PREACHING TO THE EMPTY PEW: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES IN PREACHING AMONG SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST PASTORS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SINGAPORE

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Abstract

Preaching is fundamental to the ministry of a pastor. It is the heart of pastoral service anywhere. Challenges in preaching and novel approaches in homiletical arts have been extensively studied. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a new paradigm to the field of homiletics that is worthy of investigation. This study is a pilot project investigating the experience of Seventh-day Adventist pastors preaching during the pandemic. The loss of human interaction, adaptation to technology, the change of duration, and emerging personal stress due to numerous limitations in preaching during the pandemic are the experience that participants expressed in the study. These findings highlight the need for balancing the dynamic relationship between humans and technology while providing a reminder of one the most critical aspect of homiletics, and that is the preacher themselves.

Keywords: *Homiletics, Pastors, COVID-19 Pandemic, Technology*

INTRODUCTION

Preaching can be considered the most distinctive career identification of a pastor. In some cases, the pastor's title is known as a preacher. The homiletical duty of a pastor has been integral to the work of pastors as far as history has recorded. The purpose of preaching is described as the media of the gospel proclamation, a platform for theological education, and dissemination of the Christian mission.[1] Furthermore, preaching is the platform where the theological position of the Christian faith is established in the form of public communication—in short, preaching lies in the heart of Christian religious practices and beyond[2].

While preaching as a field of study may be well studied throughout the years, the church continues to adapt to the evolution of human society. The continual change in how mass communication works in public ignites the need to make preaching more relevant to the modern world. Emerging preaching styles and delivery methods had been noticed and creative communication of the Christian faith had become part of the discussion in the field of homiletics. Furthermore, the introduction of the internet has made online preaching a common practice in many churches. Many churches nowadays provide an online, live-streaming service where the preacher can have their audience from across the world without having to attend the physical services. A preaching in one part of the world can reach out to

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[1] Hennie Pieterse and Cas Wepener, "Preaching: An Initial Theoretical Exploration," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (April 20, 2021), accessed November 23, 2022, http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/6501.

[2] Wann Fanwar, *The Gourmet Pulpit: Preaching With Panache and Power* (Thailand: Institute Press, 2006).

audiences that may live at the opposite geographical location than the preacher. The internet radically changes how pastors reach out to their audience in their preaching.

Despite all the changes and adaption of preaching in society, the current COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes in how religious services affect the way preaching is done. All the previous adaptations in preaching had focused on developing delivery techniques and style, rhetoric, and hermeneutical adaptations. However, all of these shift remains in the context of physical preaching in the church where live, physical attendees are expected to be the audience.

The whole paradigm of preaching shifted significantly with COVID-19. The pandemic forced church services to be closed down. Furthermore, to run their services entirely online without the presence of their audience on-site. For the first time in the history of homiletics, a preacher is preaching to an empty pew. At the same time, their audience listens to the sermon from another place in a significant global phenomenon.

This research explores the experience of pastors in preaching during COVID-19 in Singapore. Preaching will remain an integral part of pastoral ministry. A growing pool of knowledge in understanding how preaching adapts to environmental changes is critical in helping pastors remain effective in providing their primary service in ministry while reducing potential hurdles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Preaching in the Modern World

Preaching in the modern world has been identified as an emerging research field in homiletics. The shift in preaching to adapt to modern society emerged as early as the 60s with the idea that preaching needs to be more sensitive to the need and context of the listener.[3] Traditionally, preaching is about extending the message of God to His people. However, with the emerging concern, preaching is about making preaching relevant to the audience.[4] The shift in homiletical concern also shifts the research attention to methods that will provide the best environment for preachers to reach out to their audience. However, some theologians reminded us that the need for adaptation to the modern world should not diminish the theological soundness of the Christian message.[5] Instead, the full proclamation of the Biblical message must remain a critical element of preaching.

The development of homiletics that gives more attention to the immediate context of the audience naturally moves researchers to explore how homiletics can be relevant to the modern world. In terms of language use, preachers then utilize a meta-discursive approach to fit into the listener's needs.[6] The emerging trend in discussing how preaching need to be audience-sensitive eventually leads to the issue of the use of technology in preaching, particularly the use of the internet in preaching. While contrasting views naturally emerged, the internet is perceived as a potentially powerful tool for efficiently reaching out to the mass.[7]

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[3] J. Dorcas Gordon, "Stewarding the Mysteries of Faith: Preaching the Gospel in Twenty-First-Century Canada," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 30, no. Supplement 1 (January 2015): 81–92.

