The Power of Preaching and Deliberative Dialogue to Catalyze Congregational Social Action: A Case Study from “The Purple Zone”

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North Middletown Christian Church is a 188-year-old congregation located in Bourbon County in central Kentucky. They currently have an average in-person worship attendance of about forty people. The Rev. Dr. Stephanie Moon (hereafter, Rev. Moon) has served the congregation since 2016 and is their first female pastor.

North Middletown is located between three other larger towns and serves as a bedroom community to a population of approximately 700 people who work in places such as Lexington, Paris, Winchester, and Mount Sterling. Like the surrounding community, the congregation is racially homogenous (white), mostly heterosexual, and cisgender. Politically, however, the church is “purple”—there are left-leaning and right-leaning views represented among the members. This is in contrast with the majority of their North Middletown neighbors, most of whom have conservative political views. “We [as a congregation] are weighted more on the liberal side of the continuum,” she explained in her Doctor of Ministry thesis (Moon 2020, p. 37), noting that the congregation is part of a progressive liberal-leaning denomination (Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]) in an overwhelmingly conservative, Evangelical community. Yet, she points out that political divisiveness during the Trump era has increased polarization and caused some members to leave the church. “Like many organizations with diverse political and social belief systems, we sometimes struggle with approaching topics that we disagree on with Christian charity” (Moon 2020, p. 38).

Those topics include poverty, a serious issue in this community, as well as food scarcity, the opioid crisis, and an overall decline in quality of life and general morale. “With all of these problems, the church sometimes feels overwhelmed and powerless. It would be easy to languish in the problem-soaked narrative,” Rev. Moon said. “How we talk about our
place matters. If the church does not have hope in this place, how can we expect others to?" (Moon 2020, pp. 32, 33).

This is one of the challenges for Rev. Moon as a preacher: how to speak of and catalyze hope when so many factors work against it. How can a pastor maintain the energy of a small, rural town beset by poverty and decline? In what ways can such a pastor generate the will for regaining vitality and passion for ministry within herself and her congregation when the narrative of scarcity is the predominant story told about them by others and told to each other?

These were questions that Rev. Moon brought with her as she participated in a two-day training module I led in 2019 to teach pastors and lay leaders about the “sermon-dialogue-sermon” (SDS) method for addressing social issues. The training, funded by a grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, and carried out through a program at Lexington Theological Seminary in Kentucky where I teach preaching and worship, was titled “Dialogue in the ‘Purple Zone’: Pedagogies for Civil Discourse in Online and On-site Settings.” The project was designed to test the SDS method that I had developed in my book, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red Blue Divide* (Schade 2019). My purpose for the project was to explore the use of deliberative dialogue as a tool for facilitating difficult conversations and encouraging civic engagement in online, on-site, and congregational settings within theological education.

The motivation for this work came from the expressed desire of our students, alumni like Rev. Moon, and their congregations to learn how to dialogue with each other about the important issues of our time amid increasing divisiveness in the church and society. Our intent was to determine if a particular form of civil discourse known as deliberative dialogue—used in tandem with preaching that frames and accompanies the process—is a viable method for bridging the divide between seminary study and public ministry and building capacity for civic engagement and social justice action in the church. This article explains the homiletical foundations for this work, recounts a training process and its results, and highlights the case study of Rev. Moon and her congregation as an example of effectively applying the SDS method in a congregation.


I approach the work of preaching and dialogue with the foundational belief that a preacher’s message is intended not solely for the Christian community but also for the broader context within which the church ministers, encompassing the full spectrum of social, economic, political, and cultural challenges. Because preaching intersects with society in a number of ways, it requires multivocal discourse, collaboration, and accountability. Therefore, we must develop approaches to gospel-centered, ethical preaching that actively involves the public sphere with respect, dialogue, cooperation, and a focus on enhancing both the congregation and the wider community.

Within the discipline of homiletics, there is precedent for socially engaged preaching shaped by the interchange between the preacher with their congregation and the community beyond the walls of the church. Nearly four decades ago, John McClure presented a fresh perspective on the weekly preaching task in which he emphasized collaboration with parishioners in sermon preparation. His book, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet*, explored the way the principles of participative dialogue can be integrated into inherently monological sermons (McClure 1995). McClure proposed a collaborative method of scriptural engagement and sermon preparation as an alternative to the conventional clergy-centered or inductive styles, aiming to bridge the gap between private and public realms in developing a public theology. The roundtable pulpit method involves regular meetings between the preacher and a group of parishioners to discuss the upcoming biblical text for the sermon. The insights derived from these discussions are then skillfully woven into the sermon rhetoric.

“Collaborative preachers form small groups of laypersons, from within and outside the church, who meet with the preacher to discuss biblical, theological, and experiential
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materials for the upcoming sermon,” McClure explains (2007, p. 13). “The preacher ... prepares the sermon so that it resembles both the form and message of the collaborative brainstorming process. After the sermon is preached, preachers return to these groups for feedback and to begin the process again” (2007, p. 13). Goals for this type of collaborative preaching include “educating congregations on what sermons are and how they function in the community, increasing ownership of the ministry of the proclamation in the church, teaching the Bible, widening preaching’s audience, promoting a public form of theology in the public and symbolizing a collaborative form of leadership in the church” (2007, p. 14).

