

Can Earth Get a Witness? Why Pastors Avoid Environmental Preaching

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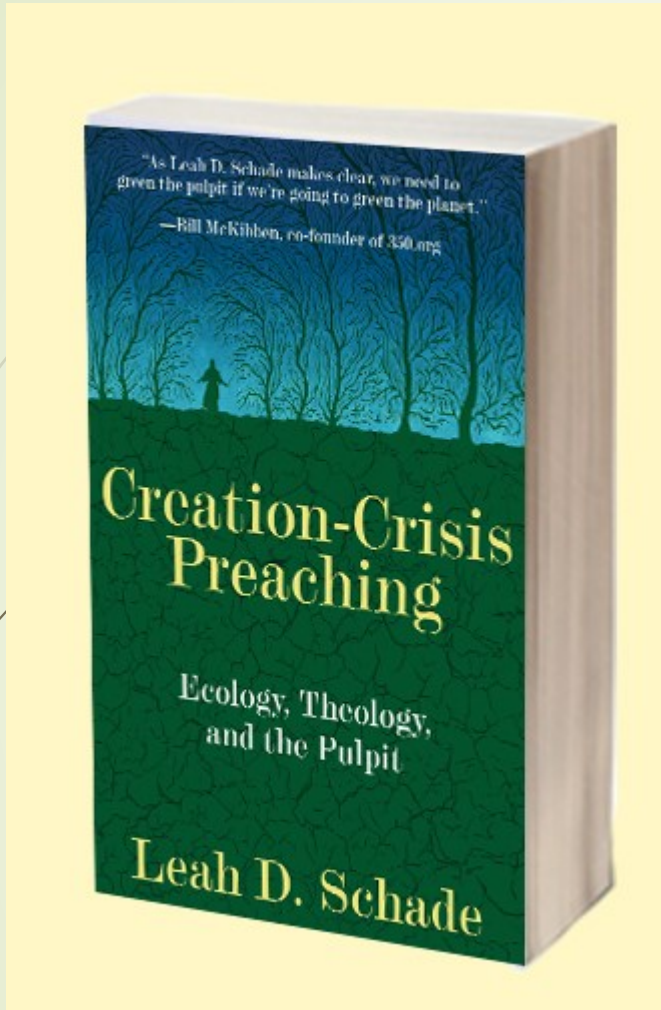
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Overview



- 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:

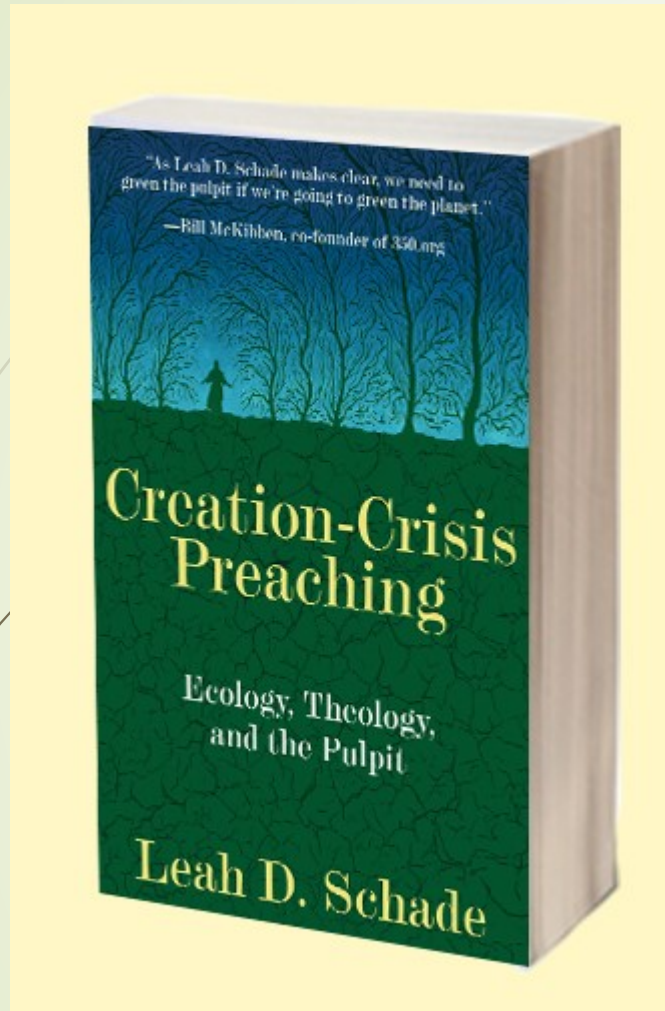
- 52% of Protestant pastors address environmental issues once a year or less
- 11% never speak to their church members about the environment
- 25% speak on environmental issues several times a year
- 12% address environmental issues at least once a month

