Can Earth Get a Witness?
Why Pastors Avoid Environmental Preaching

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Lexington Theological Seminary
Overview

- Previous studies about environmental preaching
- Research Study – “Preaching about Controversial Justice Issues”
- Environmental issues continue to rank lowest
- Reasons clergy avoid environmental issues in preaching
- Why preaching about environmental issues matters
2009 Lifeway Study:

- 52% of Protestant pastors address environmental issues once a year or less
- 11% never speak to their church members about the environment
- 25% speak on environmental issues several times a year
- 12% address environmental issues at least once a month

2014 PRRI/AAR Study:

- 1/3 of Americans say their clergy leader speaks about climate change often (11%) or sometimes (25%).
- More than 6-in-10 Americans say their clergy leader rarely (29%) or never (33%) references climate change.

2014 Study by John M. Clements, et al:

- Between 1993 – 2010 there was “no clear evidence of a greening of Christianity among rank-and-file Christians in the general public.”

- Mainline and evangelical Protestants still reported lower levels of environmental concern than did non-Christians and nonreligious respondents.

Have preachers’ willingness to engage environmental issues changed in light of the 2016 presidential election?
Survey: “Preaching about Controversial Issues”

• What: 60-question online survey
• When: Jan. - Feb. 2017, 6 weeks
• Who: 1205 mainline Protestant clergy in the U.S.
• Why: To assess how preachers are approaching their sermons during this divisive time in our nation’s history.
Range of topics included:

• The difference the 2016 presidential election has made in preachers’ willingness to address controversial issues in the pulpit

• Topics clergy intended to address in the 6 months following the presidential inauguration as compared to the topics they engaged prior to the election

• Reasons clergy list for either engaging controversial topics in their sermons, or avoiding them
Please mark the following topics that you intentionally and/or specifically addressed or incorporated into your preaching in the LAST 12 MONTHS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
<th>RANK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>698</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial and/or ethnic tensions</td>
<td>68.3%</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food insecurity/hunger</td>
<td>66.1%</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homelessness</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration/Refugees/Migrant workers</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights for persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White privilege/White supremacy</td>
<td>50.4%</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interfaith relations</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental illness</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

838 respondents.

Confidence level: 95%. Margin of error: 3.4%
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Climate change</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Semitism (hostility, prejudice, or discrimination against Jews)</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child abuse</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human trafficking/Slavery</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabilities</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender-based violence and/or rape</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pollution</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American issues</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's access to reproductive health</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean energy/renewable energy</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental racism</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fossil fuel extraction (fracking, mountain-top removal, pipelines, etc.)</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Species extinction</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

838 respondents.  RANK

Confidence level: 95%. Margin of error: 3.4%
Choose two of the topics that you are most likely to avoid in your preaching

- 319 out of 761 respondents chose one of the environmental issues (climate change, species extinction, fossil fuel extraction, environmental racism, pollution, clean/renewable energy).

- In other words, 42% of respondents on that question listed at least one environmental issue as a topic they would avoid in preaching.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women’s reproductive health</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fossil fuel extraction (fracking, MTR, pipelines, etc.)</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of capitalism</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White privilege</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights for LG BTQ</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun violence</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War/militarization</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Species extinction</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental racism</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate change</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Hot Topics” pastors consider off-limits
Controversial issues INTENDED for sermons in 2017
Controversial issues INTENDED for sermons in 2017 (cont.)
Reasons clergy avoid environmental issues in preaching

**THOUGHT TO BE ANTITHETICAL TO THE GOSPEL**

- “What do any of these [environmental] issues have to do with the gospel?”
- “[Fossil fuel extraction] isn’t the gospel.”
- “[Clean/renewable energy] has no relation to the gospel message.”
- “[Species extinction] is not applicable to the gospel text.”
Reasons clergy avoid environmental issues in preaching

**NOT A PRIORITY**

- “I can't envision [clean/renewable energy] as a topic for preaching, as there are other issues that are much more important, urgent, and relevant to preach on.”
- “There's little direct action anyone can take. There are more important/pressing issues.”
- “I don't want to lose my job. I don't want to distract congregation from doing healing work.”
- “[Species extinction is] not my most pressing issue. But, I recognize that the increase of our population has changed the national and international landscape and division of resources.”
- [Species extinction]: “Other bigger fish to fry (ironically enough!)”
Reasons clergy avoid environmental issues in preaching