A related homiletical practice is called conversational preaching, first developed by Ronald J. Allen in 1998 (Allen 1998). Not to be confused with a sermon that is in the form of an actual conversation with listeners in the preaching moment, “conversation” as Allen uses it is a “broad metaphor for the sermon preparation process itself. Sermons are prepared in conversation with the church’s tradition, sacred texts, local church situations and concerns, social context, pastoral issues, the church year, and so forth” (McClure 2007, p. 18). Allen explains:

> A conversational approach listens to the voices in an interpretive situation (usually the Bible, church history/tradition, the experiences of the communities involved, scientific and other data) and helps the community consider interpretive options that are consistent with the community’s deepest convictions (or challenge those convictions) and possible implications. The preacher helps the community toward an adequate interpretation of God’s purposes in the context in which the sermon is preached (Allen 2018, p. 48, footnote 3).

According to Ronald Allen and O. Wesley Allen, a conversational approach to preaching means that sermons are shaped “to contribute to postmodern individuals’ and communities’ approaches to making meaning in a pluralistic setting by offering a tentative interpretation of, experience of, and response to God’s character, purposes, and good news” (Allen and Allen 2015, p. 102). Highlighting the term “tentative” is crucial, as the preacher’s message should be provisional and inviting, drawing on their training, study, experiences, and interactions with various conversational partners. It also encourages ongoing dialogue within the community to collectively discern the theological, scriptural, traditional, and experiential implications of addressing public concerns.

In her book, Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church, Lucy Atkinson Rose built on the concepts of collaborative and conversational preaching by intentionally inviting marginalized voices into the preacher’s conversation. She stressed that “within this community of shared faith and commitment, conversational preaching seeks to acknowledge a diversity of experiences, interpretations, and wagers, especially those on the margins without power, status or voice” (Rose 1997, p. 128). She made use of the image of oikos (Greek for “household”) to describe how the church may be re-formed in the spirit of conversational preaching:

> Within the household of God, domination and submission give way to partnership and cooperation; clericalism, or the hierarchical relationship between clergy and laity, disappears; everyone participates in setting the church’s agenda and carrying out the church’s ministry; and, in particular, those who are most marginal, whose voices have been excluded and silenced, are valued and invited back into the life-restoring conversations (Rose 1997, p. 123).

Conversational preaching, Rose said, consults voices from various perspectives, both local and global, past and present, with particular attention to the voices that are missing, drowned out, or ignored from the tables that have traditionally excluded them.

3. What Are the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon Method and Deliberative Dialogue?

The sermon-dialogue-sermon (SDS) method draws on collaborative and conversational preaching while also adding its own unique features. It is a process wherein deliberative dialogue is bookended by two sermons: one to introduce the topic and invite people
to the dialogue (the “prophetic invitation to dialogue” sermon), and a sermon after the dialogue that integrates the insights that emerged from the discussion (the “communal prophetic proclamation” sermon). Typically, the dialogue happens after the service, either that same day at an adult forum or during the week at a Bible study or special event. The dialogue can also take place over two to five weeks in order to allow more time for engaging the topic. Generally, the pastor preaches the follow-up sermon the week after the dialogue. This method aims to foster active engagement and meaningful conversation between the preacher and the congregation specifically about a pressing social issue, creating a dynamic and participatory preaching experience over time rather than a single, stand-alone sermonic event.

While it shares a great deal in common with McClure’s roundtable pulpit format, the SDS method differs from McClure’s process in two ways. First, the sermon and dialogue focus on a social issue rather than on a biblical text (although scripture certainly informs the process). Second, the conversation utilizes the formal process of deliberative dialogue, which provides a scaffold for discussing the topic in a healthy way. Utilized by the Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forum Institute (NIFI), deliberative dialogue is a method that enables citizens from diverse backgrounds and political orientations to engage constructively with one another, support community-building, and strengthen the democratic process. In a deliberative dialogue, participants from all walks of life and different political orientations engage in respectful discourse to weigh the pros and cons of three different approaches to an issue. Together, they discern the common values they share in the midst of their different standpoints and determine next steps for social action as a community.

The process utilizes nonpartisan issue guides to give structure to the dialogue. Rather than force people to make choices about which of the three options they prefer, the guide encourages participants to listen carefully to one another with discernment while also probing and challenging respectfully. The premise of the guides is that through deliberation, it is possible to experience a more respectful way of being citizens and to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of these three different positions so as to discern how the community might move forward.

Thus, the kind of inclusiveness for which Rose advocated is exactly what “purple zone” preaching within the political red–blue divide is about. It entails developing relationships with one’s parishioners and people within the community, listening to their voices, and inviting them into a dialogue about the important issues that affect people’s lives. It also means articulating uncomfortable truths in ways that are respectful while reflecting one’s willingness to be vulnerable, open, and trusting the process of discernment around these topics of social concern.