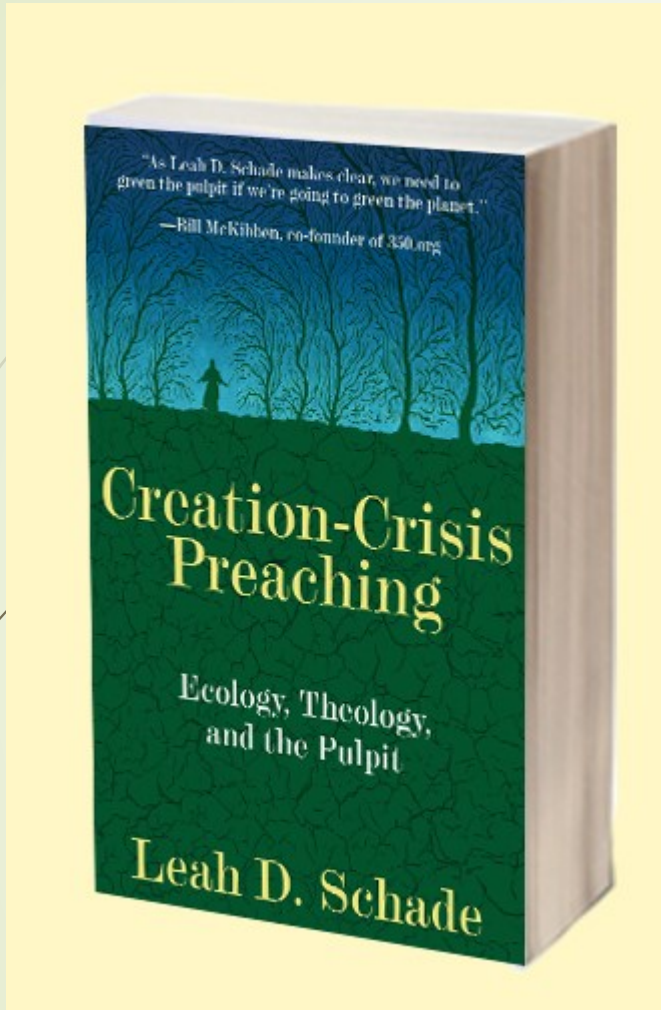
Mark Kelly, "Lifeway Research Studies Global Warming Beliefs among Protestant Pastors". April 16, 2009. <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-studies-global-warming-beliefs-among-Protestant-pastors>; accessed July 13, 2014.

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.

Jones, Robert P., Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, *Believers, Sympathizers, and Skeptics: Why Americans are Conflicted About Climate Change, Environmental Policy, and Science: Findings from the PRRI/AAR Religion, Values, and Climate Change Survey*, Public Religion Research Institute and American Academy of Religion; Washington, D.C., 2014; 4.

