



Trends among Lutheran Preachers

DAVID S. LUECKE

*Royal Redeemer Lutheran Church
North Royalton, Ohio*

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO PREACHING IN THE CURRENT PRACTICE OF LUTHERAN pastors? Are there any trends that are likely to become stronger in the future? The length of sermons is a suggestive starting point. Are they getting shorter or longer? Both, according to data gathered through a “Survey of Practices of Lutheran Preachers” sponsored by this journal.

The norm for Lutherans is a sermon of less than 15 minutes, as reported by two out of three preachers. One way to spot a trend is to look at practices of newer preachers, in this case with less than ten years in ministry. They show a trend toward shorter sermons. Younger preachers are also less inclined to view the sermon as the most important part of the service.¹

Another way to spot a trend is to identify those recognized as trendsetters and see what they are doing. Those so identified for this study were more than twice as likely as all others to see the sermon as the most important part.² And their ser-

¹Eighty percent of respondents with less than 10 years experience said they preach less than 15 minutes, compared to 62% for those who started earlier. Twenty-four percent of the younger view the sermon as the most important part, compared to 31% for the older.

²Sixty-seven percent of the trendsetters saw the sermon as the most important part of the service, compared to 30% of the random sample.

DAVID S. LUECKE, a Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod pastor, is the author of The Other Side of Worship: Reclaiming Our Heritage of Diversity (1995).

A recent survey supports the hypothesis that commitment to more effective communication leads to departures from traditional Lutheran approaches to preaching and worship.

mons are longer. Two-thirds preach more than 15 minutes, compared to one-third in a random sample.

A four-page instrument with 54 questions went to two separate groups. The random sampling was of ELCA and LCMS pastors in roughly the same two-thirds to one-third proportion as the actual count in those church bodies. One hundred sixty-nine completed the questionnaire for a response rate of 33%. The size of this sample is sufficient to describe perspectives and practices representative of both denominations.

The second group, 49 in number, received the same questionnaire differently marked. This selection was deliberately biased to represent “trendsetters,” pastors doing interesting and innovative ministry, as determined by a small panel of Lutherans whose travel and ministry brought them into contact with churches and pastors across the country. The bias was toward contemporary worship and growth. Nineteen responded.

I. PREACHING PERSPECTIVE

The hypothesis of the study is that commitment to more effective communication can lead to departures from the Lutheran norm in approach to preaching and worship by placing greater emphasis on the needs and interests of the hearers and participants.

Would you agree or disagree with this statement: “Good preaching just needs to present the word of God clearly”? Or this one: “The needs and interests of the hearers should be the primary concern in developing a sermon”?

The first statement would be typical for a “proclaimer.” To preach is to proclaim—the two words come from the same Latin root. The challenge is to present the word of God clearly and convincingly. The task is to start with the word for that day and to work toward application for the hearers. As one stated this perspective in his own words, “The Gospel, properly preached, will address the needs (perceived and otherwise) of the hearers.”

Establishing the word for the day is the purpose of the lectionary and its selection of passages that set the weekly theme. The pre-selection is meant to assure a balanced presentation of the full scriptural message over a year’s course.

The Lutheran preaching heritage is heavily shaped by the lectionary. In the random sample, 86% of the preachers identified lectionary preaching as their most characteristic approach. One might ask whether Lutherans even recognize any other approach.

There are others, of course. One is expository, working Sunday after Sunday through a portion of scripture, typically a book of the Bible. Expository preaching is also a proclaimer’s approach, since it starts with pre-selection of the text. Eight percent of the large Lutheran sampling identified expository as their most characteristic approach.

Topical is a third approach. First comes selection of a topic or theme, which then guides selection of scriptural texts that relate to it. Only 4% of the general sample identified this as their most characteristic approach.

The hypothesis of the study, again, is that commitment to more effective communication can lead to departures from the Lutheran norm in approach to preaching and worship. Such a shift from the norm is clearly evident in the preaching perspective of the designated trendsetters. Compared to only 4% in the general sample, two-thirds of these trendsetters identified topical preaching as their usual approach. Ninety percent said they grouped themes into a multi-part series several times, compared to 23% in the general sample. Compared to that group, trendsetters were half again as likely to agree that needs and interests of the hearers should be the primary concern.