4. Testing the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon Process

In the “Dialogue in the ‘Purple Zone’” project, I focused on using dialogue as a pedagogical tool for seminary students, clergy, and congregations to create a “purple zone” between conservative Republicans and progressive Democrats in U.S. political discourse. I assembled a team that included a theologian, a biblical scholar, a homiletician, a social science researcher, and a clergyperson skilled in moderating deliberative dialogue in congregations. Our intention was to build a pedagogical bridge between classroom study and public theology by enabling ministry students, practicing clergy, and congregations to host and facilitate difficult conversations around challenging social issues. One of the goals of this project was to teach deliberative dialogue to clergy and laity in an on-site seminary setting and assess its pedagogical effectiveness. A second goal was to equip these clergy–laity pairs to implement the pedagogy of deliberative dialogue in their churches and assess whether the process would help to increase their congregation’s capacity for civic engagement and social justice action.

For the first goal, we brought together a group of ten pastors who were Lexington Theological Seminary (LTS) graduates and one lay leader from each of their congregations
(a total of twenty people) to learn the SDS method. Fundamental to this training was asking the pastors to select a lay leader whose political orientation was different from their own. This decision worked on two levels. First, it ensured that we had a politically diverse training group ranging from conservative to moderate to progressive viewpoints. Second, the lay leaders served as ambassadors for this project in their congregations by making inroads with their peers in the church and ensuring that the dialogue groups were politically diverse. In the two-day on-site training, LTS core faculty, along with our consultants, helped with teaching, assessment, and evaluation of this cohort.

For the second goal, our plan was to mentor the clergy–laity pairs over the course of the twelve months following this training as they implemented the SDS process twice in their congregations. There were several different topics chosen among the teams to address in their sermons and the deliberative dialogues, including the opioid crisis, hunger issues, the church’s role in a divided society, and the future of the federal Social Security benefits program. A primary question we were asking about this goal was “If pastors and laity are taught the deliberative dialogue process for engaging in difficult conversations about social issues and then implement this process in their churches, will this lead to increased public engagement and social action on the part of their congregations?”

While each team was able to carry out the first SDS process in their congregation, the emergence of COVID-19 and the subsequent declaration of a medical emergency and global pandemic meant that some of the pastor/lay leader teams were not able to complete the second round of the sermon-dialogue-sermon process. Also, because congregations were not able to meet in person for the second half of the project period, this significantly impacted the percentage of people who said they were actively volunteering—a key variable we were measuring to determine the effect of dialogue on civic engagement. Nevertheless, indicators about attitudes toward civil discourse showed improvement. For instance, between the pre- and post-intervention surveys of the congregation members, we saw an overall net decrease of 22% in reported feelings of disappointment, frustration, and hurt regarding the discussion of social issues in church.1

We also noted that even in the midst of COVID-19, the 2020 election season, and social unrest around justice issues throughout the nation, the congregants reported that engaging in social issues was important for them. For example, in both surveys, 83% strongly or moderately agreed that “working for social justice is an extension of my faith.” Further encouraging data from the survey showed the response to a question about whether or not the church should “help members discuss social issues and host community dialogues.” The number who agreed or strongly agreed in both years remained strong at 86–87%. Even more heartening was the increase in the percentage of those who agreed or strongly agreed that their church should “work to make changes in community and society.” In 2019, that number was 87%. In 2020, the number rose to 92%. While correlation cannot be confused with causation, it may be the case that the sermon-dialogue-sermon process conducted in these congregations contributed to this increase.

We also gained important learnings about how the SDS process affected a congregation’s willingness to engage in civil discourse and social justice. First, regarding next steps for how a church might move forward on an issue, many realized that churches do not have to “reinvent the wheel,” so to speak. Many participants were able to name or identify existing connections to community organizations with which the church could partner to address justice issues on a local level. For example, as a direct result of the SDS process, one congregation initiated a food ministry to work with feeding programs already active in their community. Second, one congregation had several of their youth attend the forum on food and hunger issues, and they were especially keen on learning about how to read food labels to gauge nutrition. As a result, one of the possible next steps that came out of the discussion was being more proactive about choosing more nutritious food to donate to food pantries. This highlighted the importance of involving young people in these dialogues whenever possible, in that they can bring energy and perspective to the dialogue that shape the tone and generativity of the discussion in positive ways.
5. A Case Study in Repeated Engagement with the SDS Process

There was one pastor, Rev. Dr. Stephanie Moon, who engaged in the SDS process with her congregation three times over the course of three and a half years between the fall of 2019 and the spring of 2023. Their engagement has allowed for a longitudinal case study of the ways in which a congregation can strengthen democratic practices through deliberation, theological reflection, and community outreach, all while being accompanied by sermons informed by deliberative dialogue. For the remainder of this article, I will briefly recount the three deliberative dialogue experiences Rev. Moon had with her congregation, then supply my own critical reflection on the implications of this process for a congregation’s engagement in the public square and community action.

