

CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**DISCOVERING THE COMIC SPIRIT
FOR PREACHING IN LGBTQ+ AFFIRMING CONTEXTS**

**A PROJECT IN MINISTRY PAPER
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ABSTRACT

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Traditional homiletical methods may fall short in addressing the needs of LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. Can the comic spirit enliven preaching in these contexts? This is not just a theoretical question but a practical and pastoral one. A praxis for preaching with the comic spirit may be characterized by the intentional use of humor, levity, wit, and comedy to promote theological understanding. Sermons in LGBTQ+ affirming congregations can be more effective by utilizing expressions of the comic spirit that are informed by the respective contexts, with special interest given to the intersectional identities and lived experiences of queer listeners. The author, an openly queer ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, engages this topic as a self-examination of praxis and centers his research primarily within three Houston congregations. Where cishet homileticians have studied stand-up comedians, the author bridges the queer research gap by exploring drag performers as muse. Three homiletical strategies for a queer-informed praxis of the comic spirit emerge from the project: (1) disarming tension to engage the listener, (2) fostering congregational connection, and (3) balancing depth and levity. Each of these strategies serve to impact the listener through queer-affirming sermons that inspire theological insights.

To my handsome spouse, Marc Waters, Esq., who beams with wit and insight;

To my mom and dad, Jeanie Gilbert Brooks and the late Rev. Ronnie Gilbert,

Who have displayed the radical love of Romans 8:35-39;

And, to Rev. Dr. Karen Dorris and Rev. Sandra Smith,

Whose mentorship and allyship remind me of what the Gospel is all about.

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CHAPTER 1.
INTRODUCTION

Background and Purpose

Preaching is no laughing matter—or is it? What role do creative homiletical tools play in communicating the Gospel effectively? Long before I began formal research into the use of the comic spirit in preaching, my journey was marked by a desire to connect deeply with congregations while grappling with my evolving understanding of faith, identity, and more relevant ways of communication through preaching. My experiences in traditional and affirming church settings provided the foundation for what would later become an exploration of humor as a sacred experience shared between the pulpit and the pew. My introduction to preaching began in Evangelical Christianity. During my time in seminary at Baylor University, I was immersed in a more conservative environment that more or less prioritized conformity to more traditional preaching styles and ideologies. I studied under professors like Joel Gregory, a renowned Evangelical preacher and homiletical scholar whose influence shaped my early understanding of the pulpit. Gregory once described my preaching as “winsome,” a comment he used to affirm my natural ability to engage congregations through my early attempts at a preaching praxis.¹ I was grateful. However, I sensed that something was missing even then. Fred Craddock writes of the Christian congregation, “So what does this audience want, oratory? No;

¹Joel Gregory, PRCH 7316: Preaching I (class workshop, George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Waco, TX, November 13, 2007).

they want some insight.”² Even then, I could sense that a more developed praxis required a bit more creativity—a creativity that leads the listener toward meaningful insights.

The more traditional models of preaching learned in seminary left little room for the vibrant human expressions I observed in everyday life. The sermons I delivered were not crafted with the comic spirit in mind. Yet, I began to notice how moments of humor would show up from time to time in my preaching. These expressions of humor had a unique power to connect with listeners. Laughter seemed to open doors that a more solemn approach failed at opening. During this same period in seminary and early parish ministry, I was navigating a personal journey. As a closeted queer man, I wrestled with the tension between my private life that only a few personal confidantes knew and the expectations of the more conservative spaces where I presented myself in ministry. I cannot help but believe that the authenticity of queer joy was finding its way into my preaching somehow. Nevertheless, there was a strain in my early preaching ministry living a dual life in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” environment.

Looking back, I see how this tension also influenced my use of humor in various settings. Humor became a way to deflect attention from divisive social issues I felt unprepared to address directly. Then at other times, humor was a method to disarm congregants with a joke at the beginning of a sermon to simply break the ice. While I lacked the vocabulary to articulate it at the time, I was beginning to see how the comic spirit held homiletical significance beyond its ability to amuse. As my ministry progressed, I had the opportunity to serve in a variety of congregational contexts. From suburban to urban, European-American and multiethnic congregations, each setting

²Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 89.

brought unique challenges and opportunities. Early in my career, I served conservative settings where innovation in the pulpit was not celebrated, from my perspective. In these spaces, congregations held sermons close to standards of my Evangelical training. Scriptural exposition was always the primary goal. Humor was superfluous rather than being viewed as holding a meaningful place in sermons.

Over time, my ministry led me into spaces more open to creativity. One such congregation was Westbury United Methodist Church. I felt more freedom to experiment with more creative homiletical tools like narrative preaching. At Westbury Church, I often incorporated personal stories and wit into sermons. Near this same time, I came out as a queer man. At Westbury Church, I began to share more of my queer life through my preaching. Authentic story-telling weaved my experiences into the message in ways that resonated with listeners, both queer and straight. While I still lacked a formal understanding of the comic spirit, I began to notice how my natural use of levity and vulnerability could coalesce to create moments of connection. The turning point in my ministry came when I was called to serve LGBTQ+ affirming congregations in Houston. Bering Memorial United Church of Christ was one such congregation in the heart of Montrose, a neighborhood known as a haven in Houston for the LGBTQ+ community. Bering Church had a long history of advocacy, notably its social services outreach during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, when the church became a sanctuary for those marginalized by society. With a legacy of resilience, the people of Bering Church created a unique preaching context—one that celebrated joy even in the face of pain.

Preaching among the communities of Westbury Church and Bering Church allowed me to step more fully into my identity as a queer preacher. For the first time, I

was not only able to speak about topics such as justice and liberation without fear of significant backlash, but I was also encouraged to embrace the lived experiences of queer culture in my preaching. The congregations I served taught me about the inspirational power of humor that can immerse from lived experiences. I discovered that as a somewhat bohemian, queer man preaching in conservative Texas of all places—there was much to laugh about with my congregations. Drag performers became an unexpected source for sermons. I observed their ability to blend levity and flair to communicate a meaningful message. Parallels to preaching seemed to emerge. Perhaps, I could wield a bit of levity and flair in the pulpit—albeit without wigs and makeup? This sense of curiosity began to lay a groundwork for this research project’s focus to address the unique needs of queer congregants. Many people among LGBTQ+ communities have carried the weight of religious trauma, having been rejected by the people they trusted most. As the more traditional sermon forms may have a place in other contexts, those ways of preaching can fail to connect with the lived realities of some marginalized congregants. Even the most winsome preaching fails when it disregards the experiences of LGBTQ+ people who are found in every part of the Christian Church. I began to realize what was needed was a way of preaching that embraced vulnerability while inviting laughter into the sacred space of Christian worship. Though I had not yet articulated it as such, the comic spirit was beginning to take shape as a distinctive in my sermons.

Before I formally began researching preaching with the comic spirit, my journey was already rich with experiences that pointed me toward this approach. From the constraints of traditional homiletics to the liberation of LGBTQ+ affirming

congregations, each step along the way contributed to my understanding of the pulpit as a space for joyful proclamation. The seeds had been planted while I had yet to name the comic spirit as homiletical method. My personal and ministerial experiences laid the foundation for what would become a greater exploration of how humor can enliven preaching and foster connection in communities that need it most.

The role of openly queer clergy within the life of the Christian Church is significant. We represent the embodiment of hope for many. I have found that my presence in the pulpit reflects a prophetic hope. Every time I step into the pulpit, such questions are invoked: Can we imagine a wider Christian Church that might embrace full affirmation? What unique perspective of faith is vitally offered from queer preaching? What is God seeking to reveal to God's people through LGBTQ+ affirming sermons? My role as a preacher challenges the cisgender heterosexual (cis het) standard. The exclusionary norms have no place for openly queer preachers. My embodied witness serves as a living testament to the Christian Church's potential. This research project reinforces the significance of queer preaching and LGBTQ+ affirming preaching contexts as the comic spirit is considered for its value in preaching praxis.

ACTS Program's Influence on the Research Topic

It goes without saying that the ACTS Doctor of Ministry in Preaching program has influenced the development of my thesis topic. The three years of this program have not only shaped my understanding of homiletical praxis but also refined my approach to addressing the unique needs of the congregational contexts for this research. Through a

combination of coursework, mentorship, and contextual reflection, I have come to appreciate the potential of the comic spirit as an essential tool for queer preaching.

The ACTS program challenged the traditional norms in my theory and praxis and introduced an approach that centers the importance of social location and the dynamics of the preacher's hermeneutics. The program's coursework offered new insights. In Core I, creativity through incarnational translation of scripture illuminated the ancient texts through the common experiences of the congregation. I discovered all the more how preaching could resonate with the social, cultural, and spiritual realities of my listeners. The program's emphasis on interpreting scripture from one's social location helped me move away from a homogenized approach to sermon development and encouraged a responsiveness to the unique identities and needs of my congregation.

During Frank Thomas' elective course, the concept of humor in preaching was briefly introduced as a secondary element to be considered with the celebrative preaching tradition. This resonated with my growing belief that laughter and levity could be effective tools to be developed—beyond sermons that are celebrative. Subsequent courses also reinforced this idea. The Core II instructor highlighted the importance of engaging the listener through embodiment and noting the emotional responses from the congregation, including laughter, as signs of vital preaching performance. During Ron Allen's elective, we explored how preachers who seek to influence the work of social justice through their sermons must empathize with marginalized communities as an initial act toward preaching as liberation. I began to think about how the comic spirit could be a vehicle for social justice.

These experiences illuminated something that had been missing in my preaching—a more informed use of the comic spirit in my sermons. Through this study of homiletical praxis, I have become keenly aware of the dynamics of communication in arenas beyond the pulpit. I am a social guy—an extrovert. So, naturally, I witnessed how informal communication in places like queer bars was no great effort. I began to realize that wit and laughter were abundant in my social life. Could it be that wit and laughter might have a place in my life as a preacher? Could it be that LGBTQ+ affirming congregations would benefit from an approach to homiletics that welcomes a more authentic, more relatable witness into sermons?

The work of this research has been guided well by the oversight of Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder. Over the course of our three year academic sojourn, Crowder validated my interest in this niche field of homiletics. She also led me to uncover a stronger framework in response to a specific research gap—the comic spirit in queer preaching. Together, we have explored how this work can contribute to the broader academic conversation while remaining grounded in my unique social location as a queer preacher in Houston.

Crowder's encouragement to engage deeply with my context has reinforced the ideals of this program and has yielded much in my work. The primary preaching context for this project, Bering Church, is a historic congregation that has long served as a sanctuary for LGBTQ+ individuals and allies. However, I found that the traditional mainline preaching styles of decades past sometimes failed to resonate with the bohemian, vibrant culture of the surrounding community. As the congregation's first openly queer pastor to be called by the congregation to that role, I have sought to develop

a preaching praxis that embraces the comic spirit as a means of embodying the ancient truths of Christian faith in ways that are both authentic and impactful to my queer kindred.

Ultimately, the ACTS Doctor of Ministry in Preaching program has provided an environment that has led me to a clarified thesis topic while aiding in the enrichment of my identity as a preacher. By embracing the comic spirit, I aim to offer a homiletical approach that is both faithful to the Christian tradition and responsive to the unique needs of LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. My research seeks to be a testament to the value of the comic spirit for contextual preaching within marginalized communities.

The Research Question

LGBTQ+ affirming congregations must answer the essential question guiding this research: In what ways can the comic spirit enliven preaching toward insight? This is not just a theoretical question but a practical and pastoral one. This research project reflects an understanding of unique obstacles the queer community faces. It emerges from my own experiences as an openly queer pastor navigating these unique contexts. Over the years, I have come to see that some traditional homiletical methods may fall short in addressing the needs of LGBTQ+ affirming congregations without creativity. While these methods may be effective in other settings, they sometimes fail to communicate in relatable ways to queer people. The comic spirit offers an opportunity. By integrating intentional expressions of the comic spirit into sermons, preachers can create messages that connect with their congregations.

The comic spirit offers an opportunity. When wielded keenly, it can be an approach to sermon development and delivery that transcends mere amusement to communicate theological truths. Homiletical scholars like Blayne Banting, Karl and Rolf Jacobson, Joseph Webb, Jacob Myers, Alyce McKenzie and Owen Lynch have explored humor's role in preaching. It should be noted that their work reflects the perspectives of the cishet academy. These frameworks offer valuable insights but fail to capture some distinct challenges and opportunities queer preachers face in addressing LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. My research sought to discover some of what these scholars may have missed by exploring how the comic spirit can uniquely serve queer preachers and their listeners.

Stand-up Comedians as Preaching's Muse

Researchers in homiletics have increasingly turned to comedians as a source of insight into effective communication strategies and the use of humor in delivering sermons with stronger impact. One area of focus has been comedians' ability to establish rapport with their audiences. They can seemingly get away with discussing the most serious subjects and controversial issues. Nothing seems to be off limits. Comedians are known for their dynamic stage presence and ability to connect emotionally with listeners. These attributes are relevant to homiletics as the preacher must also find a way to connect theological truths with the daily lives of congregants. By observing comedians, preachers can learn to build trust and create a shared sense of understanding through the comic spirit.

Comedians use humor to disarm resistance and open listeners to new perspectives. One needs only to step into a local comedy club to observe how a well-crafted joke can address sensitive topics. Successful comedians are skilled at navigating social commentary while creating an environment of trust. Should not preachers seek to address such challenging topics with the same measure of grace? Might the comic spirit present in comedy clubs have a role in Christian congregations as well? United Methodist Bishop and homiletical scholar William Willimon writes: “For years I’ve slipped into comedy clubs incognito. Watching a comic stand and deliver, forming strangers into a community with nothing but words, using biting social commentary and critique and having people laugh as they pay good money for it rather than storm out in rage because of it.”³ Preachers should be curious to learn the dynamics of this approach to communication that the comic spirit holds. This is what Willimon calls “a preacher’s dream.”

Drag Performers as Preaching’s Muse

If comedians have something to teach us, what about drag performers? There is literature regarding the theology and practice on the use of humor in preaching from cis-het perspectives, but drag performers and their use of the comic spirit have not been considered. Novel to this thesis will be the contribution of drag performers. Through field observations and interviews, I have sought to better understand how drag performance can benefit my preaching. Drag is a performance art that draws from queer culture and theatricality to offer a message that objects to social norms. In his memoir, eminent drag

³William Willimon, introduction to *Divine Laughter: Preaching and the Business of Serious of Humor* by Karl N. Jacobson and Rolf A. Jacobson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), ix.

performer RuPaul writes: “[I discovered that] drag made a mockery of the sacred cow of identity and all the societal expectations that came along with it. The act of rebellion was an unspoken alliance that united...in a system where things insisted on being one or the other, drag was everything. That made it magic.”⁴ RuPaul’s sentiment resonates with the liberation values of Queer Theology present within queer preaching. There are many ways that liberation is communicated through drag performance—and the comic spirit is its essential messenger. As a patron of drag performance for most of my adult life, I have come to believe that drag performers are our queer prophets. Their extravagant costumes and exaggerated personas entertain while challenging societal norms. Through lip-synching, storytelling, and an abundance of risqué jokes, drag performers offer a subversive witness to a world that demands assimilation to mainstream ideals. Many of these ideals resonate with queer preaching, where the preacher—with a bit less flare—offers a message of hope to the social outcast. I would assert that there is no denying how the act of stepping into a pulpit involves an element of drag performance. The human preacher is transformed into a vessel through which divine truths are communicated. A rather vivid illustration embodies this concept as biological males prepare themselves to take the stage as drag queens. RuPaul writes, “Tucking is exactly what the name implies...duct tape may be used...tucking is not for the faint of heart. It can be very painful.”⁵ Can I preach Christ’s teaching to love our enemies while having not yet

⁴RuPaul, *The House of Hidden Meanings* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2024), 108.

⁵RuPaul, *Workin’ It!: RuPaul’s Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010), 47.

embodied this goal myself? Can I stand in the pulpit the day after national travesties, such as the January 6th Insurrection, and preach about love—when in fact, I am not sure that I truly love my enemies? We need spiritual duct tape in these moments that allow us to preach God’s Word through the comic spirit. Perhaps, holy tucking is needed for sermons like these. Incongruity makes up the heart of drag. This act of incongruent, prophetic witness plays an important role in how drag’s comic spirit informs queer preaching. Queer preaching can, indeed, be very painful but worthy. The comic spirit can provide a means toward effective prophetic witness.

More broadly, there is little discussion around the role of humor in queer homiletics and how congregations that affirm LGBTQ+ identities can grow from the comic spirit when used well. Drag performance is certainly not the same, per se, as stand-up comedy. Drag is a different medium. Why choose drag performance as the queer homiletician’s muse in bridging this research gap? I have discovered that there is not a significant community of openly queer stand-up comedians who perform for primarily LGBTQ+ populations, at least in Houston. An exact parallel to the cishet community is not found in my context. How queer of us queers to not copy a cishet tradition by exacting definition! But, we do have a longstanding tradition of drag performers who are quite familiar with humor. That said, drag performers are considered ineffective unless they have a competency in performing with the comic spirit.⁶ Elements of improv comedy are essential. Stand-up comedians have long called on the use of improv

⁶Olivia Germann, “Gender Performance: From the Freak Show to Modern Drag,” *Digital Literature Review*, 3 (2016): 71, <https://openjournals.bsu.edu/dlr/article/download/2645/1567/4275>.

comedy.⁷ Drag performers also have identified that improv is a shared discipline.⁸

Therefore, I will assert that my study of drag performance toward the identified research gap is germane. For those preachers working in LGBTQ+ affirming congregations, there is a great deal to learn from this tradition. This three-year study of my preaching praxis includes the valuable insights of drag performance. Through this research, I have explored the work of two notable Houston-based drag performers.

Defining the Comic Spirit for Preaching

For the purposes of my research project, I have defined a praxis of the comic spirit as the intentional use of humor, levity, wit, and comedy to reveal deeper truths within sermons. The comic spirit moves listeners toward new ideas as it invites the congregation to reflection. Humor does not trivialize serious issues but instead provides a means of navigating theological messages with authenticity. This definition reflects a synthesis of the scholars I have referenced, most notably the work of Alyce McKenzie and Owen Hanley.⁹

In McKenzie and Hanley's text, the mergence of humor and the divine are explored as they offer the term "comic spirit" to the field of Homiletics. As Hanley's

⁷Tobyn DeMarco, "Improvisation and Stand-Up Comedy," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 78, issue 4 (September 2020): 419-20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12754>.

⁸Edward Scrivens, "YAAS and...: Drag, Improv, and Play," *Torch* (blog), November 22, 2017, <https://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/article/yaas-and...-drag-improv-and-play>.

⁹Alyce McKenzie and Owen Lynch, *Humor Us!: Preaching and the Power of the Comic Spirit* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), 9.

expertise is rooted in secular communication theory, the subject of humor is central to his work. The authors write that Hanley has never encountered, through his research, “a social context where humor is fully absent.”¹⁰ The academic field of Communications Studies broadly asserts that human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is the foundation of social systems and interpersonal relationships. It is Hanley’s view that “comic” communication is present in all these social settings, even if it is not fully defined or recognized, and is therefore a valuable element of communication to understand and utilize effectively. McKenzie, as a homiletical scholar, offers perspective to humor’s theological vision as “spirit” and its value in Christian preaching. The authors reference theologian Brian Edgar: “Humor is an aspect of divine character...and an element of the Apostle Peter’s declaration ‘that you may participate in the divine nature’ (II Peter 1:4).”¹¹ McKenzie uplifts Edgar’s theology as one that embraces both the human and the divine nature as harmonious and interconnected. The authors write: “Being attuned to humor, playfulness, and a sense of the absurd in life around us is a hallmark of a posture in life we call the comic spirit. It is also an integral part of the character of God.”¹² The human spirit, in McKenzie’s perspective, is in fellowship with God’s spirit which is intrinsically humorous.

Through my definition, I support the idea that the comic spirit for preaching is an encounter with the divine. As one who celebrates a Pentecostal childhood, I find that

¹⁰McKenzie and Lynch, *Humor Us!*, 11.

¹¹Brian Edgar, *Laughter and the Grace of God: Restoring Laughter to Its Central Role in Christian Spirituality and Theology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019) 4, quoted by McKenzie and Lynch, *Humor Us!*, 16.

¹²McKenzie and Lynch, *Humor Us!*, 16.

theological concepts exploring the nature of God as Spirit are of core resonance. Pneumatology reminds us that the Holy Spirit represents the omnipresence of God. Amos Yong writes: “At the most basic level, the Holy Spirit symbolizes the presence and agency of God in the world...God’s way of being in and transforming the world.”¹³ The Spirit-filled preaching I witnessed throughout my youth was certainly a transformative experience. It captivated my heart and wooed me to a life of Christian discipleship. It has also been my experience that the presence of the Holy Spirit continues to be manifest through queer preaching, as well as in the ordinary lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people. God as the perpetual transformer is always seeking to guide God’s people into truth. When the comic spirit is effective in preaching, it is most certainly evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of the congregation. The comic spirit is an agent of transformation through preaching that guides listeners into truth. Expressions of the comic spirit in sermons are varied but always point to insights of faith, as inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The comic spirit takes on many different forms. Therefore, terms such as “humor,” “levity,” “wit,” and “comedy” may be read as somewhat synonymous for the purpose of this thesis as we consider the comic spirit’s homiletical role. The use of the comic spirit in preaching has been previously explored by cishet homiletics scholars who acknowledge its significance. I will seek to add to their work from the perspective of my social location as a queer preacher and homiletical researcher.

¹³Amos Young, “On Divine Presence and Divine Agency: Toward a Foundational Pneumatology,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 3, no. 2 (2000): 175, <https://www.academia.edu/64153585>.

Thesis Statement

Cishet homiletics scholars have provided valuable insights into the role of humor in preaching. I will show that their work often reflects normative assumptions about preachers and congregations. These frameworks rarely address the specific needs of queer preachers or LGBTQ+ Christians. The available scholarship is missing something in the application of the comic spirit to LGBTQ+ affirming contexts. My research seeks to bridge these gaps, exploring how humor can uniquely serve LGBTQ+ people by *disarming tension* that is sometimes present with queer listeners; *fostering connection in diverse congregations* where LGBTQ+ individuals need to discover safe spaces; and *balancing depth and levity*, so that the scriptures might come alive in new ways.

As an openly queer ordained minister, I will present a review of my own preaching praxis using the comic spirit for LGBTQ+ people and their allies. This research project will show that humor might not just be a tool for communication but also can be an agent of liberation and transformation. By incorporating levity and wit into my own preaching during these eight sermons of the study, I will aim to model an approach that resonates with LGBTQ+ congregants and allies. While cishet scholars have laid a foundation for understanding humor's role in preaching, my work offers a new perspective that centers my experience as a queer preacher in LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. I will assert that by incorporating the comic spirit, queer preachers can break through tension, cultivate greater connections among congregations, and communicate with greater insight through a balance of levity and theological depth. Thus, the thesis statement of this research is: *The comic spirit can enliven and enhance my preaching in LGBTQ+ affirming contexts*. This thesis positions the comic spirit as a

transformative practice—a vital tool that I have developed as a queer preacher—that reflects the joy, resilience, and grace of the Gospel, offering hope and belonging to queer individuals and allies who encounter it.

Thesis Structure

I have organized this thesis into seven chapters, each building on the insights and experiences outlined above. Chapter Two offers a contextual analysis of myself as a preacher and my developing praxis of the comic spirit. I will also include relevant consideration of the LGBTQ+ affirming congregations where research was conducted. Chapter Three addresses the homiletical issue through a comprehensive literature review, examining key homiletical theories with a queer reading for related value and limitations. It explores the work of cishet homiletics scholars who have contributed valuable insights relating to the comic spirit. With Chapter Four, I explore the contributions of Queer Theology to the research including the perspectives of gay, lesbian, and transgender scholars. Queer Theology's contribution to my research of the comic spirit for queer preaching is presented. Chapter Five outlines the research methodology, including the use of qualitative and quantitative tools such as focus groups, interviews, field observations, and surveys. With Chapter Six, I present the findings of this research, focusing on the impact of the comic spirit on the congregation's theological insight with the eight sermons. I have included data collected in response to these sermons delivered in LGBTQ+ affirming contexts to evaluate the effectiveness of the comic spirit. Finally, Chapter Seven offers homiletical strategies discerned from this project and their implications for queer and cishet preachers more broadly. It considers the potential of the

comic spirit to enliven preaching in LGBTQ+ affirming contexts, as well as its limitations, with practical recommendations for preachers through three proposed strategies. The thesis will show that preaching is indeed a laughing matter when it effectively engages the comic spirit for the good of all God's people.

CHAPTER 2.
MINISTRY CONTEXT

Queer Preaching

Despite the expansion of some federal protections, LGBTQ+ individuals in the United States continue to be subjected to exclusion. The Christian Church has failed queer people as flawed theologies and interpretations of scripture have deemed non-heteronormative identities as incompatible with traditional Christian teaching. Historically, systems of the cishet patriarchy have wielded their power to institutionalize LGBTQ+ persecution. Dubious doctrines and decrees have led to significant harm for queer individuals who have only sought to simply be themselves among their faith communities. From exclusion from ordination to outright rejection in many denominations, LGBTQ+ Christians have often faced barriers that deny them full participation in the life of the Christian Church. As an ordained minister who is openly queer, I stand as a counter-narrative to this story of marginalization perpetrated by the cishet patriarchy. My witness serves as a visible affirmation of LGBTQ+ inclusion. By claiming my full identity, I am showing that individuals of all identities can thrive in leadership within the Christian Church. This visible representation challenges harmful historical narratives. It also holds the potential to open the door for others to reimagine their relationship with the Christian faith.

Queer preaching is rooted in the belief that all people are created in the image of God and therefore may communicate God's Word as those who bear God's likeness. This understanding challenges traditional interpretations of scripture that have been used to

marginalize LGBTQ+ individuals.¹ Affirming congregations often employ a hermeneutic rooted in Queer Theology which emphasizes liberation from the harmful tenets of traditional Christianity. As an openly queer minister, my preaching draws on my own lived experiences to illuminate the ways a queer-affirming Christianity can speak to LGBTQ+ individuals and allies. This perspective enriches the theological imagination of the Christian Church, inviting congregants to see a message of radical inclusion at the heart of the scriptures and how that message applies in the modern world. By embodying the ministry of Jesus Christ, who consistently ministered to those marginalized by religious and societal structures, I seek to proclaim a message of love and inclusion that resonates with all who have been excluded.

It is my belief that one of the primary functions of queer preaching is to address the harm caused by non-affirming theologies. By rejecting oppressive theological traditions, queer preaching creates a space for healing. For many LGBTQ+ individuals, affirming congregations provide their first opportunity to hear messages that celebrate their identities as fundamental to their faith journeys rather than as obstacles to overcome. My position in the pulpit demonstrates that LGBTQ+ individuals are worthy of inclusion and leadership within Christian congregations and denominational governance. This representation can be enlightening for congregants who may have doubted their place in faith communities. It provides a real and visible example of what is possible when we embrace the full diversity of God's creation.

¹Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 62.

Queer preaching is also about empowerment. It celebrates the unique contributions of LGBTQ+ individuals to the life and mission of the Christian Church by emphasizing the diversity of the body of Christ. These communities hold the potential to challenge cis-het power dynamics by advocating for leadership structures that reflect the inclusivity of the human family as God has created it to be. I have witnessed how my presence can inspire others to embrace their own gifts and callings within the churches I have led. By modeling an authentic approach to ministry from the pulpit, my LGBTQ+ voice has offered a living testament of Queer Theology that is resonant in the parishes I have served. This voice of empowerment serves as a prophetic witness to the broader church and society to embody the Gospel's transformative power.

Queer preaching also challenges the Christian Church to expand its own evolving understanding of God and our relationship to God and one another. These contexts enrich the church's theological imagination by making space for LGBTQ+ people to bring a broader understanding of faith. These kinds of congregations call for the wider Christian Church to embrace a more expansive vision of God's Kingdom—a vision where all people are welcomed and valued. My role as an openly queer minister amplifies this expanded understanding. By integrating my identity and experiences into my preaching, I have discovered how sermons can address issues of inclusion and diversity through intentional expressions of humor. My work here revealed that my developing praxis not only benefits LGBTQ+ individuals but also assisted in enriching the faith of the wider community, encouraging both queer and cis-het listeners to respond to the call of Christian discipleship through my sermons.

Identifying Contexts for the Research Project

As is common with many Doctor of Ministry research projects, my project was originally designed with a focus on a single social location, as relevant data is most effectively gathered and interpreted when tightly focused. I should acknowledge that this conventional approach allows for a fuller understanding of the one specific context. This method can ensure that insights are both meaningful and actionable. However, my research trajectory shifted when I left my ministry position at Bering Memorial United Church of Christ after completing the second year of research. Pivots of this nature sometimes take place during Doctor of Ministry research projects and do not diminish their impact when guided strategically. This transition required me to adapt my project to incorporate new congregational contexts. Although this presented unique challenges, it also provided an opportunity to broaden my perspective. A more refined approach included praxis for diverse ministry settings in Houston that are unique as LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. Principally, this pivot has allowed “self” to act as the primary contextual subject with preaching praxis evaluated. New homiletical insights were the result.

Self as Contextual Subject

As an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, I am dedicated to cultivating inclusivity in my preaching ministry by addressing systemic injustices. My journey in the pulpit has been shaped by my identity as a cisgender queer man with a theological foundation in Queer Theology. At the heart of my preaching ministry is the desire to inspire LGBTQ+ affirming congregations to respond to the core message of

sermons through the use of the comic spirit. The foci of my sermons range from personal spiritual growth to the broad concerns of social justice. Sometimes a vital response to social justice concerns can thrive in affirming spaces without attention to one's more individual journey of faith. Coming from an Evangelical background, I recognize that the individual journey of faith was of sole concern in my former tradition. In more progressive Christian communities, I have found that social justice works can often be the exclusive focus of preaching. However, I believe both are essential to a more holistic understanding of Christian discipleship and both work hand in hand.

Whether speaking to my own congregation or as a guest preacher, I try to craft sermons that resonate with the congregation's lived experiences. Both challenge and comfort are themes often present in those sermons. Presenting a prophetic voice plays a role in my preaching, boldly addressing social injustices while balancing with pastoral care. There is vital place for both social action and spiritual renewal in my sermons. Marginalized listeners need renewed hope in the Divine more often than actionable calls, in my opinion. Utilizing the comic spirit, I value the power of storytelling and metaphor in bringing the message of the ancient scriptures and the experiences of contemporary life closer together.

I have discovered that bridging these elements require an appeal to the emotion before logic, in most settings. Having been reared in the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal denomination, I watched many preachers offer dynamic sermons filled with emotion. My own calling was certainly influenced by observing my father's ministry as an ordained minister and preacher throughout my childhood. After seminary, I discovered mainline traditions emphasized logic. Yet, both emotion and logic are a part of the human

experience. I have come to believe that both are needed in effective sermons. The comic spirit is a tool that keenly appeals to human emotion. Through creative illustrations and reimagined biblical narratives, my sermons aim to help listeners see their faith as useful in real life and the broader world in which we live.

As an openly queer preacher, I have found that Queer Theology and its liberation core drives much of my preaching. My sermons seek to empower queer people. Boldness in word and deed is something I discovered when reconciling my queer sexuality and my calling to Christian ministry. Is it not absurd that God would call a queer man to Christian ministry? A cisgender, queer man whose biological father is a Mexican-American and whose biological mother is Hungarian-American? Is it not absurd that God would call a queer man, adopted by cishet conservative Pentecostal parents, to become an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ? This calling invokes a hearty belly-laugh from time to time. Laughing my way into the work of liberation has been my journey, I suppose.

Through my research, I have explored how levity can enhance my sermons without detracting from their gravity. An unexpected turn of phrase or a fully crafted joke has its place. In addition to discovering levity, I have worked to develop the physical elements of the comic spirit. What people see informs their trust and acceptance of the sermon. Well executed gestures and eye contact allows for greater connection with the congregation providing a more engaging presence in the pulpit, especially when they are funny. These areas of growth are interconnected, as both a mature use of verbal humor and an embodiment of the comic spirit require work.

Ultimately with this research project, my desire has been to improve my overall preaching praxis, with a specific focus on integrating the comic spirit into my sermons. I believe that humor can be a divine gift to preaching. I believe that more effective preaching, enlivened by the comic spirit, can inspire others to see their faith as a call to personal and social wholeness, rooted in the radical love at the heart of Christ's message to all people. The context of my research considers my own praxis as a preacher within three congregations in Houston, Texas—Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, Covenant Baptist Church, and Westbury United Methodist Church—where eight sermons were delivered and evaluated during the three years of my research.

Bering Memorial United Church of Christ – Houston, Texas

Bering Memorial United Church of Christ has a rich history marked by a commitment to social justice. The congregation was originally established by pioneer settlers over 175 years ago as the German Methodist Church of Houston. An example of resilience and justice marks the work of this people. The church's early years were shaped by its German-speaking congregation's heritage. During the early 1900s, amidst rising anti-German sentiment in the United States, the Methodist Bishop of the region gave the congregation an ultimatum to merge with the English-speaking First Methodist Church or move from its competing downtown location. Bering Church chose relocation, moving to the site where its Georgian-style sanctuary now stands. The church flourished into the 1950s, reaching a membership of nearly 2,000. It became one of the largest Methodist churches during its time. Nevertheless, urban expansion and the exodus of wealthier members to new neighborhoods led to a significant decline in the decades to

follow. By the late 1970s, Bering Church faced an uncertain future, but it embraced a new identity. Under the leadership of a forward-thinking pastor, the church became one of the first mainline Protestant congregations in Houston to welcome the “hippies and homosexuals” of the Montrose neighborhood that became a haven for LGBTQ+ people during that same period.²

A witness of extravagant welcome was forged only a few years before significant trials. In the 1980s, Bering Church’s commitment to social justice deepened as the HIV/AIDS epidemic devastated the LGBTQ+ community. The church responded by establishing one of Houston’s first nonprofit organizations to provide services for those affected by HIV/AIDS. This included a dental clinic, hospice care, and an adult daycare center—all housed on or near the church’s campus. It was during these years that the church became a sanctuary for individuals ostracized by society. Funerals were held almost weekly for those lost to the disease—both church members and those from the wider community. Bering Church’s advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights extended beyond the HIV/AIDS crisis. The congregation has continued to embrace its role as a beacon of inclusivity. In 2021, the congregation voted to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church due to the denomination’s anti-LGBTQ+ policies that remained unchanged at that time. This congregation was one of only a few United Methodist congregations

²Houston’s Montrose District, like Chicago’s Northalsted (or Boystown), became the center of LGBTQ+ life and culture during the 1960s and 70s. Common oral history shared among local Houstonians credits the affordable housing as one possible contributing factor to this location’s popularity. As newer, more desirable neighborhoods were constructed, the aging homes located in Montrose were a value for economically disenfranchised populations such as LGBTQ+ people. Additionally, the moniker “hippies and homosexuals” was first used by cishet members of Bering Church to identify the counter-cultural people they welcomed into their congregation. It became a humorous and endearing label embraced by all over the years.

nationwide to take such action on behalf of queer people. Bering Church subsequently joined the United Church of Christ (UCC). Shortly after its affiliation with the UCC, Bering Church called me to be its first openly queer associate pastor by congregational vote. During my time with this congregation, I learned first-hand about the dynamics of preaching among a congregation whose population is majority LGBTQ+. While gay and lesbian preachers have filled the pulpit in recent decades, preaching at Bering Church has primarily been the duty of cishet, European-American United Methodist clergy appointed to that role. Sermons delivered at Bering Church since the 1970s have been described as wide ranging in style—some examples described as “intellectual” and others as “extemporaneous” and “inspirational.”³ My voice in the pulpit was distinguished for offering authentic witness as a queer person.

