

Interview with Kenyatta Gilbert and HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Senior Advisors for “Assessing Pedagogical Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Academy of Homiletics”

In 2022, the Academy of Homiletics (AoH) received a grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion to undertake a project entitled “Assessing Pedagogical Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in the Academy of Homiletics.” The project included a survey of guild members and analysis of submitted syllabi to assess how homileticians have integrated DEI into their pedagogy and scholarship since 2019 when the organization undertook the effort to “unmask homiletical whiteness.”

Senior homileticians Kenyatta Gilbert and HyeRan Kim-Cragg served as accountability consultants for the project. Gilbert is the Dean and Professor of Homiletics at Howard University School of Divinity. He has been a member of the AoH since 2000, where he has served as recording secretary, vice president, and president of the Black Caucus. He also serves on the editorial board for the journal Homiletic.

Kim-Cragg is the Principal and the Timothy Memorial Church Professor of Preaching at Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto. She has been a member of AoH for fifteen years and has served on the Executive Committee since 2021. She also serves on the editorial board for the journal Homiletic.

In April 2025, project co-directors Leah Schade and Richard Voelz sat down with Gilbert and Kim-Cragg to reflect on their roles and the outcome of the research. In light of global movements of authoritarianism, white Christian nationalism in the U.S., challenges to theological education in progressive institutions, and the backlash against DEI, the conversation highlights the importance of continued research both within the AoH as well as other scholarly guilds.

Interview

Voelz: Tell us about your role in this project and how this work has aligned with your values and commitments as a homiletician and as a leader in theological education.

Kim-Cragg: I would say our roles were as advisors to both of you. You consulted with us on the grant proposal to Wabash, so we were part of this from the beginning. We were your sounding boards, listening deeply and attentively to the plans, ideas, goals, and the overall process. We were happy to support your leadership roles, especially when you were hiring four Ph.D. students from diverse backgrounds and guiding them through their work of analyzing the syllabi data. That was labor intensive work! After the data collection was completed, Kenyatta and I read the initial findings of the member survey and syllabi analysis. We had a conversation with both of you that shaped the panel sessions we presented at the 2022 and 2023 annual meetings.

Putting on my principal hat as the head of one of the largest mainline theological schools in Canada, I find that having a sounding board is essential in my role as a leader. When you have a robust idea, asking people to be your sounding board is a grounding exercise in leadership. So, we were glad to mentor you in that.

I also want to emphasize that the implementation of the project was equally important. Having the idea is brilliant, but if you are not executing it well, it will be a futile exercise. And then, implementing something from a project like this, especially policies at structural levels, is critical because it shapes the ethos of the institution. In the case of the Academy of Homiletics, it's about the people, the individual and collective bodies who are invested in this professional

organization. This goes back to the very nature of EDI¹ work. It's not ad hoc but embedded in and throughout what we do. What we've done at this initial stage has been a tremendous effort, and I was very honored to be a part of that.

Schade: I just want to follow up on that to say it was so helpful for Rich and me to know that we had senior homileticians who have lived through what it's like to experience the Academy going through this process. There were certain perspectives that we didn't have by virtue of our demographic locations. So, to be able to check with you and to count on your honesty and forthrightness was essential.

Gilbert: This study emerged on the heels of the Academy beginning this work of deconstructing homiletical whiteness, which I was glad to see. I'd worked with Sally Brown very closely in her leadership as president of the guild in 2019. Up to that point, it was all too common for minoritized scholars to take the lead on this work out of a defensive posture against whiteness. So, seeing non-minoritized scholars express genuine concern about the direction of the Academy was important to me. Both of you contributed to Lis Valle-Ruiz and Andrew Wymer's edited book, *Unmasking White Preaching*,² so situating your study to focus on pedagogy, specifically on how preaching is taught, is helping the Academy do more self-critical work.