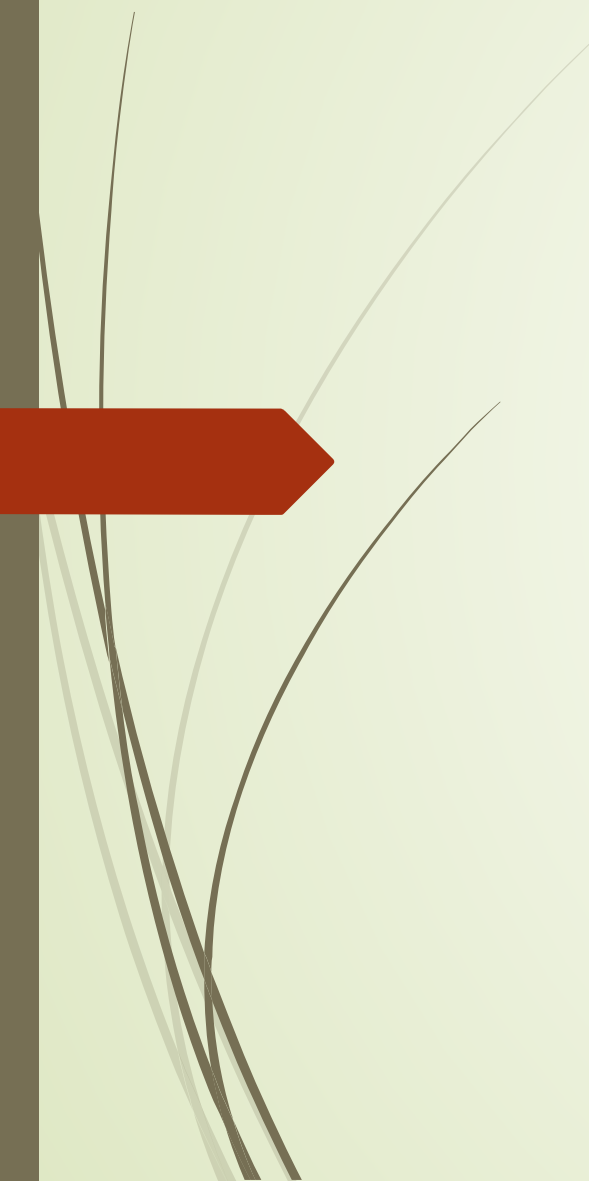




2014 Study by John M. Clements, et al:

- 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

John M. Clements, Aaron M. McCright, Chenyang Xiao, "An Examination of the 'Greening of Christianity' Thesis among Americans, 1993-2010," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53, no. 2 (2014): 373.



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

TOP 10 Controversial issues in sermons – 2016

Please mark the following topics that you intentionally and/or specifically addressed or incorporated into your preaching in the LAST 12 MONTHS.

838 respondents.