5.1. SDS Process on “The Church’s Role in a Divided Society”

Rev. Moon brought an older, female lay leader to the SDS training in the fall of 2019. They both learned the basics of deliberative dialogue, and each had a chance to practice moderating. When they returned to their congregation, they chose to use the issue guide, “The Church’s Role in a Divided Society,” for their first SDS process. To prepare the congregation for the event, they made announcements in church and in the church newsletter. On the day of the event, Rev. Moon preached a sermon on 1 Corinthians 12:12–27. In this sermon, she reflected on the importance of difficult conversations and respectful dialogue within the Christian community, drawing from personal experiences framed by Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. She noted the need to approach differences with an enthusiasm for diversity and to recognize the interconnectedness of all individuals as part of the body of Christ. The sermon included a call to approach Holy Communion with intention and to examine one’s own views while recognizing the value of the perspectives of others. Rev. Moon invited her congregation to be open to listening and engaging with others in love and respect as they participated in their first deliberation together.

In the issue guide, “The Church’s Role in a Divided Society,” there are three positions presented to participants: the church as refuge, the church as mediator, and the church as prophetic voice (Schade et al. 2019). Following their deliberative dialogue—which was held on the same day that Rev. Moon preached the first sermon—I interviewed her and her lay leader to debrief their experience with moderating. They reported that fifty-seven people attended the worship service and sixteen came to the ninety-minute deliberative dialogue. There was one teenager, one young adult, and the rest were middle-aged or older. The lay leader was the moderator while Rev. Moon served as the recorder. This allowed Rev. Moon to be neutral in the dialogue while also putting her in the role of listening to the participants and taking notes on the conversation.

At first, the participants were hesitant to voice their thoughts and opinions, but that changed once they warmed up. The group became alive with insights, and the dialogue was dynamic and far ranging. For her part, Rev. Moon noted that being in the role of recorder forced her to carefully listen and check with participants to make sure she had captured their thoughts correctly. “I realize that I don’t always listen well,” she recalled. “I tend to want to react or just move it along. So, I had to slow down and make sure I had summarized their thoughts correctly” (Moon interview with author, 22 October 2019).

Rev. Moon and her lay leader shared that the third option, the church as a prophetic voice, did not resonate with anyone in the discussion, including those with progressive political leanings. “Three of our more progressive participants said that they engage in prophetic work in their professional and personal lives, so they don’t want to deal with it at church. They prefer to see the church inspire people in their personal lives, rather than engage with social issues,” Rev. Moon said (Moon interview 2019). Yet, this realization came about after thoughtful deliberation by the group. What emerged from the discussion was language around believers being a “balm,” being loving and non-judgmental in a world that often judges people. Some members had come from churches where they felt alienated, so it was important to them that this congregation create a sense of welcome without controversy.
When I asked what values the group had expressed that stood out for her and around which Rev. Moon thought she could build the follow-up sermon, she named six. “This group—and I would also say this church—values acceptance, love, compassion, being a safe place, providing opportunities to learn, and being like an extended family,” she said. Interestingly, when it came to identifying what next steps the group or church as a whole might take, she noted that no one jumped in with ideas. “They want the opportunity to learn about social justice but don’t feel the need to take a stance,” she explained (Moon interview 2019).

Rev. Moon decided to base her follow-up sermon on 1 Corinthians 13. In the sermon, she recounted how the group had discussed the options of the issue guide and articulated the values that were important to them. “Everything that was described last Sunday is what the Apostle Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 13,” she said, pointing out that their dialogue was counter-cultural to our fast-paced society. “Sometimes slowing down, discerning, building consensus in healthy and holistic ways is worth the time. Those gathered last Sunday believed that the cost of mild disagreement was worth the benefits we receive when diversity of people are present. But, we are also reminded of the last part of the phrase, the one so many people forget: in ALL things, LOVE! That means we can lovingly express our opinions AND disagree!” (Moon 2019).

Rev. Moon reminded listeners that love means the church measures things differently than do businesses, media, or society. “We live into something that is beyond human measurement, and it endures. It never ends. All other things will fade away, but love was there at the beginning in Creation, love led God’s people, love came into the world in the form of Jesus, and love is in this world by the presence of the church. It continues in this life and next. It exists for ever,” she said. She concluded the sermon by proclaiming, “We have a way that is far more excellent. It is love, and you, beloved church, are the models” (Moon 2019).

Toward the end of the interview, I asked Rev. Moon what she learned about her congregation through this process. “I thought that people didn’t want to talk about social issues because of fear. But I realized it’s more about pastoral concern. They want to create a non-anxious place, to care for one another. It was lovely to hear that,” she said (Moon interview 2020). Her lay leader added that there is a sense of family and intimacy in this small congregation. Thus, even when they disagree, they learn to move on for the sake of the ministry.

When asked if they would consider using the deliberative dialogue format again, both were enthusiastic and suggested that they might want to address an issue having to do with the needs of children and families. Rev. Moon noted that food scarcity in their rural community and the opioid crisis were having profound impacts on children and youth. As it turns out, these were precisely the two topics that the church decided to undertake in their subsequent dialogues over the next three and a half years.