Regarding demographics, Bering Church consists of about 75% LGBTQ+ people, with the large majority being gay men and lesbian women. About 25% of the congregation is straight allies. The relative ethnic makeup is largely European-American, at 80% with a growing margin of minority populations including Latin-Americans at 10%, Asian-Americans at 5%, and African-Americans at 5%. Members are often described as successful professionals, most all holding college-level education or higher at 75%. Some working-class people are among the congregation as well, at 20%. Unhoused people also make up a noteworthy margin, about 5% of weekly worship attendees. It may easily be said that Bering Memorial United Church of Christ has

³Bob Manchester, Bering Church’s long-time organist, interview with author, March 6, 2024.

exemplified the power of faith in action, making it a model for congregations seeking to embrace diversity and justice in their ministry.

Westbury United Methodist Church – Houston, Texas

Westbury United Methodist Church, located in Southwest Houston, represents a compelling story of courage and commitment to justice. From its roots in the 1950s as a suburban church-start to its modern identity as a multicultural and LGBTQ+ affirming congregation, Westbury Church has continually evolved to meet the challenges of its time. Westbury Church was founded in the 1950s as an outreach from Bering Memorial Methodist Church and other more centrally located congregations during Houston's suburban expansion. Its campus, characterized by mid-century modern architecture, included a 700-seat sanctuary to accommodate the growing population of the newly developed, deed-restricted Westbury neighborhood. The time of segregation in the Jim Crow South shaped the church's early identity. Ushers were instructed to seat African-American visitors in the balcony, reflecting the prevailing racial attitudes of those years in Houston. By the late 1980s, social and demographic changes began to reshape the Westbury neighborhood. The congregation would feel the effects as well. One of the first African-American families who boldly moved to the Westbury neighborhood also boldly joined this church. Others followed. Despite resistance from some members, the church's clergy embraced this shift and published a public statement of welcome to signal a more racially inclusive culture. With the 1990s, the appointment of the church's first African-American senior pastor garnered recognition from the *Houston Chronicle*—claiming Westbury United Methodist Church to be a model for diversity.

Building on its history of inclusivity, Westbury Church became a leader in LGBTQ+ affirmation. In 2017, the Church Council voted to welcome me to their parish ministry staff as the congregation's first openly queer person to a full-time ministry role. This marked a milestone in its journey toward equality. Only two years later, the congregation formalized its commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusion by becoming a Reconciling Congregation, publicly opposing the United Methodist General Conference's anti-LGBTQ+ posture at the time. The designation solidified Westbury Church's role as one of the few LGBTQ+ affirming churches in the Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The multitude of LGBTQ+ people in this older suburban part of Houston known as "Married Montrose" finally had their own United Methodist congregation close by.⁴ Westbury Church's journey reflects its identity as a courageous church willing to move beyond the past by its ongoing efforts to challenge systemic injustices in the face of denominational hierarchy and doctrinal norms. The church's commitment to "Multicultural Inclusivity" remains as one of its core values and is expanded to include the queer community as well.⁵ From addressing racism in its early years to embracing LGBTQ+ individuals as part of its mission, Westbury Church has consistently demonstrated the courage to act on its beliefs.

⁴The Westbury neighborhood was developed during the 1950s and 60s. During its so-called "white-flight" period of the 1980s and 90s, the older mid-century suburban community became an affordable option for minority populations, including LGBTQ+ families desiring a more settled lifestyle. As a result, Westbury is sometimes referred to as Married Montrose among queer locals.

⁵"About," Westbury United Methodist Church, <https://www.westburyumc.org/about> [accessed on June 17, 2024].

Preaching at Westbury Church has been uniquely diverse since the 1980s. From the church's first European-American female senior pastor to its first African-American male senior pastor, a wide variety of preaching has been celebrated through the years to the present. During my time in ministry, I served alongside a senior pastor who was an Asian-American male. Today, they have an African-American female serving as senior pastor. Sermons delivered at Westbury Church are described as "culturally relevant," "inspiringly celebrative" and others as "filled with story."⁶ As an Associate Pastor, I added to the rich legacy as the first openly queer preacher to fill the pulpit at Westbury Church.

Demographics at Westbury Church set cis het people in the majority making up about 85% of the church's population, leaving LGBTQ+ people at about 15%. Ethnic diversity may be measured with 40% European-Americans, 30% African-Americans, 10% Latin-Americans, 5% Asian-Americans, and 5% internationals primarily from the African diaspora. While most members are classified as professionals with college-level education or higher at 65%, many working-class families are among the congregation as well at 30%. Working-class refugee populations at 5%, make up those who affiliate with Westbury Church through a social services ministry it supports. As a suburban congregation, unhoused people are not located among the population.

Today, Westbury Church defies the odds as it grows in membership and influence. In the face of denominational schism experienced in May of 2023, the congregation is viewed as a mentor to others within the UMC. Its impact extends beyond

⁶Sarah Winkel, Westbury Church's long-time organist, interview with author, October 12, 2021.

its walls, providing a model of progressive Christian witness in Houston. The *Houston Chronicle* continues to report on the many great happenings in this congregation. The people of Westbury Church are fostering a community rooted in love and justice and remain as a beacon of hope for marginalized communities.

Covenant Baptist Church – Houston, Texas

Covenant Baptist Church, located in Houston's Museum District, stands as a testament to the power of faith and conscience. Its origins may be tracked to the 1960s as a dissenting voice from within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) as the denomination resisted cultural change. Covenant Church has become a congregation known for its progressive theology, commitment to social justice, and groundbreaking inclusivity. Covenant Baptist Church was founded in 1965 during the Civil Rights Movement by a group of about sixty individuals who opposed the racism, sexism, and growing theological rigidity of their denomination. Assimilation to the status quo would not cut it. These individuals sought a new expression of Baptist identity, rooted in justice and liberation. Over time, Covenant Church affiliated with the American Baptist Churches USA and later joined the Alliance of Baptists, a denomination known for its progressive theology and its affirming stance of women and LGBTQ+ individuals in ordained ministry. From its inception, the church embraced the historic Baptist principles of soul competency, local church autonomy, and the separation of church and state. While the SBC would depart from these principles, Covenant Church has held fast. These principles have provided a theological foundation for Covenant's advocacy on social issues, setting it apart from many other Baptist congregations in the region.

Notably, Covenant Church was the first Baptist congregation in Houston to publicly affirm queer people. The church's commitment to broad LGBTQ+ justice has been further evidenced by its participation in the ordination of openly queer clergy. With a long history of affirming LGBTQ+ people in ordained ministry, Covenant Church was the congregation that first formally ordained me to Christian ministry in 2018. This legacy of affirmation has positioned Covenant Church as a leader in creating inclusive community and advocating for that same diversity to be embraced in Greater Houston. As a founding member of the Houston Faith Leaders Coalition of Greater Houston (FLC), Covenant Church lives out its call in the city. When Houstonians faced a divisive vote regarding an Equal Rights Ordinance that sought to provide local protections for LGBTQ+ people, the leaders of Covenant Church were among the most active in championing this cause through the FLC.

Covenant Baptist Church's identity as "Liberal, Ecumenical, and Baptist" does not go unnoticed as the phrase is proudly displayed on its public-facing signage. These ideals are equally carried out through its various ministries that embrace a wide range of faith perspectives as it centers the congregation's core of Christianity. Some members claim faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior while others do not understand their spiritual journey in that way. The church's sermons are described as being rooted in the Christian and Hebrew scriptures, cultivated for an informed demographic, and set on the cutting edge of social transformation.

Covenant Church has not only nurtured inclusivity among its congregation, but its preaching has also embodied this value. People of varying ethnicities and sexual orientations have delivered sermons here—those from among the congregation and guest

preachers. Since the church's founding, senior ministers primarily have been cishet, European-American men. That said, Covenant Church has long been an advocate for marginalized people. Its current senior pastor, a cishet European-American woman has served in her role over ten years and has worked to bring diversity into all areas of church life. Preaching in this congregation is rooted in the mainline tradition and has been described as "academic," "prophetic," and "reverent".⁷ As one who was ordained by Covenant Church and returned as a guest preacher, I added to the prophetic tradition as a queer person preaching boldly from a queer perspective.

Regarding demographics, Covenant Church is made up of about 85% European-Americans and 10% African-Americans. Another 5% represents Latin-Americans and Asian-Americans collectively. Cishet people are in the majority at 75% with LGBTQ+ people at 25%. Almost all members of this congregation are professionals with a college-level education or higher, at 95%. Few working-class people attend Covenant Church, at 5%. Unhoused people occasionally attend weekly worship services, as the congregation's Museum District is not far from downtown street encampments.

As a congregation for thinking people, Covenant Church remains relevant and impactful, even as the religious landscape around it evolves. It is quite a statement to claim this progressive form of Christianity and to do so as a Baptist congregation in Texas. Included with their website, the church explains: "We retain the name Baptist because of the power of its historic principles and their congruence with what we hold to

⁷David Lee and Maggie Johnson, Covenant Church members, PPG-B meeting, June 23, 2024.

be true.”⁸ The principles of soul competency, local church autonomy, and the separation of church and state remain at the core. Covenant Church also embraces its role as a prophetic voice for justice and a haven for the marginalized. It uniquely holds space for interfaith community while embodying a core witness of Christian faith in action. In ways grand and small, the church reveals this identity. As a progressive Christian congregation, Covenant Baptist Church stands as a model for other faith communities in Houston.

Conclusion

LGBTQ+ affirming preaching contexts, such as Bering Church, Westbury Church, and Covenant Church, play an important role in building a more just world. As my research has focused on my praxis with the comic spirit, the congregational contexts have also offered vital analyses to this project. It may be said that these congregations present an inclusive vision of the Christian Church—one that invites all people into full participation. The comic spirit should serve that vision. As an openly queer preacher, I have discovered that LGBTQ+ affirming contexts have naturally been the only places that have welcomed my preaching ministry. The wider Christian Church can and should do better. By embracing queer preaching, the Christian Church not only reconciles with its past but also reclaims its prophetic voice as a beacon of hope and justice in the world. It should be our goal to cultivate queer preaching in these spaces so that affirming communities may flourish. Perhaps the comic spirit can be a tool to achieve this end.

⁸“Covenant’s History,” Covenant Baptist Church, accessed July 10, 2024, <https://www.covenanthouston.org/covenants-history.html>.

Nevertheless, it has been my personal goal within my limited contexts, to discover how the comic spirit may strengthen my own voice in the pulpits that welcome my ministry as an openly queer preacher.

CHAPTER 3.

HOMILETICAL ISSUE

Literary Examination of the Comic Spirit in Preaching

A thorough understanding of the comic spirit in preaching begins with an examination of five key homileticians whose work has shaped contemporary discussions on humor and its role in proclamation.¹ Blayne Banting's exploration of wit and imagination, Karl and Rolf Jacobson's emphasis on the "Stand-up Theologian," Jacob Myers' integration of insights from professional comedians, Alyce McKenzie and Owen Lynch's academic framework for the comic spirit, and Joseph Webb's foundational methodology provide critical perspectives on preaching with humor. These scholars each have approached the subject from distinct academic and methodological angles, offering theoretical insights and practical tools for integrating the comic spirit into sermons. There are varying theological perspectives presented as well. This chapter critically evaluates the scholars' contributions by highlighting their relevance to homiletics and the limitations of their frameworks. These works establish the foundation for expanding the comic spirit's application to my preaching praxis and the unique dynamics of LGBTQ+ affirming congregations.

¹By qualifying these scholarly works as "contemporary," I seek to emphasize that most of the authors considered have been published within the last fifteen years. Joseph Webb's *Comedy and Preaching* would be an exception. His text may be considered a classic in the niche field on comic homiletics.

Blayne Banting's Contribution to the Comic Spirit in Preaching

Blayne Banting, in his book *With Wit & Wonder: The Preacher's Use of Humour and Imagination*, provides an exploration of how humor and creativity can enhance preaching. The author identifies specific forms of humor, which he refers to as “wit,” that are exemplified throughout the New Testament Gospels. The author defines wit as “a truly gospel-inspired understanding of humour.”² Banting's central argument is that the preacher's engagement with both wit and wonder can enhance sermons just as Jesus Christ preached, making these sermons more relatable and impactful for congregations. Banting grounds his exploration of humor in the context of biblical witness offering chapter and verse citations as prooftexts. There are eighteen distinct forms of humor presented both in the body of the text and neatly summarized with an appendix—including “hyperbole,” “irony,” and “caricature” to name a few examples.³ With his work, Banting asserts that humor is not merely a modern innovation but an intrinsic aspect of human experience as revealed in scripture. This scriptural focus reflects Banting's Evangelical theology, which views the Bible as the ultimate authority and guide for all matters of Christian faith and practice. His methodical categorization of humor is designed to encourage preachers to draw primarily from scripture when incorporating wit into their sermons.

The book also highlights the interplay between wit and wonder, with wonder serving as a catalyst for the preacher's creative imagination. The author defines “wonder”

²Blayne Banting, *With Wit & Wonder: The Preacher's Use of Humour and Imagination* (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2013), 44.

³Banting, *With Wit & Wonder*, 131-133.

as somewhat synonymous with the concepts of human imagination and creativity.⁴ Banting offers a theological approach for integrating imagination into the craft of preaching. He writes, “We might express the role of human creativity as co-creativity...we are invited to bring our God-given capacities to create and imagine.”⁵ This notion of co-creativity aligns with broader theological discussions about the role of human agency and human purpose as Imago Dei, a creative God who makes creative children in the divine image. With wonder as the preacher’s creative imagination, preachers are encouraged to exercise agency and discernment through four types of imagination he classifies as conventional, ethical, prophetic, and poetic.⁶ While the author encourages the preacher’s creative imagination, the boundaries for such a practice are rooted in an Evangelical hermeneutic.

Banting keeps the recommended praxis close to the Bible. The author’s practical application focuses on how the preacher can use humor to illuminate the pericope. By rooting humor in scripture, he argues that preachers can maintain theological integrity while also surmounting the task of engaging their congregations. His identification of specific forms of wit in the New Testament Gospels offers a rather structured approach for preachers seeking to incorporate humor into their sermons. However, Banting’s approach is not without limitations. Questions are raised when considering the author’s understanding of the scope of human creativity. Can the comic spirit move beyond the sacred canon? Is the preacher limited to wit found explicitly in scripture, or is there room

⁴Banting, *With Wit & Wonder*, 94.

⁵Banting, *With Wit & Wonder*, 65.

⁶Banting, *With Wit & Wonder*, 100-102.

for humor that arises from present-day contexts? Is the author's understanding of wonder too rigid? For cishet Evangelicals, the answer is likely no. However, for queer people and their allies found in all parts of the Christian Church, the answer may be different.

Queer Reflections on Banting's Work

A queer reading of Banting's work challenges his exclusive reliance on Bible-based humor alone. One might ask, are there other sources for the preacher? While the author's identification of wit in scripture is valuable, it may be evaluated as incomplete as it overlooks the ongoing and dynamic ways God inspires humor in present-day contexts.⁷ For LGBTQ+ affirming congregations, where humor often emerges as a tool of resilience and subversion, the preacher's creative imagination must be willing to extend beyond scriptural examples to resonate fully with the lived experiences of queer individuals. Banting's treatment of wonder, if expanded, could provide a helpful corrective to his exclusive scriptural focus. By emphasizing the preacher's role as a co-creator with God, the author opens the door to a broader understanding of humor as a divine gift that transcends time and culture. Where Banting holds wit and wonder within the bounds of the Bible and Evangelical perspectives, a queer reading would argue that God's creativity cannot and should not be limited by any ancient text. Might the queer preacher be inspired with a fresh joke—maybe even a joke discerned from a present-day lived

⁷Though Blayne Banting writes from the perspective of classical Evangelicalism, my queer reading commends a more progressive hermeneutic which sees Divine Revelation as ongoing. As a mainline Christian, I agree that the Bible is central to Christian faith, even among most LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. Yet, inspiration for the comic spirit's use in queer preaching may be found in scripture and beyond the pages of the sixty-six books of the canon, as revealed through the lives of queer people.

experience that falls outside the standards and norms of ancient cultural experiences from the Bible? This perspective aligns with Queer Theology's emphasis on the sanctity of LGBTQ+ human experiences. Queer theologians would propose that the author should examine not just the New Testament Gospels but the ongoing, unfinished Gospel according to the daily lives of LGBTQ+ people. There is plenty of fodder there that might enliven the sermon. In this sense, Banting's framework could be expanded to include humor that arises from the unique cultural expressions of queer individuals and their communities. The author's theological foundation of classical Evangelicalism limits the scope of his analysis, overlooking the ways fresh expressions of wit and wonder can reflect divine creativity—when evaluated from a queer reading. The theological underpinning of the author's work fails to uplift how God is still revealing wit and wonder within our continuing human story—even the stories of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people. A queer reading of Banting's work challenges these theological limitations, calling for a more expansive understanding of the comic spirit for sermons. The author fails to embrace the lived realities of diverse people in diverse congregational settings and promotes a homogeneous understanding of Christianity and its pulpit. Nevertheless, there are valuable insights to be found with Banting's work as the Bible remains the central text in most LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. By integrating the author's insights with a broader theological imagination, preachers might effectively engage their LGBTQ+ affirming congregations and proclaim the Continuing Testament's Gospel with the rainbow colors of wit and wonder.

Karl and Rolf Jacobson's Contribution to the Comic Spirit in Preaching

Karl and Rolf Jacobson's *Divine Laughter: Preaching and the Serious Business of Humor* asks the question: How can we, as the interpreters of scripture, step out of the way and allow the Bible to shine in the limelight of comedy through preaching? Their belief is that the scriptures are rather humorous already. Preachers only need to harness an ability to present that humor as it is. By emphasizing the role of the preacher as a "Stand-up Theologian," the Jacobsons provide a unique perspective on how the Bible's humor can encourage a fuller understanding of Christian faith and foster fuller engagement by the listener.⁸ Stand-up Theologians are those preachers who reimagine the funny or peculiar sacred narratives. They are the interpreters who are not afraid to present the scriptures in a modern rendering. Stand-up Theologians read scripture without their piety glasses on in an effort to catch what might have been missed in their Biblical Studies courses from seminary. The authors' contributions are both theoretical and practical, offering insights that may resonate with traditional and affirming preaching contexts. The authors write, "the Bible is often funny, both intentionally and unintentionally... we need to let the Bible be funny when it is funny, because it will be more meaningful if we can let its humor breathe."⁹ There is no need to conjure up a stand-up comedy act as there is so much humor already present in the ancient texts. The preacher's task is to allow the humor present in the biblical text to have its own space among the congregation.

⁸Karl Jacobson and Rolf Jacobson, *Divine Laughter: Preaching and the Serious Business of Humor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 108.

⁹Jacobson and Jacobson, *Divine Laughter*, 22.

The authors' concept of the Stand-up Theologian expands this hermeneutical focus by drawing, by some measure, on the techniques of professional comedians. The goal is not to turn the preacher into a stand-up comic but to adopt a posture of engagement. While most of the text's focus is aimed at highlighting examples of humor found in both testaments of the scriptures, the Jacobsons identify three parallels they believe exist between comedians and preachers. The first is "seeing the world in askance" which is presented as the communicator's ability to wield incongruity as a conceptual framework for approaching complex topics. The second is "the power of intrusion," or the ability to broach a subject that otherwise would not be commonly discussed. The third parallel identified is "truth telling," the ability to speak about social ills in ways that maintain the listener's attention.¹⁰ Unlike the comedian, preachers should see humor not as an end in itself but a means of cultivating insight. This distinction is central as they encourage Stand-up Theologians to focus on the theological impact of the comic spirit. Humor for sermons should never be about eliciting laughter without a purpose. One might see the Stand-up Theologian's mission as humor-driven understanding for the congregation.

Queer Reflections on the Jacobsons' Work

While the Jacobsons' work is important in many respects, it primarily addresses traditional Mainline Christian contexts, leaving a critical gap in its application to marginalized communities, particularly LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. A queer reading of their concept of the Stand-up Theologian expands its potential by emphasizing

¹⁰Jacobson and Jacobson, *Divine Laughter*, 8-17.

the unique cultural expressions of humor within queer communities and how queer interpretations of scripture might bring humor-filled insights. As the authors emphasize scripture as a primary source of humor in preaching, queer incarnational translations are an opportunity that should be uplifted.

Moreover, while the Jacobsons acknowledge the relevance of modern-day sources of humor—unlike Banting—their focus remains largely within the confines of humor found in the Bible suggesting that these examples might be preferred over others. For LGBTQ+ congregations, where humor can serve as a tool of social liberation, preachers may need to draw more extensively on the Continuing Testament of God’s work in our present lives, as mentioned with the critique of Banting. This hermeneutic calls on preachers to interpret cultural and personal narratives to better understand the nature of God displayed through queer life. Incorporating these elements into the Jacobsons’ framework could enrich its applicability to diverse social locations—most especially LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. A sole focus on scripture excludes the divine gifts of human reason and human experience. Of note, there are only a very few references to queer people in the scripture. God is still writing a sacred story that includes queer people—and it is often pretty funny! Overall, the authors make a significant contribution to the field of homiletics, offering a theological and practical approach for integrating humor into preaching. A queer reading of their work could invite a more expansive application of their insights, bridging the gap between traditional homiletics and the unique dynamics of queer cultural expressions. By building on the authors’ foundation, preachers can harness the power of humor for proclamation with greater authenticity for LGBTQ+ affirming congregations.

Jacob Myers' Contribution to the Comic Spirit in Preaching

Jacob Myers' *Stand-Up Preaching: Homiletical Insights from Contemporary Comedians* is an innovative text that bridges the worlds of homiletics and comedy beyond theology and biblical studies into theory and practice. Myers' work is distinguished by its intentional engagement with professional comedians as sources of inspiration for preachers, offering a fresh perspective on how the comic spirit can be employed as a useful tool in the pulpit. Comedians are put under the homiletical microscope, per se. By focusing on the performative aspects of preaching, Myers challenges preachers to see themselves not just as proclaimers of God's Word but as embodied storytellers of faith. Something more holistic is Myers' aim. Preachers are meant to connect with their congregations and comic technique can help. The author's work is both an invitation and a guide for preachers to approach the craft of preaching through best practices.

At the core of Myers' work is the concept of what he calls the "Stand-Up Preacher," a term used to describe preachers who integrate the performative techniques of stand-up comedians into their sermons. Unlike the Jacobsons' idea of the Stand-Up Theologian, which focuses on the theological implications of the comic spirit, Myers emphasizes the art of performance itself. He writes: "I define comedy as a discursive form that employs humor to prompt an audience to see the world in fresh ways. I define humor as a rhetorical structure that uses language, vocal inflections, and gestures to prompt laughter."¹¹ Framing the concept for homiletics, Myers coins the terms

¹¹Jacob Myers, *Stand-Up Preaching: Homiletical Insights from Contemporary Comedians* (Eugene: Cascade, 2022), 31.

“humorletics” for the nature of humor and “comiletics” for the way in which humor is presented.¹² Comedy’s content and delivery are considered with the author’s homiletical framework. He invites preachers to study the craft of comedians, including their use of timing, cadence, and audience engagement, to enhance their ability to connect with listeners. The author offers best practices through an analysis of eight diverse stand-up comedians including Dick Gregory, Daniel Sloss, Hari Kondabolu, Dave Chappelle, Hannah Gadsby, Wanda Sykes, Hasan Minhaj, and John Oliver. The book examines these eight comedians for strengths and weaknesses as performers while highlighting parallels valuable for preaching. The author writes: “I want to demystify stand-up comedy and to engage this allied discipline for homiletical insight.”¹³ By examining the work of professional comedians, rather than ancient expressions of the comic spirit found in biblical studies, Myers provides a model for preachers to critically reflect on the comic spirit through a more current model.

By practical evaluation, Myers offers a wealth of insights for preachers seeking to incorporate humor into their sermons. He uplifts the use of irony, word-play, and self-deprecating humor—among other expressions of the comic spirit—as concrete tools for crafting sermons that resonate with congregations. These forms of the comic spirit are not presented in a list. Rather, the author identifies them with specific examples per each of the eight comedians. Myers also highlights the importance of understanding one’s persona and how it shapes the delivery of a message. For preachers in LGBTQ+ affirming contexts, these insights based in contemporary examples are invaluable.

¹²Myers, *Stand-Up Preaching*, 31-34.

¹³Myers, *Stand-Up Preaching*, 28.

Queer Reflections on Myers' Work

A queer reading of Myers' text celebrates his inclusion of openly queer comedians like Wanda Sykes, whose use of persona serves as an example of how the comic spirit can be used to speak about complex issues congregants may face. The author acknowledges the role of persona in Sykes' jokes which can provide a model for preachers to draw on their own unique identities and experiences in their homiletical practice. Myers writes: "Sykes embodies a kind of blues sensibility that does not deny or ignore the suffering she has endured, but refuses to grant it the final word."¹⁴

Vulnerability and humor meet here. Myers' intentional examination of comedians from diverse ethnicities and sexual orientations supports the author's claim that the comic spirit "provides preachers and churchgoers with the fortitude to face the world in its manifold messiness."¹⁵ Our world is indeed messy when God's diverse human family is at odds. A message of connection is needed through preaching with the comic spirit. The author recognizes the potential for the Christian Church and its sermons to act as a bridge for cultivating connections that challenge the status quo.

By in large, *Stand-up Preaching* makes a significant contribution to the study of the comic spirit in homiletics, offering preachers a practical and relational model for engaging their congregations. Myers moves us out of the church library into the comedy club as students of the greats in this field without the baggage of too much ecclesiology. His work is novel, beyond the standard fare of traditional Christian homiletical scholarship. It is also an inclusive work. Nevertheless, mainstream contexts are the

¹⁴Myers, *Stand-Up Preaching*, 163.

¹⁵Myers, *Stand-Up Preaching*, 228.

author's primary focus. Further exploration of the comic spirit for queer and marginalized communities is an opportunity for a second volume of this book. A queer reading of Myers' work invites queer preachers to adapt these best practices presented while embracing their own identities and cultural expressions.

Alyce McKenzie and Owen Lynch's Contribution to the Comic Spirit in Preaching

With Alyce McKenzie and Owen Lynch's *Humor Us!: Preaching and the Power of the Comic Spirit*, a comprehensive academic exploration—by mainstream terms—is presented. The authors delve deeply into the theory of humor unpacking its potential for preaching. Focusing on the duality of the preacher and the sermon, McKenzie and Lynch's framework is established. Cultivating the comic spirit for both sides of the duality is of concern to the authors. The book bridges theoretical discourse and practical application to address the ways sermons might be enlivened by the intentional use of comedy. Their contributions are particularly valuable for preachers seeking to integrate humor in ways that resonate with present-day listeners while remaining theologically grounded. The first focus is “preacher” as it emphasizes that the comic spirit begins with a person who at times functions as a court jester or fool, but ultimately as a sage.¹⁶ Theology, psychology, and sociology are used to address this focus throughout the text. The authors write of “preachers as comic spirits” personified who may be “more open, accepting of ambiguity, and willing to laugh at themselves and with others in the course

¹⁶Alyce McKenzie and Owen Lynch, *Humor Us! Preaching and the Power of the Comic Spirit* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), 125-137.

of unpredictable daily events.”¹⁷ The ideal preacher, under the influence of the comic spirit, is in touch with these qualities. The preacher’s comedic persona is presented by the authors as paramount to effective humor and is the starting place rather than scripture or another outside source—in contrast to previous theories reviewed. The preacher can discover this comedic persona from their social location, life experiences, and theological convictions that all may be sources of relatability between pulpit and pew. This approach challenges preachers to see themselves not just as conveyors of truth but as active participants in the comedic dynamic of the sermon. The authors make a hermeneutical claim: “The preacher, as comic spirit’s respect for ambiguity shows up in her avoidance of proof-texting, her willingness to take the trouble to interpret text in their broader canonical contexts, and her acknowledgement that texts don’t boil down to one single meaning.”¹⁸ This hermeneutical claim places McKenzie and Lynch’s work in contrast to Banting’s text.

The second focus involves the “sermon,” to be examined through a detailed analysis of the comic spirit’s presence and purpose. The authors categorize the comic spirit, in terms of its content, into three broad theories: superiority, relief, and incongruity.¹⁹ This approach to categorization is in keeping with broader academic studies of humor. Within each of these categories, expressions of humor are noted for their value in sermons. The authors further present fourteen strategies for sermons. For the purpose of my review, I will list a few of these strategies that I found most relevant to

¹⁷McKenzie and Lynch, *Humor Us!*, 149.

¹⁸McKenzie and Lynch, *Humor Us!*, 152.

¹⁹McKenzie and Lynch, *Humor Us!*, 75-91.

my project: “Humor can lower listener defenses when exposed to a challenging or painful reality that calls for a change in their behavior/actions...Humor can pave the way for the introduction of a deeper, more difficult topic...Humor can invite us into a biblical text by seeing it in an off-kilter way.”²⁰ With these strategies, a praxis for developing sermons with the comic spirit may be discerned. Therefore, these strategies require a sense of logical estimation, implementation in sermon development, and ongoing practice across multiple sermons with a system for congregational feedback to confirm the intended results.²¹

Queer Reflections on McKenzie and Lynch’s Work

A queer reading of *Humor Us!* highlights the potential of McKenzie and Lynch’s work to address the unique dynamics of LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. The authors’ discussion of superiority humor, for instance, aligns with the practice of “reading” in queer culture—a playful, often satirical form of humor used to subvert societal norms and build community among LGBTQ+ people. In critique, McKenzie and Lynch do not explicitly engage with queer cultural expressions of the comic spirit by name. They write of superiority humor, for example: “Don’t throw a punch at someone who has less power than you or can’t punch back.”²² Queer preachers may find that their analysis of

²⁰McKenzie and Lynch, *Humor Us!*, 61-71.

²¹As elements of each scholar’s work inspired the development of my praxis, the approach presented with McKenzie and Lynch’s homiletical strategies became the driving force for discerning three homiletical strategies from across the eight sermons of this project.

²²McKenzie and Lynch, *Humor Us!*, 79.

superiority humor can be adapted for relevance in LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. The authors' two-fold theory, with its emphasis on preacher persona, is especially relevant in places where authenticity is critical to building trust with the community's sage of theology. Queer people have little patience for pretense with religious figures and institutions. For LGBTQ+ preachers, a deeper understanding of self and persona, as defined by the authors, can be a liberating act that allows them to reclaim their identities and experiences as sources of insight. This perspective aligns with the concepts present in Queer Theology. For the cishet preacher, McKenzie and Lynch's work may be read as comprehensive, addressing theory and praxis of the comic spirit for preaching in mainstream settings. With regard to queer homiletics, the book leaves room for expansion in addressing the specific needs of LGBTQ+ people. The fourteen homiletical strategies lack contextualization for queer preachers and queer listeners. The authors' theoretical framework is valuable but could benefit from the inclusion of queer humor when considering a more contextually relevant praxis.

Overall, this book is a worthy source for better understanding the comic spirit for preaching from a Mainline Christian perspective. As an elevated academic text, it offers both theoretical depth and practical tools for integrating the comic spirit into homiletical practice. The dual focus on the preacher and the sermon provides a wholistic approach that emphasizes self-awareness, creativity, and theological integrity. I found the authors' work to be more comprehensive than Banting and the Jacobsons' texts as McKenzie and Lynch's reach expands well beyond biblical studies. At the same time, the textbook is not as novel or as inclusive as Myers' text. It is clear to the reader that McKenzie and Lynch center their research in cishet, Mainline Christianity. The author's lens for the comic

spirit as preacher and as sermon leaves opportunities for exploration into queer preachers and queer sermons, whose challenges are sometimes different from cishet norms.

Joseph Webb's Contribution to the Comic Spirit in Preaching

Perhaps the most essential text I reviewed for this project was Joseph Webb's *Comedy and Preaching*. Published in 1998, the book was among the first to explore the comic spirit as a legitimate tool for sermons. Webb's work is smart and useful. It is most valuable for its concise presentation of the subject matter with equal treatment of theory and praxis. Preachers discover an applicable framework for preaching as the author explores five elements of the comic spirit: (1) the comic story, (2) the comic premise, (3) the comic metaphor, (4) the comic Bible, and (5) the comic persona. Through an exposition of these five elements, the author provides a structured approach to crafting sermons. Webb offers a clear method for preachers while also addressing the theoretical and theological underpinnings of his view of the comic spirit. Though the text is rather dated as of the publishing of this thesis, I believe Webb's contribution remains a vital resource for homileticians who value a concise guide.

Webb's theoretical foundation is rooted in a pastoral concern for effective communication. As the widely recognized author of *Preaching Without Notes*, Webb understands best practices in communication theory and how listeners engage with sermons. This pastoral concern guides each of the five elements of comedy that offer a roadmap for incorporating humor into sermons in meaningful and effective ways. With the element of the comic story, Webb highlights the importance of narrative as a vehicle for humor and theological insight. He writes that "the art of storytelling is the foundation

of the comic spirit.”²³ For Webb, this is the rhetorical device by which the other four elements are best expressed. With the element of the comic premise, the author expounds on the nature of humor and its more basic reliance on incongruity. For Webb, “incongruity (which is another, less baggage-laden term, for irony) is the fundamental premise of the comic spirit. And there are numerous ways that it can be utilized in preaching.”²⁴ The use of unexpected juxtapositions helps preachers invite reflection on the sermon’s theological message in creative ways. With the element of comic metaphor, the author proposes that objects and illustrations can serve as guiding symbols in a sermon that is both humorous and insightful. Webb writes, “Every sermon, like every speech, every novel or short story, every book, every poem, every formal act of communication, is built around a central motivating notion...one central metaphor...to shape the sermon’s central thrust.”²⁵ When the object or illustration is commonly recognizable, the comic impact is felt by the congregation more fully.