[4] Hans Malmström, "Engaging the Congregation: The Place of Metadiscourse in Contemporary Preaching," *Applied Linguistics* 37, no. 4 (August 2016): 561–582; see also Chan Heo, "Preaching with the Congregation: Appropriating John McClure's Homiletical Theory for a Korean Context" (Dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 2015), https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/37438079.pdf.

[5] Oscar Lontoh, "Engaging Secularization with Expository Preaching," *Didaskalia* 2, no. 1 (2019): 19–28.

[6] Malmström, "Engaging the Congregation."

[7] Tripp Hudgins, "Preaching Online," *Anglican Theological Review* 101, no. 1 (December 2019): 79–88.

The Impact of Technology on Human Interaction

Technology and its impact on how people interact have been the research subject for quite some time. Distance and time have been shortened with the aid of technology. However, on the other side, online interactions reduce the time people spend in face-to-face meetings.[8] The social shift caused by technology also includes how areas of humanities such as performing arts changed. Musical performance is one of the areas where technology has caused a significant impact on how human-technology interaction works. A term known as *appification*[9] describes how musical play had been heavily influenced and relied on application to provide musical pieces. Such a shift in how technology is used creates concern that technology may overtake the core elements of humanity and replace them with synthetic forms such as artificial intelligence.[10] While it may sound like an overstretching theory, it is plausible to imagine that one day, sermons in the church will be delivered by a computer instead of a preacher.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Phenomenological Approach: Rationale

A phenomenological approach is utilized for the study with several rationales. First, the phenomenological approach focuses more on investigating the lived experience of the participants instead of explaining the causes of the problem.[11] In the context of the present research, the epistemological value of it likely comes from filling up the knowledge gap in the subject due to the minimum preliminary study related to the topic and context of the research. Second, the phenomenological approach provides room for participants' in-depth personal expression.[12] Since the research aims to explore the participants' experience in preaching, in-depth information is necessary to establish robust data.

Data Collection

Before the research takes place, the researcher applies for official approval from the Singapore Adventist Conference (SAC) Administrative Committee. Once approval was granted, the researcher approached each participant individually to discuss the research details, including the research design, procedure, and objective. Each participant receives a written information sheet as well.

Data were collected through interviews. The researcher set up a secured teleconference meeting room and arranged a meeting time with each participant separately. The interview was designed as semi-structured, and a question guide was provided as the baseline for further exploration based on the topic of interest. Where appropriate, the

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[8] Junko Yamamoto and Simeon Ananou, "Humanity in the Digital Age: Cognitive, Social, Emotional, and Ethical Implications" (2015): 18.

[9] The term itself is yet to be added as an official English word. However, academics had identified the phenomenon to be empirical. See more: Kai Tuuri and Oskari Koskela, "Understanding Human–Technology Relations Within Technologization and Appification of Musicality," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (April 21, 2020): 416.

[10] Adit Gupta and Ravi Tomar, "Technology vs Humanity, a Detailed Lookback," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2020), accessed November 23, 2022, https://www.ssrn.com/abstract=3521900.

[11] Jamie L. Penner and Susan E. McClement, "Using Phenomenology to Examine the Experiences of Family Caregivers of Patients with Advanced Head and Neck Cancer: Reflections of a Novice Researcher," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 7, no. 2 (June 2008): 92–101.

[12] Janice Gidman, "Listening to Stories: Valuing Knowledge from Patient Experience," *Nurse Education in Practice* 13, no. 3 (May 2013): 192–196.

researcher will prompt each participant to give additional details to their answer to expand their responses with more relevant insight.

The interview process was recorded in the form of audio and video material. Each participant gave their consent for the researcher to store these materials in a secured folder to which only the researcher has access.

Participants

All participants are SDA pastors currently working for the SAC and holding long-term residency status in Singapore, either as Singaporean citizens, permanent residents, or long-term work visa holders. All participants joining the research were over the age of 21 and were full-time, paid employees of the SDA church. Six participants were interviewed for the study. These 6 participants represent 85% of all the English-speaking pastors working for SAC. In the last three years, all participants were serving in one of the SDA Churches in Singapore; thus, they have been fully engaged with the dynamics of the church ever since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019.