5.2. SDS Process on Food Justice

For the second SDS process in Lent of 2020, Rev. Moon and her congregation chose to address food scarcity in their community using an issue guide produced by the Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums Institute called “Land of Plenty: How Should We Ensure People Get the Food They Need?” (National Issues Forums Institute 2017). In her D.Min. thesis, Rev. Moon explained her congregation’s rationale for choosing the topic of food scarcity:

[The people in the congregation] recognize that we are surrounded by farmland—some of it active cropland and some worked in previous decades—however, many people in our community face food scarcity.... This nation uplifts rural life, rural values, and the symbol of the family farm; however, rural people often do not have access to enough food or nutritious food. This creates dissonance between our perception of farming as a way of life, this nation’s identity as a ‘land of plenty,’ and the reality many American families face. (Moon 2020, p. 26)
Because of the pandemic, the deliberative dialogue process was discontinued after two meetings. However, they picked up the topic the following year in Lent 2021 via Zoom meetings. In February 2021, she preached the introductory sermon based on the story of Jesus feeding the masses (Mark 8:1–13). Then, the dialogue took place over the five weeks of Lent, exploring three options: (1) ensuring people have the nutritious food they need; (2) being good stewards of the food system; and (3) coming together in meaningful ways over food. She noted that because the congregation had already learned the process of deliberative dialogue in the fall of 2019, they were able to use it as a tool for deciding what food-related ministry they wanted to undertake with more intentionality. “Because the church was already familiar with the sermon-dialogue-sermon process learned through [the grant], this became the basis of discernment with a small group of active members,” she said (2020, p. 95).

For her follow-up sermon on Maundy Thursday, she focused on Jesus’s last meal with his disciples in Luke 22:1–10. A few weeks later, congregants were invited to bring containers of soil from their property to the church for the outdoor Earth Sunday service on 18 April 2021. There, she combined them all into one container, blessed the earth, then redistributed them back to the worshipers to take home and add to their gardens.

Then, pledge cards were distributed that listed the ideas that came out of the deliberative dialogue. She explained, “They could choose one or more of the following activities: grow an extra row in their gardens and donate the food to the church, help glean and distribute food, help the children of North Middletown grow a garden, work to organize a local farmers market, plan a late summer harvest meal celebration, and pray for the church’s efforts in bringing nutritious food to those who need it” (2020, p. 96).

She saw that the option which generated the most enthusiasm was the idea for a summer feeding ministry project that would bring fresh, nutritious food to the food deserts of their community and reduce waste. The congregation did this by gleaning produce from local farmers’ markets at the close of the day and taking it to low-income neighborhoods. Rev. Moon received guidance from the director of Glean Kentucky, an organization that redistributes excess fresh fruits and vegetables to nourish those in Kentucky without access to fresh fruits and vegetables. The director encouraged Rev. Moon to visit local farmers’ markets to talk with growers and make arrangements to deliver the food directly to local residents without the need for storage or refrigeration.

Twelve volunteers from the church subsequently visited subsidized apartments and trailer parks to give out the food. They began building relationships with residents and word quickly spread that free fresh produce would be available every week. What began with a delivery to twenty-five people grew to forty by the end of the summer.

Rev. Moon explained that this project stretched the congregation’s understanding of its Christian identity and mission. “It involved getting to know farmers and our neighbors in the community,” she said. “This required the church to get out of its comfort zones and interact in ways and places previously unexplored” (2020, p. 98). This also meant venturing into the political realm in order to understand the systems that lead to hunger in the first place.

One of the ways Rev. Moon took her congregation to a deeper level of understanding systemic issues that affect food scarcity and hunger was by preaching a four-week sermon series she titled “Food for Thought” in the summer of 2021, during the food gleaning and distribution. The sermon series covered issues such as food for enjoyment, Jesus’ relationship with food, the early church and food, and the sins of overconsumption and food waste. Thus, she provided what I would call “homiletical accompaniment” that extended beyond the initial SDS process.

Overall, Rev. Moon felt that the gleaning and distribution project resulted in positive energy for the church. The volunteers enjoyed acquainting themselves with both the growers and the recipients. They offered prayer, and ensured the well-being of the community members by checking on them each week. “This project felt like picking ‘low-hanging fruit,’” Rev. Moon recalled. “The opportunities had been right in front of the church’s eyes.
The farmers were more than willing to donate, and the community members were grateful to receive it. It took energy, commitment, and the courage to try something new to receive these excellent results” (Moon 2020, pp. 99–100). She hopes that in the future the church might be able to plan an end-of-summer farm-to-table celebration meal to bring together all the people involved in the project.

Ultimately, Rev. Moon surmised that the “spirit of experimentation” that arose from this project is one that might energize the church well into the future (Moon 2020, p. 125). Yet, she also noted that another issue loomed large over the community that would also need their attention: the opioid crisis.