**TWO OBSCURE, COMPLEX**

- “This item [environmental racism] does not exist.”
- “I have no idea what [environmental racism] is.”
- “It’s too complicated.”
- “I feel getting them to admit racism is a problem first is a step we've yet to achieve (on the whole).”
Reasons clergy avoid environmental issues in preaching

DON’T BITE THE HAND THAT FEEDS YOUR PARISHIONERS

- “So many livelihoods in the congregation are tied to fossil fuels. Also, misinformation is too strong to untangle in one sermon.”
- “Too many parishioners have livelihood in this industry; hard to separate personal from systemic.”
- “It’s difficult to preach against an industry where most of your members make a living or are directly associated with it.”
- “Members associated with fossil fuel extraction view [clean/renewable energy] as a direct economic threat in an already severely depressed area.”
- “Livelihood of some in my congregation depends on coal.”
- “This is my congregations' primary source of income.”
- “Heavily fossil fuel based industries in the area.”
Reasons clergy avoid environmental issues in preaching

DON'T BITE THE HAND THAT FEEDS YOUR PARISHIONERS

“The economy of my city is heavily dependent on fracking and although it is a deeply eco-aware congregation, it is also a congregation that realized that the slowing or elimination of fracking in our community has incredibly far-reaching negative impacts on families in our community.” (Colorado)
Reasons clergy avoid environmental issues in preaching

DON’T BITE THE HAND THAT FEEDS YOUR PARISHIONERS

“Critique of the false dreams regarding capitalism we have been promised, e.g. the factories and coal jobs are not coming back. I am struggling to find the Gospel witness. **Where does the unemployed coal miner find and hear the good news in the end of his family’s primary vocation?** At this point the issues seems to be one of pastoral care until Scripture helps me find a voice.” (Kentucky)
Why preaching about environmental issues matters

“Americans who say their clergy leader speaks at least occasionally about climate change are more likely to be believe that climate change exists than Americans who tend not to hear about climate change in church (49% and 36%, respectively).” (PRRI survey, 2014).
Why preaching about environmental issues matters

- More than 6-in-10 (60%) of Americans who report hearing about climate change from their clergy leader at least occasionally are very (38%) or somewhat (24%) concerned about climate change.

- Only 4-in-10 (39%) of Americans who attend congregations where the issue is rarely or never raised are concerned.” (PRRI survey, 2014).
What are strategies and tactics for “green preaching”? Watch for the lecture in the Festival of Homiletics on-demand bonus materials: “Green” Preaching in the “Purple Zone”
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at Lexington Theological Seminary

The first Green Chalice Seminary!
Sallie McFague’s Environmental Theology (September 2020)
Dr. Emily Askew founded LTS Green Task Force, a group committed to environmentally just practices in the seminary. Her current research puts theology in conversation with environmental studies and other fields. She is the Associate Professor of Systematic Theology.

Climate Change: Caring for Our Planet, Caring for Ourselves (October 2020)
Rev. Dr. Richard R. Coble is an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and serves as an associate pastor for Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville, N.C. He is an LTS Adjunct Professor of Pastoral Care.

Church, Society, and the Ethics of Global Warming (November 2020)
Rev. Dr. Christy Newton, an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), serves as the Senior Minister of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Vallejo, Calif. She is an LTS Adjunct Professor of Christian Ethics.

Food and Faith (March 2021)
Rev. Dr. Wilson Dickinson is an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), writer and Director of The Green Good News. He is the LTS Director of the D.Min. & Lay and Continuing Education Programs.

Creation Crisis Preaching and Worship (April 2021)
Rev. Dr. Leah Schade is ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and “EcoPreacher” blogger for Patheos. Prior to coming to LTS, she pastored in Pennsylvania. She is the LTS Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship.

Womanism, Creation Care, and Justice (May 2021)
Dr. Mitzi J. Smith is the J. Davison Phillips Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary. She is one of three black women biblical scholars in the USA with an endowed chair. She is an LTS Adjunct Professor of New Testament and Womanist Hermeneutics.

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- Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship, Lexington Theological Seminary
- Ordained Lutheran (ELCA) clergy since 2000
- Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019)
- Rooted and Rising: Voices of Courage in a Time of Climate Crisis (Rowman & Littlefield, November 2019)

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