With the element of the comic Bible, the reimagining and retelling of biblical texts with modern terms is uplifted. The author writes, “The possibilities of such stories—stories of the past inferred from stories in the present—are everywhere between here and biblical lore, between here and the Old Testament, or the New...it is not imagination as opposed to the text. It is imagination, the comic imagination fully aligned with the text, fused with the text.”²⁶ By approaching scripture with a fresh perspective,

²³Joseph Webb, *Comedy and Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 74.

²⁴Webb, *Comedy and Preaching*, 94.

²⁵Webb, *Comedy and Preaching*, 99.

²⁶Webb, *Comedy and Preaching*, 125.

preachers can uncover its inherent humor and relevance for modern audiences. With the element of the comic persona, Webb emphasizes that every preacher brings a unique persona into the pulpit that is shaped by their personality, social location, and relationship with their congregation. He writes, “There is no such thing as preacher neutrality...they want to know if the preacher is genuine, a real ‘flesh and blood’ person and not a ‘stuffed shirt.’”²⁷ As the text warns preachers to not exaggerate one’s persona too much, it also commends a self-examination of the preacher to discover characteristics of persona and harness those characteristics for vital communication through the comic spirit.

As a forerunner in the niche field of comedic homiletics, Webb’s work stands as a guidebook for the working preacher seeking to enliven sermons with the comic spirit. The author’s own ability to communicate the subject matter effectively jumps from the pages of this book. There are blind spots in Webb’s treatment of the comic spirit, or rather lack of specific treatment, for queer and other marginalized communities. Yet, the author’s theory and recommended praxis is broadly applicable beyond his cishet, Mainline Christian context. Webb’s work is a concise text, an accessible view into the essential elements of sermons enlivened by the comic spirit. This concise and accessible framework, without an excess of theory and abstraction, may be adapted by queer preachers for LGBTQ+ affirming congregations.

²⁷Webb, *Comedy and Preaching*, 128.

Queer Reflections on Webb's Work

A queer reading of *Comedy and Preaching* highlights both strengths and limitations. To his credit, Webb's primary emphasis on storytelling is particularly relevant—as other scholars have demonstrated. Webb's text may be adapted to queer preaching by uplifting stories that resonate with the experiences of LGBTQ+ listeners. Queer preaching further thrives when it reclaims the preacher's identity and lived experiences as sources. Webb's five comic elements can be adapted to uplift the story and the storyteller in ways that keep the theological message sound and move queer listeners toward a stronger understanding of the message. However, Webb's framework is limited by its lack of explicit engagement with LGBTQ+ concerns. There is a complete absence of queer people, queer culture, and queer affirming preaching in the text. The author's focus on mainstream preaching contexts overlooks the unique cultural expressions of humor that are possible for queer preaching. Again, this text was published in 1998, long before the legalization of Marriage Equality in the United States and the formal embrace of the LGBTQ+ community by some mainline denominations. Webb's work is pioneering among mainstream homiletics, no doubt. However, the author's lack of engagement with any form of diversity and inclusion leaves room for further development. A queer reading of Webb's work challenges preachers to adapt the author's five elements of comic preaching while drawing on insights from Queer Theology and LGBTQ+ culture to create sermons that resonate with affirming congregations.

Conclusion

In review of the homiletical scholars considered with my project, there is a critical groundwork that has been laid. The research of these cis-het scholars highlights the creative potential for preachers and their sermons, emphasizing the practical ways humor can inspire insight among congregations. Scholars from Evangelical and Mainline theological traditions have been presented, offering a wider view of the Christian Church and its relationship to the comic spirit. A queer reading has been given to each book highlighting the strengths and limitations of each approach. Each of these five texts have contributed to my developing praxis. By synthesis, they provide a collective framework that I have adapted for queer preaching within LGBTQ+ affirming congregations in Houston, Texas. Through queering these studies by established homiletical scholars, my thesis will seek to push the boundaries of common preaching praxis. My aim will be to demonstrate, through preaching praxis, how insights from historically excluded perspectives—namely the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people—can challenge and transform the dominant paradigms of the field. As preaching is a theological practice, common understandings of Queer Theology will further inform a developing praxis demonstrated with this project.

CHAPTER 4.

EXPANDING THE ISSUE BEYOND HOMILETICS

Queer Theology as Cognate Field

Queer Theology provides a vital lens for understanding the lived experiences and spiritual journeys of LGBTQ+ individuals. Before one can effectively preach with the comic spirit in LGBTQ+ affirming congregations, they must discover a contextual understanding of LGBTQ+ people and views on matters of Christian faith from queer perspectives. As a merger of secular Queer Theory and the broad tradition of Christian Theology, Queer Theology speaks of the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people and understandings of faith rooted in these experiences. This makes Queer Theology an essential cognate field for exploring preaching in affirming contexts. Traditional theologies that have been used to harm and exclude are not taken at face value. A more expansive understanding of human experiences can serve to illuminate theological concepts through queerness. Queer Theology invites a reimagining of doctrines and/or biblical interpretations. With respect to the field of Biblical Studies, some of the scholars presented with this review focus their queering primarily to scripture—carrying the influence of Queer Theology into this field and are classified here as queer theologians by broad definition. Also, queer preaching calls for a keen understanding of both theology and scripture. Therefore, this chapter examines the contributions of key scholars who each identify as belonging to the LGBTQ+ community—Patrick Cheng, Michael Carden, David Tabb Stewart, Thomas Hanks, Austen Hartke, Jay Emerson Johnson, and Pamela Lightsey. Each brings a perspective of theology and/or scripture that is representative of

gay, bisexual, lesbian, and transgender people. European-American, African-American, and Asian-American scholars are included to further provide an intersectional perspective. They present theological traditions that are expansive, including mainline denominations such as the Episcopal Church USA and the United Methodist Church, as well as the Metropolitan Community Church. This denominational diversity mirrors a multi-denominational faith history of queer people who find their way to LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. With Queer Theology, heteronormative Christian theology is critiqued and new theologies are birthed. These authors represent leading voices in the field. As a Latin-American, cisgender, queer man, with a multi-denominational background, I have grown in my preaching ministry from examining the work of these scholars—both by cultivating a queer theological acumen and by seeing how the work of queering theology and scripture can often be an enterprise inherently rich with the comic spirit.

It should be noted that some parts of the Christian Church have drawn a line between Queer Theology and so-called “Affirming Theology,” that may be evaluated as a form of heteronormative Christian orthodoxy that is merely affable to LGBTQ+ people and same-sex marriage.¹ Preaching inspired of this exclusivist theology alone deserves rotten tomatoes, in my opinion! It rejects the multifaceted, intersectional identities and experiences of queer Christians while demanding cultural assimilation to cishet norms. I propose that a truly affirming theology is one that makes space for the authentic, bold voices of all queer theologians—even those with whom we may disagree. An LGBTQ+

¹Matthew Vines, “Reform vs. Revolution: Distinguishing Affirming Theology from Queer Theology,” The Reformation Project, accessed December 30, 2024, <https://reformationproject.org/affirming-theology-vs-queer-theology>.

affirming congregation should not discourage or prohibit Queer Theology from being considered by its clergy or laity. My research is conducted under this assumption through the use of the designation “LGBTQ+ affirming congregations,” where Queer Theology is exercised in the development and delivery of the eight sermons considered with this project. A review of queer theologians’ works has aided the development of a preaching praxis that authentically reflects the realities of the LGBTQ+ communities I have served and the needs of a given sermon.

By integrating the perspectives of these queer theologians into comic homiletics, I have developed and delivered more contextually relevant sermons throughout this project using expressions of the comic spirit that resonate with queer understandings of Christian faith. With this chapter’s literary review, I will primarily underscore the bold theological language and themes of Queer Theology that resonate with LGBTQ+ people. Additional commentary is offered relating the previous chapter’s homiletical theories to the work of these theologians. Both streams—queer contextualized theology and homiletical theories for the comic spirit—will be noted to support the work of my thesis. With notice, readers should be aware that language pertaining to sexuality and sexual situations will be presented with this chapter.

Patrick Cheng’s Contribution to Queer Theology

It is my belief that Patrick Cheng’s *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* stands as a fundamental text in the field of Queer Theology. His work offers a comprehensive view into leading perspectives in the field while presenting his own undergirding synthesis. Cheng defines Queer Theology as “rooted in queer theory

and...critiques the binary categories of sexuality (that is, homosexual vs. heterosexual) and gender identity (that is, female vs. male) as socially constructed...also more fundamental boundaries such as life vs. death, and divine vs. human...that on the surface seem fixed and unchangeable.”² At the heart of Cheng’s premise is the concept of “radical love.” The author defines this concept as “a love that is so extreme that it dissolves all existing boundaries...[bridging] the gap between queer theory and Christian theology.”³ After offering a genealogy of Queer Theology, the author presents a queering of doctrines related to the Triune God.

When considering the God of Creation, the author relates marriage and queer sex to Divine agency and his premise of radical love. He writes: “God is under no compulsion to create the cosmos and human beings. Thus, creation is a pure act of grace and unmerited love. If God is under no compulsion to engage in creation, then human beings are also under no compulsion to procreate in order to fulfill the image and likeness of God.”⁴ With this argument, Cheng defends all forms of committed relationships as possessing a core of “unmerited self-giving love.” The author further argues that the Trinity reflects the divine nature of relationality and fluidity, offering a model of inclusion and mutuality. The author cites queer theologians who critique heterosexuality and monogamy with a view of the Trinity as polyamorous, devoid of jealousy and

²Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 10.

³Cheng, *Radical Love*, 139.

⁴Cheng, *Radical Love*, 67.

gracious beyond conventional conceptions.⁵ He writes, “the Trinity is actually a polygendered or polysexual being itself.”⁶ This relationship is extended beyond God’s self to God and humanity. Biblical examples would include God dissolving the divides between Divine Father and Mother of Creation and dissolving the divides between the infinite God and the finite human through the Divine conception with Mary for Christ’s Incarnation. For LGBTQ+ people, Cheng proposes God as both parent and companion—one who reveals that the way toward wholeness in relationship to community.

As God of the Incarnation, Jesus Christ is considered. The author rejects traditional understandings of original sin and proposes sin as essentialism. Cheng writes, “if radical love is understood as a love so extreme that it dissolves existing boundaries, then the rejection a radical love is essentialism, or the reinforcing of the boundaries that keep categories separate and distinct from each other.”⁷ Jesus Christ becomes the agent of radical love. The person and human nature of Jesus is further explored as one who crossed social and sexual boundaries. Regarding social boundaries, biblical examples include Jesus dining with the tax collector, associating with the Samaritan woman and other social outcasts. The dividing line between heterosexual and homosexual is blurred as Jesus’ personal relationships are examined. Cheng offers the proposition that “Jesus could have been attracted to both sexes...to see Jesus as a sexual being is to see him as

⁵Cheng, *Radical Love*, 58-59.

⁶Cheng, *Radical Love*, 59.

⁷Cheng, *Radical Love*, 74.

bisexual in orientation, if not also in his actions.”⁸ Biblical examples would include Jesus’ household in Bethany—a living arrangement that included Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. The embodiment of Jesus is also viewed for its reflection of transgender concerns. With the tenets of the Transfiguration and the Resurrection, the body of Christ may be described as “the same and different...in a way that defies easy categorization.”⁹ Christ is for LGBTQ+ people, not just a historical figure, but a relevant person who reflects the complexities of our daily lives.

Through the God of Spirit, the author speaks of the Holy Spirit as the real and present helper of humanity. Through his treatment of Sacramentalism, Cheng writes: “the sacraments can be understood as a foretaste of radical love. Just as foreplay can be a foretaste of sexual pleasure, the sacraments can be a foretaste of our ultimate destiny when we are reunited with God’s radical love.”¹⁰ For Cheng, the concerns of Pneumatology and Eschatology are closely related. The need for intimacy and communion is ever-present along the Christian’s spiritual journey. The sensual nature of the Eucharist shared with others is compared to the “intimate and sacred moments of lovemaking” where the experience of the sacrament reflects “both the bedroom and the altar.”¹¹ For LGBTQ+ people, the Holy Spirit is an active agent of connection, welcoming and wooing us through Christian discipleship, leading to ultimate consummation.

⁸Cheng, *Radical Love*, 81.

⁹Cheng, *Radical Love*, 83.

¹⁰Cheng, *Radical Love*, 120.

¹¹Cheng, *Radical Love*, 122.

Practical Implications for Preaching Discerned from Cheng

Cheng's premise of radical love calls preachers to proclaim a Gospel that is inclusive beyond traditional boundaries. For the author, a theology that sees LGBTQ+ life as holy and worthy should guide sermons. By integrating Cheng's insights, preachers can craft sermons that challenge exclusionary practices, celebrate diversity, and inspire congregants to engage in acts of justice and solidarity across the spectrum of LGBTQ+ experiences. The preacher may be as bold as to include Cheng's sensual comparisons to illustrate the sacredness of queer relationships if the context permits such a liberty. The preacher may engage his reinterpretation of the Triune God to address issues of systemic oppression still present in the Christian Church and in broader society. It is clear that Cheng's understanding of radical love knows no bounds. This approach affirms queer identities and deepens the congregation's understanding of God as ever expansive and full of understanding for the queer journey.

Relating to the work of comic homiletics, parallels are noted with Webb's discussion of incongruity. As Cheng's premise is concerned with dissolving boundaries, Webb's understanding about humor as incongruity is concerned with a similar function. Webb defines incongruity for humor as "the principle of putting things together that do not go together, things that should not, by the normal modes of acting, go together."¹² Clearly, sexuality and Jesus are two things that do not typically go together. The opportunities for humor seem endless for sermons. Discovering humorous incongruities that serve the message of the sermon might be the preacher's goal when considering Cheng's theology for homiletics.

¹²Joseph Webb, *Comedy and Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 77.

Critique of Cheng's Work

Without a doubt, Cheng's introduction is a concise and useful text for those seeking to understand the immerging field of Queer Theology. Nevertheless, it may pose a challenge to some readers. His focus on the intersections of queer theory and theology may feel abstract to the cishet community. Cheng's theology promotes a radical love for all humanity. However, it may not fully address the issues of intersectionality adequately. The experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals who navigate marginalization based on disability, economic status, and other classifications could be uplifted with this work, even as an introduction. *Radical Love* is a seminal text as it offers the whole Christian Church a vision of Christianity that is inclusive and liberating. His treatment of Queer Theology prompts readers to see orthodoxy through the eyes of queer experience as well as the familiar teaching of Romans 8:35-39. He writes: "Christian theology promises that nothing...can ever separate us from the love of God. There is no love that is more radical than that, and that is why Christian theology is, at its core, a queer enterprise."¹³ My praxis would be incomplete without Cheng's understanding of the radical love that is at the heart of the Christian faith.

Contributions of *The Queer Bible Commentary* to Queer Theology

Queer Theology is infused throughout this first of its kind commentary compiled from among LGBTQ+ scholars. *The Queer Bible Commentary*, edited by Deryn Guest, Robert Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache has been pivotal in advancing queer concerns in theology and hermeneutics. A team of thirty-one queer scholars deconstruct

¹³Cheng, *Radical Love*, 140.

traditional biblical interpretations, some that have been used to oppress LGBTQ+ individuals, while offering fresh readings of the whole Bible that celebrate the complexity and diversity of queer identities. This work is both Queer Theology and Queer Hermeneutics. The team's approach combines rigorous academic reflection with a commitment to context. This work is essential for understanding how scripture can be reclaimed as a source of affirmation and liberation. New ideas about faith emerge. For preachers in LGBTQ+ affirming contexts, the authors' insights provide various perspectives for engaging scripture in ways that resonate with queer individuals. Scripture is interpreted by highlighting common cultural, historical, and ideological biases. Diverse LGBTQ+ theologies emerge in counternarrative. This commentary served as an aid for each of the eight sermons preached with this research project. Here, we see the commentary's exceptionally wielded Queer Theology for justice and affirmation.

For the purposes of the literary review, I have chosen to highlight the commentary's treatment of the "clobber passages," scripture texts most often employed in harmful ways against LGBTQ+ people and how humor may be properly discerned from them for preaching. Three of those texts have been selected for brief review. As the purpose of the thesis is aimed at discovering the comic spirit for preaching in LGBTQ+ affirming contexts, the subject of queer liberation is a core concern. Therefore, finding ways that the comic spirit may be about the work of transformation is the goal. As Banting's work and the Jacobsons' work both center the Bible as an already humorous text, I hold that there are elements of humor that might be discerned from even such passages that have been tools of harm to LGBTQ+ people. Earlier, it was stated that my own spiritual journey has been characterized as "laughing my way toward liberation."

Humor can be a tool of prophetic preaching from the margins that resists anti-queer perspectives.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah, as recorded with Genesis 19:1-38, has long been understood in traditional Christianity for its overwhelming presence of sexual immorality. Focus has been on the Sodomites unreasonable demands to engage in sexual activity with Lot's angelic guests. While often overlooking Lot's misogynistic offering of his own daughters to appease the mob's lust, traditional readings have pointed to the supposed same-sex attraction displayed as a cause for the wicked cities' demise. Michael Carden believes that this narrative should garner the reader's attention for its immoral behavior—but not by an inaccurate judgment of this historical context and situation. He writes: "In contrast to this Christian myth, Jewish traditions concerning Sodom and Gomorrah highlighted the evils of hostility towards outsiders and unwillingness to share resources compounded with a cruelty towards the poor, as the sins for which Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed."¹⁴ The more accurate historical-critical reading reveals the sexual demand as an abusive display of power. Carden adds: "The Sodomites do not act out of unrestrained same-sex desire but instead are understood as threatening sexual violence and rape against Lot's guests."¹⁵ Uplifting the mainstream of Jewish scholarship, Carden easily exposes the homophobia of traditional Christian scholars who overlook alternative perspectives. Exercising a queer reading, the author writes: "The threatened rape of the angels is an attempt to inscribe the outsiders as not real men...the

¹⁴Michael Carden, "Genesis/Bereshit" in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 36.

¹⁵Carden, *Queer Bible Commentary*, 37.

Sodomites are also attempting to inscribe the queer as outsider. By doing so they are effectively declaring that they are all straight in the Sodom state.”¹⁶ The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is reframed by a more accurate historical criticism. A queering of the text reveals the gross marginalization of queer people by cishet patriarchal forces.

The teaching of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 have been examples of Old Testament law commonly used to condemn male same-sex intercourse as an “abomination.” The two passages are found in a section of Leviticus discussing various laws regarding sex. While traditional Christian readings have labeled these related passages as fundamental prohibitions directed toward gay men, David Tabb Stewart proposes an alternative. Employing textual and historical criticism, we are given the passage: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.”¹⁷ Stewart asks: “Is it clear that a man cannot do precisely that—lie with a man as with a woman? That anal intercourse is not vaginal intercourse?... Did the writer need to write more than ‘You shall not lie with a male’ if the intent was a general condemnation of male homosexuality?”¹⁸ After discourse pertaining to language and ancient Hittite Law, Stewart points to context with Leviticus 18:7 and the clarifying focus of incest. He writes: “Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 forbid male-on-male incest within certain degrees of relation. This abhorrent behavior is one among a number including all the sexual crimes of Leviticus 18...not a general

¹⁶Carden, *Queer Bible Commentary*, 38.

¹⁷Leviticus 18:22, NRSVUE.

¹⁸David Tabb Stewart, “Leviticus” in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 96.

prohibition against all homosexual relations.”¹⁹ Queering the text, Stewart points to Leviticus’ clear prohibition of straight men sleeping with their wives during the period of menstruation—a commonly overlooked section of these sexual laws and a clear example of the cis het patriarchy’s double standard.

Moving to Paul’s letters, Romans 1:24-27 stands out among New Testament passages used to harm the LGBTQ+ community. It has been read as one of the most striking biblical prohibitions toward the sexual behavior of queer people by traditional Christians. With his scholarly reading of Romans, Thomas Hanks proposes that Paul may be one who doth protest too much. He writes: “Paul’s law-free Gentile mission created suspicion about his manhood and that of his mainly unmarried co-workers...hence, in Romans 1:24-27 Paul first echoes the traditional Jewish propaganda line against Graeco-Roman homoeroticism, which he had imbibed from his youth and assimilated in the form of internalized homophobia.”²⁰ This queer reading of Paul does not exclude a view toward historical criticism which places Paul’s Jewish-Roman ethnicity in the unique social location of his letter. Hanks reminds the reader that Roman students of this period in history—such as Paul in his youth—commonly engaged in pederasty with their mentors, per cultural norms. It is proposed that Paul seeks to separate himself from this practice that could be understood more broadly by Jewish-Christians as Gentile decadence. Modern-day readers would approach this topic with questions of power dynamics and age-appropriate consent. Yet, this historical context places adulthood in the

¹⁹Stewart, *Queer Bible Commentary*, 99.

²⁰Thomas Hanks, “Romans” in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 583.

early teen-age years near the time of apprenticeship. The presence of ambiguity abounds in this case. Hanks further explores a route of textual criticism, pointing to the possibility that Paul proposes this prohibition only to later trap the judgmental reader in a rhetoric of abundant grace that is introduced in Romans 2:1-16. Hanks writes: “When the apostle’s rhetoric first echoes common homophobic prejudices...but then proceeds immediately to a powerful deconstruction process...is the whole process consciously ‘intentional’—or perhaps the fruit of his subconscious working of God’s liberating Spirit?”²¹ Did Paul mean to say, “Gotcha!” with such a reversal on the judgmental, homophobic reader? Hanks suggests this possibility. Queer readers are left with seeing Paul’s authorship of Romans 1:24-27 as innately human and rather clever through its employ of reversal.

Practical Implications for Preaching Discerned from *The Queer Bible Commentary*

For preachers, this commentary’s approach opens new possibilities for crafting sermons that are both theologically sound and contextually relevant. Inclusion abounds within *The Queer Bible Commentary*. LGBTQ+ congregants can begin to see their own stories in connection to the ancient figures in the Bible. The authors’ work includes new readings of biblical narratives, offering fresh insights that challenge traditional assumptions. There is a driving commitment to include each representative community of the LGBTQ+ collective, queering the scriptures beyond the examples cited above. The commentary provides a fresh partner for interpretation to preachers in addressing broader concerns of faith and life. Thereby, a new orthodoxy can be forged with each sermon—a

²¹Hanks, *Queer Bible Commentary*, 598.

new queer orthodoxy. The authors' works invite preachers to explore the intersections of faith and identity when developing their sermons.

Relating to the work of comic homiletics, a relevant connection is observed with the Jacobsons' concept of the Stand-Up Theologian. In *Divine Laughter*, the Stand-Up Theologian is concerned with nurturing humor already present within the scriptures. The authors write: "The Bible is frequently funny...if we let it be what it is, if we let its humor breathe, the Bible will 'mean' more clearly, and be more accessible."²² I offer that the queer preacher might engage challenging scripture texts by directing the congregation to see them through the lens of McKenzie and Lynch's presentation of the Three Theories of Humor. The dynamics of incongruity, relief, and superiority are often at work. Sometimes each of the three theories are distinct and other times they overlap. As the "clobber passages" have been highlighted, one can observe these three primary streams of humor present with a queering of these pericopes.

For example, Carden's queering of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1-38) evokes incongruity humor and superiority humor through wordplay with his statement "they are all straight in the Sodom state."²³ Clearly, in an attempt to assert power over the outsiders, straight patriarchal forces of these infamous cities have landed themselves quite the opposite judgment by non-Jewish mainstream historical accounts. Look up the modern definition for "Sodomites." They aren't remembered as being straight in the Sodom state! Not at all. That's laughable! Such an action reveals the folly of human

²²Karl Jacobson and Rolf Jacobson, *Divine Laughter: Preaching and the Serious Business of Humor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 38.

²³Carden, *Queer Bible Commentary*, 38.

pride. Another example is with Stewart's queering of Levitical Law (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13). He employs superiority humor and relief humor by asking provocative questions: "Is it clear that a man cannot...lie with a man as with a woman? That anal intercourse is not vaginal intercourse?"²⁴ To ask such questions in a Christian space has a way of poking holes in traditional orthodoxy—pardon the pun! This allows queer people a moment to smile at the absurdity of anti-queer cishet logic and its foolish assumptions. Such humorous questions seek to dethrone the Humpty Dumpty logic of anti-queer cishet people in the Christian Church and expose its fragility. That is one way to laugh toward liberation.

The last example is offered with Paul's Letter to the Roman Church (Romans 1:24-27) where we see incongruity, relief, and superiority humors all three at work through Hanks' queer view of Paul's rhetorical ambiguity and reversal. The author asks: "When the apostle's rhetoric first echoes common homophobic prejudices...but then proceeds immediately to a powerful deconstruction process [in Romans 2:1-16]...is the whole process consciously 'intentional'—or perhaps the fruit of his subconscious working of God's liberating Spirit?"²⁵ Ancient rhetorical practices are not the most accessible form of humor in sermons. This is where framing the comic Bible via comic storytelling is required of the preacher. Imagine this passage, as if Paul is actually queer. Why is he writing in this way? Perhaps, he doesn't want to get outted. Perhaps, there are rumors that he is trying to put away. It is a humorous sight to behold the apostle

²⁴David Tabb Stewart, "Leviticus" in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 96.

²⁵Hanks, *Queer Bible Commentary*, 598.

attempting to “butch-it-up” for the prudish Roman Christians. Proper exegesis can effectively engage listeners through reimagining the historical context from which Paul writes. Yes, there is a bold condemnation of same-sex behavior. Yet, remember that from a queer view, Paul is likely putting on a front. Then, he quickly follows-up his anti-queer statement to the homophobes with an unexpected reversal, “we are all sinners in need of grace.” Hank’s queering is bold and makes fun of the facades that self-righteous religious people too often display while giving us a more complex, humorously queer and bearded view of Paul.

Critique of *The Queer Bible Commentary*

Groundbreaking is one word to describe the commentary. Yet, there are limitations to mention as well. The authors’ focus on creating an academically sound product makes this volume somewhat inaccessible to those without high-level seminary training. The challenge for preachers may be time. Even they must take time to unpack the academic rigor. Then, when approaching the task of sermon development, pastoral sensitivity is a concern. The commentary, like much of Queer Theology, is not a work of diplomacy among opposing theologies. It is unapologetically and boldly queer. A revision of the commentary might include more practical resources for sermon preparation such as homiletical and pastoral recommendations for better engaging cis/het allies who are encountering the language of Queer Theology for the first time. The commentary’s analysis is laudable for its intersectional approach. The experiences of queer individuals who also navigate other forms of marginalization—race, class, or disability—are included. This element carries great impact for diverse congregations.

Austen Hartke's Contribution to Queer Theology

In another first, Austen Hartke's *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* offers readers a transgender perspective within the umbrella of Queer Theology. Hartke weaves together personal narratives, biblical interpretation, and theological reflection to represent the sacred worth of transgender, genderfluid, and non-binary individuals, as well as others who identify by other terms within the broader transgender community. Hartke challenges traditional theological paradigms calling out specific anti-transgender movements in the Christian Church. At the same time, he offers a new vision for Christianity that celebrates the experiences of his often misunderstood community. Part One begins with personal stories from transgender individuals who navigate faith and identity. A window is provided into the joys and challenges of being transgender in a Christian context. The author writes that "transgender Christians have been forced to live out on the edges. They walk the fine line between acceptance and rejection, between God's love and the church's judgment."²⁶ The reader notes the resilience expressed within this text by transgender Christians who are often misunderstood by cisgender gays and lesbians, as well as most cishet people. He makes a clear theological statement. As a transgender person, Hartke writes: "I believe God made all of me—gender identity included—and intended for me to be a transgender person who sees the world through a different lens. I don't think God made a mistake. I think

²⁶Austen Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 20.

God make me transgender on purpose.”²⁷ Hartke’s theology points to God’s creative intention.

Part Two provides a more in-depth theological discussion about how transgender Christians know themselves to be deemed holy by God. A theological distinctive is presented through the physical and mystical body of Christ and its spiritual relevance to the bodies which transgender people inhabit. Key to his theology is an emphasis on embodiment. God is seen not just in the reflection of the idealized cisgender body—God is made manifest in the eunuch. He writes: “When we see ourselves in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch...we are not told to suffer for suffering’s sake...Instead, God decides to move in our direction by choosing to experience suffering alongside us...it’s Jesus who’s seeing himself in our story.”²⁸ Hartke invites readers to see Jesus as transgender. He writes: “Body theology and the belief in God’s incarnation in Jesus are important for all Christians, but even more so for those whose bodies have been marginalized, ignored, or oppressed.”²⁹ For Hartke, the doctrine of Creation speaks to the transgender experience. He writes that “even though we’re made in a certain way before we’re born, we don’t stay exactly as we were originally made...the continuing nature of creation is something that’s observable in the first chapters of Genesis.”³⁰ The doctrine of the Resurrection is of concern to Hartke as well. The author writes: “Jesus himself had a body, and it was through life and death in that body that the whole world was

²⁷Hartke, *Transforming*, 2.

²⁸Hartke, *Transforming*, 124.

²⁹Hartke, *Transforming*, 138.

³⁰Hartke, *Transforming*, 141.

redeemed...even after Jesus' resurrection from the dead, he goes on doing very bodily things."³¹ Transgender people are empowered to claim more than a blanket theology of affirmation. Hartke declares the transgender experience as God's intention through a queering of Creation and Resurrection.

Practical Implications for Preaching Discerned from Hartke

Hartke offers important stories and historical data on transgender justice for preachers that may easily be incorporated into sermons to educate about transgender inclusion from the pulpit. By prioritizing lived experience, Hartke grounds his theological arguments in the realities of transgender individuals. There is also a significant reliance on biblical studies to support Hartke's theological claims. This approach to theology is a clear indication of the author's background in Biblical Studies and may be helpful to some preachers whose contexts center scripture. Abstraction is by in large avoided with the author's approach to Queer Theology. He employs a queer hermeneutic that seeks to uncover themes of transformation and divine intention within God's master plan for humanity. Hartke's interpretation challenges traditional readings of scripture using the common principles found within Queer Theology, useful when preaching to LGBTQ+ affirming congregations.

Relating to the work of comic homiletics, McKenzie and Lynch's text resonates with Hartke's work through its focus on the preacher as a comic spirit. As Hartke seeks to uplift a transgender perspective of Queer Theology, his primary concern is embodiment.

³¹Hartke, *Transforming*, 136.

McKenzie and Lynch write, “Preachers as comic spirits can do two things...find joy and laughter in the midst of the most difficult circumstances. The other is to laugh at themselves.”³² As a cisgender queer man, I will not presume how transgender preachers might consider laughing at themselves. However, I know that in my own human finitude, I commonly fumble they/them pronouns used by many transgender people...almost every time. Years of learning traditional English grammar does not make honoring the embodiment of our transgender siblings an easy task. Misgendering is not a laughing matter, except in the case of self-deprecating humor—perhaps. Admitting from the pulpit that the concept is challenging—for even the cisgender queer preacher—is rather funny and may go a long way in helping to normalize the concept of queer pronouns. Cisgender people should care and work diligently to honor an individual’s pronouns. Sermons on transgender inclusivity may benefit from a generous use of self-deprecating humor when considering such practical concerns—most especially when the sermon is clearly established on a foundation of transgender-affirming theology.

Critique of Hartke’s Work

The author offers quite a gift to the Christian Church through this book. Many transgender people, upon rejection from their families and faith communities, tend to find new places of acceptance beyond Christianity. Hartke is one of the few transgender Christian scholars who not only have remained but have contributed to the work of Queer Theology. It is clear that praxis is of importance to the author. A unique feature of this

³²Alyce McKenzie and Owen Lynch, *Humor Us!: Preaching and the Power of the Comic Spirit* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), 153.

text comes with its conclusion titled, “The Trans-Affirming Toolbox” where actionable insights are offered to church leaders seeking to nurture the work of inclusion in their congregations. He writes, “So let’s talk about how the flock can be brought back together again.” Specific items are proposed under headings such as “Education...Conversation... Consensus... Connection...[and] Follow through.”³³ Additionally, the author’s intersectional approach encompasses the experiences of transgender people of color through narratives uplifted in Part One and theologians quoted in Part Two. To note any limitation would be to point to a lack of cultivated abstraction with Hartke’s theological discourse. Compared to others in the broad field of Queer Theology, the author’s theoretical framework may come across as rather light. Even so, the accessibility factor allows this text, and its central theological message, to be widely received through a more concrete approach.

Jay Emerson Johnson’s Contribution to Queer Theology

Jay Emerson Johnson’s *Peculiar Faith: Queer Theology for Christian Witness* is a classic text within Queer Theology that challenges traditional Christian doctrines to grow toward new paradigms. Theological concepts are reimagined to reflect the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. The author’s work focuses on reclaiming Christianity as a still relevant spiritual movement in the modern world. A missing voice within this movement has been the voice of Queer Theology. Where traditionalists would object to Queer Theology’s vital presence and perceived counter-orthodoxy, Johnson would argue “to the contrary, queer home economists will turn most often to Christian

³³Hartke, *Transforming*, 170.

history for its diverse perspectives rather than for its timeless articulations.”³⁴ The so-called universal tradition of our faith is full of diverse perspectives. The author proposes a three-part framework to support his approach to Queer Theology that he describes as “invitational, developmental, and social” for the catholicity of Christianity displayed throughout history.³⁵ The author recognizes the peculiar nature of queer language when discussing Christian theology. He writes: “What feels natural to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people translates as unnatural in religious speech; gender transition stands for some as a rejection of God’s given nature, which transgender people often embrace quite naturally.”³⁶ Where cishet theologians have often controlled the language of theology, Johnson offers an alternative.

Following the pattern of other queer theologians, doctrines surrounding the Godhead are discussed with inclusion in mind. With regard to God the Creator and the doctrine of Creation, Johnson’s view is dynamic: “Regardless of sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, intelligence, or any other marker in social classification schemes, ‘God made me this way’ fails as a good theological claim...a more lively and dynamic insight: ‘God is making me in a particular way’...a queer theology for Christian witness could easily take root there, by embracing our God-given freedom to live in ways as shamelessly creative as the handiwork of the Creator.”³⁷ In other words, Johnson asserts that God’s

³⁴Jay Emerson Johnson, *Peculiar Faith: Queer Theology for Christian Witness* (New York: Seabury Books, 2014), 47.

³⁵Johnson, *Peculiar Faith*, 47.

³⁶Johnson, *Peculiar Faith*, 58.