5.3. SDS Process on the Opioid Crisis

Having two SDS experiences under their belts, Rev. Moon and her congregation decided to take up a third during Lent in 2023. This time, they decided to tackle the issue of drug addiction, a problem that affects many small towns and rural communities. As Rev. Moon explained, “Opioids are now wreaking havoc on our community because they are relatively cheap and readily accessible. The highly addictive nature of this drug ensures that people get quickly dependent and desperate to acquire more. Unfortunately, the user can easily misjudge the amount and accidentally overdose, or the substance could be mixed with other deadly drugs such as Fentanyl” (2020, p. 29).

She noted that “the local newspaper is filled each week with arrests for those charged with being under the influence of a controlled substance or with possession of illegal narcotics and paraphernalia” (2020, p. 29). Yet, because North Middletown does not have adequate police coverage, reports of drug-related activity rarely result in arrests due to the slow response time of law enforcement.

Further complicating this problem is that fact that drug offenders who do receive proper treatment or seek to live productive lives after incarceration find few options in their small town. And because they have limited resources that enable them to move to a place with more opportunities, they remain in an area with the same people who are still using drugs, which often leads to relapse.

Rev. Moon noted that her church had already been trying to help those who were healing from drug addiction by opening their doors to a Narcotics Anonymous group. But, during the coronavirus shutdown, the group ceased meeting. So, the congregation decided to utilize the issue guide, “What Should We Do About the Opioid Epidemic” during the five weeks of Lent to start the conversation about how their church might respond to this community crisis (National Issues Forums Institute 2018).

Choosing this topic indicated a shift for Rev. Moon and her congregation toward what I would call “prophetic courage,” since addiction is much more of a controversial issue than feeding the hungry. At first, Rev. Moon was unsure how her congregation would respond to the invitation due to the stigma and shame for those affected and their families. Also, many regard addiction as a moral failure rather than a disease. But when she learned that three people in their small community had died from overdoses in the first part of the year she decided to move ahead with the plan.

Rev. Moon made available printed issue guides in the lead-up to Lent and also sent out a link so people could access the material online. They met in mid-week discussions during the five weeks of Lent. There were usually about sixteen people in attendance, so she and her lay leader would alternate with moderating and note-taking and also being with the break-out groups for discussion.

In my interview with Rev. Moon after she had completed the process, she said that her concern about people being hesitant to participate in the dialogue turned out to be unfounded. “People were really engaged,” she said. “And folks stuck with it during the entire five-week process” (Moon, interview with author, 11 April 2023). She also noticed that the participants engaged in real-time research using their hand-held devices during discussions and in between sessions, especially regarding the topic of Fentanyl addiction, which was not a problem when the guide was originally written.
She said that a turning point happened between the third and fourth week of the five-week dialogue. “There was a massive drug round-up with twenty-four people indicted on drug-trafficking charges. And about twenty of them were from our tiny community,” she said. “So, the timing of doing this dialogue could not have been better” (Moon interview 2023).

The three options laid out in the guide are (1) focus on treatment for all; (2) focus on enforcement; and (3) focus on individual choice. For Rev. Moon’s congregation, these options were not discussed in the abstract. There were people in her congregation who were dealing with the effects of opioid addiction in their families. For example, one member is a great-grandmother helping to raise her great-grandchildren because the court ordered that they be taken away from their mother due to drug-related problems that were endangering the children. Despite the mother’s attempts to recover through treatment programs, she has betrayed their trust so many times that the family has had to distance themselves from her. And, as it turned out, she was one of the individuals indicted in the drug arrests earlier that year.

Rev. Moon noted that some of the participants in the dialogue “did not have a very compassionate outlook when it comes to addiction. Unfortunately, they feel that it’s a matter of free will. So, we had to unpack that a bit. This meant that we had to spend a lot of time educating folks about the nature of addiction” (Moon interview 2023). During those times, other participants began to speak up and push back against the narrative that addiction is a matter of choice. Nevertheless, “there was still a lot of finger-pointing and blaming. As a result, we did not come up with clear next steps, because this is just so complicated,” she said. The one thing the congregation decided to do was to invite the director of a local narcotics task force to help educate the congregation about addictions and how they as a church can be helpful in their community.

When it came to preaching, Rev. Moon did not introduce the topic of opioid addiction with a single sermon. Instead, she preached on the epistle readings from the Revised Common Lectionary during the five Sundays of Lent and found ways to link themes in the texts to subjects they were discussing in the dialogue. For example, in a sermon on Romans 5:1–11, Rev. Moon addressed the topic of suffering, focusing on verses 3–5: “And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” In this sermon, she talked about the recent arrests of drug users in their community and the ways the opioid crisis has caused so much suffering, including the loved ones of those addicted to drugs (Moon 2023b; Romans 5:1–11).

Yet, she emphasized that believers ought not vilify those who are addicted or arrested on narcotics charges since they are caught up in a system of sin. “They might be convicted and face serious consequences, but they are also someone’s daughter or son, mother or father, and members of our community. They are made from flesh and blood, just like us. We cannot call them sinners without acknowledging our own sin in the same breath. We cannot ever believe that they are outside the bounds of God’s redemptive love” (Moon 2023b; Romans 5:1–11).