Data Analysis

The theoretical framework for analysis reflects Colaizzi's steps of descriptive phenomenological research.[13] The researcher transcribed the recorded data into written form. Afterward, the researcher conducts multiple reading of the manuscript and initiate the coding process in each reading sequence. The choice of code did not follow any specific guidelines. Instead, the code is identified according to the expression captured in the manuscript. In the final reading sequence, the researcher compiles the code into several clusters following codes that show similar expressions to each other.

Results

Based on the information gathered from the interview and coding process, the overarching theme that remains consistent throughout the data revolves around the theme of change. All participants described spontaneously how their preaching routine experienced significant changes due to the restriction in church service because of the pandemic. These responses to change can be clustered into four main significant themes, as shown below.

Change in Preacher-Audience Relationship:

The most prominent expression captured from the interview is how pastors experience significant changes in their relationship with members regarding preaching. Pastors felt the lack of interaction between a speaker and their audience.

> **Pastor K:** "Yeah, I think the changes will be, you know i guess the idea of preaching towards the pew, empty pew, we are learning to preach without having all these feedback that we want. We watch we see members respond, we feel more energetic, to preach…

A camera is now replacing this interaction between the preacher and their audience.

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[13] Rosie Morrow, Alison Rodriguez, and Nigel King, "Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Method," *The Psychologist* 28, no. 8 (2015): 643–644.

…because when you are preaching to the camera, you actually have to have more eye contact towards the camera. You cannot watch anywhere else except the camera. Because the camera is your audience…

…Yes, if you are focusing on the camera, then the people behind you, you cannot do both. So that time during the live streaming time our focus always in the camera…

…Its different, I have to say. I have to preach to a non-congregation, it's definitely harder, because there is no feedback except the camera, and the level of focus that you need to have been different. So, pastors may find it joyful because, it depends on personality, my personality is with people so when there are no people, you won't have feedback so the sermon can be dry."

Pastor T: "I have to preach to chairs, for a while. That it was really hard. Not seeing people's expression is actually very hard. Because i preach according to how is see people react and sometimes even change the direction if I have seen the point is not going through. But i could not i could not see anything I just have to base it on my faith and preach to what i think that hear it…

As I said it's hard to preach to chair, but at the same time its good not to have to preach to people, you just say what you have to say, you don't have to be affected by people's expression or reaction"

"i think, i have been thinking about it you know, then suddenly all of the sudden, you asked yourself who is your audience, and the temptation is i have to preach to the entire world because now its online.

The change in preacher-audience also being expressed in that their audience now has the choice to attend the service remotely as what being described below:

Pastor H: Of course, that part is that some members quite picky, even though they are able to come they just choose to just watch it online.

Pastor S: It has forced me to re-evaluate what makes an engaging sermon, whenever everybody stop in church pre-pandemic and listening to you they can't go anywhere, but there are some people in church no matter you preach a great sermon or a terrible, they will thank you, but now right you can tell, when your streaming number go down, people are clicking close, of your sermon, it will tell you where does your number goes up, what is the numbers go in and go out, so you are fighting with online, anyone can click off and go do something else, your sermon better be short and engaging…

When people are not there, you preach on camera is very different from preaching when people can look at you, can tell that you *(the audience)* are listening or not, they laugh at your jokes, it's just different.

However, the interview also unveils that the preacher-audience interaction during sermons is a positive change for certain pastors, specifically in reading audience responses during the sermon.

> **Pastor R:** "I remembered some members told me that I preach better much better on the camera than in from of people, and I realize it's because all I set up an imagination on how the people are very happy and supportive and so it reduces the tension and anxiety that I have. So it's different when you see people and their reaction towards you such as when they are sleeping or become motionless, I can imagine all of that, enthusiastically so i will say that pandemic change my preaching because i had the opportunity to try something different to preach in front of the camera instead of people and i had the opportunity to realize to not to be too affected by people, because I realize I am looking too much on people"

The concern over the audience's response to online preaching is how the audience perceives the preacher through the screen.

> **Pastor M**: Because I have to speak to the mic and the camera thinking that there will be people listening to me, I have to be very confident that there are many people listening to me and also taking notes, and also its all recorded and it's all on the website. And it can always be pulled back. So, a lot of conciseness very cautions in the usage of words, and whatever it may be. Because it's in the media, people do not want to look upon the screen, the small screen, and the phone and this and that.