Here are some of the series noted by trendsetters: six weeks on “Building a Marriage that Will Last,” eight weeks on “Opposites that Attract,” four weeks on “Your Turn,” eight weeks on “The Balanced Life,” four weeks on “All About Anger,” three on “Repacking your Bags,” four on “Where Is God When You Need Him?” three weeks on “Happy New You,” three on “How to Love a Woman,” three on “Life-Changing Conversations,” five on “Big Questions of Faith.”

Several comments serve to summarize well the perspective of the many who explained their preference for the lectionary approach. “I use the lectionary because it covers a wide range of scripture. Lectionary keeps me honest so I cannot just use my ‘favorite’ texts. I am exposed to and encouraged to preach on a wide range of texts and topics. I trust God can speak through lectionary texts.” Another adds to such discipline a very practical consideration. “I still haven’t ‘shaken free’ of the sound advice that the lectionary will cover what is necessary and keep the preacher from sliding off track. On a very pragmatic level, it also is what many of my preaching resources follow.”

Additional practical advantages cited for lectionary preaching include ability to study texts with others, as one said he does weekly with neighboring pastors from a variety of denominations. Similarly for another, “I value our historical heritage via the lectionary.” Of course, the lectionary makes coordinating music and readers easier for months ahead. This approach can also keep in front of people the text on the bulletin back cover.

The preference for expository preaching was explained this way: “I think the church needs to hear the Word in context, not cut up by the lectionary.” “Most people in the congregation have poor theological/biblical education. They enjoy learning more about the Bible and its meaning.”

Expository and topical can work together, as expressed in this comment, “I use topical when I want to teach to a perceived and more immediate need, and expository when I want to teach a key concept that will lay out foundational truths.”

Here are some other explanations of preference for topical preaching. “The preacher is prophet and must apply God’s word to the needs of the hearer—should

be both loyal to God's word and to his people." "Topical is often easier to 'be where parishioners are.'" One respondent noted that topical "allows for bridges to be built between scripture and people's needs, and it requires disciplined development."

For another preacher it means "freedom, relevance, flexibility, effective communication, discipleship development (more 'fruit' on the tree in my experience with topical sermons)." A similar thought was expressed this way, "The topical approach allows me to move more freely under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to address the needs of our people, and the needs of the unchurched who are seeking help." Concern for the unchurched brought these additional comments. One explained his preference as simply "guest retention and higher worship attendance." Another claimed, "effective as outreach and inreach, too!"

II. TEXT FIRST OR LISTENER FIRST

To distinguish "communicators" from "proclaimers" does not mean that Lutheran preachers are strangers to good communication techniques. Those in both the large and the small samples overwhelmingly agreed that imagery and illustrations most often distinguish excellent preaching from the average, that proclamation without communication is ineffective, that storytelling in preaching is important, that the language of the people should be the language of the sermon.

The point, in theory, is whether text comes first and then the application, or the listeners' concerns first and then the relevant text. The historic approach is deductive. The alternative is inductive. Truth should remain the same in both approaches. The second is likely to be more engaging than the first.

This distinction is easier to recognize in corporate communication with clients or customers. The standard approach used to be to start with a well-designed offering or service and present it to consumers as attractively as possible. This can be called an engineering approach. Get the product right first. In preaching, this would be the truth of the text.

The alternative is to identify felt needs of the consumers and to design and communicate offerings that best fill those needs. Call this a marketing approach. In an increasingly consumer-oriented society, careful marketing that directly addresses consumer wants is rising in importance. The engineering still has to be sound, however.

The Lutheran heritage is first-rate theological engineering that proclaims the word of God in all its depth and breadth. If the gospel were an automobile, Lutheran preachers would be the Volkswagen of the church. VWs are well-designed cars, which were once well appreciated in America. The fact of the marketplace, however, is that Volkswagen lost considerable market share in this country in recent decades. Competitors paid more attention to features that car buyers grew to expect. Only in recent years have marketers been added to the engineer-dominated upper levels of VW corporate management.

Given their orientation to let the needs and interests of the hearers be a primary concern in sermonizing, the trendsetters are adding a marketing orientation to the Lutheran norm of good theological engineering. Long may that engineering heritage remain robust! The trendsetters see the need to add fresh perspective.

One instinct of a communicator, as defined here, is to go directly to the hearers to solicit ideas for sermon topics and emphases. This is the easiest form of market research. Less than 10% of the larger representative group said they frequently did so. The comparable figure for trendsetters was 40%.