Returning to her focal text from Romans 5, she noted that Paul “gives us permission to struggle with and witness to the messiness of life. He does not leave us there in the suffering but offers us a way to hope.” She concluded the sermon with the pastoral assurance that we do not bear suffering alone. “We will suffer, but we need not do it without hope, and we need not do it alone” (Moon 2023b; Romans 5:1–11).

The following week, Rev. Moon preached on Ephesians 5:8–14 and focused on what it means to live as “children of the light” (v. 8). She explained that it involves examining ourselves with openness and transparency in the midst of community, and engaging in dialogue in order to gain clearer vision, insight, and truth. She pointed to the congregation’s participation in the deliberative dialogue process as an opportunity for shedding light on a topic. “We decide how we are going to behave as we encounter this topic. We have
covenanted to listen without judgment, not to talk over one another, and not to allow one or two to dominate the conversation” (Moon 2023a; Romans 5:8–14). Importantly, she noted how her own assumptions are consistently upended by the dialogues because they challenge her to rethink what is the “right” course of action. She encouraged the congregation to use the season of Lent as a time to “shine the light on ourselves” individually and collectively. This is not for the purpose of self-loathing or shame, but for acknowledging the tendencies within us that hurt others, ourselves, and our relationship with God. She concluded the sermon by proclaiming, “Little by little we will wake up. And by waking up, it is like rising from the dead, for Christ’s light will shine on you” (Moon 2023a; Romans 5:8–14).

With these two sermon examples, we can see how Rev. Moon wove the dialogue and preaching together rather than bookending the dialogue with an introductory sermon and a follow-up sermon. This has been an important learning for me, that the SDS process can be flexible, adaptable, and expandable to fit a church’s and preacher’s needs. Since I started teaching the SDS method to others, I have seen many preachers modify the process depending on their circumstances, and I encourage this. It is more important for the process to serve the preacher and church than for the preacher and church to serve the process.

In our interview, when I asked Rev. Moon where she felt God’s presence in this third sermon-dialogue-sermon process, she said, “God was present in the listening. People showed up to talk about something that is not very pleasant, and I believe that was at the prompting of the Spirit. Lent is a time of self-examination when we consider the darker aspects of humanity. It’s a time of confession, whether it’s having addiction itself, or being hard-hearted toward others who struggle with addiction” (Moon interview 2013).

She also recalled bringing up the sense of despair that can feed into addiction. “Certainly, some overdoses are accidental. But I wonder if for others there is a feeling of, ‘Well, this is all there is. And I don’t want to be part of this anymore.’ I think the church can give voice to that lament and be a place where we offer space to grieve,” she said. She went on to say that the church needs to address the need and pain that are often numbed with drugs or alcohol. “Families are sometimes in denial because of the shame and the pain. So can the church make space for these conversations in a more intentional way?” she asked (Moon interview 2023).

At the conclusion of our conversation, Rev. Moon shared that during Palm Sunday, the congregation continued a practice they had started during the onset of the COVID pandemic: they did a palm “processional” in their vehicles by driving around the boundaries of the town.

As we waved our palms and honked our horns, I thought about how this community is our “parish.” These people are within the bounds of our ministry. Here is the drug house where the children are running around unsupervised because their parents are high. There’s our parishioner’s house who’s trying to raise her great-grandchildren. And we’re being escorted by a firetruck and those emergency workers are dealing with overdoses every day, sometimes multiple times a day. They are all part of our community, all part of our ministry. (Moon interview 2023)

She credits the SDS process and deliberative dialogue with providing her and her congregation the means by which to understand this sense of community in a deeper and broader way.

6. The Importance of Trust and Regular Practice for the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon Process

In evaluating Rev. Moon’s journey with the SDS process, I believe that continued “homiletical accompaniment” is one of the factors that contributes to its overall effectiveness and impact in a congregation. I have talked with other preachers who, like Rev. Moon, employ the SDS process regularly. They, too, have found that their churches gain greater facility with deliberation the more they practice.
Especially for clergy whose pastoral identity may be more prophetic while their congregation is reticent to become activists for justice in the public square, the SDS process can create intentional space and time to articulate, clarify, and listen to the values that undergird their positions. As this case study with Rev. Moon and her congregation has demonstrated, the SDS process provides a way to extend and develop a congregation’s grappling with social issues and activate their engagement in the public square, even if the movement is incremental.

However, as Rev. Moon noted in her thesis, the pastor who sees their role in the public square very differently from the way the congregation sees theirs must continually discern how to lead effectively in order to bring the two views into closer parity. Does the pastor simply accept the difference between how they and their congregation understand the role of the church in the public square and try to minister as effectively as they can? Or do they work to lead the congregation further into engagement with social issues? In other words, what is the role of the pastoral leader? “Is it to move them where the pastor feels they should go or where the congregation feels called to go?” Rev. Moon asks (Moon 2020, p. 45).

She admitted that when she first started her ministry with North Middletown Christian Church, she wondered whether her call to the congregation would be a good theological fit. The context of the church was vastly different from anything she had previously experienced. “However,” she said, “remaining with this congregation, learning the context, and deciding to live in the community has been a rewarding experience for [me] and perhaps the congregation. It has been fruitful to live with some of the tensions of who gets to set the tone for how the congregation leads itself into the future” (2020, p. 45).