³⁷Johnson, *Peculiar Faith*, 71-72.

creative work in the lives of queer people is itself a credential and claim of holiness. When considering God the Redeemer and the doctrine of Incarnation, the author offers the illustration of God desiring to make a home in humanity—an embodied desire. He writes: “LGBT sensibilities infuse this analysis with bodily desire itself as a source of insight. The many failures to live at home among others cascade from the challenge of finding ourselves at home in our own bodies.”³⁸ This illustrated sense of self-loathing prompts queer Christians to ask such theological questions: “Can the peculiar faith of Christians bear witness to the God who makes a home with and in our bodily life? How can we reshape our churches into households of embodied desire? Would this make any difference in a world of homeless spaces?”³⁹ Johnson believes that such questions will lead Christianity toward relevance in the modern age.

The author goes on to consider the doctrine of Salvation, in relationship to God the Spirit. He writes: “The disruptive, untamable character of the Spirit serves more than merely disruption itself but a divine purpose, nothing less than salvation.”⁴⁰ For the author, it seems clear that the institutional church has attempted to present an orderly path for Christian discipleship. Yet, the testimony of Luke-Acts is one of Spirit-filled disruption that resonates with queer people. Johnson states that, “LGBT people quickly recognize this Lucan posture in their own lives of managed chaos. Those who spend years and enormous amounts of energy trying to fit into social systems of sexual and gender conformity know well what happens when they disrupt those systems: cherished

³⁸Johnson, *Peculiar Faith*, 99.

³⁹Johnson, *Peculiar Faith*, 99.

⁴⁰Johnson, *Peculiar Faith*, 110.

expectations crumble.”⁴¹ The author counters the traditional tendency toward more ordered assumptions in favor of a Pneumatology of liberation. When we recognize the Holy Spirit’s nature as “perversity and sanctity” at work in humanity, we begin to uncover a fuller understanding of the Christian journey toward wholeness.⁴²

As an Episcopalian priest and theologian, he places value on ritual through his queering of Christian faith and practice. The congregation in its rites and worship is a certain hope for Johnson’s view of revitalized Christian witness. He writes: “Mapping the dynamics of a faith community to the rhythms of romantic desire may seem odd to some, yet the rituals inherent to both highlight the challenges in bearing witness to Christianity’s peculiar faith—not only challenges but also opportunities to seduce the world with God.”⁴³ Central to Christian ritual is the place of the Sacraments. Like Cheng, Johnson uses the language of Queer Theology to speak of the sacramental activity as “erotic.” The author explains that “relatively few...Christian characters would use the word ‘erotic’ to describe their life-changing encounters yet most of them would certainly acknowledge the ecstatic character of those moments.”⁴⁴ Sensual language is a distinctive feature of Queer Theology, underscored with Johnson’s view. The attractive nature of Christian spirituality can be like a romantic encounter through this contextualized language. The author writes: “Falling in love often involves both, the driving urge for

⁴¹Johnson, *Peculiar Faith*, 110.

⁴²Johnson, *Peculiar Faith*, 108.

⁴³Johnson, *Peculiar Faith*, 161.

⁴⁴Johnson, *Peculiar Faith*, 177.

union with another and its accompanying rupture of the status quo.”⁴⁵ The rituals, as shared in Christian community, can be a way that we enter into courtship with the “socially erotic God.”⁴⁶

Practical Implications for Preaching Discerned from Johnson

There are implications for preaching with Johnson’s perspective of Queer Theology. His emphasis on relationality encourages preachers to approach sermon development with abstract imagination that is fearless when it centers the marginalized voices of LGBTQ+ people. Themes of revitalized Christian witness can be the focus of sermons, drawing on Johnson’s interpretation of Christian spirituality. Framing theological concepts in this way may be life-giving to queer congregants and educational to allies. In addition, Johnson’s focus on contextualized theological language through queer sexual culture provide opportunities for sensitive exploration of sensory-rich language in the pulpit—within the boundaries of one’s denominational expectations and local congregational sensibilities. The practice of Queer Theology from the pulpit may be like navigating a minefield within diverse congregations whose assumptions are grounded in orthodoxy. Nevertheless, the author notes strength in such a diversity that may be an opportunity for the preacher. He writes: “The Holy Spirit queerly calls naturally odd people of a wildly creative God and knits them together into perversely Pentecostal communities...there we encounter the erotically social character of God in a

⁴⁵Johnson, *Peculiar Faith*, 177.

⁴⁶Johnson, *Peculiar Faith*, 161.

ritually aroused life of communion.”⁴⁷ The preacher who is familiar with the so-called odd people of the congregation—both cis het and queer—will understand how to present such themes and language in a way that resonates with the congregation through preaching, further developing the congregation’s understanding of the Divine through a queer lens.

Relating to the work of comic homiletics, my queer reading of Banting’s *With Wit & Wonder* applies to Johnson’s use of abstract imagination. Johnson offers us a Queer Theology that presents God as an erotic dance partner. Now, just imagine reading that line out loud to a Sunday School class full of teenagers. Laughter would be endless! So would the emails from parents be endless. Don’t read that line to the teenagers! I offer that illustration to highlight the power of imagination. It can grab our attention—sometimes in a good way, other times not so good. Banting writes: “When a preacher’s imagination miss-fires, often it is due to a misreading of the congregation’s capacity to understand and appreciate what or how the preacher has spoken... Get to know the demographics of your congregation. Understand the age, gender, socio-economic, political and educational composition of those who hear you preaching every week.”⁴⁸ Just as a comedian should know the audience, the preacher should know the congregation. God as an erotic dance partner might be equally funny, insightful, and well suited for a sermon offered to adults at the Cathedral of Hope (UCC) in Dallas, Texas

⁴⁷Johnson, *Peculiar Faith*, 228.

⁴⁸Blayne Banting, *With Wit Wit & Wonder: The Preacher’s Use of Humour and Imagination* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), 110.

where almost all church members are LGBTQ+. Sermons offered with the comic spirit and Queer Theology require a keen knowledge of context.

Critique of Johnson's Work

Some might consider Johnson's Queer Theology as too abstract, particularly in its illustrative sexuality. While this can be a general critique of the field, Johnson's work elevates the abstraction with a keen sense of academic fortitude. It is a lofty read and it wields queer vocabulary that may be unsettling to many. Preachers are often seeking concrete tools for sermon preparation. The listener benefits from concrete messages as well. Additionally, Johnson's emphasis on LGBTQ+ inclusion could be made stronger with a more intersectional vision that vividly names other forms of marginalization, such as racism, economic inequality, or disability. These too are realities faced by LGBTQ+ people and their encounter with the Divine. Preachers seeking to broadly include allies in sermons should be cautious when Queer Theology is presented without background and nuance. Johnson models an approach to ease readers into the "peculiar faith" he proposes offering much definition and antidotes to aid readers. It is important that theology not appear needlessly sexualized. Through a postscript to the text, Johnson writes: "Theology itself...can never fully capture but can only point toward Divine Reality...theology always remains imperfect and unfinished...the perpetually unfolding endeavor of trying to bear transformative witness to the Source of life itself."⁴⁹ Grounding evocative language in the author's intended context will amplify its effectiveness. In all, Johnson

⁴⁹Johnson, *Peculiar Faith*, 239.

gives readers an excellent look into ways LGBTQ+ people encounter faith. He presents these perspectives with cultivation and innovation for a new generation of Christianity.

Pamela Lightsey's Contribution to Queer Theology

Where other queer theologians miss the experience of people of color, Pamela Lightsey's *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* offers an excellent resource for understanding the intersection of Womanist Theology and Queer Theology. The sacred worth of African-American queer women is the subject of this text. The author's theological vision is rooted in a commitment to the affirmation of all identities as she addresses the overlapping realities of racism, sexism, and homophobia. This is as much a personal memoir as it is a developed work of theological scholarship. The author gets personal. Lightsey highlights the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression drawing on her own experiences as an African-American lesbian theologian. She reveals how the Christian Church can address these forms of oppression more holistically. Cishet theological frameworks of the Christian tradition fail to recognize the queer individuals who occupy multiple marginalized identities. Even within the tradition of womanist scholars, the author notes that "they have not yet produced a full queer theology manuscript totally committed to the lives of Black lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer women."⁵⁰ The book is offered as a first in the field.

After presenting a brief history of Queer Theology and discussing its intersection with Womanist Theology, Lightsey tackles the term "queer" and what it means for

⁵⁰Pamela Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 1.

LGBTQ+ people of color. She writes: “Black LGBTQ identified persons must be quite cautious when it comes to the term queer if that naming includes a rejection of our ability to claim as objective our knowledge of our own sexual identity, which is often mediated by our experiences in the world and in our culture.”⁵¹ The author argues that the term “queer” may be seen as a privilege to white bodies. Agency is to be claimed by African-American LGBTQ+ people. Lightsey continues by saying, “it is strange and perhaps even a bit arrogant for white queers to talk about giving up and doing away with that from which they have always benefitted, as though such theories ought easily to fit the contexts of persons of color merely because they too happen to identify as queer.”⁵² When it comes to sexuality and gender identity, the complexities of dealing with such matters—and naming them—are not the same for White and Black people. The author offers multiple examples relating to terminology. The reader discovers how it is not uncommon for some African-American women to be mistakenly called “sir” as womanhood is often recognized by the attributes defined by mainstream white femininity. When the term “gay” came into the vernacular, it was primarily European-American men and women of the 1970s who claimed that term for themselves—those who were more concerned with their own interests rather than the struggles of African-American peers. Also, there is a history of Black people being viewed as “exotic mystery, cursed mutations, and lowest of the Western world’s bodily caste system.”⁵³ For these

⁵¹Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 32.

⁵²Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 32.

⁵³Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 33.

reasons, the term “queer” should be understood as taking a different meaning for queer people of color, according to Lightsey.

The author later turns to the Bible as a source of Queer Womanist Theology. She asserts that any attempt to consider Christian theology without a biblical tradition would fall outside the contextual boundaries of the African-American experience. To illustrate this point, she writes: “we who were raised as Christians within the Black community often practiced reading skills with the Bible in hand, were made to read scriptures to understand our moral, social, political responsibilities, were nurtured under Black preaching styles rich in biblical instruction, and were required to memorize scriptures for our day-to-day living.”⁵⁴ Lightsey acknowledges that most Black queer people in the United States are Protestants who do not see the Christian Church, or any figurehead thereof, as authorities that supersede the Bible. That said, as a United Methodist, the author upholds the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as a trustworthy means of interpreting scripture. She writes: “all four sources—scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—are important for queer womanist theology because they help substantiate our faith.”⁵⁵ It is Lightsey’s belief that the Wesleyan understanding—coupled with an ultimate trust in God—is sufficient for queer womanists.

Lightsey then turns her attention to the subject of racism before queering doctrines of Creation, Eschatology, and Imago Dei. She writes: “Racism in America has been in effect so long that it seems an incorrigible entity. We speak of it not only as a

⁵⁴Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 40-41.

⁵⁵Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 49.

characteristic but also as having a life of its own.”⁵⁶ She characterizes racism in terms of African-American Pentecostalism’s teaching about demons that need to be cast out. Yet, it appears to Lightsey that racism is not a demon so easily removed as one that presents itself in a Pentecostal altar call. As this real and present evil is identified, the doctrine of Creation is offered as a theology of liberation. She writes: “To understand that this world ultimately does not belong to humanity but to somebody bigger than us has long been a source of hope for Black queer Christians...God who ordered the world into being and set precedence by the creation of humanity from dust is relational, then and now.”⁵⁷

With her treatment of Eschatology, she points to Queer Theology’s concern with transformation, specifically through the eyes of transgender individuals. Seeing God bring about renewal of body, mind, and spirit is something that transgender people experience when transitioning. All the more, African-American transgender individuals understand the need for a world, broken by racism and transphobia, to experience renewal. She writes: “It is not solely what God has done for humanity but the eschatological work of making all things new including a world where suffering is extinct...black transpersons no less than black gender-conforming persons have embraced that hope.”⁵⁸ Regarding the doctrine of Imago Dei, the author uplifts African-American queer women’s bodies as made in God’s likeness. She reminds the reader of the history of slavery that controlled Black bodies, then moves to the psychological theory of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs which supports the essential human need for

⁵⁶Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 57.

⁵⁷Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 60.

⁵⁸Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 71.

companionship and sexual intimacy. The author writes: “Our fleshy bodies frankly require a healthy self-love in order to come into right relationship with God and others. We ought to love our bodies—our raw, naked bodies uninhibited by the attachments of context or status!”⁵⁹ African-American LGBTQ women should hold a generous and healthy amount of self-love, in Lightsey’s view. With a developed sense of self-love, the author offers that Queer Womanist Theology may be a catalyst for transformation that extends beyond African-American queer women into the wider human family. Lightsey writes: “That love of self must also extend to loving thy neighbor as thyself.”⁶⁰ In this view, the Gospel holds the potential to be proclaimed as bodily liberation as well as social transformation.

Implications for Preaching as Discerned from Lightsey

Lightsey’s Womanist Queer Theology can inform preaching in LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. Her emphasis on the African-American queer woman challenges preachers to address the unique experiences of congregants who face multiple forms of marginalization. Preachers can craft sermons that are both inclusive and timely incorporating stories and themes from African-American queer communities, as presented by the author. Contemporary social issues such as the intersection of racism and women’s rights might be explored from the pulpit by way of a queer womanist perspective. Congregations may be prompted to engage in acts of advocacy and solidarity proclaiming a message of inclusion that does not ignore LGBTQ+ women of color.

⁵⁹Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 83.

⁶⁰Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 83.

Preachers can create a space where congregants feel seen, valued, and empowered to live authentically through the author's focus on queer embodiment. Sermons can celebrate the diversity of human identity by affirming the sacredness of all bodies.

Relating to the work of comic homiletics, parallels are noted with Myers' concept of the Stand-Up Preacher. In *Stand-Up Preaching*, preachers are commended to study the work of professional comedians and learn from their best practices. As Lightsey offers a view of Queer Theology from an African-American lesbian lens, Myers' offers a homiletical review of Wanda Sykes. He recounts a comedy bit where she "essentializes queerness and Blackness for comical effect...[as she] grapples with multiple levels of power and powerlessness at work on her Black, queer body."⁶¹ Syke's bit is offered below where she speaks from her perspective, and then from her mother's voice in response:

It's harder being gay than it is Black...It's harder being gay than it is being Black. Cuz there's some things I had to do as gay that I didn't have to do as Black. I didn't have to come out Black. I didn't have to sit my parents down and tell them about my Blackness...I didn't have to sit them down: 'Mom, Dad I gotta tell y'all something. Hope y'all still love me. I'm just gonna say it. Mom, Dad: I'm Black!...Oh no, Lord Jesus, not Black!...Anything but Black, Jesus! Give her cancer, Lord, give her cancer! Anything but Black, Lord!...No. No. You know what it is? You been hanging around Black people...they twisted your mind!⁶²

As a white passing Latin-American, raised from birth by adoptive European-American parents—I do not face the same measure of marginalization that African-American queer women face every day. What might I learn from Lightsey and Sykes?

⁶¹Jacob Myers, *Stand-Up Preaching: Homiletical Insights from Contemporary Comedians* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2022), 159.

⁶²Wanda Sykes, *I'ma Be Me*, accessed January 10, 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_wWJ-_4uSY.

Myers writes of the dichotomy of comedy and rage. This is a form of incongruity humor at work through the example quoted above. Myers writes: “Such a framework helps us see beyond conventional wisdom...rage is turned into comedy, even as comedy exposes the rage that motivates it.”⁶³ This brand of humor is similar to the work of Womanist Queer Theology as offered by Lightsey, as it can call forth social accountability. As a UCC minister, social justice is a common theme within my preaching ministry. My personal use of intersectionality to address a social concern would require consideration. With any expression of the comic spirit, cultural sensitivity is important.

Critique of Lightsey’s Work

Like other texts referenced with my research, Lightsey’s work is essential to the Christian Church. No previous texts have addressed the perspectives of African-American queer women in the Christian tradition. Only a few limitations are noted. Lightsey’s work leaves room for further exploration of other intersecting and marginalized identities. Immigrants and people with disabilities number among African-American queer women but do not receive significant mention. LGBTQ+ affirming congregations would benefit from her voice with a more expanded reach to include these populations. The author’s Queer Theology relies largely on biblical studies. Some would review this as a limitation, while others would credit the author’s authenticity within her African-American context. The queer preacher might appreciate the multiple biblical citations when seeking to develop affirming sermons that take into account a queer womanist theological perspective.

⁶³Myers, *Stand-Up Preaching*, 160.

Conclusion

Queer preaching that is authentic to the queer experience relies on theology and hermeneutics from a queer perspective. If the comic spirit is to be effective among LGBTQ+ listeners, preachers must become students of the varied perspectives present among Queer Theology. This project has re-enforced the premise of my thesis—that expressions of the comic spirit should be contextual and lead to theological insights. As this chapter has examined the contributions of key scholars from among the LGBTQ+ community, queer theological ideas have been explored for their homiletical value. Additionally, the inherent comic spirit often displayed by Queer Theology has been illustrated. With Queer Theology, heteronormative Christian theology is critiqued, and new theologies are birthed. These authors represent leading voices in the field. As a Latin-American, cisgender, queer man, with a multi-denominational background, I have grown in my preaching ministry from examining the work of these scholars—both by cultivating a queer theological acumen and by seeing how the work of queering theology and scripture can often be an enterprise inherently rich with comic spirit.

It may be said that a multidimensional framework for preaching is provided by the queer theologians presented here. Their collective insights emphasize the importance of offering queer perspectives through homiletical practice. These theologians challenge preachers to craft sermons that resonate with their LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. Themes including liberative hermeneutics, embodiment, and intersectionality have been explored for their theological value and homiletical potential. Traditional Christian doctrines have been reimagined for their power to speak to queer people and through

queer experiences to the wider Christian Church. The comic spirit, informed by Queer Theology, transcends mere entertainment to become a prophetic tool. The comic spirit, driven by a contextual understanding of LGBTQ+ perspectives of Christian faith invites queer preachers to enliven their preaching for the purpose of greater insight by connecting more intentionally with the queer listener.

CHAPTER 5.

PROJECT PLAN AND PROCESS

The Preaching Ministry Project focused on developing a preaching praxis that integrates the comic spirit into homiletics, particularly in LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. Over these past three years, my research project involved the formation and delivery of eight sermons. Each sermon attempted to engage the use of the comic spirit and explore how the homiletical tool might deepen the listener's engagement. To inform and evaluate my praxis, I used a multifaceted research approach. Two Parish Project Groups served as standing focus groups for both development and feedback. The first Parish Project Group (PPG-A) was facilitated at Bering Church representing its members during the first two years of research. The second Parish Project Group (PPG-B) gathered during the third year via Zoom and included members from Covenant Church, Westbury Church, and peers from the ACTS program. Congregational Sermon Surveys, after each sermon, solicited a wider margin of feedback. Supplemental research tools included an initial, larger focus group of LGBTQ+ and ally representatives from Bering Church that will be referred to as the "Initial Focus Group." Additionally, field observations and interviews were conducted to gather information from the realm of drag performance. Together, these methods assisted in developing insights and assessing the effectiveness of the comic spirit in preaching.

At the core of my research was the PPG-A and PPG-B interactions. As integral focus groups, the PPG-A and PPG-B meetings offered qualitative data through verbal and written feedback throughout the sermon development and evaluation process. Following the ACTS Doctor of Ministry guidelines, Sermon Formation sessions gathered the PPG-

A and PPG-B prior to each sermon to assist in the generation of ideas that aligned with the project's goals while keeping an eye on contextualization. These meetings included prayer, scripture reading, and brainstorming—gatherings that were both spiritual experiences and practical in their resulting ideas. Neither PPG-A nor PPG-B was timid in expressing their perspectives on the value of humor's compatibility with sermon themes. They assisted with scrutinizing cultural references. Contributions were vital when considering boundaries for how humor might be incorporated. The PPG-A and PPG-B helped mold sermon purpose statements and provided ideas about how levity might improve sermons. The PPG-A and PPG-B gathered for feedback sessions following sermons, often directly after the Sunday worship service. Each PPG-A and PPG-B meeting was guided by a formal agenda and was audio recorded for reference. The Congregational Sermon Surveys provided a critical component of my research, aimed at the listener of each of the eight sermons. With the assistance of technology, surveys were conducted digitally for convenience. Additionally, paper surveys were collected from those who preferred a traditional hard copy. Every attempt was made to insure the anonymity of survey respondents. Surveys were available following each sermon and collected immediately following the worship services. The survey results were compiled into a digital spreadsheet and provided insights into the strengths and challenges of using the comic spirit in my preaching. These results offered subsequent sermon guidance as the praxis was refined.

Along with the PPG-A and PPG-B meetings and Congregational Sermon Surveys, my research project utilized other tools. The Initial Focus Group was the first step in this project. I wanted to explore the commonly held understandings of humor among an

LGBTQ+ affirming congregation before making a hypothesis regarding this thesis. I led the session and allowed those gathered to respond at will. The meeting was audio recorded for reference. Findings offered guidance for all three years of this project. Field observations and interviews added depth to the project's research, particularly in Year Two. Discovering a praxis that is relevant to LGBTQ+ affirming congregations filled with queer people should include a study of drag performers if understanding the comic spirit is the goal. Two drag performers were observed and interviewed. I initially considered the work of an up-and-coming drag king. Then, I focused on a veteran drag queen who has performed in Houston for decades. Both field observations and interviews provided seminal data that influenced my LGBTQ+ cultural focus for this project.

Naturally, the sermons made up the primary driving force of this research toward praxis. Eight sermons were developed, delivered, and evaluated. Each sermon tested various elements of the comic spirit, from incongruity and superiority to storytelling and hyperbole. As concepts were discovered from the review of published scholars, they were enacted through the given sermon. This process sometimes enhanced an existing inclination toward the comic spirit, giving name and definition to a skill previously unnamed in my preaching. Other times, authors offered new methods that were practiced, allowing my research to expand my understanding of the topic by taking new risks.

Initial Focus Group

The Initial Focus Group conducted at Bering Memorial United Church of Christ on July 31, 2022, served as a cornerstone for the work of Year One in the Preaching Ministry Project. This gathering brought together twenty-seven participants representing

a diverse cross-section of the congregation. Participants included members and regular attendees, people of various sexual orientations, ethnicities, ages, levels of education, and socio-economic statuses. The Initial Focus Group explored the role of the comic spirit in daily communication and Christian worship. The insights gained from this session shaped the development of my research, offering guidance for incorporating the comic spirit into preaching within LGBTQ+ affirming congregations.

The session posed five questions to participants: (1) Speaking rather broadly, do you enjoy moments of laughter and levity? Why or why not? (2) What are the things that make you laugh during the course of a regular day? (3) What are ways that you have seen laughter and levity improve or weaken the way people communicate—between individuals, in professional and social settings, in society and mass media, etc.? (4) If laughter and levity have a place in our lives six days in the week, do you believe that laughter and levity can have a place in church life on Sundays? Why or why not? (5) How have you seen laughter and levity used—effectively or ineffectively—in preaching? As I led this conversation, participants responded at will. This session was audio-recorded for reference.

The Initial Focus Group offered valuable responses to these questions, including theoretical commentary and other practical recommendations. One participant noted, “Laughter can bring us together,”¹ highlighting its role in building sacred community, or *κοινωνία*, as described in Acts 2:42-47. The central dynamic of the apostolic church is expressed with this sentiment. While mainline preaching might recommend logic to

¹Participant A, Initial Focus Group, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, Houston, Texas, audio recording, July 31, 2022.

achieve such a goal, this insight affirmed the potential of humor, an emotional experience, to forge and strength bonds within the congregation through preaching. Another participant emphasized that humor has a unique way of disarming people, particularly its ability to cut through moments of tension.² Humor could be seen for its utility to create space for difficult conversations. This idea was especially relevant given Bering Church’s history as a haven for marginalized groups. When addressing social justice concerns, uncomfortable truths must be confronted. The participant shared, “I have personally seen that in daily conversations...laughter and levity can cut right through the tension.”³ The focus group’s reflections on humor as a means of breaking tension offered direction for this project’s sermons, especially when developing sermons that approached social justice issues.

Cultural sensitivity emerged as another theme as the conversation continued. Participants mentioned the importance of humor that resonates with the congregation’s diverse cultural and social identities. For an LGBTQ+ affirming church situated in Houston’s Montrose District, this meant that the comic spirit might be at its best when its use is authentic and contextually relevant. Diverse populations do not always hear humor in the same way. One voice in the group cautioned, “I think that cultural sensitivity is critical when it comes to humor in Christian worship.”⁴ This recommendation guided many decisions about humor in sermons for this project. Some potential risks of humor were recognized by the group. One participant remarked, “We used to stand in the corner

²Participant B, Initial Focus Group.

³Participant B, Initial Focus Group.

⁴Participant C, Initial Focus Group.

of the bar and hold court...humorously judging people as they came through the door.”⁵ This type of superiority humor was collectively frowned upon. While various uses can alienate or confuse a congregation for the purpose of a sermon, humor that is tuned in to the cultural center can bring hope and healing. “Even at a funeral, the minister shared a well-placed joke, and it brought a brief moment of joy when we all needed it most,” one participant shared.⁶ Concerning the comic spirit’s use, the Initial Focus Group underscored the need for balance and intentionality. If such a balance can be achieved in as solemn of an occasion as a funeral, the comic spirit can certainly find its place in a Sunday morning sermon.

Beyond theoretical insights, the Initial Focus Group offered specific reflections on the forms of humor that might be effective in preaching. One participant shared, “Levity is more than just well-crafted jokes...its facial expressions and gestures.”⁷ Of course! This is where I admit a bias to my research from the start. Here, I thought the group would offer wisdom for crafting words. And yet, preaching as a fully embodied practice rose from within the group’s collective understanding. I have come to believe that the preacher’s appearance and their gestures must be taken into account as well. This perspective of humor informed the project’s approach, encouraging me to loosen up and explore how to use my body practically for the non-verbal communication of humor.

⁵Participant D, Initial Focus Group.

⁶Participant E, Initial Focus Group.

⁷Participant F, Initial Focus Group.

Additionally, participants drew on their own experiences with humor in social settings. One participant noted, “I took a defensive driving course taught by a comedian. We laughed the whole time, and I never learned more about driving than I did from that course.”⁸ Interestingly, I also took the same course here in Houston several years ago, so it was good to be reminded of both the educational uses for humor (and that I was not the only naughty driver in the room). This comment expressed the potential for the comic spirit to enhance learning through its use in preaching. After all, if sermons do not mature our thinking, what good purpose do they serve?

The Initial Focus Group also explored the theological implications of humor in preaching. Some among the group shared their perspectives from their studies of scripture. “In Sunday School class, we’ve learned how the Bible is full of humor...people have been laughing for thousands of years,” one participant mentioned.⁹ Incarnational translation is foundational to the ACTS Doctor of Ministry in Preaching curriculum and is echoed by various authors I studied as a tool of the comic spirit. Sometimes, biblical texts can be made culturally relevant when retold through a framework of humor. This comment encouraged me to use this tool learned in Year One coursework. At the same time, the group cautioned against reducing preaching to comic theatre. Another participant affirmed, “I love laughter in church, but I am not here for a comedy show...humor that doesn’t overshadow the message makes preaching effective.”¹⁰ This may point toward a desirable balance between levity and gravity. But perhaps, when used

⁸Participant D, Initial Focus Group.

⁹Participant G, Initial Focus Group.

¹⁰Participant E, Initial Focus Group.

wisely, humor becomes a component of enlivenment to the theological message rather than something that is secondary. Illustrations of food are often helpful to me, I have found. To speak in culinary terms, the comic spirit can be an integral part of the entree rather than just a side dish. The insights gained from this Initial Focus Group provided essential guidance for the project's exploration of the comic spirit in preaching. Participants were attentive to various functions that humor can achieve, including connection, disarmament, cultural sensitivity, and theological resonance. These reflections laid the groundwork for my preaching praxis to more formally take shape. With this conversation, the project began its journey of discovering humor as a tool for bridging theology and lived experience.

Parish Project Group Meetings

The Parish Project Group (PPG-A/PPG-B) meetings worked to aid in my research project. The Sermon Formation meetings provided a collaborative space for group members to explore sermon themes, consult regarding comedic elements, and ensure theological compatibility as each of the eight sermons were conceived. The PPG-A and PPG-B contributed to my preaching praxis by helping me ground sermons in the congregation's cultural and spiritual identities. PPG-A was a group of eight diverse laity and clergy of various ages and ethnicities from Bering Church. This group ranged in age from those in their 20s to their 70s, with representation from European-American, African-American, and Latin-American populations. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals made up the largest portion of the group with the minority representing cishet allies. PPG-A remained the same during the first two years of research at Bering Church. In the third

year, the group retained similar measures of diverse representation, with a slightly larger number of cis het allies. PPG-B also included eight individuals with representative members from Covenant Church and Westbury Church. Peers from the ACTS Doctor of Ministry in Preaching program were included in the PPG-B to provide continuity with knowledge of my project and developing praxis. Together in each year, we were able to integrate the comic spirit in ways that resonated with the diverse LGBTQ+ affirming congregations where sermons were offered.

A defining feature of PPG-A and PPG-B's processes was its foundation in the Christian essentials of prayer and scripture. Key features guided Sermon Formation meetings. Following a clear agenda, members were guided in Lectio Divina—a meditative spiritual practice that centered the sermon's scripture text by reading it aloud and in repetition. Extemporaneous prayer then led to a free association exercise. With this exercise, members were invited to share ideas, images, and stories that came to mind during or immediately after the meditative scripture reading. These reflections were recorded and often contributed to the development of a sermon purpose statement. Some contributions led to the development of sermon illustrations—further contextualizing the comic spirit's immergence. Sermons rooted in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures remain the tradition of the LGBTQ+ affirming congregations where sermons were offered.

One of the insights from PPG-A meetings was recognizing humor's potential to disarm and engage the congregation. This insight emerged across research methods and was underscored by participants in the PPG-A. Humor was discerned as a way to open the congregation to theological reflection. With each mentioning, this insight influenced

sermon development. The group explored ideas for modern analogies that would make abstract concepts relatable. Through a collaborative effort, various sermon illustrations were created that were accessible and engaging, using the comic spirit.¹¹

PPG-A also emphasized the importance of tailoring humor to the congregation's unique social and cultural context. As the congregational context at Bering Church includes higher than average populations of queer people, the group focused on comedic references and narratives that aligned with experiences of the LGBTQ+ community—but not exclusively. The congregation's values and experiences also guided the development of comedic ideas. The work of LGBTQ+ justice was never far from sight. Naturally, cultural nods were included, such as references to queer history and popular media, which helped establish a shared connection between the preacher and the congregation. In one case, our free association work led to the idea of a humorous video clip being used that honored transgender justice.¹²

The balance between levity and gravity stood out as another central theme in PPG-B's discussions. The theological content of a sermon can become too heavy for some listeners. The comic spirit can bring a welcomed lightness like leaven to bread. The group underscored that humor should enliven the theological message rather than becoming the objective of the sermon. What is leaven without flour? To address this balance, the PPG-B joined me in exploring the use of humorous metaphors and analogies that also held meaningful theological reflections. In a sermon on Christian Nationalism,

¹¹PPG-A, Sermon Formation Meeting – Sermon Four, audio recording, July 16, 2023.

¹²PPG-A, Sermon Formation Meeting – Sermon Two, audio recording, August 14, 2022.

for example, our conversations led us to various lighthearted yet spiritually inspired illustrations on the theme of social transformation.¹³ Our collaboration ensured that humor enhanced this sermon's goals and furthered the work of my research project.

Congregational Sermon Surveys

The Congregational Sermon Surveys provided research rooted in context for each of the eight sermons. With the surveys, the effectiveness of my preaching praxis could be measured and evaluated by listeners who made up the LGBTQ+ affirming context for my Preaching Ministry Project. Before each worship service began, an announcement was given highlighting the QR code found in the bulletin leading respondents to a digital form for convenient access using a smart phone. Congregants who might prefer a paper option were invited to participate in the survey by collecting a form in the Narthex and returning it to a physical drop box. With anonymity insured, these surveys were compiled into an exhaustive document that was presented to the PPG-A/PPG-B and myself. The Congregational Sermon Surveys provided insights that pointed to both strengths and growing edges. By reviewing these results following each sermon, I was able to adapt my praxis throughout the three years of my project.

The Congregational Sermon Surveys were presented to the entire body of the congregation. Metrics are noted. Sermons One through Six were preached at Bering Church and had on average 100 listeners in attendance on those six Sunday mornings.

¹³PPG-B, Sermon Formation Meeting – Sermon Seven, audio recording, July 7, 2024.

For Sermon One, twenty-eight respondents participated.¹⁴ Sermon Two received twenty-five responses.¹⁵ Sermon Three garnered thirty-two.¹⁶ Sermon Four yielded twenty-one.¹⁷ Sermon Five numbered twenty.¹⁸ Sermon Six also received twenty survey responses.¹⁹ At Covenant Church, eighty-five people were in attendance that Sunday morning for Sermon Seven, with twenty-six listeners completing the survey.²⁰ Sermon Eight was offered during a smaller Wednesday evening service at Westbury Church with about thirty in attendance, twenty-seven of whom graciously participated with the survey. These metrics are considered statistically relevant with over 20% of each group responding to surveys.

Four questions were presented with each survey with qualitative and quantitative data measured. Qualitative data included open responses to two questions: (1) What was the main idea that you understood from the sermon today? (2) How would you describe the elements of the comic spirit, such as humor and levity presented in the sermon? These questions served to identify the theological insight understood from the sermon and the expressions of comic spirit that aided in revealing that insight. Key quotations from these responses are offered with Chapter Six. Quantifiable data included “yes / no” responses to the two primary questions gaging the given sermon’s effectiveness: (1) Did the sermon

¹⁴Appendix A.

¹⁵Appendix B.

¹⁶Appendix C.

¹⁷Appendix D.

¹⁸Appendix E.

¹⁹Appendix F.

²⁰Appendix G.

help you consider a new or renewed way of thinking about the main idea? (2) Do you believe the presence of the comic spirit assisted you in hearing and responding to the sermon and its main idea? These questions served to validate an effective praxis by a supermajority for each sermon. Other quantifiable data included the demographics of the survey respondents with sexual orientation, gender identity, and ethnicity to confirm the praxis' resonance among a diversity of listeners within the contexts.

Field Observations of Drag Performers

In an effort to discover new research in my field of study, it became apparent that drag performers might offer a unique perspective. Two performers in Houston stood out. These observations featured the drag king Hugh Stone, a European-American female in her mid 30s, and the drag queen Kofi, an African-American male over 50. I will use they/them pronouns for these individuals to honor the genderfluid nature of their work. Each performer contributed a unique worldview as field observations of these drag performances added to the project's depth. Drag performance remains a widely popular art form in the LGBTQ+ community in Houston. I sought to observe these performers in their native Montrose environment. Would they demonstrate a use of the comic spirit to engage, critique, and empower audiences? Could I learn from these observations in a way that informed my preaching praxis? I found that observing Hugh Stone and Kofi demonstrated how the comic spirit can operate as a tool for community-building and social commentary, revealing a drag-informed praxis that could be translated into preaching.