It was also a big step for our members to submit their syllabi for analysis. There's a lot of vulnerability in that. This would not have happened had you all not been the kind of persons that you are, and I applaud that. At the time, there was a level of sensitivity that I had because I did not know you two as well. So, I had some questions, such as, why should a Black scholar respond to this request and engage in this work, if this is not a particular issue that is derived from the concern of a person who's minoritized? And what does it mean for white scholars to do the probing? What might be the motivation behind it? After having participated as an advisor with HyeRan, I now see that not only were you wanting a sounding board, but you were doing it out of genuine concern about how we transform an academy whose work, by and large, is Eurocentric and often unquestioned.

So, I felt it was very important that you would invite an African American male and an Asian Canadian woman to be a part of it. I saw your thoughtfulness and the respect you had toward your senior colleagues. So that gave me the impetus to say yes to your request and serve in this role.

Schade: Can I just add, David Jacobson had online town halls about DEI when he was president in 2020. Kenyatta, he asked you and me to convene one of the small groups about "teaching praxis for solidarity." You and I met ahead of time and thought about how we would structure this gathering and the kinds of questions we were going to ask. Then we recorded what the group discussed and our recommendations for the Academy going forward. But we knew we needed some metrics to help us understand where we are now and how things are changing. Rich reached out to me and said, "Hey, if you want to do this, I'm with you on it." So, there's been this trajectory over the last six years that has led us to this point. Now that we have this data, we've reached a milestone, but we're not finished. We're thinking about where we go from here.

Voelz: To build on what Leah said, it was vitally important for us not to allow this work to fall at the feet of minoritized scholars. That was a core value for us. And I really wanted us to do some broad work as a collective body so that we would have something to show for this effort. This

¹ EDI is equity, diversity, and inclusion, another arrangement of the DEI acronym.

² Lis Valle-Ruiz and Andrew Wymer, eds., *Unmasking White Preaching: Racial Hegemony, Resistance, and Possibilities in Homiletics* (Lexington Books, 2022).

project is going beyond theoretical papers or individual kinds of work in people's schools. So, I think you've named well what we're up to as well as our hopes and values for the project.

Schade: What are your observations about the study? What did you learn from this work? What things surprised you, or what was affirmed for you?

Kim-Cragg: This is a beautiful symbiotic combination of research, teaching, and service. Each area matters and they should complement each other. That's what happened – it was about teaching, but recognizing that teaching can be improved with research. And research has to go through the rigors of publication and engagement with the members of the Academy. We've accomplished a lot, but it's not about glorifying the work. It was a *kairos* moment. Even though many schools were making DEI a priority, there has also been some pushback. So, all of this ripened at the time when our own Academy focused on the theme of dismantling whiteness through our annual conference, workgroup papers, and journal articles. We've come to understand that these issues are a core part of who we are and what we do as the Academy of Homiletics.

What was eye-opening for me, however, was how slow this work is. The research showed that course assignments, textbooks, and other resources people are using are still very white-dominant. Even the issue of inclusive language is confounding. I mean, the feminist movements have been going for more than fifty years. But our spiritual trailblazers in faith, like Julian of Norwich, were using feminized imagery to describe God. And yet we are still working on accepting this in the 21st century.

So, things are still pretty bad in terms of DEI, but we are pushing hard for it at the same time. And there have been some accomplishments and improvements. I want to recognize both realities to help us clarify our work without completely despairing about the situation.

The other thing I want to talk about is the complexity of different languages in our classrooms. The survey showed that many of our students' operational language is more than English. So, I'm interested to see how this bilingual and non-Anglocentric homiletics is at play in classroom dynamics. How do you guide students to craft a sermon that is not in English? This is a huge area that we have not yet delved into as a guild, but we need to pay attention to it. This is not just the work of international students or faculty members. It's everybody's work because the overall historical landscape is still very much white Anglo-dominant. Those who benefit from this system must take this reality much more seriously.

Gilbert: For me, there were things that many of us already know, but it was good to have them affirmed by the data. And doing the presentations for our guild at the annual meetings was important. It was a lot of data and very comprehensive, but even given the time constraints, I felt that it was digestible. And we made space for responses and discussion in terms of the lens of access.