She has come to realize that “officiating at funerals, presiding at weddings of members’ grandchildren, and holding hands in hospital rooms for seven years allows the congregation to trust [my] leadership instincts. The congregation has also extended much grace and kindness toward [me and my family]. Over time, it seems that any ‘agendas’ we might have carried have been replaced with mutual trust in one another’s decision-making” (2020, p. 45).

This process of building trust between the pastor and the congregation, as well as the congregation members and each other, is a key factor in the success of the SDS process. My research and continued work with pastors and congregations has convinced me that engaging in a regular practice of preaching and deliberative dialogue provides a helpful structure for building relationships to minister effectively in congregational contexts. “Just having the format [of the SDS process] is such a great tool for ministry,” Rev. Moon said. “I don’t have to be the expert. I can trust the process. And I can trust my people” (2020, p. 45).

7. Challenges and Limitations of the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon Process

The Rev. Dr. Moon’s case demonstrates that the sermon-dialogue-sermon process can contribute to a congregation’s willingness to engage in public issues and social action. And there are other examples, such as the ten clergy I trained in the Great Plains Conference of the United Methodist Church in 2020–2021. When surveying congregants in four of those churches before and after the clergy introduced the SDS process, we found that those who participated in deliberative dialogue reported increased civic participation in 2021 compared with those who did not. These activities included attendance at a local community meeting to address a social issue, volunteering for an interest group or nonprofit, raising money for charity, displaying a bumper sticker or button, and protesting, marching, or demonstrating.

This is not to say that there are not challenges and limitations to the SDS method, including the need to plan ahead for the process, the reticence of some to participate if they have been hurt by dialogue experiences in the past, and the risk of the process breaking down if participants refuse to respect the ground rules for respectful dialogue. Also, the rise of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories in public discourse can make the deliberative dialogue process difficult. Comments in surveys by parishioners have noted
that some participants had “entrenched beliefs” or beliefs based on “misinformation.” When dialogue partners cannot even agree on what is real and what is factual, this undermines the foundations of community deliberation.

Nevertheless, most parishioners in both the Disciples of Christ congregations from the Wabash project and the United Methodist congregants from the Great Plains conference agreed that deliberative dialogue was helpful for their congregation. In their comments, for example, they appreciated being able to discuss topics in a non-confrontational manner, engage complex issues with nuance, and hear others’ viewpoints with respect.

8. Questions for Future Research

As preachers continue to experiment with the SDS process, there are many options for further analysis and research. One is to explore how other denominations and cultural or geographic contexts adapt the method for their purposes. Another is to engage in more longitudinal studies of pastors and congregations working with the process over an extended period of time, as Rev. Moon did with her congregation. This would provide further examples of the long-term impacts the process can have on a congregation’s social engagement and deliberative practices.

A third option is to explore the role of technology in the facilitation of the SDS process, such as online platforms for discussions or virtual engagement. While I have collected quite a bit of information on this aspect of the SDS method due to congregations going online during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is much more to investigate regarding technology’s role in deliberative dialogue. Finally, a qualitative analysis of sermons preached by different pastors utilizing the SDS process could teach us a great deal about the rhetorical strategies used, language employed, and thematic elements utilized for framing deliberative practices using scriptural and theological teachings and imagery.

My gratitude extends to the numerous pastors and churches that have embraced the sermon-dialogue-sermon process, enriching my understanding as a homiletician and researcher. Their collective endeavors have not only expanded my knowledge but, more importantly, have demonstrated a tangible enhancement of democratic practices within congregations through the thoughtful incorporation of deliberation and proactive community outreach accompanied by preaching. This collaborative exploration underscores the transformative potential inherent in the sermon-dialogue-sermon process as a catalyst for fostering engaged and participatory democratic practices within the fabric of religious communities.

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Notes

1 Of the nine congregations that completed the project (one pastor left their congregation midway through the project), one was located in a rural area, five were in small or midsized municipalities, and three were in suburban areas. Three midcentral states were represented: Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia. All churches were in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination. While the congregations were politically and economically diverse, racially and culturally, they were 97% white non-Hispanic. The first congregational survey was conducted in 2019 (n = 432); the second was in 2020 (n = 235). Responses were anonymous.

2 According to Medical News Today, “Food deserts are regions where people have limited access to healthful and affordable food. This may be due to having a low income or having to travel farther to find healthful food options.” “What are food deserts and how do they impact health?” Jessica Caporuscio, Medical News Today, 22 June 2020. https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/what-are-food-deserts. Accessed 7 June 2023.
The Great Plains Conference of the United Methodist Church is made up of 17 districts, 1007 local congregations, 220,000 lay people, and nearly 800 active elders, deacons, associate members, and local pastors in the states of Kansas and Nebraska. I trained ten pastors in the SDS process in 2020 and surveyed their congregants before and after the training. A total of 187 respondents in four of the congregations completed the surveys. The responses were anonymous.

References

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