My first outing was to observe Hugh Stone, who had won Houston’s “Gayest and Greatest” award in 2023 for “Best Drag King” with only a few years of previous performing experience. They appeared on February 14, 2024, as part of a queer variety show that blended traditional drag performance with other mediums such as burlesque, glam, and acrobatics. The room was filled with a young clientele—people in their 20s to 40s, by my estimation. A wide range of genders and ethnicities numbered the small crowd in a cabaret setting of tables and chairs with a small stage area for the various acts. I noted that Hugh Stone’s traditional drag performance seamlessly blended humor with storytelling. Hugh Stone’s use of humor was contextual, drawing on shared experiences within the queer community to create moments of connection and laughter. While the wider cisnet population associates drag performance with female impersonation as with such pop icons like RuPaul or Dame Edna, drag kings have been practicing their craft for all most as long with less notoriety. This makes Hugh Stone’s regional fame all the more noteworthy. Without spoken words, Hugh Stone performed lip-syncing while lavishly costumed, dancing in a parody of traditional gender norms. The physicality of the comic spirit was noted as the absurdity of masculinity was playfully critiqued. Some observers might witness the keen social commentary at work while others were simply entertained.

I discovered that Hugh Stone’s performance fostered a shared sense of connection through the comic spirit. Though some ignored the act to focus on their beverage or conversation partner, nearly all in attendance were drawn in and displayed a range of emotional responses that indicated a shared moment of joy and awe, when Hugh Stone took to the stage. The performer’s ability to integrate levity with social critique mirrored some goals for this preaching praxis—to disarm audiences, challenge assumptions, and

create a space for new ideas. They did so using an exaggeration of hypermasculine tropes through movement, costume, and persona. Most of all, Hugh Stone's use of levity through drag performance was electric. It should be noted that Hugh Stone's act was without verbal communication beyond a pre-recorded Country & Western song. I emphasized that preachers might benefit from incorporating gestures, props, or even attire to reinforce their points in a similar fashion. These are elements that may be classified as physical humor.²¹ Let it not be mistaken—I do not mean that a new praxis should include dancing among tables in a rhinestone cowboy costume, silvery toy pistols in hand, with sensual dance moves. In my opinion, these are not elements to be translated directly. However, the physical expressions of the comic spirit observed and noted²² were practiced effectively and pointed to elements of sermon delivery often overlooked. Hugh Stone's performance provided something for the queer preacher to consider—the non-verbal, physical expressions of humor that can aid in birthing insight within sermons. The primary take-away from Hugh Stone's performance was the power of embodied levity. It is a powerful tool that can call attention to the communicator who wields such an expression of the comic spirit drawing listeners to attention. Theatre performance scholar Anne Bogart writes, "Speaking is the final act in the attempt to communicate; the ultimate signal that you resort to when you have tried everything else."²³ Non-verbal

²¹"What is physical comedy?" *BBC Maestro*, November 27, 2023, accessed January 20, 2025, <https://www.bbcmaestro.com/blog/what-is-physical-comedy>.

²²Author's field notes, Hugh Stone's performance, Echo's Night Club, Houston, Texas, February 14, 2024.

²³Anne Bogart, *And Then You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 23.

communication is important, and the comic spirit can be an agent of such communication. Webb would identify Hugh Stone's embodied levity as an appeal to "comic metaphor"²⁴ and "comic persona."²⁵ Embodied levity can take many forms and can capture the congregation's eyes, drawing them into a collective moment of new perspectives.

My second outing was to observe Kofi, a veteran drag queen with decades of performance experience. On March 7, 2024, I witnessed Kofi's traditional drag show and noted the elements of humor and pathos in their performance. Serving as both an emcee and a performer, Kofi excels in their work, which is differentiated by the ease in transition from comedy into heartfelt, sincere commentary that in many ways felt like church. Some moments included a crude joke that was soon followed by a touching word of hope to struggling people. The setting was one of Houston's mainstream gay bars with a stage. Patrons sat in chairs in a theatre arrangement but also stood around cocktail tables and near the bar area with drinks in hand. Those in attendance included a variety of ethnicities—yet most of the crowd was over 40, by my estimation. They seemed like regular attendees who had come to see Kofi and her band of local drag queens for years. Kofi's use of humor often employed irony and hyperbole, at one point removing her wig and fanning herself with it. Kofi employed the comic spirit through exaggeration while critiquing the oppressive standards of feminine beauty. The cishet patriarchy was challenged through the comic spirit in this way. Simultaneously, the goal was entertainment. I doubt the average attendee considered Kofi's performance for its

²⁴Joseph Webb, *Comedy and Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 97.

²⁵Webb, *Comedy and Preaching*, 127-129.

academic social commentary. Yet, the layers of meaningful communication allowed the audience to engage in varied and accessible ways.

Kofi's performance also displayed the importance of community engagement and affirmation. The audience showered Kofi with laughter, applause, and dollar bills. In the early years of drag, venues often did not directly compensate performers. Aside from the emotive gifts of laughter and applause, patrons offered tips during the performance to support the performer. This custom has become a fixture in queer culture. I watched the audience remain engaged as they offered affirmation to Kofi throughout their show. The emotive affirmation came with laughs drawn from their improvised wit during the emcee portions. Then, gifts of one-dollar bills and fives were showered during lip-synced acts. This common practice of community engagement and affirmation in drag performance resembled my previous experiences in congregations that understand preaching as call and response. Preachers share a word of truth, and the congregation responds with an emotive "Amen!". In other locations, a moving sermon is preached, followed by tithes and collected offerings. Is this a function of the comic spirit? When I observed Kofi, these actions of engagement and affirmation became a way by which they measured their effectiveness with the comic spirit. By observing the faces of those in attendance—with their dollars in hand—I could also see that joy was present in fullness as affirmation was bestowed. The primary connection to my preaching praxis observed with Kofi was the ability for the comic spirit to nurture a sense of community that was measurable. Their effectiveness drew people together. When preachers engage in the comic spirit effectively, most especially forms of the comic spirit that are culturally relevant to their congregations, a sense of community may also be fostered.

Cultural context was a primary driving force noted in both field observations. Hugh Stone and Kofi seemed to understand their queer audiences and find ways to connect with them through the comic spirit. There was no shortage of lived experiences or cultural references through the costumes, music, dance, and spoken word. I noted that important messages were revealed through drag's employ of levity. Additionally, I recorded how the comic spirit can cut through social tensions. Audiences are engaged despite such tensions and distractions through the comic spirit presented with drag. A sense of community can also be fostered. An effective use of the comic spirit in drag does not push people to the outside but draws them in. Insights gathered from this field observation²⁶ have implications for the development of a preaching praxis that embraces the comic spirit in LGBTQ+ affirming congregations.

Interviews with Drag Performers

The interviews with Hugh Stone, a young drag king, and Kofi, a veteran drag queen, provided insights into how drag performance integrates the comic spirit and other valuable perspectives. Parallels to the development of a preaching praxis were clear. These conversation prompts were asked at each interview: (1) Tell me about how you got into drag performance. (2) What do you believe defines an effective drag performance? (3) Do you believe queer preachers can learn something from drag performers? (4) If so, what might you teach queer preachers who preach to LGBTQ+ affirming

²⁶Author's field notes, Kofi's performance, South Beach Night Club, Houston, Texas, March 7, 2024.

congregations?²⁷ Both performers shared reflections that were recorded. The following highlights insights gained from these interviews.

The interview with Hugh Stone took place on February 26, 2024.²⁸ Hugh Stone spoke to how drag performance is a transformative art form. There is both intentionality and improvisation behind drag. Through humor, cultural critique, and audience engagement, Hugh Stone exemplifies how performance can challenge norms and build community in ways that resonate on both individual and collective levels. Hugh Stone views drag as “a celebration of queer creativity and freedom,” an art form that blurs boundaries and expands possibilities for self-expression.²⁹ Reflecting on the observed Valentine’s Day variety show, my research ventured into spaces conventional Doctor of Ministry projects might avoid. Hugh Stone described their performance of “Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy,” which drew inspiration from Matthew McConaughey’s character in the film *Magic Mike*. “His character was absurd,” Hugh Stone explained. “He was this really serious, hyper-masculine stripper manager, which is hilarious in itself. My drag lets me play with that kind of exaggerated masculinity in a way that is fun and subversive.”³⁰

²⁷With regard to the final question offered with the interview, the assumption is that the two drag performers are familiar with the work of preaching in the Christian tradition. I came to these interviews knowing that Hugh Stone and Kofi identified as Christians and were active members in their local churches. Such an assumption should not be made of all drag performers outside the scope of this research project.

²⁸Hugh Stone, interview by the author, Blacksmith Coffee Shop, Houston, Texas, audio recording, February 26, 2024.

²⁹Hugh Stone, interview by the author.

³⁰Hugh Stone, interview by the author.

The creative process that Hugh Stone follows is not haphazard. Like other drag performers, the garment is everything. A meticulous attention to detail is present when it comes to costume design. They crafted chaps and a vest using black leather and leopard-print velvet for this performance, embodying the over-the-top aesthetic often associated with drag. There were plenty of rhinestones as well. “I wanted the whole look to be larger-than-life,” Hugh Stone explained. “It’s not just about dressing like a guy; it’s about creating a caricature of masculinity that’s both glamorous and campy.”³¹ The costume was indeed impressive. It did not look to be made by an amateur with a white-collar office job. Their focus on crafting costumes by hand also reflects their resourceful and intentional approach to drag. “I used to think I’d have to pay someone to make my costumes,” Hugh Stone shared. “But then I started experimenting with hot glue, sewing machines, and scraps of fabric, and it became another way to express myself and create something uniquely mine.”³²

Central to Hugh’s drag is the concept of “playing with masculinity,” a recurring theme in their performances. “Masculinity is often treated as something very serious, but I like to make fun of it,” they said. “Not just to make fun of it, but to explore what it means and how anyone can express it if they want to.”³³ As a queer man, I was fascinated by Hugh Stone’s comments here. Growing up in a small Texas football town, masculinity was like a social currency. The more masculine men always rose to the top. Hugh Stone

³¹Hugh Stone, interview by the author.

³²Hugh Stone, interview by the author.

³³Hugh Stone, interview by the author.

challenges this norm. Their approach playfully questions traditional gender norms. Hugh Stone's work invites the audience to reflect on their beliefs about masculinity and gender identity. While some at this performance might have been engaged at this level, others were there to just simply enjoy the show, by my observation.

Audience interaction is another hallmark of Hugh Stone's performances. They described their goal as creating an "energy arc," a dynamic flow that engages the audience from beginning to end.³⁴ "At the start of a performance, I try to hold back a bit," Hugh explained. "I want everyone's attention focused on me, but I don't give it all away at the beginning...I start moving into the crowd, interacting with people and reading their body language."³⁵ As with the wide array of cabaret and lounge performance media, this shared dynamic is at play—the performer's interaction with the room. Therefore, spontaneity can be intentional. Hugh's emphasis on spontaneity further underscores the parallels between drag performance and homiletics. Though Hugh Stone displayed a mastery of physical comedy, the performer's broader understanding of spontaneity can have implications for both embodiment and the spoken-word with sermons. I was prompted to consider my preferred mode of manuscript preaching. Preachers must internalize the manuscript rather than simply read it to allow for moments of spontaneity—moments directed by the sometimes spontaneous nature of the comic spirit. The crafted syntax is shaken up by a fresh turn of phrase, the use of a humorous vocal tone, or a physical gesture that may be spontaneously discerned in the moment of sermon delivery. Hugh Stone explained that their performances are largely improvised, guided by

³⁴Hugh Stone, interview by the author.

³⁵Hugh Stone, interview by the author.

the mood and energy of the audience. “I don’t choreograph my movements or plan everything in advance,” they said.³⁶ I was amazed at this statement as dance moves were well placed with the music and fit the character. “Once I know the song inside and out, I can just let go and respond to the room. Every audience is different, and I want to create a unique experience for each one.”³⁷ This adaptability aligns with the goals of a preaching praxis that seeks to meet congregations where they are, using the comic spirit to draw them into the message. While extemporaneous preaching, or preaching without notes, is widely popular, those of us who are manuscript preachers can learn to dance in the comic spirit, as well.

Hugh also discussed the role of the community in shaping their way of drag performance. They credited Houston’s AFAB (Assigned Female at Birth) drag community for providing a supportive space to learn and grow as a performer. “When I first started, I didn’t know how to do my makeup or make costumes,” Hugh shared. “But I connected with other performers who were so encouraging. That network gave me the confidence to keep going and to keep improving.”³⁸ What does this say of the comic spirit and preaching? The need for inspiration and feedback from our peers regarding the development and delivery of humor is key for preachers who are willing to preach like drag performers.

³⁶Hugh Stone, interview by the author.

³⁷Hugh Stone, interview by the author.

³⁸Hugh Stone, interview by the author.

For Hugh Stone, drag is ultimately about creating connections and nurturing joy. “I want my audience to feel like they’re part of the performance, not just watching it,” they said. “Drag is about bringing people together, making them laugh, and giving them a space to be themselves.”³⁹ The togetherness expressed here is lacking in many congregations, from my experience. Preaching with the comic spirit embodies these goals toward community building. Overall, Hugh Stone’s vision aligns closely with the goals of a preaching praxis that uses the comic spirit to build community and inspire change. Queer preachers can learn from Hugh Stone’s work.

The interview on March 19, 2024 with Kofi presented an unexpectedly sacred view of drag performance.⁴⁰ Kofi began by emphasizing the relational and spiritual dimensions of drag, comparing the role of a drag performer to that of a minister. “Just like you as a minister, we as entertainers don’t always know why people are coming, but we’re in a powerful position to impact their lives,” Kofi shared.⁴¹ This recognition of a sacred responsibility through drag performance underscores the transformative nature of the art form. It is clear that Kofi sees their role as one of creating meaningful connections with the audience by using humor to engage and inspire. This is among the goals of my research project.

Central to Kofi’s approach is the use of humor as a tool for both entertainment and critique. They described their performances as blending levity into important

³⁹Hugh Stone, interview by the author.

⁴⁰Kofi, interview by the author, Café Ginger, Houston, Texas, audio recording, March 19, 2024.

⁴¹Kofi, interview by the author.

statements that challenge mainstream social norms. Kofi explained, “We exaggerate certain things in our shows...because sometimes you have to laugh at how ridiculous life is before you can draw the strength to stand up to it.”⁴² Most drag queens celebrate glitz, glam, and all the attributes of classic femininity. However, Kofi seemed to recognize that the cis het patriarchy seeks to bind these qualities with all biological females as an act of inequitable power. Kofi playfully confronts this injustice by making space for other genders to embody the feminine realm of beauty and find empowerment within it. When it comes to my preaching praxis as a queer man, Kofi’s thoughts on femininity encouraged me to embrace these qualities that are present in my own persona and perhaps allow them to be exaggerated when such a practice might serve the message of a sermon. In queer preaching with the comic spirit, I have discovered that it’s okay to be a sissy and express the feminine side of my persona with boldness!

Like Hugh Stone, improvisation and audience interaction are key elements of Kofi’s performances. They emphasized the importance of understanding the people in the room and adapting the performance based on the energy and mood. “I scan the audience to decide where to go next,” Kofi said, adding, “It’s about being in tune with what people are giving you and responding in a way that makes them feel seen and included.”⁴³ Again, I related this to my manuscript style of preaching and reminded myself that I cannot be all things to all people. Nevertheless, I can and should be in tune with the congregation. If in the moment of preaching, I sense that an element of the comic spirit will not resonate with the congregation, I can and should change the manuscript and offer

⁴²Kofi, interview by the author.

⁴³Kofi, interview by the author.

something else in its place. After all, the words on the paper are my words, and I know how to create new words—even if they might not be quite as polished. Such pivots in a sermon are possible but can be challenging for manuscript preachers to achieve. Practice will likely develop this sense of adaptability with the comic spirit.

Kofi also highlighted the role of storytelling in their performances, describing it as a way to draw audiences into a shared emotional and cultural space. They shared an example of a personal story that was presented as an emcee, where humor was used to navigate vulnerability. “I told a story about my grandmother, who was the first person to tell me I was beautiful. It started with something funny about her strict rules, but by the end, the audience was in tears,” Kofi recounted.⁴⁴ Storytelling is a powerful element of the comic spirit. It is made even more effective by reaching a wide array of emotions that relate to the common experiences of listeners.

One of the most poignant moments in the interview came when Kofi reflected on the impact of their work. They shared a story about an audience member who credited one of their shows with saving his life. “God put something on my heart to say, and I didn’t know why. But it reached him when he needed it most,” Kofi said.⁴⁵ Where other drag performers might not take such a liberty, Kofi leans into their persona, with a long history as an active member of the Church of God in Christ, to achieve communication of this nature in a space that needs such a witness. This story highlights the sacred potential of drag performance to offer hope and healing, even in unexpected ways. In this case, the comic spirit is not diminished by moments of essential, direct words of hope. The comic

⁴⁴Kofi, interview by the author.

⁴⁵Kofi, interview by the author.

spirit through drag performance initially drew this individual to the bar that night. Kofi, a Pentecostal drag queen, was the vessel God used to keep a man from taking his own life that night. Some would call that sort of irony absolute foolishness. I would call that the perfect embodiment of the comic spirit in LGBTQ+ affirming spaces.

Through these interviews with Hugh Stone and Kofi, I discovered that there was a meaningful idea that each performer sought to convey through the comic spirit. With Hugh Stone, a playful approach to deconstructing gender norms was a core value expressed through their art form. This is a hopeful message to those who have been oppressed by the norms of masculinity. From a theological perspective, I witnessed a reflection of the Divine that is beyond the bounds of gender—a message of the Divine that laughs at idealized visions of strength. This is a message of power through equity. Additionally, I noted how Kofi was attuned to the needs of the audience and used humor to communicate a vital word of affirmation. In the case of Kofi's care for the depressed man, the comic spirit was lifesaving. Both expressions of an important, meaningful idea were intentionally packaged in levity. A sense of balance was achieved through the comic spirit as the message was delivered more effectively.

From my interactions with Hugh Stone and Kofi, I learned about how the comic spirit in drag performance can uniquely serve LGBTQ+ people by *disarming tension*, *nurturing connection* and *balancing depth and levity* so that meaningful ideas may be communicated. These strategies of the comic spirit were noted for my own use in homiletical praxis. While these homiletical strategies have been noted throughout the eight sermons, the strategies were further informed by the field observations and interviews for sermons offered in the final year of my research. To disarm the tension of

the topic of Christian Nationalism at Covenant Church, I wrapped God in drag—presenting the Divine as David Hodo, the construction worker from The Village People to communicate that we are called to co-labor toward social transformation. To nurture connection, I employed caricature at Westbury Church to wrap the judgmental religious figures of Blind Bartimaeus in drag—presenting them as the Church Lady from *Saturday Night Live* to communicate that inclusion, not exclusion is our aim in faith community. To balance depth and levity, I wrapped the prophet Isaiah in drag through an incarnational translation of the scripture—reimagining the prophet as Gay Isaiah who guest stars on the television series *Queer Eye* to refashion America’s outdated, bigoted wardrobe to embrace the garment of pluralism. Each homiletical strategy resulted in the desired impact. More will be shared about these sermons in Chapter Six. In all, I have discovered drag performance has uniquely informed my developing praxis to preach with the comic spirit among LGBTQ+ affirming congregations.

Integrating the Comic Spirit into Eight Sermons

Throughout the three years of research in the Preaching Ministry Project, eight sermons were developed and delivered to explore integrating the comic spirit into preaching. Sermons were informed by my research, which included the Initial Focus Group, PPG-A/PPG-B meetings, Congregational Sermon Surveys, the two field observations, and their related interviews. These sermons served as practical experiments as I sought to discern how humor might enhance theological understanding and challenge the listeners to reflect on their faith in new ways. By intention, I employed the comic

spirit to the themes of each sermon in specific ways. I aimed to discover how the comic spirit can enrich the preaching experience while remaining rooted in theological purpose.

The first year's sermons laid the foundation for the project. The creative use of the comic Bible came with Mister Rogers and the first sermon's unneighborly apocalyptic Luke 12:51-53. A reframing through incarnational translation, illustrating the power of incongruity, was the goal here. The icon of neighborliness helped disarm the congregation and lead them to theological insight, despite the complex nature of the lectionary text.⁴⁶ The second sermon, based on Jesus at the Pharisee's Home in Luke 14:1, 7-14, used humor to address themes of humility and inclusivity. With inspiration from the PPG-A's suggestions, this sermon employed queer cultural references and lighthearted anecdotes to critique social hierarchies and invite the congregation to embrace radical hospitality. A video clip from the popular television series *Pose* was used to illustrate society's inhospitable treatment of transgender people of color.⁴⁷ The third sermon reimaged the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus the Beggar from Luke 16:19-31, humorously portraying the rich man as a hotel guest obsessed with luxury upgrades. A cult favorite quote was included—Diahann Carroll's famous line from the television classic *Dynasty*: "The champagne is burnt." The creative narrative and popular reference served to engage the audience while critiquing privilege and materialism. This

⁴⁶Bodie Gilbert, "The Gospel According to Mister Rogers," sermon manuscript, August 14, 2022.

⁴⁷Bodie Gilbert, "Humility and Inclusivity," sermon manuscript, August 28, 2022.

was a memorable and accessible use of the comic spirit that related to both queer folx and allies of various ages and backgrounds.⁴⁸

The second year's sermons built on this foundation. The fourth sermon tackled the parable of the Merchant and the Pearl of Great Price in Matthew 13:45-46. This sermon used a humorous retelling of the 2023 blockbuster film *Barbie* to explore our role in building a more just world.⁴⁹ The fifth sermon addressed the theme of awakening to justice through a topical sermon with scripture reference from the story of Peter as the Rock in Matthew 16:13-20. The comic device of metaphor was used. A brass alarm clock functioned as a witty prop to symbolize the urgency of responding to injustice.⁵⁰ The sixth sermon promoted the concept of forgiveness, based in the parable of the Unmerciful Servant in Matthew 18:21-35. A humorous metaphor was used—Monopoly's "Get Out of Jail Free" cards. This was a tangible item that each congregant could take to remember the need to offer forgiveness and be forgiven.⁵¹

The third year's sermons brought this project to its conclusion and further confirmed my initial hypothesis. The seventh sermon focused on social transformation, from the Equity Proclamation of Isaiah 40:1-11, using humorous images of God as a

⁴⁸Bodie Gilbert, "Beyond the Burnt Champagne," sermon manuscript, August 28, 2022.

⁴⁹Bodie Gilbert, "Going for Broke," sermon manuscript, July 30, 2023.

⁵⁰Bodie Gilbert, "Awakened to Trans Justice," sermon manuscript, August 27, 2023.

⁵¹Bodie Gilbert, "Empowered to Forgive," sermon manuscript, September 17, 2023.

highway construction manager to explore the congregation's role in building a more inclusive society absent of the giant, debilitating pothole that Christian Nationalism can be to our nation.⁵² The eighth and final sermon, rooted in the story of Blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52, reflected on the collective journey of the congregation towards becoming a mentor of other congregations seeking LGBTQ+ inclusion. This sermon used the comic spirit to celebrate the congregation's resilience while inviting them to envision an abundant future.⁵³

Across all eight sermons, homiletical strategies emerged. Three findings were apparent across all research methods. *First, when addressing complex social or theological issues, the comic spirit may be used to disarm tension and better engage listeners with the message.* I found that humorous anecdotes and other expressions of the comic spirit created a lighter atmosphere. This allowed listeners to approach complex topics with openness. *Second, the comic spirit requires an understanding of the cultural context—its people, the social location, and common experiences shared as it fosters a sense of connection.* It was important to draw on the context's identity as an LGBTQ+ affirming community, so that the sermons incorporated references to queer culture, popular media, etc. This ensured that expressions of the comic spirit might better resonate. *Third, the gravity of a message can be balanced with the presence of levity.* Humor served as a lens to magnify and illuminate theological truths, enhancing the congregation's understanding. This journey of exploration and experimentation through

⁵²Bodie Gilbert, "Building a More Just Highway," sermon manuscript, August 25, 2024.

⁵³Bodie Gilbert, "The Blessing of Bartimaeus," sermon manuscript, June 30, 2024.

research revealed a unique potential for the comic spirit to transform queer preaching, creating messages that resonate and inspire.

CHAPTER 6.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

Impact of the Research Project on Me as a Preacher

The research project offered insights to inform my preaching in LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. The work has been enlightening in many ways. It has reshaped my understanding of homiletics and empowered my voice as a queer preacher. This reflection explores how the project's learnings have shaped my preaching ministry. The project's eight sermons will be evaluated through the lens of the Parish Project Groups (PPG-A/PPG-B), the Congregational Sermon Surveys, and my own reflections toward personal growth in praxis. The development of a praxis for the comic spirit has immersed not as a structured method. Readers may identify a demonstrated praxis through meaningful, effective uses of humor, levity, and wit uplifted with this chapter and its evaluation of the project's eight sermons. Uses of the comic spirit, that are both contextually derived and theologically intentioned, will be highlighted and evaluated for effectiveness. These expressions of comic spirit are noted in each sermon and are qualitatively affirmed by PPG-A and PPG-B evaluations in this chapter. Qualitative and quantitative measures from the Congregational Sermon Surveys are presented offering a wider verification of my Preaching Ministry Project's goals. Common themes discerned from these evaluations and surveys point to a preaching praxis that embodies three primary findings of the comic spirit—its value in *disarming tension toward insight*, its quality in *promoting deeper connections toward insight*, and its unique power in *communicating through the balance of depth and levity toward insight*. This chapter will

explore these findings as sermon evaluations, from the perspectives of congregants, are unpacked in further detail.

Evaluation of Year One Sermons

The evaluations of my Year One sermons provide a comprehensive perspective on the strengths, challenges, and overall impact of my research. During this year, the project focused on incorporating the comic spirit, emphasizing biblical interpretation to engage a diverse LGBTQ+ affirming congregation at Bering Memorial United Church of Christ. I have gained valuable insights by reflecting on feedback after the sermons. Areas of my sermon content and delivery have been considered.

My first sermon introduced the challenge of presenting hope within an apocalyptic text, Luke 12:51-53, known for its stark and unsettling tone with relationship to the discord of humanity. The Revised Common Lectionary includes such texts that require preachers to grapple with the theological challenges they present. The Congregational Sermon Surveys praised my approach. I employed creative levity to navigate this difficult passage. Incorporating the imagery of the iconic television program *Mister Rogers Neighborhood*, I sought to lighten the mood toward insight. An incarnational translation of the scripture was offered during the sermon providing a fresh look into the text.¹ Then, the sermon moved from despair to joy as the sermon recognized the fuller message of the Gospel—a more hopeful message that does not end with this

¹A hallmark of the ACTS Doctor of Ministry in Preaching is its foundational curriculum with emphasis placed on Charles Cosgrove and Dow Edgerton's *In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching*. I found that many homiletical scholars who study the comic spirit widely embrace this concept and commend its use.

pericope. When our expectations of sacred community seem most unneighborly—even in complete disarray—God’s hope is always in sight. The God of the queer Incarnation is one that does not shy away from the absurdity of taking on the cloak of humanity in order to forge a more just, inclusive world. One survey respondent remarked, “He took us through the valley and right up to the mountaintop.”² Others commented on my creative use of theatre and costume to balance the heavy topic, incorporating the television show’s familiar theme song and the preacher dressing in a Mister Rogers costume, my own incarnational cloak. Yes, I preached in Mister Rogers drag and danced my way into the pulpit. This feedback affirmed the use of a common cultural reference to aid in bridging the gap between the heavy tone of the scripture and the congregation’s need for hope. Balancing humor with depth was critical to this sermon’s success. Apocalyptic texts can result in confusing sermons presenting theological themes that may not be in keeping with the congregation’s identity. The positive responses from the congregation validated my efforts and provided initial data to confirm my hypothesis. Congregational Sermon Survey results affirmed this sermon as insightful by a measure of 100% and effective in its use of comic spirit by a measure of 94.4%, with queer respondents representing 72.2% and cishet allies representing 27.8%.³

²Respondent 4, Congregational Sermon Survey – Sermon One, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, Houston, Texas, audio recording, August 14, 2022.

³Appendix A.

In the second sermon, I experimented with the celebrative preaching style, a method I studied in my coursework under the guidance of Frank Thomas.⁴ Preaching from Luke 14:1, 7-14 about Jesus' visit to the Pharisee's Home, I focused on themes of inclusion and radical hospitality. To introduce the sermon, I presented a clip from the recent television series *Pose*. This scene depicted a witty transgender African-American woman confronting bigotry experienced from a cishet, European-American woman. Some would call this cishet person a "Karen" by pop cultural terms.⁵ I used this designation throughout the sermon as an example of superiority humor. In many ways, this illustration resonated with the LGBTQ+ members of the congregation, affirming their lived experiences as those who have suffered similar marginalization. As this video displayed a related situation to the scripture text—entitlement to an exclusive banquet seat—my goal was to bring the listener into the cultural context of our present location. Yet, the character Electra's witty response was no doubt sharp as she rebuked the bigot. One member of the PPG-A suggested that a brief clarification could have strengthened the theological message: "I don't think we want to encourage trading meanness for

⁴Frank Thomas' elective course on African-American preaching is viewed as another cornerstone of the ACTS Doctor of Ministry in Preaching. His book *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching* is a definitive guide to the celebrative method and invites preachers of all ethnicities to utilize the method by adaptation within their preaching ministries.

⁵The character designation of "Karen" originated in the African-American community and became more widely recognized through its adoption in mainstream pop culture. A Karen is classically understood to be a European-American woman of privilege who unjustly expresses rage and harm toward marginalized communities, sometimes verbally or by other acts of disproportionate aggression.

meanness.”⁶ Making this point explicit would have ensured that all listeners understood the behavioral intention. As I agreed in part with this perspective, I also noted that this individual was a cishet member of the PPG-A. The larger body of queer folx on the PPG-A indicated that this expression of “reading for filth” was a practice of queer liberation theology in their view, and the comic spirit served to foster a connection with this sermon.⁷ *The Transgender Christ, of Queer Theology*, dares to rise from the grave to subvert the powers structures of the privileged. The Transgender Christ, who embodies qualities of the Queer Woman of Color—she may seem offensive to those who refuse to see the Divine Image that beams through her embodied witness of the Gospel and her liberative wit that calls forth accountability.

Despite a noted cultural and theological disconnect among one cishet representative, the celebrative method and uses of the comic spirit were well-received by the majority, with the congregation breaking into spontaneous applause—an infrequent and affirming response from this congregation. One survey respondent noted, “I loved the inclusion of gay culture references. It made me wonder what and how Jesus would read me. The inclusion of humor made it easier for me to see the points where I sometimes can be a Karen.”⁸ Might Jesus be the transgender woman we have excluded from the banquet

⁶PPG-A Member 4, Sermon Feedback Meeting – Sermon One, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, Houston, Texas, audio recording, August 14, 2022.

⁷The idiom “reading for filth” is a fixture of superiority humor utilized in the LGBTQ+ community and made popular through its place in drag performance. A litany of witty insults is focused toward a single individual who receives the reading, often in an utterly speechless state.

⁸Respondent 7, Congregational Sermon Survey – Sermon Two, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, Houston, Texas, audio recording, August 28, 2022.

table? Do we need to be read for filth? A rebuke from Jesus is often required. The same respondent continues in praise of the manner of celebration used through a familiar hymn text: “At the end, you started quoting John 3:16...wove it into an old hymn...talked about God’s gift as an act of love for all people... I’ve never thought of [When I Survey the] Wondrous Cross as a radical inclusivity hymn.”⁹ Feedback reinforced the potential of celebrative preaching to be enlivened by the comic spirit in an LGBTQ+ affirming congregation. Congregational Sermon Survey results affirmed this sermon as insightful by a measure of 90.9% and effective in its use of comic spirit by a measure of 90.9%, with queer respondents representing 63.7% and cishet allies representing 36.4%.¹⁰

My third sermon addressed generational poverty and societal oppression through Luke 16:19-31, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus the Beggar. I employed Barbara Lundblad’s “Sermon as Movement of Images” sermon structure which prioritizes sensory-rich language and vivid storytelling through a more cinematic pattern.¹¹ The PPG-A commended my use of imagery, particularly a reference to “burnt champagne” from the popular 1980s television show *Dynasty*.¹² This added levity to the sermon while highlighting disparities between wealth and poverty. Queer Theology reminds us that the

⁹Respondent 7, Congregational Survey – Sermon Two.

¹⁰Appendix B.

¹¹This sermon method was taken from Ronald Allen’s *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler* which presents students of homiletics thirty-four methods for sermon structure and delivery.

¹²From the iconic phrase: “It’s burned. The champagne was obviously frozen in the bottle.” The familiar line originates with an episode titled “New Lady in Town” which first aired in 1984. Queer enthusiasts of *Dynasty* have commonly employed the phrase for its absurd exaggeration and kept it popular over time through video clips played in queer bars and night clubs.

God of Sodom and Gomorrah is ever mindful of the outsider and does not look favorably upon those who disregard hospitality to the outsider. Employing comic story-telling, I shared a personal story about a homeless man named Pops. He came to live with me and my roommates during college. I shared that one day, I walked into the bathroom and discovered Pops using my toothbrush, and I wondered how long he had been using that toothbrush of mine—the same one I had used every single day. Ugh! This humorous anecdote humanized the abstract concept of generational poverty and moved the congregation toward a deeper understanding of their role in addressing societal inequities. One survey respondent shared that the use of the comic spirit was “modest and integral to the text.”¹³ Additionally, a PPG-A member, a young film student in the group, commented, “This was my favorite sermon out of all those I’ve heard you preach...it unfolded like scenes from a movie...you invited listeners to connect the dots rather than doing that work for us rhetorically.”¹⁴ Yet, a different reaction came from another survey respondent who felt that the sermon structure “seemed a bit disjointed.”¹⁵ I noted that a few survey respondents found my use of the Lundblad pattern to be a bit too abstract as they were accustomed to more traditional sermon structures. Nonetheless, the balance of levity and depth in this sermon helped communicate a complex theological theme.

¹³Respondent 5, Congregational Sermon Survey – Sermon Three, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, Houston, Texas, audio recording, September 25, 2022.

¹⁴PPG-A Member 4, Sermon Feedback Meeting – Sermon Three, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, Houston, Texas, audio recording, September 25, 2022.

