutionally required language around diversity or inclusive language in their syllabi, instructors might consider addenda that flesh out how the instructor aims to practice those DEI concerns in the course and why they are significant for the introductory preaching course.

5. *Reconsider methods of evaluation, grading, and assessment*

I have yet to talk about evaluation, grading, and assessment of students, especially their sermons. Moving toward practices of evaluation, grading, and assessment that admit bias and move toward inclusion and equity are vital. A few of the syllabi utilized pass/fail grading in assignments and/or for the course, with explanations about the difficulty of evaluating and grading sermons. Elsewhere, I have written about the practice of “ungrading,” which in part eliminates or de-emphasizes letter or numerical grades as a theo-ethical, anti-colonial practice.²⁵ Carolyn Helsel has written about her experience of communally generated rubrics for student sermons, which promote conversation about the varieties of what might make for “good” preaching. Such rubrics also promote student agency, voice, inclusion, and more equitable power-sharing in the classroom.²⁶ Suffice it to say, as instructors consider DEI and anti- or decolonial practices in their syllabi, a critical appraisal of evaluation and grading systems may reveal the ways in which assessment ranks and sorts students, thereby perpetuating colonial logics, biases, and inequities. Alternative forms of assessment may generate more equitable, meaningful, and effective means of providing feedback to preaching students.

6. *Learn about and implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL)*

Assignments are a way students demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and growth. However, we know that students learn, engage, and respond in the classroom in a variety of ways. Universal Design for Learning recognizes the diversity of learning in our

²⁵ Richard William Voelz, “After the Graded Sermon: ‘Ungrading’ as Theo-Ethical Practice for Homiletics,” *Teaching Theology & Religion* 27, no. 4 (2024): 123–29, <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12680>.

²⁶ Carolyn Browning Helsel, “Evaluating Sermons: The Function of Grades in Teaching Preaching,” *Teaching Theology & Religion* 20, no. 3 (2017): 204–15, <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12389>.

classrooms and seeks to meet it through multiple modes of engagement to “foster equitable and inclusive learning opportunities for every individual.”²⁷ UDL recognizes that learning and engagement come not just via an innate, acontextual sense of “multiple intelligences,” but are also culturally constructed and affected by (dis)abilities. UDL seeks to observe how teaching and learning practices can move beyond bias or cultural limits and open possibilities for all learners. With UDL in mind, an introductory syllabus might encourage students to choose from a range of types of responses beyond reading and writing, such as recording audio or video, composing visual art or music, dance, or convening a conversation. The point here is that DEI-attentiveness and UDL can walk hand-in-hand.

7. *Offer options for students with diverse language backgrounds*

Even simply focusing on student sermons, we can think about student sermons and non-native English speakers. As noted above, a very small number of introductory syllabi in the data sample (3) allow for the possibility of non-native English speakers to preach their sermons in their first language. Since preaching is highly contextual, it makes sense to encourage students to preach in their first language, despite any perceived “losses” for the learning community. In my experience, there can be a robust conversation among the learning community about what native English-speaking students observe in their colleagues’ sermons when they attend to a sermon in a language not their own (supplemented by a translated manuscript or immediate translation through a service such as Google Translate). Matters of embodiment, including gesture, vocal dynamics, and clerical attire — what HyeRan Kim-Cragg calls “the language of the body” — can become key aspects of intercultural learning and help students claim those dynamics as their own without being subject to Western homiletical standards. This is not at the expense, however, of attending to robust conversations about epistemology, culture, power, and the exegetical and theological insights that arise when encountering sermons in various spoken/written languages — what Kim-Cragg calls “the language of the mind.”²⁸

Conclusion: Introducing Homiletics with a Renewed Commitment

Recognizing the plurality of experiences in communities, homiletics has benefitted immensely from the ideas of “dialogue” and “conversation,” as well as the robust imagery of the “roundtable.”²⁹ Yet, despite pedagogy being of significant interest to this guild, I am not sure that introductory syllabi benefit from a dialogical, conversational, or roundtable approach. Instead, at least in my experience, the syllabus is largely treated as the discrete work of individuals. The vast differences across the sample syllabi seem to largely confirm that mindset. In an era in

²⁷ “The UDL Guidelines.”

²⁸ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching: Creating a Ripple Effect* (Lexington Books, 2021), 89. I also want to note: I am not suggesting that by attending to embodiment in sermons from those of various language backgrounds, we celebrate or fetishize markers of embodiment that might belong to a particular culture, obscuring the rich exegetical and theological insights that preachers bring in their first languages. While matters of embodiment might stand out more easily when listening in a language we do not share with the preacher, teachers should bring Kim-Cragg’s more holistic language sensibility to those gathered for the sermon.

²⁹ Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership & Preaching Meet* (Abingdon Press, 1995); O. Wesley Allen, *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach to Proclamation and Preaching* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Ronald J. Allen and O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Sermon without End: A Conversational Approach to Preaching* (Abingdon Press, 2015).

which instructors reconsider the ways their introductory syllabi have relational effects, I would suggest that instructors form conversational circles with a range of partners about our introductory syllabi. These conversations across the guild, within members' institutions, with working preachers, and others could sharpen DEI-attentiveness within syllabi, enabling honest conversations about what is and is not present in our syllabi, celebrating instances of success and naming struggle, and identifying that which is worthy of adapting and adopting from others. Even more, such conversational circles could foster a greater sense of mutuality, collective responsibility, and DEI-attentiveness in the guild at large and in interpersonal relationships. Granted, as Kenyatta Gilbert cautions, since scholars from minoritized backgrounds have often borne the labor of DEI, it would be imperative to clarify that such groups are not intended to serve as a sounding board for scholars from more privileged social locations.³⁰ Rather, each instructor would enter the conversational circle with awareness of and honesty about their own possibilities, limitations, and boundaries.

These observations have only begun to scratch the surface of DEI-attentiveness as it relates to introductory preaching courses. Our research team's preliminary reports centered on analysis and interpretation of the data without much by way of prescriptive recommendations. However, in the spirit of robust accountability and action, this article has focused on the introductory homiletics course because of its critical importance as an entryway to students' engagement with the discipline, as well as the foundation it builds for future engagement with DEI in preaching. In tracking trends and examples among the introductory courses in the data sample, my aim has been to observe the ways that introductory courses in the sample have engaged in DEI-attentiveness and then to offer some preliminary frameworks for pedagogical dispositions and practices, both for the collective homiletics guild and for individual instructors. In concluding this first phase of our team's research with the realities of pedagogical realities and some beginning possibilities, we hope that our next phase of data collection and analysis will expand the guild's collective imagination for the DEI-attentive introductory syllabus.

³⁰ See in this issue, "Interview with Kenyatta Gilbert and HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Senior Advisors for 'Assessing Pedagogical Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Academy of Homiletics.'"