Once the message is developed, a communicator would want to help the listener stay tuned to it. One simple way is to provide an outline in the bulletin. About 10% of Lutheran preachers usually do that. The figure is 60% for the trendsetters. An additional one-fourth of them usually provide an outline on an overhead screen, compared to none in the general sample. This practice of providing an outline in the bulletin, by the way, is much more prevalent in LCMS churches (24%) than ELCA churches (4%).

For trendsetters the role of the sermon itself is different. As noted earlier, two-thirds of them aim for sermons longer than 15 minutes, compared to only one-third in the general survey. It takes time to communicate well. The effort is more important, too. Two-thirds of the trendsetters also regard the sermon as the most important part of the service, compared to the norm of one-third.

III. WORSHIP

A reasonable theory is to predict that the hearer-oriented communication perspective would carry over to shaping the rest of the worship service as well.

The rationale for many of the changes now characterized as contemporary worship is to improve communication with the participants by reducing barriers to their engagement. Getting out from behind the pulpit and closer to the hearers is a simple change. In addition, having song leaders visible up front with sound amplification makes songs easier to follow, especially new ones. Having the words projected overhead enables participants to follow the leaders better and to identify more readily with others in the congregation. Grouping songs together into extended medleys can allow a build up of emotional engagement. Praise choruses seem to do that better than hymns of previous centuries. An instrumental ensemble with drums can carry the momentum better. Making major shifts from the hymnal order of service permits simplification.

What is contemporary worship? There is no common definition. What is called contemporary in one congregation can appear quite traditional to another. The seven functional characteristics just listed can serve as indicators. They were individually part of a section of the questionnaire that asked respondents to indicate on a five-point scale how often they did each, from never to always. Those scores were combined to develop five degrees of contemporary worship: none, little, low, high, and very high.

So, how far has that trend gone? This careful random sample of 169 churches permits an answer. About 12% are doing “high” or “very high” contemporary in at least one service. If those doing “low” are included, the number goes up to 43%.

In this study, high contemporary describes a service where most of these seven characteristics are almost always present: songs grouped at the beginning, major shifts in order, song words on overhead, preaching outside the pulpit, mostly praise choruses, leading by instrumental ensemble, and by singers with sound amplification. On this scale, low contemporary would be either some of these characteristics most of the time (as in a blended service) or most of these characteristics some of the time (as in a schedule other than weekly).

The theory that doing contemporary worship is related to more willingness to give priority to the needs and interests of participants is supported in this general sample. Of those who reported such a perspective, 16% were doing high contemporary, compared to 8% of the others.

Traditional hymnal services still remain the norm, of course. The questionnaire had items asking how frequently various indicators were present. For at least one weekend service, 88% of the respondents said they regularly use a complete hymnal service setting, 82% use only the organ for congregational singing, and 74% use only hymns for congregational singing.

Overall, on a composite scale reflecting degrees of traditional, a little over three-quarters of these Lutheran congregations have at least one service that is high traditional.

But diversity is present even within traditional worship. Forty-one percent usually modify the hymnal setting slightly. Forty-five percent usually use supplemental liturgical resources. This is done more in LCMS churches (54%) than in ELCA (40%).

Is there a trend toward printing the full service in the bulletin? The practice is becoming common. Thirty-six percent reported that they usually do so for at least one service. This happens more in LCMS, 45% of whose pastors reported this practice, compared to 31% for ELCA respondents.

Contemporary worship is still an alternative style. In only one instance was high contemporary done in a church with only one service. When those doing low contemporary in their only service were added, that proportion went up to 30%.

Among the churches with multiple services, high contemporary is presently done in 20%. When those doing low contemporary are added, that proportion goes up to 52%. (As noted earlier, the comparable figures for all Lutheran churches, with single as well as multiple services, are 12% doing high contemporary, increasing to 43% when low contemporary are added.)

The data, by the way, show that churches with a high contemporary service are more likely than Lutheran churches in general to have a high traditional service at another time. They offer clear alternatives. At present, one of the best ways to as-

sure continuation of formal, full hymnal worship is to focus all the changes on the alternative.

The preceding section describes what can be found among Lutheran churches selected at random. The trendsetters are different, as should be expected. Doing something contemporary was a major factor in their selection. Just for the record, 95% of them have a high or very high contemporary service. Their main contribution to the study was to demonstrate, as shown earlier, how preaching is approached differently when worship is approached differently. The same basic understandings of communication affect both.