¹⁵Respondent 12, Congregational Sermon Survey – Sermon Three.

Congregational Sermon Survey results affirmed this sermon as insightful by a measure of 87.5% and effective in its use of comic spirit by a measure of 100%, with queer respondents representing 50% and cishet allies representing 50%.¹⁶

Strengths Identified in Year One Feedback

One of the most consistent affirmations in the evaluations was my ability to use levity to engage the congregation in shared cultural experiences. References such as those shared from television—*Mister Rogers Neighborhood*, *Pose*, and *Dynasty*—resonated strongly, demonstrating my understanding of the congregation’s context and social location. This further demonstrated that scriptural understanding could be better achieved with the comic spirit’s ability to reimagine texts through incarnational translation. It was clear that the congregation related to the message, and even to each other, during these moments. Elements of humor and creativity lightened the tone of difficult passages and made the messages more memorable. During this program year, a local comedian visited our church one Sunday while I was preaching. In a social media post directly following the church service, she quoted my sermon—a brief phrase where I referenced the unsavory view of Samaritans by the Lukan orthodox religious community as equivalent to Cher’s “Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves.”¹⁷ The cishet Italian-American comedian, Susan Saccoman joined Bering Church just a few weeks later offering supplemental proof of an effective, growing praxis of the comic spirit in my preaching ministry.

¹⁶Appendix C.

¹⁷Susan Saccoman, 2022, “May we find gratitude in the important, little things,” Facebook video, October 9, 2022: <https://www.facebook.com/743212316/videos/640587057664818>.

Another area of strength noted was my growing confidence and comfort in the pulpit, contributing to the effectiveness of the comic spirit. The PPG-A observed an increasing naturalness in my delivery and a deeper connection with the congregation throughout the three sermons. One member remarked, “Each sermon felt more natural in this space.”¹⁸ This feedback underscored how my adaptive approach—incorporating feedback from the PPG-A and Congregational Sermon Surveys—contributed to my growth as a preacher and the development of my preaching praxis goals.

Challenges and Areas for Growth from Year One Feedback

While the sermons were generally well-received, there were areas identified where I could further refine my approach. One occasion was providing additional context for cultural references to ensure inclusivity for LGBTQ+ listeners and allies. For example, the *Pose* illustration in the second sermon resonated with LGBTQ+ members. However, it needed more framing for cis het listeners less familiar with queer culture and its function as liberation. Similarly, references like “burnt champagne” added levity but required careful integration to maintain the listener’s focus on the sermon’s theological core. A more concrete sermon pattern may have improved the perceived balance of levity and its intended connection to the theological depth.

¹⁸PPG-A Member 2, Final Evaluation Meeting – Year One, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, Houston, Texas, audio recording, September 25, 2022.

Evaluation of Year Two Sermons

The PPG-A and Congregational Sermon Surveys provided invaluable feedback on my Year Two sermons. My use of levity began to be refined as embodied performance was the subject of focus in sermons this year. More creative tools and social justice themes were incorporated, culminating in three sermons that explored distinct styles and methods. The evaluations highlighted strengths as well as areas for further growth as I continued to integrate the comic spirit in my preaching ministry.

The first sermon of Year Two focused on the parables of the Kingdom of God in Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52, specifically the parable of the Pearl of Great Price. This sermon emphasized preaching as embodied performance, focusing on eye contact, gestures, and extemporaneous delivery—all qualities that serve to enhance the use of the comic spirit. The PPG-A noted significant improvement in my ability to engage the congregation as I began in this year to internalize sermon content more and not rely as heavily on sermon notes. One survey respondent remarked, “Your freedom from the pulpit allowed you to connect with the audience in a way we hadn’t seen from you before.”¹⁹ My research confirmed that congregations will often be more captivated by the liberated emotive capacity when sermons are not bound to the use of visible notes. Stand-up Preachers should note that professional comics avoid the use of notes as well. Additionally, I have never observed a drag performer use notes. Regarding expressions of the comic spirit, I used the recent blockbuster hit *Barbie* as a comic metaphor throughout the sermon. The movie illustration provided an opportunity for a comedic aside where I

¹⁹Respondent 3, Congregational Survey – Sermon Four, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, Houston, Texas, audio recording, July 30, 2023.

used a careful dose of self-deprecating humor to show a photo illustration of Pastor Bodie not participating in the required all-pink uniform socially expected when watching this film with friends at the cinema. Continuing the comic metaphor, I discovered that humor is not always universal. With another illustration, I mentioned how Fox News commentators considered the *Barbie* movie as “too woke” as it promoted a so-called “liberal agenda.”²⁰ A still shot of the news anchors was projected during the sermon. Here, I employed a method of incongruity humor and superiority humor as I pointed to the irony of these comments coming from “Barbie-like” European-American female news anchors who are beneficiaries of liberal values for the workforce. Superiority humor can potentially alienate some listeners and should be used cautiously—most especially when referencing political topics. This reference did not resonate with one lesbian member of the PPG-A.²¹ Otherwise, the PPG-A affirmed that the sermon achieved its goal of uplifting the congregation’s call to pursue God’s Kingdom with full commitment. My body language emphasized this message—an urgency as I paced the chancel. I used large hand gestures, employing exaggeration and physical humor, to express the magnitude of the parable’s costly pearl. I made reference to the pearl as “Liberace-sized,” as an example of relief humor via a queer cultural icon. According to the results of the Congregational Sermon Survey, the scripture’s central theme of “going

²⁰“Did the Barbie movie go too woke?” *Jesse Watters Primetime*, July 3, 2023, *Fox News*, <https://www.foxnews.com/video/6366616526112>.

²¹PPG-A Member 4, Sermon Feedback Meeting – Sermon Four, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, Houston, Texas, audio recording, July 30, 2023.

for broke,” in pursuit of equity and justice resonated with the congregation.²² However, one member of the PPG-A shared feedback expressing concern that the theology might be “unrealistic” as the parable’s hyperbole might present a too extreme theology.²³ Is there anything worth giving it all to achieve, especially when spirituality is the motivation? This is a valid concern. What did Christ mean here? Could it be that Queer Theology’s so-called Erotic God (a rather hyperbolic superlative) seeks that we might reciprocate an abandon for Her/His/Their overwhelming proposition of foreplay through Communion and ultimate consummation in Eschatological destiny? Are we meant to be fully abandoned—body, mind, and spirit—unto God and God’s Kingdom? What does that even mean, if so? Biblical scholars will debate such questions well beyond the scope of this research project. I noted that preachers should seek to identify theological hyperbole in the scriptures and apply caution when uplifting it in sermons. I wisely chose not to employ the term “erotic” for God with this sermon but rather allowed the queer theological concept to inform my thinking in sermon development. Considering sermon delivery, my praxis grew. As extemporaneous preaching was not a familiar form, I took an extended amount of time to rehearse the sermon in the chancel throughout the week. Comedians would call this the process of going “off-book.” The sermon demonstrated how performance elements, such as gestures and expanded body language, enhanced the delivery and overall impact of the message with the comic spirit. Congregational Sermon Survey results affirmed this sermon as insightful by a measure of 93.8% and effective in

²²This was a relatable colloquialism, considering Houston’s relative proximity to gambling venues incorporated into Sermon Four. The phrase was offered in reference to the risk we are called to consider through the Pearl of Great Price.

²³PPG-A Member 6, Sermon Feedback Meeting.

its use of comic spirit by a measure of 87.5%, with queer respondents representing 68.6% and cishet allies representing 31.2%.²⁴

The second sermon addressed transgender justice, a timely issue in light of recent legislative attacks in Texas that year—an opportunity for gravity to be balanced by levity toward insight. I used a topical structure rather than an expository form for this sermon, which exegeted a social concern and presented a progressive Christian response. The sermon included scripture, but other extra-biblical sources were considered principle sources to better understand the topical concern. A heart-wrenching story was seminal which shared about a transgender child and her mother, Kai and Kimberly Shappley, who were exiled from Houston due to political oppression. I found it essential to share this story of neighbors from the congregation’s city. Additionally, Austin Harke’s work in transgender theology offered relevant information regarding the concerns of transgender Christians. Other supporting information came from a *Texas Tribune* news article to contextualize the subject further. The sermon was commended for its boldness. One survey respondent stated, “I just didn’t realize how serious this situation is for trans individuals. This sermon was eye-opening.”²⁵ The topic of the sermon was particularly close to my heart. As cisgender gays, lesbians, and bisexuals have been granted more acceptance in mainstream culture, our transgender siblings continue to be misunderstood and left to the furthest extent of the margins. I genuinely believe that even progressive

²⁴Appendix D.

²⁵Respondent 14, Congregational Sermon Survey – Sermon Five, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, Houston, Texas, audio recording, August 27, 2023.

Christian communities can be willfully ignorant of the needs of transgender people in our care.

In an effort to balance with levity, the use of a prop for this sermon was key. The brass alarm clock, an expression of comic metaphor, symbolized the urgency of justice. The clock symbolized an awakening to transgender justice concerns—to become “woke.” By physically handling the clock during the sermon, I reinforced its message visually. Even though not many use a traditional alarm clock, it still holds a place in our minds as an icon of sorts. The bells on the clock made an audible sound when I sat it forcefully on the pulpit, emphasizing our need to wake up to the call of solidarity—demonstrating a praxis of physical humor as the ring was heard. I further employed word play and relief humor when I referenced the concern of transgender justice as “alarming.”

This sermon required more than a simple “Thanks be to God, Amen” at its closing. Prompted by Hartke’s practical approach to Queer Theology, the sermon had to include a tangible call to action, in my opinion. For those sensing the need for a response, I created a discussion panel on transgender justice with five transgender individuals from the church’s community, moderated by a PPG-A member. The sermon presented an invitation to attend this discussion held in the church parlor at a future date. An expression of physical humor might be noted when I upheld the bulletin and made exaggerated gestures to the QR code registration link for the panel discussion at the sermon’s close. Including this tangible next step strengthened the sermon’s credibility and purpose. I closed the sermon referencing the lectionary text of the day, Matthew 16 and its familiar charge: “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church—and

the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.”²⁶ I employed incongruity humor as I quoted the scripture with a witty revision: “and the gates of Hell—otherwise known as the Texas Legislature—shall not prevail against it.” The PPG-A praised this as an effective use of levity and performance to address a serious topic, noting that it moved many congregants to applause at the conclusion. One PPG-A member reflected, “This sermon didn’t just inform—it mobilized us.”²⁷ This sermon demonstrated the use of a physical prop as a comic metaphor and its power to motivate the congregation to see a concept in a new way. Congregational Sermon Survey results affirmed this sermon as insightful by a measure of 89.5% and effective in its use of comic spirit by a measure of 100%, with queer respondents representing 78.9% and cishet allies representing 21.1%.²⁸

The final sermon of Year Two explored forgiveness and accountability through Matthew 18:21-35, the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. With this sermon, I employed the comic spirit’s tools of metaphor, storytelling, and incongruity. A key feature was the use of a “Get Out of Jail Free” card from the board game Monopoly, a comic metaphor. Hundreds of these cards were made available at the chancel rail to be picked up during Holy Communion as a tangible, tactile response to the sermon. They served as a visual aid to illustrate the concept of forgiveness—just as with the board game, forgiveness is the function. As Cheng’s vision of radical love is about dissolving boundaries toward queer liberation, boundless forgiveness as liberation was uplifted. The evaluations praised

²⁶Matthew 16:16, KJV.

²⁷PPG-A Member 1, Sermon Feedback Meeting – Sermon Five, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, Houston, Texas, audio recording, August 27, 2023.

²⁸Appendix E.

the metaphor as humorous and insightful. “It made the abstract idea of forgiveness tangible and relatable,” commented one survey respondent.²⁹ However, the PPG-A cautioned that such props and tangible items should be used sparingly to avoid feeling gimmicky.³⁰ I agreed with this sentiment. Such items included with sermons seem to fit maybe just a few times per calendar year, by my estimation.

This sermon shifted from the prophetic tone of the second sermon to a more pastoral and familiar style, prompting congregants to consider how forgiveness can be lived out in everyday life. I employed comic story-telling through the universal dread of the principal’s office from grade school days. I shared a humorous, self-deprecating personal account of my own childhood antics—how I experimented with foul language and how I encouraged others to join me in breaking the rules. In the cafeteria line that day, I pranked a more naïve kid to hold his tongue with his fingers and dared him to shout the word “Ship!” Take a pause from reading my thesis and give this a try. Yes, foul language is the result. (I hope that was a welcomed, cathartic experience for you.) The congregation exploded with laughter as insights prompted a look at the personal journey toward wholeness. This expression further displayed a praxis of comic persona as I was vulnerable to share from my own juvenile delinquency and my continuing tendency toward pranks and foul language from time to time. By my estimation, progressive Christian preaching can rely too much on championing social issues as its primary fare. Society’s concerns certainly need tending. But, the individual heart also needs spiritual

²⁹Respondent 8, Congregational Sermon Survey – Sermon Six, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, Houston, Texas, audio recording, September 17, 2023.

³⁰PPG-A Member 2, Sermon Feedback Meeting – Sermon Six, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, Houston, Texas, audio recording, September 17, 2023.

care as we recognize our own faults and seek to live by repentance and abundant forgiveness. Queer Theology emphasizes a vigorous self-love, loving one's own queer self as made in the Imago Dei. When this love for self is absent, we often act out. The sermon uplifted that forgiveness is both an act of love for neighbor and love for self, as unresolved resentments can result in self-destruction that has been empirically studied.³¹ The PPG-A noted that this balance of prophetic and pastoral preaching reflected my growing ability to address both systemic and personal dimensions of faith. One PPG-A member commented, "You are finding a rhythm between challenging us and comforting us, which our congregation needs."³² The feedback affirmed that the comic spirit holds the ability to serve a wide range of theological concerns in preaching in LGBTQ+ affirming contexts. Congregational Sermon Survey results affirmed this sermon as insightful by a measure of 95.5% and effective in its use of comic spirit by a measure of 100%, with queer respondents representing 72.6% and cishet allies representing 27.4%.³³ The sermon manuscript may be found as Appendix I for supplemental reference.

Strengths Identified with Year Two Sermon Feedback

The evaluations consistently highlighted my growth with the comic spirit and with this program year's goals of sermon performance through embodiment. This was

³¹Karen Swartz, "The Healing Power of Forgiveness," *John Hopkins Medicine* 25 (Summer 2014): https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/publications/johns_hopkins_health/summer_2014/the_healing_power_of_forgiveness.

³²PPG-A Member 6, Sermon Feedback Meeting – Sermon Five, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, Houston, Texas, audio recording, September 17, 2023.

³³Appendix F.

especially evident in the first sermon, where extemporaneous delivery allowed for greater connection with the congregation. I was keenly reminded that neither comedians nor drag performers use notes—at least in ways that audiences can observe. An extemporaneous sermon delivery allowed the comic spirit to be communicated beyond words. The creative use of metaphors and props, such as the alarm clock and Monopoly cards, added wit and depth. In this way, the complex theological ideas in sermons were made more accessible through familiar objects. Another strength was my ability to address timely social justice issues with sensitivity and boldness. With the second sermon’s topic of transgender justice, elements of the comic spirit could be leveraged toward a more compelling call to social action.

Challenges and Areas for Growth with Year Two Sermon Feedback

Year Two of this project marked improvement but also identified new challenges. The evaluations pointed to a few of these challenges. One recurring theme was the need for greater attention toward the levity and depth balance and its relationship to issues of inclusivity. For example, the Fox News reference in the first sermon was humorous and resonated with many listeners who shared more progressive political ideologies. At the same time, this use of the comic spirit risked alienating others who might identify as more moderate or even conservative, despite their place among the LGBTQ+ affirming congregation. Similarly, the use of props, though effective, should be employed judiciously to avoid overuse. As there were more wins than losses in my research during Year Two, my overall game, per se, improved as areas of growth were identified and addressed.

Evaluation of Year Three Sermons

Year Three marked the culmination of my research, with sermons that further integrated the comic spirit as social transformation within LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. The first sermon was preached at Covenant Baptist Church, a liberal congregation whose highly educated membership appreciates academically rich preaching. The second sermon was delivered at Westbury United Methodist Church, a suburban, multicultural community with a long history of preaching that inspires social action. These new settings provided unique opportunities to apply insights from my doctoral coursework and refine my use of the comic spirit as a homiletical tool.

The evaluations highlighted growth and challenges as key takeaways from this final year. The first sermon of Year Three, based on the Equity Proclamation of Isaiah 40:1-5, was offered at Covenant Baptist Church and focused on confronting Christian Nationalism. The sermon drew primarily from Gregory Ellison's *Fearless Dialogues* and Frank Thomas's *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* and was informed by the curriculum's focus on social transformation.³⁴ I crafted a prophetic message that called listeners to concrete action—to exercise their influence by discussing this issue with friends and neighbors and, of course, by voting. The congregation is rooted in a historic Baptist understanding of the separation of church and state which was distinctive of Baptist identity until the advent of Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority movement. The social location of Covenant Church cannot be ignored—a pulpit in the conservative state

³⁴In Year Three, students of the ACTS Doctor of Ministry in Preaching are challenged to discover ways that social transformation may be inspired through preaching.

of Texas is a considerable platform for such a message to be proclaimed. However, this sermon was not prophetic in presenting a new way of looking at the role of faith in civic life for the people of this congregation. Again, Covenant Church promotes the concept of the separation of church and state better than most. The prophetic nature of this sermon was its timeliness as the 2024 Democratic National Convention had just come to a close, and presidential politics was on many listeners' minds. As a queer preacher, I attempted to counter balance the gravity of the subject with levity. Elements of levity included the comic Bible, or incarnational translation, as well as comic persona. "Your use of levity helped to make the heavy topic of Christian Nationalism more accessible," offered one respondent.³⁵

Contextualization should always be the goal for the message's theological depth as well as the use of the comic spirit as levity. There are few guest preaching opportunities where this subject could be offered effectively. Despite my understanding of the congregation's traditional Baptist identity, I needed to confirm this message's compatibility with the congregation's representatives. Before developing the sermon more fully, I spent time with the senior minister via phone interview. Also, the congregation's two members who served on the PPG-B from Covenant Church assured me that my working sermon purpose statement and ideas for levity resonated with their experiences and expectations. The wider PPG-B commended this preparation, noting that my willingness to understand the theological, political, and cultural postures of the congregation strengthened the delivery. Aside from the hot-button topic of Christian

³⁵Respondent 2, Congregational Sermon Survey – Sermon Seven, Covenant Baptist Church, Houston, Texas, audio recording, August 25, 2024.

Nationalism, a generous measure of drag-inspired humor was presented, calling on insights from my field observations and interviews with Hugh Stone and Kofi. God is imagined in the sermon as gay icon David Hodo, the construction worker from The Village People, calling us all to join him in building a highway of justice. One might say that I wrapped God in drag for the congregation. The prophet Isaiah is reimagined as a lead character in the popular television series *Queer Eye* as “Gay Isaiah,” helping redesign the wardrobe of America’s unfashionable, outdated bigotry. Here, I presented Isaiah in drag. I also employed the use of physical humor, complete with a nelly wrist break and iconic gay snap from side to side, as I introduced Gay Isaiah. In many ways, the sermon pushed the envelope as highly political and highly gay. Nevertheless, feedback affirmed the sermon’s effectiveness in a diverse congregation. One survey respondent commented, “Tying in *Queer Eye* and using that as an example of making some changes was a great way to be topical and a little subversive.”³⁶ The measure of queer comic spirit seemed to resonate well. The same respondent continued by stating, “I imagine saying ‘Gay Isaiah’ would give even the most liberal ally pause because it’s out of the norm. It might have made someone look at this a different way using a known biblical figure and reimagining them in a different role and with a different descriptor, which I am all for.”³⁷ Congregational Sermon Survey results affirmed this sermon as insightful by a measure of 83.3% and effective in its use of comic spirit by a measure of

³⁶Respondent 11, Congregational Sermon Survey – Sermon Seven, Covenant Baptist Church, Houston, Texas, audio recording, August 25, 2024.

³⁷Respondent 11, Congregational Sermon Survey – Sermon Seven.

88.9%, with queer respondents representing 38.9% and cis het allies representing 61.1%.³⁸

As I consider this sermon to offer a particularly strong presence of queer comic spirit, the sermon manuscript is offered with Appendix J for reference.

The second sermon was delivered at Westbury United Methodist Church. It centered on the story of Blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52 and emphasized the transformative power of Jesus' inclusive love. This sermon celebrated LGBTQ+ Pride Month and addressed diversity, equity, and inclusion themes within the ecclesial realm. Drawing on insights from Gennifer Brooks' *Good News Preaching*, I structured the sermon around a Good News Statement and a Discipleship Message Statement to guide listeners toward active Christian spiritual formation.³⁹ The PPG-B applauded my use of the comic spirit that fostered a sense of connection and broke through tension. Expressions of the comic spirit include comic storytelling with hyperbole, impersonation, physical humor, and self-deprecating humor. One PPG-B member remarked, "You used the comic spirit to make the message relevant and engaging, even when approaching a topic like inclusivity after our denomination's recent schism."⁴⁰ The sermon concluded with a clear call to action, challenging the congregation to mentor other churches navigating LGBTQ+ inclusion following the United Methodist Church's historic General Conference 2024 decision for the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ people.

³⁸Appendix G.

³⁹The final sermon for this project exercised the *Good News Preaching* method authored by Gennifer Brooks, the Dean of the ACTS Doctor of Ministry in Preaching.

⁴⁰PPG-B Member 5, Sermon Feedback Meeting – Sermon Eight, Zoom video conference, audio recording, September 8, 2024.

With this sermon, I reimagined the Church Lady character from *Saturday Night Live* and used her voice to rebuke Blind Bartimaeus through an incarnational translation, as inspired by insights gained from drag performers Hugh Stone and Kofi.⁴¹ This took some time listening to YouTube videos of actor Dana Carvey for the purpose of practicing the voice and gestures. The goal was to reveal that it was not the Church Lady figures in this story who captured Jesus' attention. Queer Theology asserts that the humble outcast will always outrank the judgmental churchgoer in the Kingdom of God. Transformation comes when we make room for everyone in the family of God—most especially those on the margins. Self-deprecating humor was used as I opened the sermon speaking of the fears that Westbury Church expressed and overcame when they first considered welcoming “ex-Evangelical sissies like me” into their nice, suburban church. One member from the PPG-B remarked, “Your gay humor helped endear you to the congregation...it seemed as if they remember you fondly there.”⁴² Another member from the PPG-B added, “Your personal stories and willingness to be vulnerable through humor and gay life helped the other gay people in the room feel seen.”⁴³ I employed hyperbole as I reimagined initial fears of the church becoming a Montrose night club, complete with disco balls, vodka cocktails, and go-go dancers. One survey respondent remarked, “The levity helped people to feel more comfortable and broke the ice, so that when Bodie

⁴¹As a mainstay of *Saturday Night Live* characters, the Church Lady has appeared in various sketches from the late 1980s to the present. The character is portrayed as a stereotypical, strict Christian octogenarian. She is preoccupied with orderly behavior and enjoys passing judgment.

⁴²PPG-B Member 4, Sermon Feedback Meeting – Sermon Eight.

⁴³PPG-B Member 1, Sermon Feedback Meeting – Sermon Eight.

moved into the more serious part of the sermon, we were more ready to listen, were more comfortable with the lesson, and more ready to understand and accept the lesson.”⁴⁴ Congregational Sermon Survey results affirmed this sermon as insightful by a measure of 100% and effective in its use of comic spirit by a measure of 100%, with queer respondents representing 25% and cishet allies representing 75%.⁴⁵ The sermon manuscript is offered as Appendix K for further reference.

Strengths Identified in Year Three Sermon Feedback

The evaluations consistently highlighted my growing confidence in using humor for enlivened preaching. The PPG-B included colleagues from the ACTS Doctor Ministry in Preaching program, who all commented on my growth with the comic spirit. One mentioned, “I believe we can all see that you have matured over these three years as you have studied and practiced a variety of humor in your sermons.”⁴⁶ Other PPG-B members from the two local LGBTQ+ affirming congregations observed that my integration of personal anecdotes made the sermons relatable. One member reflected, “You’ve displayed a natural rhythm with humor—it feels authentic and never forced...especially when you offer it through storytelling.”⁴⁷ The comic spirit effectively addressed complex

⁴⁴Respondent 14, Congregational Sermon Survey – Sermon Eight, Westbury United Methodist Church, audio recording, June 26, 2024.

⁴⁵Appendix H.

⁴⁶PPG-B Member 4, Final Evaluation – Year Three, Zoom video conference, audio recording, September 8, 2024.

⁴⁷PPG-B Member 1, Final Evaluation – Year Three.

topics such as Christian Nationalism and LGBTQ+ inclusivity. The listener's theological engagement was enhanced as levity provided moments of relief.

Some risks were taken during these sermons (i.e. queering Isaiah, using Church Lady's impersonation, etc.), but each was measured with intention. One survey respondent commented from Westbury Church, "I have known Bodie for a while...He can be funny or serious and blends the two effectively...the humor was used to illustrate and blend in with the sermon and not as an end in itself."⁴⁸ One strength noted was my ability to tailor messages to diverse congregational contexts. This may have been the most considerable challenge to surmount in Year Three of this project. At Covenant Church, I adapted the prophetic message to align with the congregation's intellectual and theological leanings. With my preaching at Westbury Church, I embraced the celebratory energy of Pride Month to deliver a message of hope and action. One member of the PPG-B noted that I "demonstrated an awareness of how humor operates differently across communities."⁴⁹

Challenges and Areas for Growth Year Three Sermon Feedback

While the evaluations recognized significant progress, they identified areas where I could continue to grow—albeit beyond the timeline of the research. One survey respondent from Covenant Church shared: "A couple [expressions of levity] felt more

⁴⁸Respondent 5, Congregational Sermon Survey – Sermon Eight, Westbury United Methodist Church, audio recording, June 26, 2024.

⁴⁹PPG-B Member 2, Final Evaluation – Year Three, Zoom video conference, audio recording, September 8, 2024.

forced than a natural part of the sermon.”⁵⁰ While humor effectively lightened the tone of both sermons, the PPG-B suggested that internalizing my manuscript more thoroughly enhances delivery. This proposed that both content and its delivery go hand in hand when it comes to the comic spirit for preaching. I see this as an ongoing goal for my developing praxis. Another challenge involved ensuring that humor resonated as equally as possible with all listeners. Although both sermons received overwhelmingly positive feedback, the PPG-B encouraged me to consider how the comic spirit might be experienced differently by cishet and queer congregants. One member from the PPG-B shared, “The sermon is for everyone in the room, so consider ways that straight listeners can be included in the laughter.”⁵¹ These insights will inform future explorations of the comic spirit’s role in my preaching ministry. By reflection, I also have noted that a stronger intersectional intention should be at work. Uplifting the theological perspectives and lived experiences of queer people of color, queer immigrant communities, queer people with disabilities—these areas should carry ongoing focus for vital queer preaching with the comic spirit. Additional care should be given to the expansive “+” of LGBTQ+ people—those who identify as intersex, asexual, pansexual, demisexual, and other sexual orientations and gender identities that account for the broader queer community. Further research, with greater attention to intersectionality, will offer a more inclusive praxis of the comic spirit in LGBTQ+ affirming congregations.

⁵⁰Respondent 7, Congregational Sermon Survey – Sermon Seven, Covenant Baptist Church, Houston, Texas, audio recording, August 25, 2024.

⁵¹PPG-B Member 3, Final Evaluation – Year Three, Zoom video conference, audio recording, September 8, 2024.

Evaluation in Summary

Integrating the comic spirit into preaching has measurably shaped my homiletical praxis over these three years. This work has allowed me to explore new dimensions of connection, authenticity, and theological depth through sermons that are rooted in scripture and informed by the social location of the congregation. With this research project, I can confidently claim significant improvements in my preaching praxis and its use of the comic spirit. By queering the theoretical and practical guidance from established scholars through accepted precepts of Queer Theology, a praxis emerged displaying elements of the comic spirit through eight sermons. This praxis is not a structured method. Rather, it may be identified by intentional uses of the comic spirit that are informed by experiences that are contextually resonant with LGBTQ+ people. Congregational Sermon Surveys along with PPG-A and PPG-B feedback attest to measurable growth through reported data. Qualitative and quantitative measures have been presented to indicate effectiveness in preaching praxis, as has been noted throughout this chapter. Evaluations note that my use of the comic spirit achieves its purpose of engaging LGBTQ+ affirming congregations and communicating theological truths in meaningful ways. However, the data also reveal the challenges of this craft. Like comedians and drag performers, whose artistry evolves through years of practice, my journey with the comic spirit is ongoing. Like many art forms, preaching with the comic spirit matures with time. I cannot make an empirical claim to have mastered a praxis of this nature at the close of my research project. That process will continue to grow with each sermon that engages the comic spirit.

The PPG-A and PPG-B evaluations and Congregational Sermon Survey data collected throughout this project prove my growth as a preacher. As my praxis was developed and tested with each of the eight sermons, the Congregational Sermon Surveys assessed each sermon as effective in its practice of the comic spirit for LGBTQ+ affirming contexts. Each sermon affirmed my use of the comic spirit as relevant and effective, by over a supermajority of listeners, with the final sermon drawing 100% affirmation for this goal.⁵² In PPG-A and PPG-B's Final Evaluation meetings, these results were confirmed, as well.^{53 54 55} This praxis has emerged through blending comic homiletical scholarship and Queer Theology, alongside observations and interviews of drag performers. Again, this praxis is not a specific, step-by-step method. It is identified as purposeful and effective uses of the comic spirit to inspire insight among LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. I have observed three homiletical strategies of the comic spirit for queer preaching that have emerged from this project.

A more authentic, contextually informed voice has emerged in my preaching and resulted in an *ability to foster connection within the congregation* through sermons enlivened by the comic spirit. I am more confident in claiming my lived experiences as a queer person in the pulpit. A more authentic preaching voice was an unexpected outcome

⁵²Congregational Sermon Survey Data – All Sermons Compiled, Excel spreadsheet, September 8, 2024.

⁵³PPG-A, Final Evaluation – Year One, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, audio recording, September 25, 2022.

⁵⁴ PPG-A, Final Evaluation – Year Two, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, audio recording, September 17, 2023.

⁵⁵PPG-B, Final Evaluation – Year Three, Zoom video conference, audio recording, September 8, 2024.

of this research project. The comic spirit has allowed me to embrace humor as an expression of my identity and theological commitments, creating personal and impactful sermons. For preaching in LGBTQ+ affirming congregations, this area of growth provided an opportunity to ingratiate myself with the people of the congregation as a queer preacher. While this did not eliminate the need for proper contextual investigation, it did allow this work to be more natural. The comic spirit, when offered from this place of authenticity of preacher persona, encouraged closer connections within the congregation. The PPG-A, PPG-B, and Congregational Sermon Survey data reveal improvements in my ability to engage diverse congregational contexts. The LGBTQ+ affirming congregations from this research are diverse in sexual orientation, gender identity, and ethnicity, and the comic spirit has helped me connect across these differences while offering my authentic voice. Evaluations have confirmed this measure of growth as vital to my preaching ministry as a queer man as shared moments of connection through the comic spirit have bridged divides.

Another key area of improvement is my *ability to balance depth and levity*. PPG-A and PPG-B evaluations as well as Congregational Sermon Survey data from across all eight sermons show that humor often made challenging theological concepts more accessible. Mainline preaching is not known for its ability to communicate beyond a purely logical form of rhetoric. The comic spirit invites human emotion to take a more active role in preaching. Wit is not devoid of logic. Quite the opposite is true. Humor is purposeful when used in preaching. The data presented have revealed how the interplay of reason and relief are necessary for sermons—to illuminate new theological insights.

The comic spirit, in this way, helped listeners engage with topics they might otherwise find too dense or overwhelming.

The PPG-A and PPG-B evaluations as well as Congregational Sermon Survey data highlight the challenges and limitations of using the comic spirit in preaching. Humor is contextual, and its effectiveness depends on understanding the congregation—its people, its locations, and its evolving story. Feedback from the PPG-A, PPG-B, and Congregational Sermon Surveys occasionally pointed to moments when humor did not resonate as intended. A key use of humor I have identified is its *ability to disarm and engage listeners*. There were many occasions when this was the effect. However, there were moments that have been noted where humor that was not properly informed by context alienated listeners (i.e. Fox News illustration, Electra from *Pose*, etc.). The research proved sound in these cases by providing objective data for the betterment of the praxis through the feedback mechanism of the PPG-A and PPG-B evaluations and the Congregational Sermon Surveys. The quantitative markers polled the congregations and assigned a percentage to the sermon's overall effectiveness and, more specifically, its use of the comic spirit, while qualitative data was more robust and varied in its results. Each data point provided an opportunity for reflection. Ultimately, the growing edges revealed all spoke to a central principle—expressions of the comic spirit are not always universal and must be offered with sensitivity and care.

Moreover, the data reveal that the comic spirit requires constant refinement. Even as I grow in my ability to use humor effectively, there are always areas for improvement. Any preacher who believes their praxis has achieved its pinnacle is likely mistaken. In my case, I found that the comic spirit is multifaceted. There are many opportunities for

further growth. The data collected in this project affirm that the comic spirit is a craft that requires lifelong cultivation. Like comedians and drag performers, whose artistry evolves throughout their careers, my use of humor in preaching will continue to develop.

Technical skills in comedy and the ability to investigate the dynamics of social location are all required to master the comic spirit in preaching. It is a holistic process that is about more than just being a funny preacher. A strong praxis of the comic spirit in sermons invites continuous reflection that can result in the preacher's growth. I discovered this to be true during my three years of wrestling with this topic.

The research conducted in this project demonstrates clear improvements in my preaching praxis, particularly in *disarming tension*, *balancing depth and levity*, and *fostering deeper connections*. However, the PPG-A and PPG-B evaluations as well as Congregational Sermon Survey data also highlight the inherent complexities of mastering the comic spirit. There is a particular vigilance and need for adaptation to ensure the comic spirit's effectiveness in queer preaching. Like comedians and drag performers, I recognize that my use of the comic spirit will remain a lifelong craft, shaped by continued experience and the unique dynamics of each preaching context. Cultivation remains my goal.

CHAPTER 7.

HOMILETICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Strategies for a Queer-Informed Praxis of the Comic Spirit

The homiletical significance of the comic spirit extends beyond its capacity to entertain—it serves as an innovative tool for theological enlivenment. For my praxis as a preacher, integrating humor has reshaped my approach to preaching in LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. This tool has aided in communicating issues present in scripture and theology to offer a relevant word. The daily challenges faced by congregants are addressed using the comic spirit. This integration has birthed three strategies for preaching with the comic spirit: it has been useful in *disarming tension* to engage listeners better when addressing complex issues; it has enhanced my ability to *foster connection in diverse congregations*; and it has taught me to *balance depth and levity*, enabling me to communicate in more accessible ways. The impact of this project has shaped my preaching ministry. I believe these homiletical strategies can be useful to preachers serving similar contexts as well.