Change in Preacher – Technology Relationship:

The second overarching theme that emerged from the interview was the role of technology in preaching during the pandemic. Preachers' adaptation to technology had been challenging in the earlier stage. Most of them underwent some adaptation process despite some of them having integrated some form of technology into their preaching practice. Specific expressions of the adaptation process are shown below.

> **Pastor K**: And you know the things happen so sudden, at the beginning of the pandemic we were not ready and prepared for it. So, we have a low-quality video. We used the webcam at that time so it was a very low quality, and it affected definitely the preaching style, and we were not used to all of those technology and you know YouTube will cut off suddenly and many things we experience at that time, and if i am preaching that day because that time we cannot allow two people. Because i was quite affected in a way that because all things weren't sure the sound wasn't working many things happened, so it's really impacted my preaching, because i wasn't able to focus, at the beginning part of it.

Despite the challenge, the participant did notice that technology provided practical value to his preaching:

> **Pastor K:** One thing about technology is that you can go to YouTube and see if people are actually listening to you or not. So, it's good feedback. Because it will be a drop. It's a graph.

Consistent expressions of how the preacher relates to technology remain throughout the interview. Each participant expressed a similar description in their response, as shown below.

> **Pastor H:** I think purchase of equipment, at first at home, then at church upgrading of the system, make sure the internet is stable. You know the internet is stable until the worship hits. Then the internet doesn't become stable. Then learning all the software on how to use all the streaming software. I think overall it is good, where your effort can reach further but of course it all very relevant to how much you go and promote it or leverage it. But also, for members who are sick or overseas they want to watch your sermon they can just watch it.

> **Pastor R**: Yes i rely more a lot of technology, we bought and we invest into our streaming system, we actually have a cut of a V-Stream which allow us to easily stream us to Facebook and Youtube which make the bar to do the streaming really much reduced, so we pay money for this kind of things, you used to do stream a lot, you likely use OBS, all this kind of trouble, we go and buy software to reduce the bar so that more people can do it easily without me.

> **Pastor M:** in terms of further technology i think it's not a must but i think it's a good thing. It's actually an enhancement so it means we won't die without but it's actually it's a good enhancement…

> so i think pandemic change the way preach because of using cameras and technology.

> **Pastor T:** It is not relying more on it but using it sufficiently. But i also feel that there are people, who listened to you as you share stories with your gestures and your facial expressions with your personal words and your audio is also important. Because i feel if i rely more on the pictures and the video part of it i will not be able to develop preaching skills also…

Also, with the technology, we have the supporters, such as the internet line, the Wi-Fi router, and the people working with it. They have to support them.

> **Pastor S:** For sure, without the computer, the camera, the feedback, you know, i could not do a lot, i cannot get the message out to anybody. So that aspect of technology is definitely important.

Change in Preacher – Sermon Duration Relationship:

Several participants expressed that due to the pandemic restriction, the time has become a critical factor that needs to be changed.

> **Pastor K**: during this pandemic was that it cut short my sermon to 25 minutes. i used to preach almost, i started, my sermon is always short about 30 - 35, so through years it becomes longer and longer, getting to 40-45, when the pandemic hit i got through, i tried to cut, cut, cut. So my sermon now is about 25, 30 minutes each.

> **Pastor S**: last time, i can go for 40 minutes, now no matter what i cut to 30 minutes, because beyond that i know it's hard to catch people attention, and it's harder to preach a short sermon, than a long sermon, so after that i have to spent a lot of time to reduce the size of the sermon, to really streamline it so it can be book and it can cover what needs to be covered and still be engaging and short and concise. And i get some good feedback on that, that is good and people like short sermons generally.

> **Pastor M**: Because it's in the media, people do not want to look upon the screen, the small screen, and the phone and this and that. It has to be time consciousness, and the preparations and the quick movements and there are need of some of the immediate needs and power point, all of this become very crucial and i tried to incorporate all of this into my preaching.

Preacher's Challenges:

Lastly, some participants expressed their challenges in preaching during the pandemic. Most of the challenges are related to the stress due to preaching.

> **Pastor K**: I did feel it during circuit breaker, but as things improves the easier it gets, the more people return to church, the easier for preach if people are there as compared when people are not there

> **Pastor S**: I will say initially preaching should, face shield was terrible, I hated the face shield. The saliva splatter, everything is shiny, you can't really see, after a while it gets smelly, it's terrible, i have to preach with it was terrible.