IV. GROWTH

The final survey item asked the awkward question: “Over the last five years, has your overall worship attendance (five choices): held steady, decreased by 5% or by 10%, increased by 5% or by 10%? This is not the place to review the intense discussion of what growth in attendance does or does not mean. Numeric growth remains an indicator worth examining.

Here is what the preachers reported: 12% declined in attendance, 41% held steady, 23% grew by five percent, and 24% said they grew by ten percent.

Some other study will have to present the description of growth or decline shown in the annual statistical reports to the denominations. The figures in this study seem high. A common assessment is that about 20% of Lutheran congregations are growing in attendance and an even higher percentage are declining. But almost half of the pastors in this survey think their attendance is growing, and that impression alone is worthwhile in reflecting a sense of enthusiasm and confidence.

With so many reporting growth, there are few variables in this study that stand out as significantly associated with growth. One is straightforward. Pastors who report a contemporary worship service, low or high, are more likely to report growth in attendance—60% compared to 38% for the others.

The other relationship is more subtle. Of the churches that have two or more services, those with services that are different are more likely to report growth than those who do the same in both—57% for diverse compared to 28% for the same. The alternative here did not need to be contemporary. Just the availability of an alternative made a difference.

The trendsetters, again, are different. More than four out of five (83%) reported growth of ten percent or more in the previous five years. That figure compares to 24% for the random sample.

By denomination, 42% of ELCA respondents in the large sample reported growth in attendance. The rate for LCMS respondents was 58%. Contemporary worship practices were about the same for both groups.

V. REACTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Does evidence support the hypothesis that commitment to more effective communication, namely, placing greater emphasis on the needs and interests of the hearers and participants, can lead to departures from the Lutheran norm in preaching and also worship?

Yes. The perspective and practices of recognized trendsetters are significantly different from the current norms established in the large random sampling of preachers. Trendsetters are more likely to consider that the needs and interests of the hearers should be the primary concern in developing a sermon. They are much more likely to do topical preaching and to solicit ideas for sermon topics and emphases. That they are doing contemporary worship was a consideration in their selection, and indeed the trendsetters are much more likely to report contemporary practices. They are also much more likely to report growth in attendance.

Which came first, the interest in listener-oriented topical preaching or the interest in contemporary worship? The path is undoubtedly different for individual preachers. What is common to them is commitment to meeting listeners and participants where they are for the sake of greater impact.

For some readers these results might be of passing interest but have little meaning for personal practices. Their personal convictions make preaching and worship activities in which only “should” counts, with little regard to whatever variations appear at one time or another. Heritage-shaped theological engineering remains their full calling, and the Lutheran heritage has demonstrated its strength over time.

Those open to learning from colleagues might consider the trendsetters as explorers probing new directions for Lutheran preaching and worship. Few of these explorers would claim the advantage that their way is easier than “normal” Lutheran practices. Most would reflect confidence that their effort is worthwhile based on the impact they are having.

Is theirs the way of the future? Consider these reasons to think so. The Lutheran heritage of preaching and worship flourished in very stable communities—typically rural villages where participation could be taken for granted. Commitment to the fellowship and its emphasis on hearing God’s word was usually high, for sociological reasons as well as religious.

Where such village-like stable communities remain intact, the heritage of church as parish in which all willingly subordinate their lives to God’s word fits well. The parish model of church can be a wonderful way to live the Christian life from birth to death, and Lutherans usually do it well. Where communities remain stable and Christian commitment to church is strong, traditional preaching and worship should continue to flourish—and probably will, since Lutheran churches remain predominantly rural and small town. In this study 54% of the respondents described their setting as such.

Exceptions to the norm can be expected to increase, though. The village-like sociological conditions in which Lutheran preaching and worship norms are rooted will continue to decline in a society that is rapidly changing. This is especially true in fast-moving suburbs. Even though only one out of three Lutheran churches is in the suburbs, four out of five trendsetters in this study preach and lead worship in a suburban setting.

More exceptions to the norm mean more diversity in the practices of Lutheran pastors and congregations. For those predisposed to resist diversity, this is bad news. For those open to seeing greater diversity as part of God's plan for the effectiveness of his church in the future, exceptions to historic Lutheran norms for preaching and worship can be acknowledged as signs of continued vitality into the next century. ⊕