Disarming Tension to Engage the Listener Toward Insight

One function of the comic spirit in preaching is its ability to disarm tension for stronger listener engagement. The comic spirit can serve as an icebreaker at any point in the sermon. Barriers exist in a space well before the sermon is offered. Often listeners bring concerns from daily life that may cause them to feel walled off from engaging with new ideas. Humor can cut through these unseen divisions to create a space where people

feel safe to explore challenging topics presented by the preacher. The comic spirit can open hearts and minds when preachers are intentional with its use. The emotional guardedness listeners sometimes experience when hearing challenging sermons can be alleviated by the comic spirit resulting in congregants engaging more fully with the message.

Disarming tension through humor involves creating a moment of levity that eases the emotional weight of a sermon's message. Tension often arises when a topic challenges listeners' existing notions about faith, politics, or other serious subjects that a preacher may be called to address. A shared moment of laughter can act as a bridge to connect the preacher and the congregation toward a new understanding. With this bridge, the listener can better approach the message with openness. Greater theological reflection can be shared in such a moment. The comic spirit holds the potential to assist in making the sermon's message more accessible as it facilitates vulnerable engagement beyond emotional obstacles.

Another critical aspect of disarming tension is humor's ability to humanize complex ideas to make them relatable. Much of Christian spirituality is built on invisible concepts. The realm of theology involves abstraction. This characteristic of our faith is often magnified in sermons. Abstract theological concepts can manifest tension in congregations as they attempt to understand the essential message being presented. Abstract theological concepts also have the effect of putting the listener...to sleep. In either case, the effect is not desirable. Abstraction in sermons can be a stumbling block. By introducing humor, the preacher can make the abstraction of theology more relatable in everyday terms. Familiar entry points are established. The listener becomes more

engaged. My research found that the comic spirit reduces the intellectual distance between the audience and the message. Listeners begin to see themselves in the narrative as the sermon comes alive. The comic spirit does not dumb down the presence of theology. The comic spirit illuminates theology.

Fostering Congregational Connection Toward Insight

Fostering congregational connection has emerged as another strategy of the comic spirit in my sermons. The dynamics of community building through preaching with the comic spirit involves understanding a congregation's unique characteristics. Sermons should never be one-size-fits-all. The comic spirit, when informed by the preacher's attentive listening, can celebrate the lived experiences of a congregation. I have explored how humor enhances my ability to adapt sermons to diverse audiences while maintaining theological depth.

It might be said that the work of becoming more contextually informed and relationally focused reflects the incarnational nature of preaching. Just as the Word became flesh and dwelled among us, effective preaching must embody the Gospel in ways that are relevant to the lives of listeners. After all, Christian preaching is modeled after Christ's own ministry of proclamation that was rooted in the value of community. The comic spirit facilitates this embodiment by offering preachers a means of connecting with congregants through shared experiences, cultural references, and moments of levity that reflect their realities. My research highlights how the comic spirit allows preachers to meet congregants where they are, offering theological truths in ways that resonate with their context. I have found a unique ability to adapt to different congregational contexts

using various forms of the comic spirit. Not every joke or expression of wit resonates with each group of people across locations. This adaptation has come without compromising the integrity of the message or my sense of self as a preacher. The conviction of my message and authenticity of my persona are both maintained. The comic spirit, when exercised with the aim of contextual relevance, only enhances these qualities. Congregations each have their own personality and profile. The comic spirit becomes incarnational when the preacher understands the context as fully as possible.

The comic spirit has also effectively bridged cultural divides within diverse congregations. Humor offers a common point of connection that can often transcend differences. This capacity to nurture bonds of trust is critical in LGBTQ+ affirming contexts. Those who have been oppressed, such as LGBTQ+ people, can find it challenging to open themselves to a faith community. It is only a recent phenomenon that queer people have been fully affirmed in Christian communities. Elders of the LGBTQ+ community may carry the trauma of exclusion, while younger queer individuals often experience faith in different ways. Other elements of diversity further add to the ways listeners engage with sermons. Ethnicity can play a role in the way the comic spirit can unite or divide. Preachers must not ignore how the comic spirit is perceived by people of various races and cultural backgrounds. LGBTQ+ affirming congregations are most often made up of both queer people and their cishet allies. The comic spirit may land differently for cishet people than with LGBTQ+ individuals. Queer preaching with the comic spirit can unite. My research underscored how this praxis can create moments of connection across such social divides. These three years have illustrated the power of the comic spirit to foster inclusivity within diverse LGBTQ+ affirming congregations.

Preachers must get to know the individuals who make up the congregation and develop systems for two-way communication outside the pulpit. This will result in a keen discernment to guide the comic spirit. A substantial measure of discernment should be exercised with the comic spirit so that fostering community can remain a vital result. The opposite effect is possible when the preacher wields this tool haphazardly. The most effective preachers will make time for coffee chats, phone conversations, and other forms of visitation. Humor is highly contextual and the preacher should always be about collecting information from the individuals who make up the context. What resonates with one individual may not translate effectively to another. The power of story is vital for fostering connections. Relationships of trust can be forged when the preacher takes time to learn an individual's story through conversation. When such relationships are established, systems for feedback are natural. If the comic spirit misses the mark in a given sermon, individuals may feel comfortable helping the preacher navigate a revised approach in the future. If the preacher has a trusted community of accountability that is more formally established, constructive feedback can refine the ongoing use of humor. Feedback can be a way for the preacher to ensure the comic spirit continues to foster connection rather than disrupt it.

Balancing Depth and Levity Toward Insight

Another way that the comic spirit has proven useful through my research is its keen ability to balance theological depth and levity in sermons. Understanding the function of each side of this dichotomy will serve to enhance the listener's understanding. At the core of any Christian sermon is its need for theological depth. Sermons should

invite listeners into an encounter with scripture, tradition, reason, and lived experiences for spiritual growth—if a conventional approach to Christian preaching is valued. This is where the depth is found. Such depth is essential to every sermon. Yet, presenting these elements in the fullness of their gravity can be a challenge for the average listener. The comic spirit provides the gift of lightness. When the subject matter is too heavy, levity can be the secret sauce to a sermon that brings the deeper truths into balance for the listener. Preachers should seek to discover any available entry point for congregations. Meaningful theological reflection is rarely the result of an academic lecture from the pulpit for average members of the congregation. Intellectually hospitable spaces are created in sanctuaries when levity is added to depth. Challenging truths become less demanding for the listener. The comic spirit must complement rather than overshadow the theological message. To continue the metaphor—too much secret sauce can ruin the meal. I found that this dichotomy is perhaps the most essential expression of the comic spirit for queer preaching. Moments of relief through levity are often necessary to allow the congregation to process the theological statements and emotionally charged narratives offered in a sermon. Without theological depth, sermons might not be sermons at all. It should be stated that depth and levity are not competing elements but complementary forces. My research found that the overall impact of the sermon was consistently more potent when the complementary use of levity and depth were at play.

Invitation to Queer Preachers and their LGBTQ+ Affirming Congregations

For queer preachers, the comic spirit offers an invitation to celebrate the diversity of LGBTQ+ experiences. My research identifies various ways that humor can be a tool of

liberation. The comic spirit is at its best when it is used to ignite queer joy. Sermons that reclaim the Christian faith for marginalized queer individuals—this is an essential work of queer preaching with the comic spirit. Queer-inspired humor can create space for authenticity to bloom in both the listener and the preacher. My research confirmed that shared cultural references, expressed through wit and humor, can foster a sense of belonging. The comic spirit also allows queer preachers to approach complicated topics more gracefully. Historically, cishet preaching has been characterized in some traditional settings as a coercive act. The comic spirit brings liberation from an oppressive past and reminds LGBTQ+ affirming congregations that liberation is at the heart of our message. Queer preachers can learn from the cishet Mainline Christian traditions in preaching that have emphasized logos and ethos. But, there is room to grow into a new era of preaching that embraces a more developed queer-informed pathos through the comic spirit's use.

Careful discernment will ensure that humor does not take queer preaching in a direction that fails to serve the needs of the congregation. While self-deprecating humor and superiority humor are sometimes useful, queer preachers should be aware that the uses of the comic spirit are not misunderstood. The sacred worth of LGBTQ+ individuals is an essential message that should not be miscommunicated. Queer preachers should take caution when playing into LGBTQ+ tropes for the sake of a laugh. Moments like these can bring queer people together. Yet, when humor misfires, the opposite effect can take place. The comic spirit requires sensitivity. When queer preachers commit to centering the experiences of the congregation, discernment will become second nature as levity and wit are developed for sermons. Laughter can be a marker of liberation from oppression. Queer preachers should keep in mind the gravity of social justice issues that

live in the hearts of many within their congregations. Queer preaching should proclaim release from oppression. The comic spirit can be wielded as a rhetorical tool for liberation in sermons. Queer preachers may discover that a developed praxis of the comic spirit can empower preaching to be more prophetic.

Resistance can be a function of the comic spirit for queer preachers. The project revealed how humor can disrupt narratives of exclusion. The comic spirit holds the potential to challenge systems of oppression through intentional expressions of wit in sermons. It can reveal the subversive, often ironic message of scripture—when presented from a progressive understanding. In non-affirming congregations, preaching fails to embrace LGBTQ+ Christians. For queer preachers, the comic spirit can be an effective way to offer a needed embrace to those who are outcasts. Queer preaching with the comic spirit becomes an act of prophetic defiance against patriarchal understandings of God and self. The multiplicity of queer identities is a reflection of the divine image in queer preaching—an essential theological claim, rooted in the *Imago Dei* that can be communicated through the comic spirit. What an absurd and glorious thought—God is queer! In this absurdity and glory, LGBTQ+ listeners may find themselves at different places along their respective journeys out of oppressive theologies. The queer preacher is wise to remember that progressive theological claims should be offered with concern for those coming from traditional, non-affirming religious backgrounds. Humor can aid in this effort to transcend the challenges of a diverse congregation. Opportunities for reconciliation and healing can always be presented in queer preaching. The comic spirit can be a balm in this regard.

Queer preachers seeking to use the comic spirit effectively must approach humor with care. Understanding one's self as a queer individual can aid in the preacher's ability to relate. Humor should be rooted in the experience of the community and the preacher's own identity. Authenticity is a must. For queer preachers, this can mean sharing stories and other humorous experiences. The comic spirit becomes the overflow of the preacher's personal testimony that underscores the theological claims of the sermon. Authentic humor can result in greater trust. Congregants begin to see the preacher as a real queer person. Of course, the queer preacher should remember to keep wise boundaries. Knowing when and how to include a personal anecdote can enliven the sermon, especially when it is funny. The comic spirit in queer preaching is strong when it serves the goals of the sermon. While levity can enhance engagement, it must also point toward deeper truths.

Congregations seeking to welcome queer preaching can encourage their preachers as they grow in this tool. Aside from providing a safe space for feedback, as noted previously, congregants can offer support as the preacher exercises new homiletical tools, such as the comic spirit. Just as a young person learning an instrument can hit a few wrong notes along the way, so might the preacher when it comes to expressions of wit and humor. Allow the preacher an opportunity to grow and results will improve. Remember that enlivened sermons with greater insight remains the goal. Laughter and joy can be the overflow of this tool for preaching. When used thoughtfully, the comic spirit elevates the sermon to become a more worthy proclamation of the Gospel—in the fullness of its joyful inclusivity.

Invitation to Cishet Ally Preachers and their LGBTQ+ Affirming Congregations

Humor uniquely creates shared moments of connection, making it an invaluable tool for inclusion. Cishet ally preachers seeking to better connect with their congregations may find the comic spirit useful in LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. For allies in the pulpit, humor can become a bridge that invites all members of a congregation—queer and cishet alike—into a shared space for theological reflection. Humor can play a role in communicating affirmation as the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals are validated, and a message of justice is celebrated. This work can be about congregational mutuality and solidarity. Expressions of the comic spirit can counter narratives of exclusion that have often dominated religious spaces. Humor's effects can be far reaching as it invites the whole community into a shared moment that honors the LGBTQ+ community while expanding the wider congregation's understanding of the sermon's message.

Cishet allies preaching in LGBTQ+ affirming congregations have a vital voice that the comic spirit can enhance. The cultivation of connection beyond the pulpit ministry is always key. Humor is rooted in social dynamics. Therefore, its impact depends on how the specific congregation perceives it. Ally preachers must avoid humor that unintentionally reinforces stereotypes that may be perceived as negative. Cishet ally preachers must confirm that they are not using the comic spirit in a way that relies on inaccurate assumptions about queer people. One of the most significant challenges of using humor in affirming contexts is ensuring that it resonates across a diverse congregation without triggering trauma. The communities that make up the LGBTQ+ collective bring varied backgrounds to the congregation. Humor that feels affirming to one group may alienate another. Ally preachers must consider how their humor will be

received by different groups and adapt their approach to foster inclusion. Researching the individual concerns of each community represented in the LGBTQ+ collective is of utmost importance. This will assist the preacher in better recognizing the difference between humor that uplifts and humor that trivializes. Ally preachers must avoid reducing LGBTQ+ experiences to caricatures. “If in doubt, don’t” may be a wise rule to follow. There are some expressions of the comic spirit that queer preachers may offer that cishet allies may not be able to offer, naturally. The comic spirit holds the potential to celebrate the dignity of queer individuals. Ally preachers are invited to magnify the sacredly queer qualities of their LGBTQ+ congregants. Cishet people too often misunderstand the lives of their queer siblings. The comic spirit can be a tool to uplift the stories of LGBTQ+ people and can reveal new understandings through sermons.

The comic spirit can offer opportunities for cishet ally preachers to demonstrate solidarity with the queer community. Allies can speak from a place of privilege and leverage their power to challenge and critique injustice through the comic spirit. Ally preachers should offer their witness of faith as cishet people who live alongside queer people. The spiritual family of God is a diverse one—which is actually a rather humorous idea to consider! The comic spirit in sermons can reflect the preacher’s unique role as a cishet sibling sharing the sojourn of life with LGBTQ+ individuals. When expressions of levity and humor feel sincere to the listener, the preacher may discover bonds of solidarity form as a result of sermons that incorporate the comic spirit. In progressive Christian congregations, a desire to nurture solidarity with marginalized groups is likely a core value. Allies in the pulpit are invited to use their influence to inspire new

understandings of solidarity, reaffirming the call to care for all God's people. The comic spirit can and should be used in this way.

For ally preachers, understanding the congregational context can make or break the use of the comic spirit. Knowing the individual stories of queer members, as well as cishet members, will only benefit the development of sermons with the comic spirit. Profile investigation takes time, but it is always a worthy investment. Humor must be tailored to the diverse realities of the individuals that make up the congregation. Allies should listen to and learn from the congregation to ensure that their humor aligns with its experiences. Every preacher should acknowledge the subjective nature of the comic spirit. Despite the best intentions, attempts at humor will not always resonate as intended. It is my belief that cishet ally preachers can significantly increase the viability of the comic spirit in their sermons when it is informed by real data. Preachers who know their congregants' individual life journeys will better understand the ways the comic spirit resonates.

The comic spirit offers cishet ally preachers a powerful invitation to engage LGBTQ+ affirming congregations with sermons that offer prophetic witness. Ally preachers should not discount their embodied proclamation. It means something when a straight person steps outside the mainstream of Christianity to preach an affirming sermon among LGBTQ+ people. The sermon's value increases when that sermon uses the comic spirit to better communicate to the LGBTQ+ affirming congregation. Levity and wit can be wielded for prophetic use. Yes, ally preachers can acknowledge the historical injustices perpetrated by other cishet people. But beyond the obvious message, the cishet preacher is invited to practice an innovative use of the comic spirit for

prophetic proclamation. In so doing, the preacher builds credibility with queer people and offers a counternarrative to the sermons offered in non-affirming Christian congregations.

Conclusion

Through this thesis, *Discovering the Comic Spirit for Preaching in LGBTQ+ Affirming Contexts*, three strategies have been offered displaying the wider homiletical significance of this project. Through multiple research methods, I have shown that a preaching praxis incorporating the comic spirit can display a vitality that others lack. This work has illuminated how humor, wit, and levity can *disarm tension, deepen connection, and communicate theological truths with balance* for the purpose of theological understanding. The comic spirit is about more than religious jokes—it is a tool that holds a sacred power to convey the heart of the Christian message. A queer-informed understanding of the comic spirit has improved my praxis in the pulpit. For queer and cishet ally preachers, this project offers insights that can be put into practice in other LGBTQ+ affirming contexts as well.

The comic spirit offers practical tools for queer preachers who seek to create sermons that are impactful. This research affirms that the comic spirit is not merely an addition to the homiletical toolbox but can be an essential expression in sermons. In a culture where joy is often denied to marginalized communities, laughter becomes an act of liberation. Preaching with the comic spirit declares a message of life abundant. This message invites all people—regardless of gender, sexuality, or ethnicity—into the fullness of God’s inclusive love. With the comic spirit, the pulpit becomes a place of

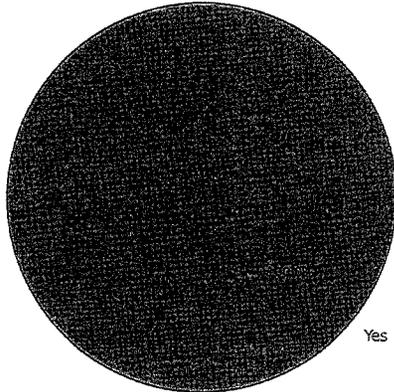
resistance against despair. It becomes a place for the proclamation of hope and belonging for everyone.

Sermons enlivened with the comic spirit are not simply about making people laugh. These sermons reveal the profound joy at the heart of the Gospel. For LGBTQ+ affirming congregations, this joy is an essential balm to the wounds inflicted by a world that too often misunderstands and subsequently marginalizes them. It is a joy that reminds them of their belovedness, invites them into the sacred community, and calls them to participate in building a more just world. LGBTQ+ affirming congregations can and should be communities that proclaim such a message. In these sacred spaces, enlivened by humor, queer individuals and their allies can experience God's Word declared as a source of renewal. Preaching with the comic spirit is a declaration of faith in the God who laughs with us and calls us to live in the freedom of divine joy.

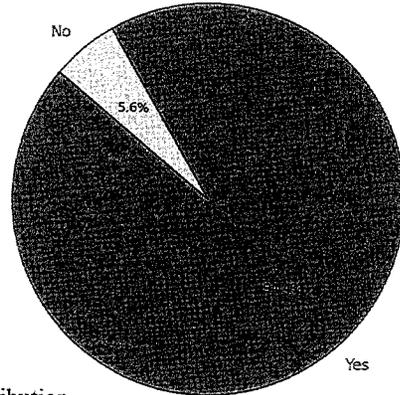
APPENDIX A

SERMON ONE SURVEY RESULTS

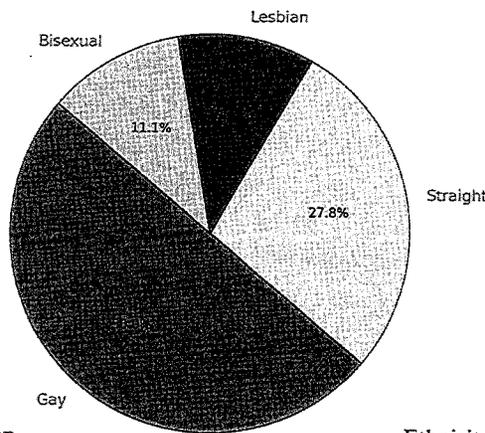
Did the sermon help you consider a new or renewed way of thinking about the main idea?



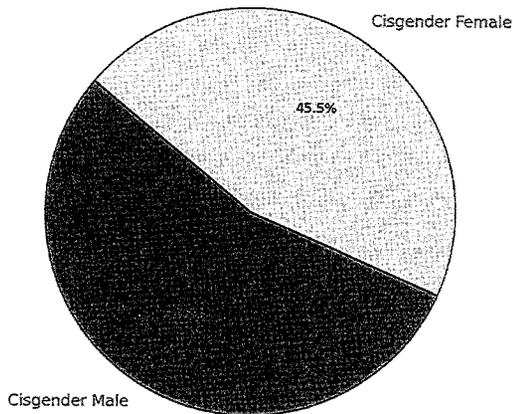
Do you believe the presence of the comic spirit assisted you in hearing and responding to the sermon and its main idea?



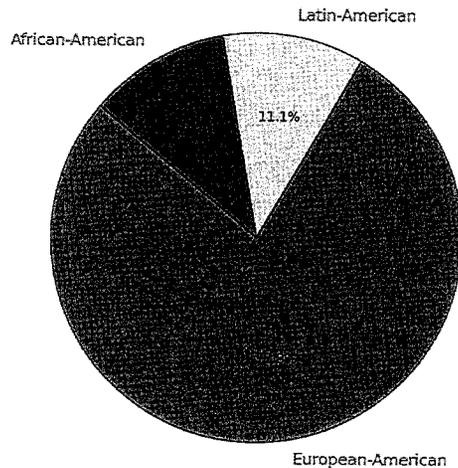
Sexual Orientation Distribution



Gender Identity Distribution



Ethnicity Distribution

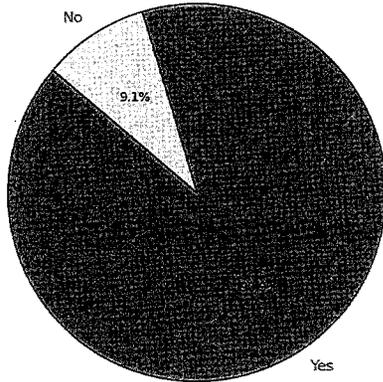


Note: Data is considered statistically relevant with approximately 28% of listeners responding to the survey.

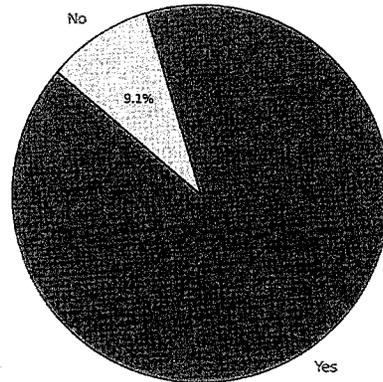
APPENDIX B

SERMON TWO SURVEY RESULTS

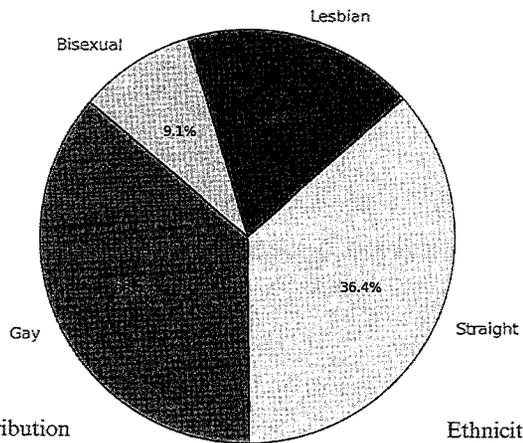
Did the sermon help you consider a new or renewed way of thinking about the main idea?



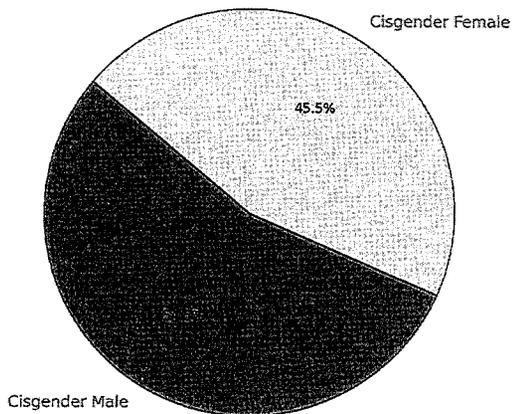
Do you believe the presence of the comic spirit assisted you in hearing and responding to the sermon and its main idea?



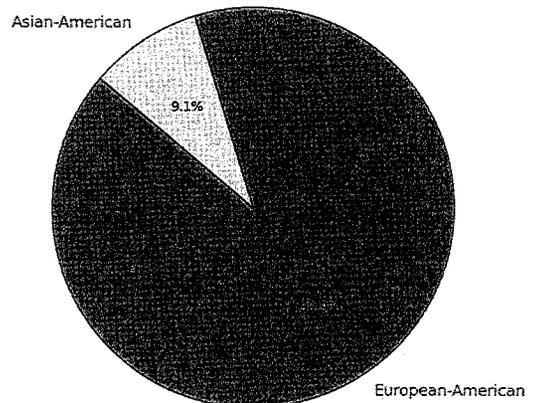
Sexual Orientation Distribution



Gender Identity Distribution



Ethnicity Distribution

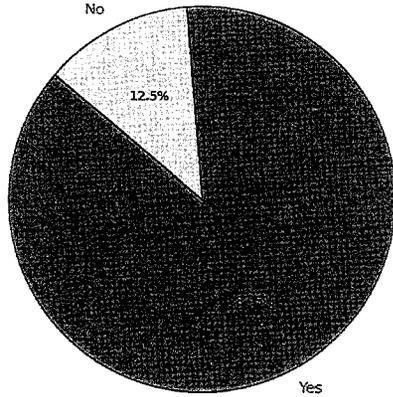


Note: Data is considered statistically relevant with approximately 25% of listeners responding to the survey.

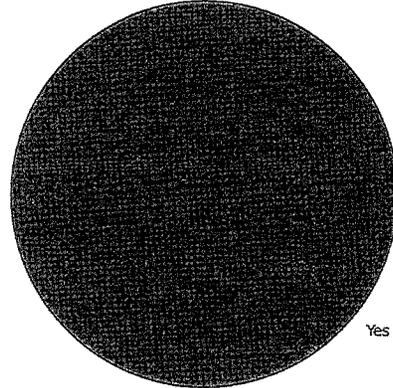
APPENDIX C

SERMON THREE SURVEY RESULTS

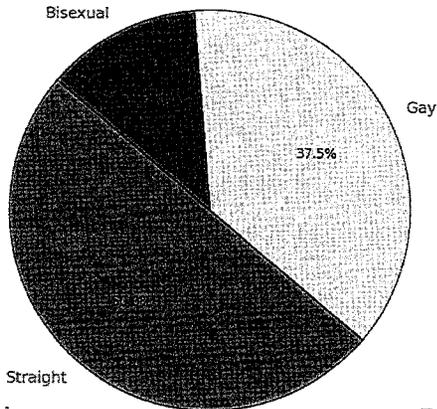
Did the sermon help you consider a new or renewed way of thinking about the main idea?



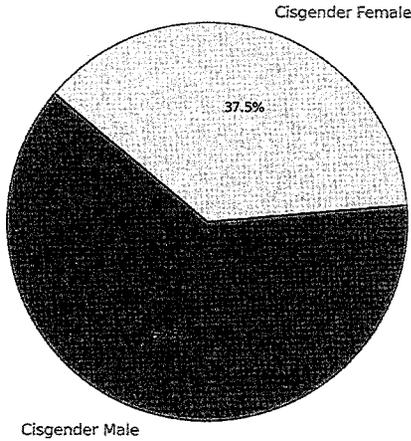
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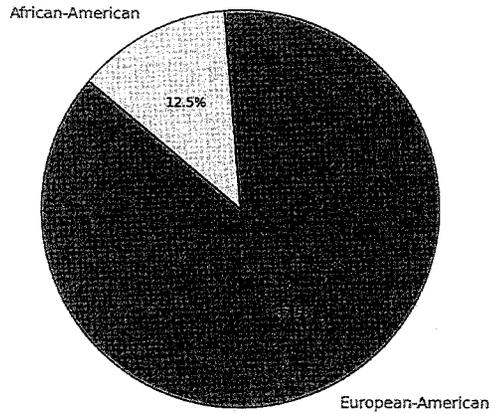
Sexual Orientation Distribution



Gender Identity Distribution



Ethnicity Distribution

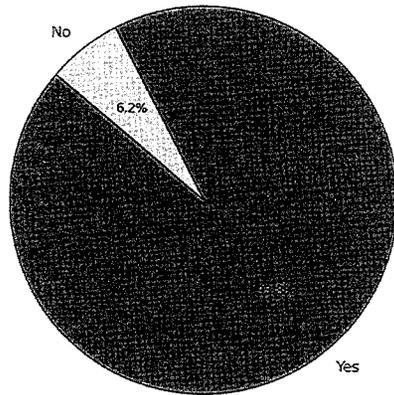


Note: Data is considered statistically relevant with approximately 32% of listeners responding to the survey.

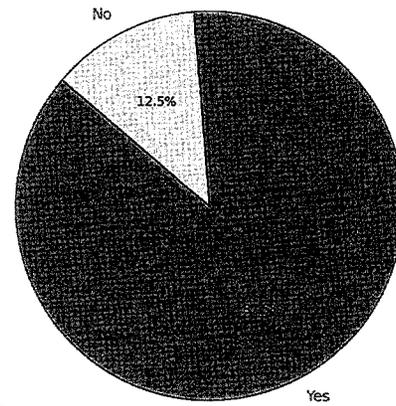
APPENDIX D

SERMON FOUR SURVEY RESULTS

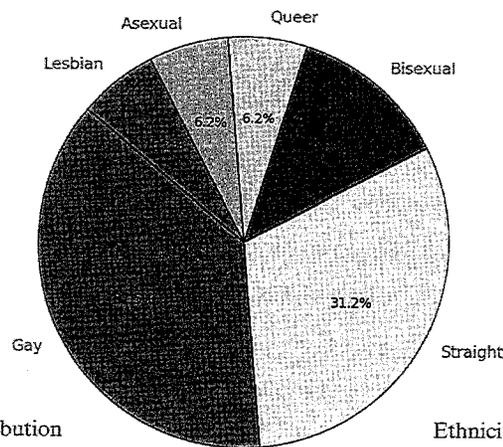
Did the sermon help you consider a new or renewed way of thinking about the main idea?



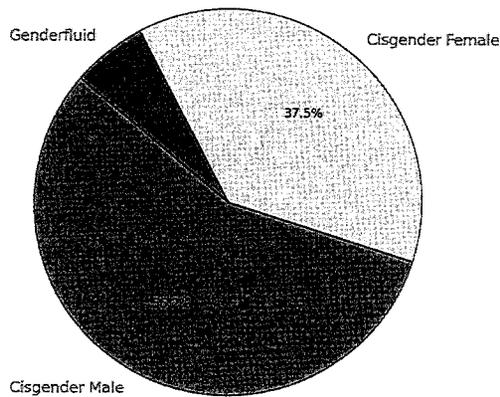
Do you believe the presence of the comic spirit assisted you in hearing and responding to the sermon and its main idea?



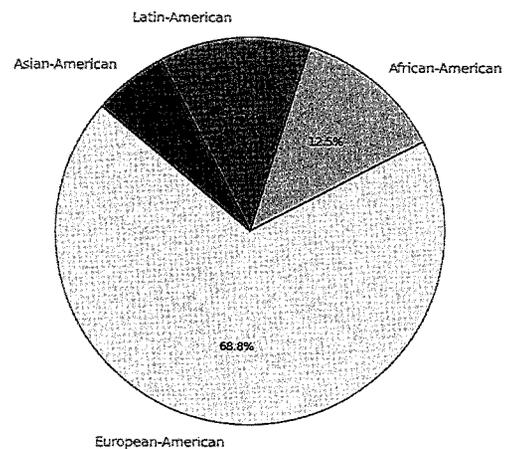
Sexual Orientation Distribution



Gender Identity Distribution



Ethnicity Distribution

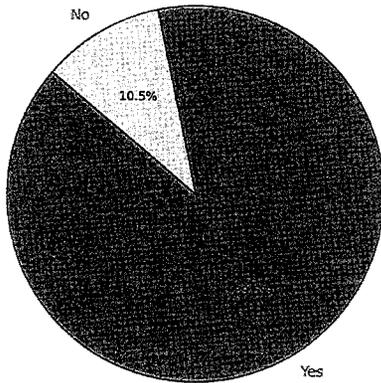


Note: Data is considered statistically relevant with approximately 21% of listeners responding to the survey.

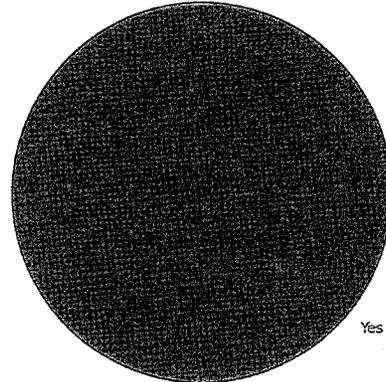
APPENDIX E

SERMON FIVE SURVEY RESULTS

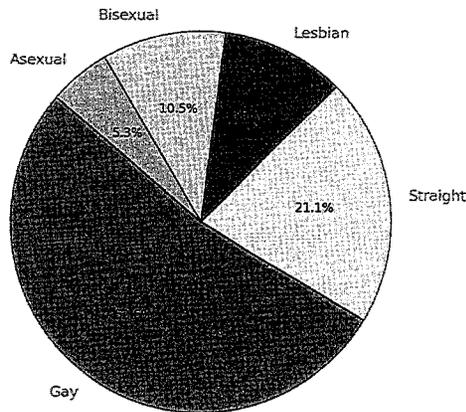
Did the sermon help you consider a new or renewed way of thinking about the main idea?



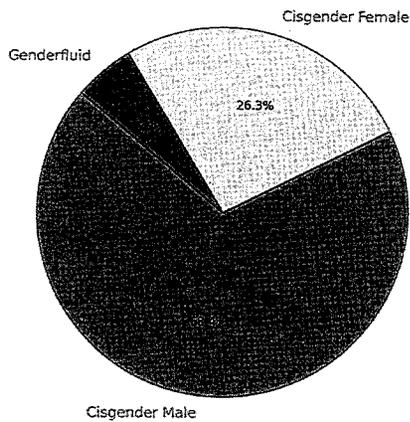
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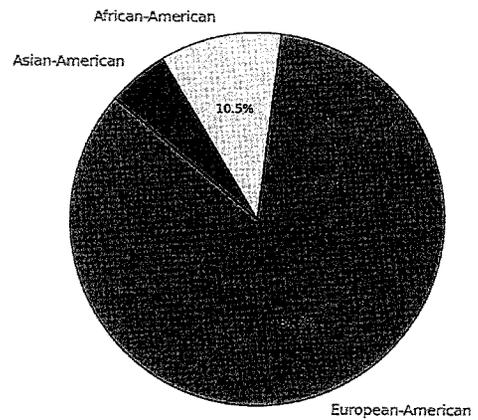
Sexual Orientation Distribution



Gender Identity Distribution



Ethnicity Distribution

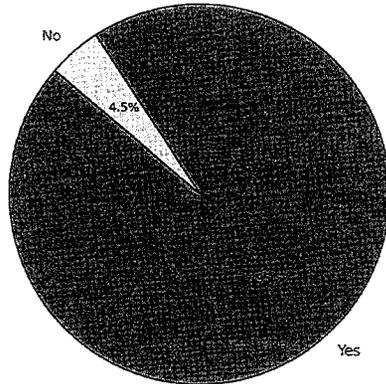


Note: Data is considered statistically relevant with approximately 20% of listeners responding to the survey.