> **Pastor R**: I think i am more stressed in preaching during the pandemic, because i think last time because of the frequencies and there are many more things to do in the pandemic we have to run as one man show normally you preach freely now you have to be concerned about the sound, the video, i am talking when you are preaching at home, then you have to be concerned with the editing, if you need to edit anything for the sermon, of course we can say we have to give to other people now i did eventually give to other people but it take time, but i think it's more stressful.

> **Pastor M**: Stresses are there. it is unlike when you are speaking to people physically. Virtually, the stress is because you have to be very careful if what you say reaches people and there are, you don't know who is listening to you, and those people who are listening to you. You don't know if they are accepting you, if they are in line with you, so all those things you have to assume and some of the assumptions are not real, it can be a fake assumption, it's really a virtual word we are trying our best to do it. So, these are the stress, we want to be perfect and good enough trying to work hard, with the time and other stresses.

DISCUSSION

The result showed that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed the preaching ministry of all participants. The radical shift in how worship service is conducted during the

pandemic forced all participants to take a significant reframing in adapting to the infection control set to mitigate the transmission of the virus. Interestingly enough, the primary expression that all participants expressed is how the loss is mainly felt in their interactions with their audience. The finding indicates that preaching is a social engagement. Human aspects such as emotional connection, physical interaction, and direct verbal communication remain critical regardless of the advancement of technology. The human part of preaching is critical to the understanding of homiletics since it shows the pastor's role in the church's life. The study also provides limited evidence that the homiletical role of pastors is not easily replaced by technology. Such findings challenge the present understanding of technology in the area of public performance in which *appification* has been observed to overtake the human side of the performer.[14] Nevertheless, the result of the research cannot be interpreted that a physical presence of a preacher is all that is needed for effective preaching to occur. Instead, a preacher needs to be able to engage the audience to allow them to share nearly equal experiences in the preaching process.[15]

Comparatively, technology has its unique role in the preaching experience of pastors during the COVID-19 pandemic as well. To a certain extent, utilizing technology in preaching is irreplaceable. As shown, all preachers have to rely upon some form of technological assistance. Mainly live streaming equipment. Effective communication requires

The study unveils the dynamics of the human side of homiletics, how it interacts with technology and how pastors navigate through both aspects of preaching. The finding suggests that pastors likely will not be able to focus only on one area while neglecting the other. On one side, despite the distancing measurement due to COVID, the importance of human interaction remains critical to the art of preaching. However, on the other side, the pandemic inevitably demands that pastors utilize technology to ensure the homiletical message is delivered effectively to the audience. In the context of this research, one specific area of further investigation can be considered in exploring the relationship between technologies and preaching. Identifying non-verbal communication has been shown to form a specific challenge concerning communicating the message using technology.[16] As shown in the result, all pastors did express some form of limitations in expressing non-verbal communication and gesture while preaching online.

The last section of the result perhaps puts the complete picture of the experience into centralizing the focus on the pastor. Without a preacher, there is no sermon. In other words, the pastor remains the main factor for effective homiletics during the pandemic. As indicated in the result, the struggle and challenge pastors endure in providing a good sermon confirmed that the pastor's factors synthesize both challenges, named technology and the human need of social interaction aspect of it.

Therefore, enhancing pastoral skills in both human engagement and technical aptitude for their preaching should be the focus of the innovative approach to developing homiletics in a pandemic. The task and responsibilities lie heavier in ensuring that the preacher is equipped well rather than focusing on just enhancing the technicalities. However, the pastor should remain grounded in the most fundamental essence of preaching.

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[14] Tuuri and Koskela, "Understanding Human–Technology Relations Within Technologization and Appification of Musicality."

[15] Heo, "Preaching with the Congregation: Appropriating John McClure's Homiletical Theory for a Korean Context."

[16] Mollie A. Ruben et al., "Is Technology Enhancing or Hindering Interpersonal Communication? A Framework and Preliminary Results to Examine the Relationship Between Technology Use and Nonverbal Decoding Skill," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (January 15, 2021): 611670.

That is to proclaim the biblical message instead of overly concerned on human interaction or utilizing technology.

CONCLUSION

Preaching during the pandemic carries a unique challenge for the preacher. The physical limitation of human interaction due to the pandemic creates a challenge for pastors in maintaining human interaction with their participants. These challenges require pastors to rely on technology to enhance their preaching. However, technology only functions as a tool for extending communication. As the primary communicator, the pastor remains the most crucial element of preaching regardless of circumstances.

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