I was pleasantly surprised that you both were so committed to the project and that you left no stone unturned. And it was presented in a way that was aesthetically appealing and appropriate. I thought it would have been enough just to focus exclusively on race and ethnicity. But the breadth of the study was both surprising and helpful because it brought in other marginalized voices. The study expanded our conversations beyond the issue of race. One thing I wonder about is whether an ongoing discussion around the issues gets lost because of the infrequency of our guild meetings. This was a strong descriptive and empirical engagement and analysis of issues around DEI. But there are many questions being raised from this work that have stayed with me, and I hope we have more opportunities to discuss them as a guild.

Voelz: As you're seeing the present and future policies of the current U.S. presidential administration and their effects nationally and internationally, what do you think this will mean for the DEI work we're doing in the Academy?

Gilbert: I think our work is so important for preparing preachers to proclaim and lift up the priestly aspects of the work of preaching, as well as justice matters. These things are converging in serious ways. Folks who have lost their jobs will need care, and that can happen in congregational spaces. Our work is important in preparing students and learners to address these critical matters. Because I'm not so sure that the current literature adequately prepares doctoral advisors for teaching students how to help their folks engage in justice issues.

The relevance of our work could not be more timely. I got a call this morning from one of my best friends who said he's going to lose half of his company [due to job cuts from the White House administration]. It makes no sense. So, what does a preacher do and say in this moment? For us to have data that speaks to the implications of DEI, it's a *kairos* moment, as HyeRan said.

Schade: In some ways, looking back from where we are now, it seems like we did this research in a different country. I mean, obviously it's the same country and the latent authoritarianism was always there underneath the racism and xenophobia. But now it has full rein. But this data gives us a baseline of what it was like before Trump 2.0. And when we conduct the survey again in another two or three years, we'll have some really interesting comparative data. To have a snapshot of what it was like then and what it will be like in the future will be very important not just for our guild, but for academia more broadly. Especially regarding academic freedom and the erasure of anything other than white history, what they're doing is going against DEI and all minoritized communities – the very work we've undertaken to better our guild. This project will help to bear witness to what we've tried to do.

HyeRan, I'm wondering how you're seeing things as our neighbor to the north, having your heart and mind both in Korea and in Canada? This country has now made itself your country's enemy. What is that like for you? What are you seeing?

Kim-Cragg: It's unprecedented. Our countries have been close friends and that history is being thrown away. It's hard to grasp. Even people in Canada are losing jobs [due to actions of the U.S.]. The anxiety level is even worse than what we experienced during COVID in some ways. So, I think that what we're doing, even with this interview and this special *Homiletic* edition, is remarkable. I want to cherish this moment because I think the future is going to be very difficult.

In my principal's address to students, faculty, and staff at the beginning of 2025, I noted that we are starting a second quarter of the century. It's a new beginning in some ways. But I think we're going to experience a lot more change and crises over the next twenty-five years. Certainly, the ultra-right wing, populist, fascist, tyrannical political forces are going to fly very high. This is happening around the world and is going to result in many negative legacies that will last for two or three decades. So, the message is that we need to buckle up and be very resilient. We must not lose hope. Keep the torch and the flame of hope alive so that it does not go out.

It's also important to note that this is the 60th anniversary of the Academy of Homiletics. We began in 1965, so this is the 60th year of our guild. As we do this work, we need to celebrate, to recollect, and to remember the contributions of our trailblazers and our ancestors. And this research project helps us to think ahead to the next sixty years as well.

Schade: One of the things I'm hearing from both of you is that it's about the relationships that we have built within our guild that are going to be very important in sustaining this work. I think there's going to be a lot of pressure from some of our institutions to dismantle the work of DEI.

The work we're doing is going to be targeted, so we need to have each other's backs as a guild and support each other when that pressure comes. We'll need to encourage and maybe even admonish each other at times to hold the line. At the same time, we need to be in solidarity with each other and keep doing this work, which will be so vital over the next several years.

Voelz: With that future in mind, let's think about next steps. When we're getting ready to do the next round of this research, what are the questions that you think we should be pursuing?