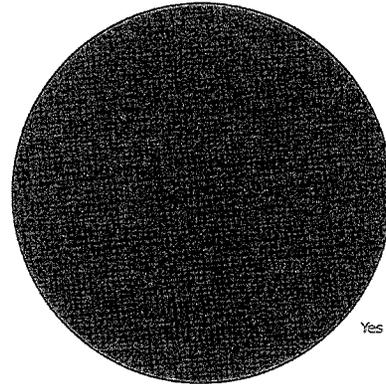
APPENDIX F

SERMON SIX SURVEY RESULTS

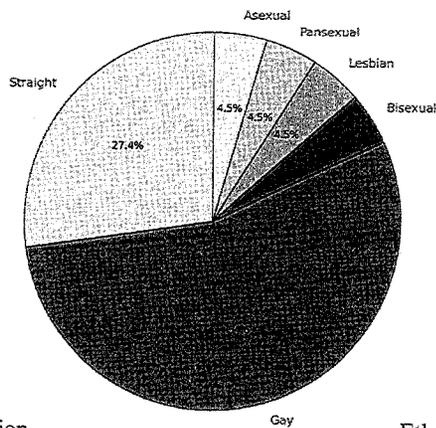
Did the sermon help you consider a new or renewed way of thinking about the main idea?



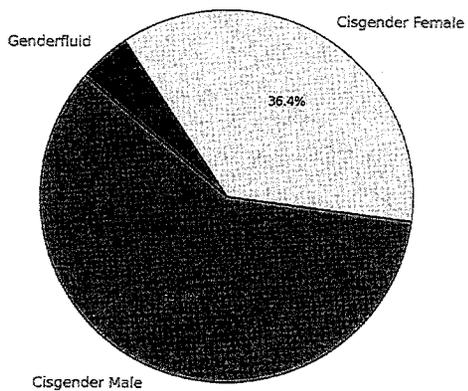
Do you believe the presence of the comic spirit assisted you in hearing and responding to the sermon and its main idea?



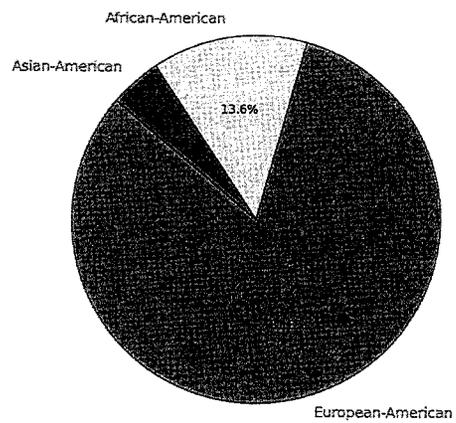
Sexual Orientation Distribution



Gender Identity Distribution



Ethnicity Distribution

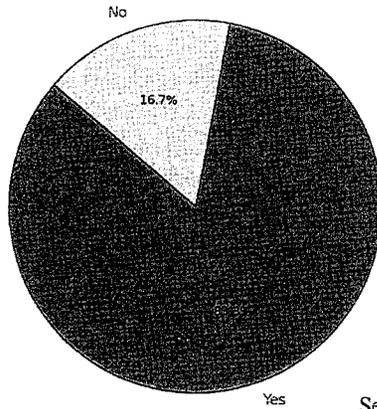


Note: Data is considered statistically relevant with approximately 20% of listeners responding to the survey.

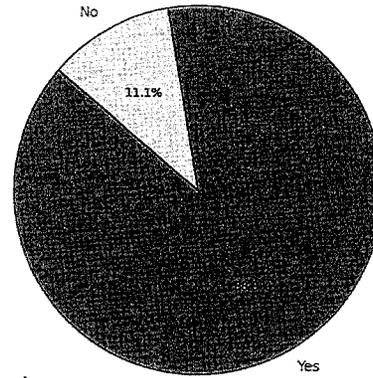
APPENDIX G

SERMON SEVEN SURVEY RESULTS

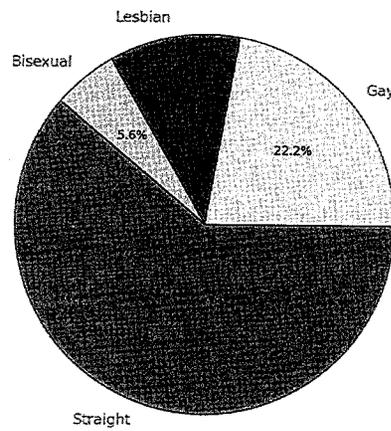
Did the sermon help you consider a new or renewed way of thinking about the main idea?



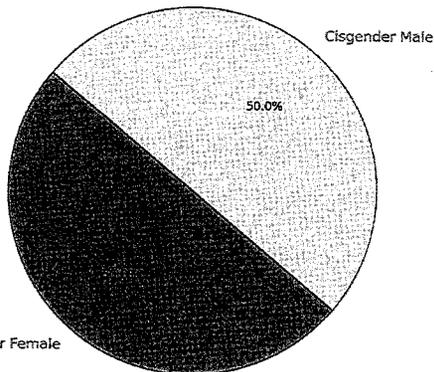
Do you believe the presence of the comic spirit assisted you in hearing and responding to the sermon and its main idea?



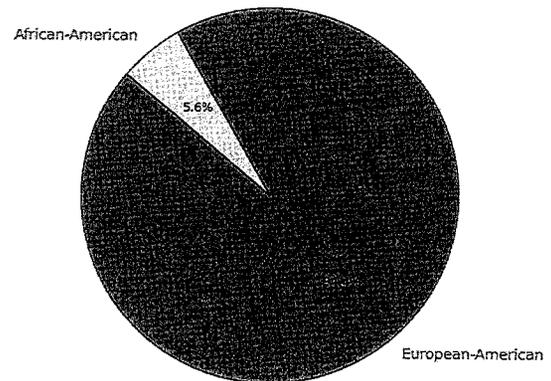
Sexual Orientation Distribution



Gender Identity Distribution



Ethnicity Distribution

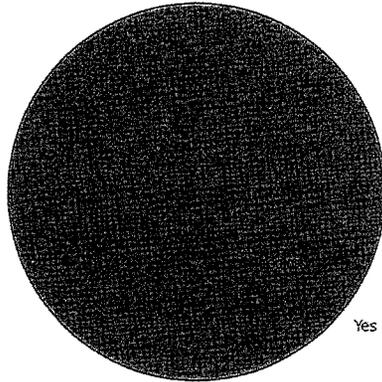


Note: Data is considered statistically relevant with approximately 30% of listeners responding to the survey.

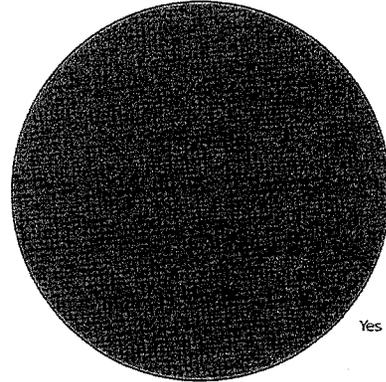
APPENDIX H

SERMON EIGHT SURVEY RESULTS

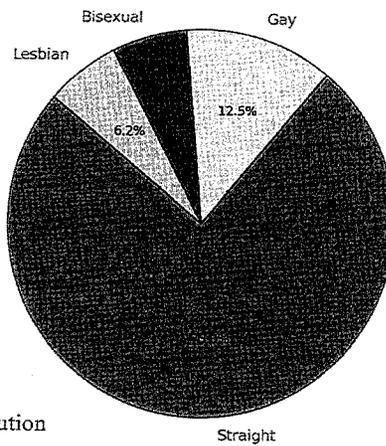
Did the sermon help you consider a new or renewed way of thinking about the main idea?



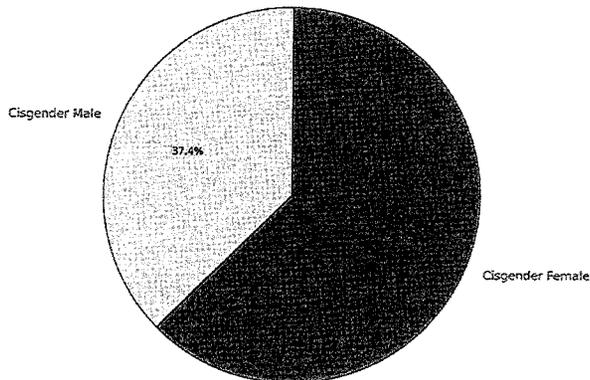
Do you believe the presence of the comic spirit assisted you in hearing and responding to the sermon and its main idea?



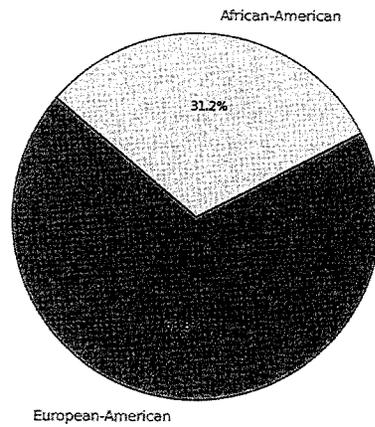
Sexual Orientation Distribution



Gender Identity Distribution



Ethnicity Distribution



Note: Data is considered statistically relevant with approximately 90% of listeners responding to the survey.

APPENDIX I

SERMON EXAMPLE DISPLAYING PRAXIS AT BERING CHURCH

Sermon Six: “Empowered to Forgive”

Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?” Jesus said, “Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle accounts, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold. Because the servant didn’t have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment. But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan. “When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins. He grabbed him around the throat and said, ‘Pay me back what you owe me.’ “Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt. “When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended. They came and told their master all that happened. His master called the first servant and said, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me. Shouldn’t you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt. “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don’t forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”(Matthew 18:21-35, CEB)

The principal’s office. The dreaded principal’s office. Who here has ever been sent to the principal’s office? Come on now, this isn’t a rhetorical question. Raise your hands please...That’s what I thought. Mm hmm. Such sinners. One time, I too was carted off to the principal’s office. The third grade was fun...maybe a bit too much fun. They say I went through a little phase...a concerning behavior that my report card called “foul language and pranks.” You see, we had these long, boring lunchroom lines, and I had to pass the time somehow. So, I opted for some innocent fun with the more naïve kids around me in the lunchroom line...that was the year of the “double dog dare,” as we called it. Naturally, I proceeded that day to double dog dare this kid to take his fingers... hold his tongue with his fingers there... and shout the word “ship.” Yes, that was with a “p.” But you see, the “p” sounds a lot like a “t” when you hold your tongue. You should try this when you get home. It’s great fun. I do it all the time when driving on the 610 Loop...All to say, I got in trouble that day in the third grade and sincerely prayed for mercy the whole way through. We all know what it feels like to mess up, and we all need some grace for our mistakes from time to time. But, when it comes to extending forgiveness to those who have wronged us, it seems that we aren’t always quite as gracious.

That's where we find our Gospel text today. Jesus is sharing a story about a king who is compassionately moved to forgive the debts of one of his servants. The servant had racked up quite a tab, but then the king let him off the hook. What's wild though is that this same guy... the servant who had received a grand measure of forgiveness... well...he turns around and has his buddy thrown into jail because he failed to pay back a rather insignificant personal loan. We find this parable as part of Matthew's "Five Great Discourses of Jesus"...with this fourth discourse, here, teaching the disciples, or the readers of this Gospel, what it means to be in Christian community with one another. Humans living around other humans...not always easy, right? Jesus uplifts an example to us through the powerful king who shows compassion and says: "You are forgiven." And, by the power of these words, the servant is set free. The moral of the story is—be like the king. And yet, we rarely see ourselves as the compassionate and empowered king when we are wronged. Scholar Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi writes of this passage: "Power is ultimately intended for liberation and reconciliation." Let me say that again: "Power is ultimately intended for liberation and reconciliation." I wonder if Jesus is teaching us through the example of the king that each of us holds an unrealized, divinely vested power that often goes untapped.

Probably one of my favorite wedding gifts was this board game. It's a *Game of Thrones* edition of Monopoly. Now, who here doesn't love a never-ending game of Monopoly? ...Okay, that was a rhetorical question. Somebody tell my spouse that he can put his hand down back there. Let me say first that if you don't know about *Game of Thrones*...well, it was a widely popular TV series on HBO...basically, a medieval fantasy where people are living out their... full HBO humanity. There's alliances among the nobility and the less noble folks. There's magic and dragons. And, it seems like there's a never-ending war involving sex, money, and power. So much backstabbing. So much drama. So much...real life, actually...just dressed up in medieval costumes. A rather perfect match for a Monopoly game board...which I should add...is a game that rarely fosters a kindly atmosphere of forgiveness. But, as with any Monopoly game, there are these unique cards that say "Get Out of Jail Free." ...I often think of this game and those cards...when I have messed up... and I can only wish that one of those cards might come my way.

When the disciple Peter asks Jesus, "How many times must I forgive? Seven times?" Jesus responds by saying, "Not just seven times...but seventy times seven." Jesus is telling us that...forgiveness should overflow from the center of our being...forgiveness should be in our bones. It should be at the core of what we are about in Christian community. Now, this doesn't mean we all become door mats. This doesn't mean that we won't have to set up boundaries for folks in our lives, especially for those that can't seem to cease in causing harm. There are even times when sharp accountability is the only healthy and necessary solution. But, there are other times, perhaps even most times, when extending grace and mercy is the better choice. When an unkind word is hurled our way...a disrespectful action...a misunderstanding that feels like a bolder that has landed on your soul...it's easy to want nothing more than a pound of flesh from the person who has done us wrong..."Send the sorry jerk to jail and throw away the key!" Sometimes in life, it seems like it would feel better if we just got...even. Yet, I hear the Gospel calling

us to share forgiveness abundantly. I wonder if, this morning, you might hear this message as well?

I wonder...I wonder what it would be like if we took all the “Get Out of Jail Free” cards, and started releasing the people we are holding captive in the jail cells of our hearts and minds? I wonder what it would be like to forgive all those people who we are still angry at? I wonder what it would feel like to give away all the forgiveness we have...just on the possibility that God might actually fill those sensitive, angry places in our own hearts with something better...maybe an unexpected sense of freedom...maybe an unexpected experience of healing. Dr. Karen Swartz, a mental health physician at The Johns Hopkins Hospital writes that “chronic anger puts you into a fight-or-flight mode, which results in numerous changes in heart rate, blood pressure and immune response. Those changes, then, increase the risk of depression, heart disease and diabetes, among other conditions.” She goes on to write that “forgiveness, however... forgiveness calms stress levels, leading to improved health... a greater possibility for wholeness and healing.” I wonder if by declaring forgiveness to those people we are holding captive...I wonder...if we might discover our own liberation in the process? I wonder if God might not just do a work of healing in our own lives when we offer with sincerity the powerful words “you are forgiven.”

Today, as you come to the altar for Holy Communion, you will find a token to pick up... an abundance of those Monopoly “Get Out of Jail Free” cards are here. And, I encourage you to take one, or as many as you need, and allow them to be a symbol drawing you toward forgiveness. Write a name or two on the back. Folks you need to let off the hook. You might do this at home in private, or even just hold on to a card in your pocket and take it with you throughout your week—without any one particular name written down. And, when an offense is remembered...or a new one arises through the course of your day...take hold of this card in your pocket and ask God to allow that grace of forgiveness to rise in your spirit. I will be taking one of these, and putting it in my car, as this is undoubtedly a better option than a certain foul word I tend to shout from time to time. Y’all...the struggle to live a life around other humans, a life of forgiveness...the struggle is real. But, we are not without the power to overcome.

The mess-ups will happen. No question. Even as adults, there are times when it feels like we are being sent-off to the principal’s office, praying for mercy the whole way through. But, there are other times when we are the ones who have been wronged...and let us not miss the Good News that we are powerful...empowered to forgive. Jesus calls us to the way of forgiveness. May we discover that as we offer forgiveness, we too might be healed and made whole.

APPENDIX J

SERMON EXAMPLE DISPLAYING PRAXIS AT COVENANT CHURCH

Sermon Seven: “Building a More Just Highway”

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:1-5, NRSVUE)

Now, I don't know about you, but when I hear Isaiah talking about forging a highway through the wilderness, I can't help but picture God...in a bright yellow hard hat...as a road construction worker... maybe like that guy from the Village People... I see God holding one of those orange cones, directing traffic, saying: “Come on, people! Keep it moving! We're paving the way for justice! Let's not mess this up!”

But of course, Isaiah isn't talking about road construction. He's talking about social transformation—clearing the obstacles, breaking down barriers, and making a way for equity to be established throughout our world. And you know what? I think we've got some serious construction work ahead of us, especially when it comes to dealing with this thing called Christian Nationalism in our part of the world.

So, if we are traveling down Isaiah's spiritual highway then...Christian Nationalism is like a giant pothole from hell. No doubt. This ideology tells us that there's only one way to be a “real” Christian—and it's usually tied up with loads of red, white and blue; it carries with it the all too recognizable musky scent of the white, heterosexual patriarchy; and it holds a very narrow definition of who's in and who's out. ...And if you don't fit the mold... well, too bad for you.

But Isaiah—as from the voice of God—proclaims a different message: “Comfort, O comfort my people...speak tenderly to Jerusalem.” During their Babylonian Exile around the sixth century BCE, the Hebrew people knew the experience of oppression. You may know that they had become captives to those who held the power and privilege... they were a foreign people in a foreign land... their homeland had been destroyed... furthermore, the central way that their faith was celebrated—through Temple worship—it was gone—effectively ripping the heart out of the Hebrew people. Diversity was not truly celebrated in Babylon as those captives were forced to assimilate into the common culture and social structure of that empire. Their was an expectation that the traditional Babylonian gods would be worshipped. Hear this: assimilation... assimilation to the majority's faith tradition—and its exclusive interpretation of that faith—was the standard. I wonder...are we not facing a similar threat of a forced

assimilation from within our own country... a hyper-conservative, hyper-Evangelical theocratic assimilation making its way into our society one policy change at a time? ... Could it be possible that we, who embrace liberalism and pluralism, might become foreigners within a native land? Perhaps. I do believe that when one single faith tradition drives the political dynamics of a country without regard for alternative perspectives—that feels like evil to me. Biblical scholar Marvin McMickle writes, and I quote: “Like Israel in its Babylonian exile, we too face evil... and that evil has not yet surrendered.” The ideology of Christian Nationalism has no plans to surrender.

I can't help but recall the January 6th Insurrection, where hyper-conservative populists—those driven by Christian Nationalism among the mob—charged the Capital in Washington like medieval crusaders with crosses and banners waving, and sent a clear message to our nation that pluralism, liberalism, and the ecumenical spirit have no place in their vision for our nation's future. While my more moderate sensibility wants to say: “Surely, this was merely an anomaly... perhaps all that garbage was just some hot heads blowing off steam... or perhaps some kind of orchestrated political theatre that more enlightened people should try to forget.” ... Well friends, we can't deny the facts... that those influenced by Christian Nationalism have successfully passed so called “Religious Freedom Restoration Acts” in many states allowing businesses to openly discriminate in the name of “Jesus”... school voucher programs with state dollars are absolutely going to private schools to cultivate Christian Nationalist ideals from early childhood... there are “Bible Literacy Bills” for public schools... new laws recently passed in our own state banning life-saving healthcare access to transgender youth... and ultimately... the nationwide overturning of *Roe v. Wade*—all the work of Christian Nationalism hiding in plain sight. Hear me when I say that gay marriage and other American freedoms deemed “unholy” are next on their agenda and they will succeed if they are not stopped. This is clearly personal to me as one who is openly queer and happily married myself... to be barred from my spouse as his next of kin during a hospital emergency or refused access to his remains in death—that was a reality that my community once faced. Not to mention other protections under the law relating to the basics of housing, healthcare, and employment. Friends, Christian Nationalism doesn't just want to make America great again... they want to make America Evangelical again... and they may just succeed if the tides are not turned. ... Have I become too political yet?

Christian Nationalism is not imaginary, folks. It's here as a weapon that has been wielded effectively... and it is just getting started... I believe it's time for Progressive Christian people, those who still firmly believe in the true founding principles of this nation... one of those chief principles being the separation ... the separation of church and state... it is time for us to respond. This is not a novel idea that the state should protect the free exercise of religion and the church must not seek a place of theocratic power through the state... If you are someone who appreciates a homework assignment, go look up the Baptist Joint Committee's report on Christian Nationalism that's freely available online and you'll see that we have some work to do. It's startling stuff... but we are not without hope.

“Comfort, O comfort my people.” My goodness, I am grateful for divine words of comfort in times like these... how we need them... I need to be found wrapped in the embrace of the Holy Spirit from time to time... Comfort that comes from the spiritual disciplines such as prayer and meditation and mysticism and all the other ways that divine comfort comes to us... we should always make room for those expressions of comfort in great abundance... but thankfully, comfort means something more to Isaiah here. God’s promise of comfort, through the prophet here, is one of justice... comfort through real action... The Good News for us this morning that God is still in the business of making a way for justice... but, we play a role in that way making.

Isaiah’s prophetic voice speaks: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord? ...Now allow me to be a bit whimsical for a moment here and employ what some might call a “sanctified imagination” of our sacred story... as we hear of divine comfort that becomes divine justice in action... if the Prophet Isaiah were alive today, I seem to think he’d make a great guest star on that television show from a few years ago called... *Queer Eye*... Who knows this show I speak of? Raise your hands. Okay...you’ll get it. The rest of you may have no idea what I mean next... anyway, picture it: Gay Isaiah walks into a situation that’s clearly a total mess. There’s division, exclusion, and a whole lot of confusion about what it means to dress well... I mean... follow God well as a civically responsible American. And Gay Isaiah’s like, “Honey, we need to straighten some things out, and I’m certainly not talking about anyone’s sexual orientation!” Gay Isaiah would be there with his spiritual makeover tips: “Alright, first, we’re going to clear out these old, outdated notions that only certain people, only Christians, only the hyper-conservative Evangelical Christians are worthy of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We’re gonna lift up the valleys of those who’ve been downtrodden by oppression and bring down the mountains of those who’ve been sitting on their high horses of privilege. And by the time we’re done, honey, you won’t even recognize this place—it’s gonna be fabulous!”

Isaiah’s call to prepare the way of the Lord...this vision of the Kingdom of God on earth...this is indeed a call to action that makes an equitable way for all people—even if they are not Evangelicals as Christian Nationalism requires. We’re comforted by the divine promise... but also empowered to be change makers. It’s a call to confront any roadblocks—political, theological, or otherwise that would seek to exclude and divide us. It’s a call to tear down the barriers that have been put up between us and God’s abundant love that transcends any intellectual convection, faith tradition, or creed. It’s a call to level the playing field so that all people can experience the wholeness that God wills for us all...together.

So, what does that look like for us today? I’m glad you asked. Friends, it looks like showing up to vote for candidates who believe in an inclusive society that keeps faith and politics in their rightful, separate places. It looks like supporting policies that protect the rights and dignity of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, race, or religion. Covenant Church, it looks like standing up to Christian Nationalism whenever it rears its ugly head, and saying, “Not in my name, you so-called Christian ideology, and definitely not in Jesus’ name.” We can vote, and we can also educate and

dare to engage with those around us to be a needed witness above an ideology that is misrepresenting the true essence of our faith...sometimes boldly and other times subtly...with a smile...never underestimating the power of a loving conversation with a neighbor and a covered dish. Can I get an amen for the transformative power of a tasty, covered dish? Now, we remember that we can only do what we can do—vote, speak out, and intuitively lean-in to conversations and relationships. Then we have to leave the rest of it to the Holy Spirit, to transform hearts and minds. We must first be willing to show up, but then trust the divine promise of Isaiah will be at work according to God’s timeline. Trusting that prophetic call of justice means that we are willing to rise when called upon.

Covenant Church, you are no stranger to words of accountability and the ministry of social action. I have heard testimonies of letters written to the American Red Cross when queer men were unjustly excluded from blood donation based on bogus, outdated science and unfettered displays of discrimination. Your voices helped changed the landscape there. You have housed Houston’s own Gay Men’s Chorus when other organizations would not. Beyond the important issues of LGBTQ+ justice, there are many other testimonies to be told. And, one only needs to open the *Houston Chronicle* nearly any given week to see that your Senior Minister knows how to communicate the Gospel into any social injustice through her brilliantly composed letters to the Editor. When it comes to the real threat of Christian Nationalism, perhaps it’s time again to do what this congregation is best known for and rise to lead Houston and Harris County in a unified voice and vote as we approach a most significant election in November. There is plenty of ingenuity and influence here in this room today, Covenant Church. It is often said that if Harris County would just show up and vote, we could turn the tide of the whole state of Texas. Can you imagine? Can you see what might be accomplished through your witness?

Isaiah ends with this powerful promise from the scriptures: “Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.” That’s the vision we’re working toward, friends. Can you see it? It was the hope of the ancients and it remains God’s promise to us today—a world where God’s love is visible and available to us all, where no one is left out, and where every crooked path has been made “straight”... or maybe we can come up with a better word than that. You get what Isaiah is saying. He’s speaking of hope... pointing to a road...a road that leads us home...a road without any evil potholes along the way. So, let’s get to work. God is in that bright yellow hard hat and has one for each of us as well. Let’s start paving that highway in the wilderness, where every marginalized person, as well as the person trapped within the ideology of Christian Nationalism...every one of God’s beloved can journey together without harming one another but lifting each other up. Let’s build this highway with the kind of fabulousness that a congregation like this one can inspire. Because when that highway is finally done...it’s going to be one of the most beautiful things the world has ever seen.

APPENDIX K

SERMON EXAMPLE DISPLAYING PRAXIS AT WESTBURY CHURCH

Sermon Eight: “The Blessing of Bartimaeus”

Then they reached Jericho, and as Jesus and his disciples left town, a large crowd followed him. A blind beggar named Bartimaeus (son of Timaeus) was sitting beside the road. When Bartimaeus heard that Jesus of Nazareth was nearby, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” “Be quiet!” many of the people yelled at him. But he only shouted louder, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” When Jesus heard him, he stopped and said, “Tell him to come here.” So they called the blind man. “Cheer up,” they said. “Come on, he’s calling you!” Bartimaeus threw aside his coat, jumped up, and came to Jesus. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked. “My Rabbi,” the blind man said, “I want to see!” And Jesus said to him, “Go, for your faith has healed you.” Instantly the man could see, and he followed Jesus down the road. (Mark 10:46-52, NLT)

I remember that when I served on staff here at Westbury United Methodist Church some years ago, there was a fear expressed by some...that if this church became a Reconciling Congregation...one of those renegade churches that dared to openly affirm queer people in opposition to what was then church law...well...we might start looking more like a Montrose night club complete with disco ball, vodka cocktails, and go-go dancers...we might start becoming a bit too “bohemian” as a church. Would all the nice straight people want to remain here if we let in all the yogis and hippies and ex-Evangelical sissies – like myself? Yet, here you are...the doors are still open...the lights are still on...and you are brilliantly beaming with a message of hope to those folks in the margins. You are a living testament that God still transforms our lives and our communities when we are willing to take a costly risk.

Our Gospel text today speaks of that same message of transformation through the story of Bartimaeus. Like some of us here today, Bartimaeus was an outcast...he would have not been invited to join the exclusive country club up the road in River Oaks—oh no. He was a street dweller and a blind man—far from the buttoned up and beautiful person who would be so easy to love.

Many of us know what it feels like to be unwanted and unwelcome. Especially those among us who embrace those more bohemian qualities, am I right? We have received our fair share of judgmental looks from the “good, wholesome” types from time to time. They have wanted us to “just be normal...just flight straight...just be like us,” they say. Yet, when I open my Bible...it seems to me that Jesus is spending a lot of quality time hanging out with the misfits of society...the outcasts...the street dwellers. And, for those supposedly “good and wholesome” types...that side of Jesus has never sat quite well. It’s in this place of tension, this liminal space that Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber reimagines Christ’s teaching of the Beatitudes...as to those on the outside. I

want us to take a moment to lean in and listen for what God might be speaking afresh for us today:

*Blessed are the agnostics,
Blessed are they who doubt,
those who aren't sure, those who can still be surprised...
Blessed are those who have nothing to offer...
Blessed are those who no one else notices,
the kids who sit alone at middle school lunch tables,
the laundry guys at the hospital, the sex workers,
and the night-shift street sweepers.
Blessed are the forgotten,
blessed are the closeted...
blessed are the unemployed,
the unimpressive,
the under-represented...
You are of heaven, and Jesus blesses you.*

The story of Bartimaeus shows us such a man... an outsider. Yet, by simply bringing his authentic, unimpressive self to the street that day... a blessing would be discovered. He would raise his voice even as the “good, wholesome” people around him—those who likely tossed a dollar his way from time to time—they would rebuke him and demand that he be quiet and not make a scene. In my sanctified imagination, I can’t help but picture... the prudish, the pious, those girdle wearing types. Do any of you remember Saturday Night Live’s “Church Lady” sketches? Actor Dana Carvey dressed in Mrs. Doubtfire-style church drag. Those are the types who I see here surrounding Bartimaeus that day. I hear the good Church Lady say that: “A proper street dweller... well, he should know his place. He should keep quiet and not bother Reverend Jesus. That unbathed, homeless fellow over there... he should certainly not forget that we are the ones that run the soup kitchen... and he better listen to our rebuke and remember that you don’t bite the hand that feeds you.” New Testament scholar James Anthony Noel writes, and I quote: “In doing what Bartimaeus did... [he] assumes the risk of retaliation from the power structure... [and even] risks martyrdom.” Most folks would keep their heads down... go along to get along. But, its clear... we can see that Bartimaeus believed that Jesus was worth the risk. All the more, when Jesus saw Bartimaeus and called for him to come forward—the scriptures record that this blind beggar casts off his cloak—yet another symbol of his security. How is a blind man supposed to find his way back to his cloak once it’s lost? That’s something you absolutely need when you live on the streets. Yet Bartimaeus... Bartimaeus risked it all in that moment.

Many of us here are well acquainted with risk. When I meet other queer people and hear their stories, most especially those stories of coming out... it’s like we’re old soldiers who made it through the battles and lived to tell about it on the other side. So, as I share my story, perhaps you might relate: After meeting my spouse Marc about ten years ago and realizing that he was the one, it was time to sit down with my parents and share this news: “Mom... Dad... I’m gay and I’m probably getting married... to a dude.” I

was raised by incredible parents who loved me deeply and would sacrifice much so that I could go on to pursue my education and career...my calling in ministry. Some of you had the opportunity to meet them during my time here at Westbury Church when they would come to visit. My father was a rugged Texas cowboy...and also a Pentecostal preacher ...and I was a pastor's kid who didn't turn out so bad like other pastor's kids often do. I loved the church—everything about it—and early on, even as a child, I felt called to this work of Christian ministry. You can imagine that when I came out to my family—it was a hard conversation.

Sitting together in our living room that day, I recall tears of confusion, deep disappointment, and genuine fear. I recall moments of speechlessness and prayerful utterances that swelled with the waves of emotions. And then...the mix of anger and fundamentalism took hold of my father as he told me...that he loved me...and I was always welcomed to come home...But if I were not his son...if he... if he were to see any other two men holding hands or showing affection on his property...he would take his gun out and shoot them dead. But God...but God began to do a work in my father and my mother. It would be two years later—two years of uncomfortable visits and awkward family gatherings. And, then I would receive a call from my dad: “Hey son, your mom tells me that you’ll be in town this weekend. Would you like to preach at my church on Sunday?”

I didn't know what to say. I grew up in his church. I knew the rules there. And, openly queer preachers don't fit in the equation. But, I accepted my father's invitation to fill his pulpit that day. I accepted my father's bold and costly risk for reconciliation as I spoke that Sunday morning. I fully received the beaming, proud smile of my father as I preached. And, I allowed God to do the work of healing and forgiveness and transformation that came from my father's costly public embrace. Not long after, he would be reprimanded by a delegation of denominational superiors in suits from the central office and he would eventually resign as pastor of this church. Then...little more than a year would pass before my father would discover that he had an aggressive form of cancer that would too soon claim his life.

We hear Bartimaeus cry out “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Like a father to a son, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Like a son to his father, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” In this very vulnerable moment, new sight was yet given. Beyond imperfect metaphors, beyond ablist—if we can look beyond the surface of this ancient narrative—we discover that Bartimaeus had much more than his physical eyes opened that day. Casting off his cloak, casting off the weights that held him back, risking disruption, all that he ever knew—Bartimaeus found strength that day to rise into a brighter future...to not just sit there with his blessing but to follow after Jesus, believing that better days were ahead, not behind him. Bartimaeus discovered full well that God transforms a hopeless situation into a future with promise when we are willing to take a risk and trust the call of Jesus Christ.

Westbury Church—you are not just a cool church with some cool bohemian people—you...you are a Bartimaeus people. And, this is a new chapter for you to rise up

and lead other United Methodists... a time of teaching the broader denominational family how you have cast off the cloak of oppressive theology, risking it all to choose the way of new sight, new vision, a new day so that your children can be baptized into a church that truly embraces all people, so that your LGBTQ+ friends can finally be married in their home church by their own pastor... so that you might even have the freedom one day to call up the Bishop—after a long tenure is celebrated with the beloved pastoral staff you presently have—and even make the bold request to have an openly queer pastor appointed to serve the people of this congregation and this city in your name and step into a new day that is filled with hope and expectation. I believe this is the Bartimaeus blessing, and it is here among you, even today.

Now, some have come to this church service—and perhaps all the United Methodist stuff isn't of much concern for you. But in different ways—you may feel overlooked... You feel like Bartimaeus... unable to be loved as you are, or maybe you are lacking some measure of purpose for your days ahead. I want to speak a word of hope to you: Blessed are the unseen, blessed are the ones who sometimes find it difficult to fit in. To you, Jesus promises the gift of new sight, renewed vision—to see that you are significant, to discover that there is unbounded love for you, and to know that you have a place to call home here at Westbury Church. This is the Bartimaeus blessing—and it is a big enough blessing for us all. May we each rise to claim that blessing and see that God transforms those who place their trust in the all-inclusive love of Jesus Christ.

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