Kim-Cragg: I reviewed the PowerPoints that you so beautifully presented, and I think the data shows some important next steps. First, those who are benefiting from the system need to carry the load. There's no other way around it. So, how do we encourage and motivate both senior and junior members who have a little more luxury and privilege to engage in this work?

The other piece we need to pay attention to is the right-wing pushback we will receive. Obviously, these oppressive forces are nothing new. We know misogyny and racism well. But the forces of neoliberal capitalism are aligning with authoritarianism in such dangerous ways now. Therefore, intersectional analysis and the kind of interlocking approaches to homiletics are even more urgent. We'll need to continue rekindling these aspects of preaching that engage scripture while looking at these aspects of our world.

Also, we're going to be dealing with tremendous collective and individual trauma because of what is happening. Preaching and trauma was the theme that David Jacobsen chose for the 2020 meeting, and it's going to need continued attention. The trauma is intersectional. There is ecological and climate trauma, trauma from populist movements, and so many more. People are genuinely fearful, so what are the resources for preaching that we can tap into?

I think the Bible can be helpful because from Genesis to Revelation, we see that what was written was, in some ways, a response to trauma. Every book was written in the midst of exile or occupation. So, the Bible can give us resources in terms of models of resilience and provide us with warnings and wisdom for preaching. I'm glad that you'll be doing more qualitative and ethnographic research. It might be interesting to talk with people who are willing to share about their work in this regard.

Gilbert: I'm thinking along the lines of displacement and the gross materialism that blinds us. For example, a city like Washington, D.C., where I teach, is experiencing aggressive gentrification. At the same time, I want to highlight the importance of interpreting things at a more granular level and how these forces impact human life. So, I think that more critiquing or at least reflecting on socioeconomics and preaching might be helpful. There may also be some fruit in thinking about institutional closures that have impacted our guild and some of our colleagues.

Part of me also says that a guild as diverse as ours could speak in a meaningful way to the Evangelical Homiletics Society about diversity, equity, and inclusion. How would our data inform another guild, spur conversation, and open eyes to look at this information we've collected? How can the data we've gathered and interpreted be used more broadly?

Voelz: Leah and I had always hoped that this project would be a model for other guilds such as the Society of Christian Ethics, the American Academy of Religion, or the Society for Biblical Literature. For example, our data shows that LGBTQIA+ members are not feeling very safe and that their voices and concerns are not fully engaged. So that would be a point of caution if we were to consider collaboration with other guilds. But just sharing our findings with the executive boards of these guilds and with the minoritized scholars within these groups might be helpful.

Gilbert: Right, it would open their eyes to the reality. Not that we have cornered the market, but we have members of this guild who are also members of other guilds as well. So, this work could spark meaningful conversations in the theological academy writ large.

Schade: Before we wrap up, um, I just want to mention that I recently saw a graphic where it showed that the enrollment for seminaries that push a white Christian nationalist agenda is much higher than for those that are within the progressive Christian realm. So, we have our work cut out for us.

Kenyatta, you were mentioning institutional closures earlier. This means that for some of us, it is a matter of survival. As we're seeing enrollments in our progressive MDiv programs plummet while skyrocketing in those conservative seminaries, I think that maintaining the faithful remnant is very important. We must hold the line and say that this is how we understand what it means to be the beloved community of God in this moment. We're not going to obey in advance, and we're not going to bend the knee. We're following the teachings of Christ and the prophets.

Gilbert: Exactly. I really want to encourage you all in the work that you're doing and to continue doing it. It will be important to stay current and collect more data as the years go on. As you take the next steps, think about what other voices you want to join you in the work. My concern is for the next generation of scholars. I'm beyond the midpoint in my career now, so I think this is the time for our guild and our schools to "do the work that our souls must have," as Katie Cannon has said.

Kim-Cragg: It's been a real delight and honor to have this conversation. Thank you for allowing this format of a collegial conversation for this article.

Voelz: This has been a generative conversation. We're so grateful for the collegiality and the mentoring that you've given to us. It's been invaluable.