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

Confidence level: 95%. Margin of error: 3.4%

Controversial issues in sermons – 2016

BOTTOM 13 of 38

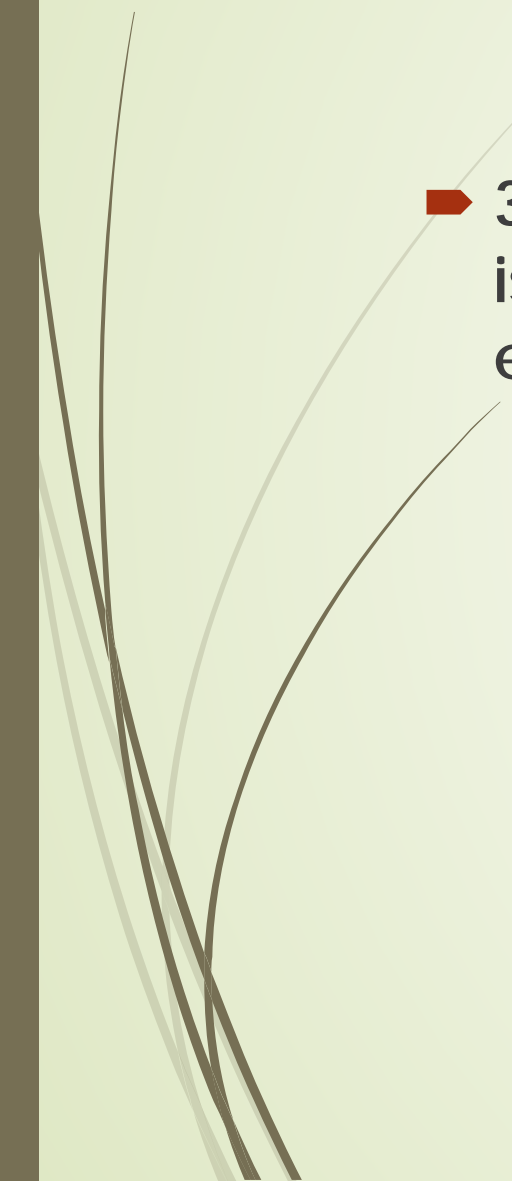
838 respondents. RANK

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

Confidence level: 95%. Margin of error: 3.4%



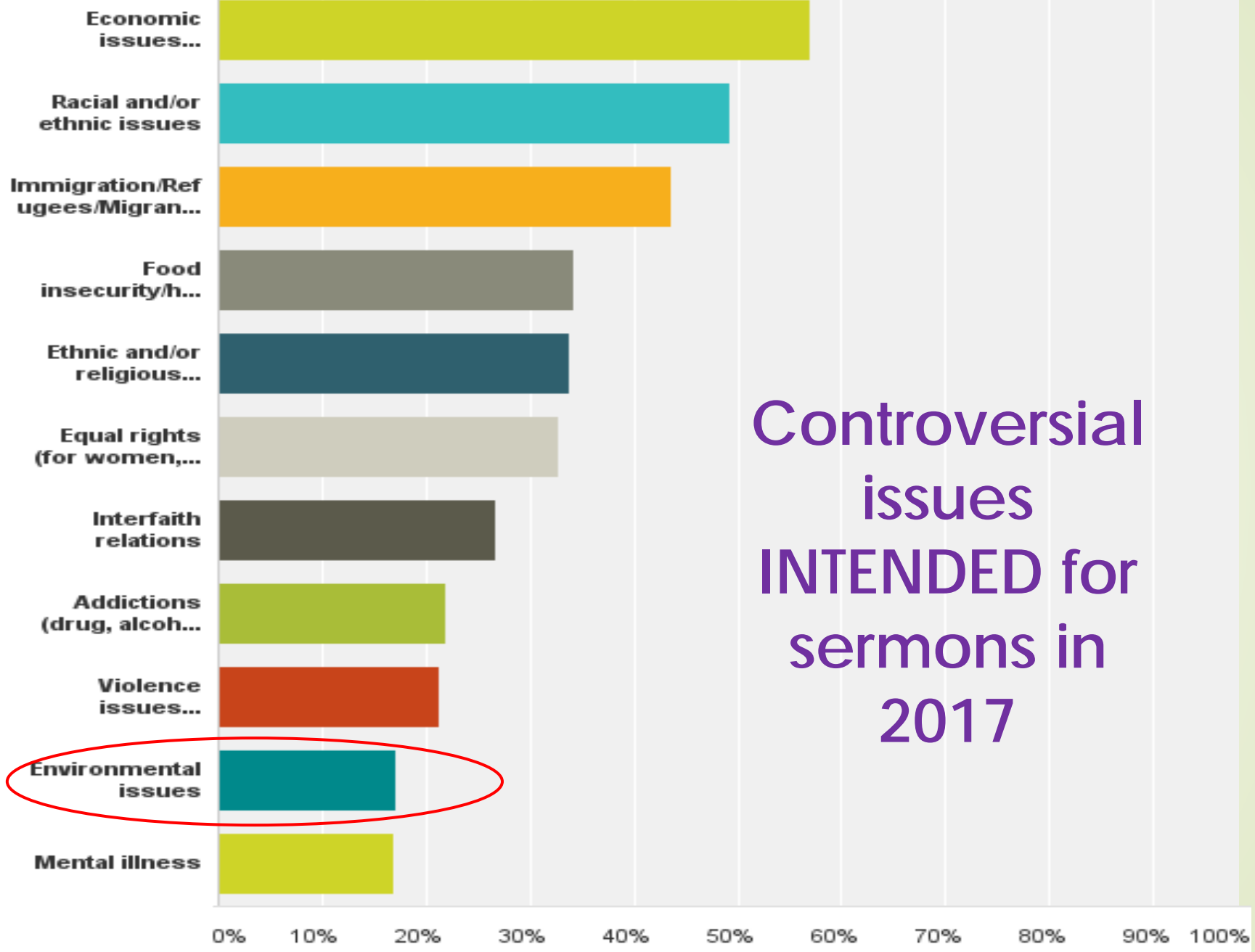
Choose two of the topics that you are most likely to avoid in your preaching

- ▶ 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.
- 

“Hot Topics” pastors consider off-limits

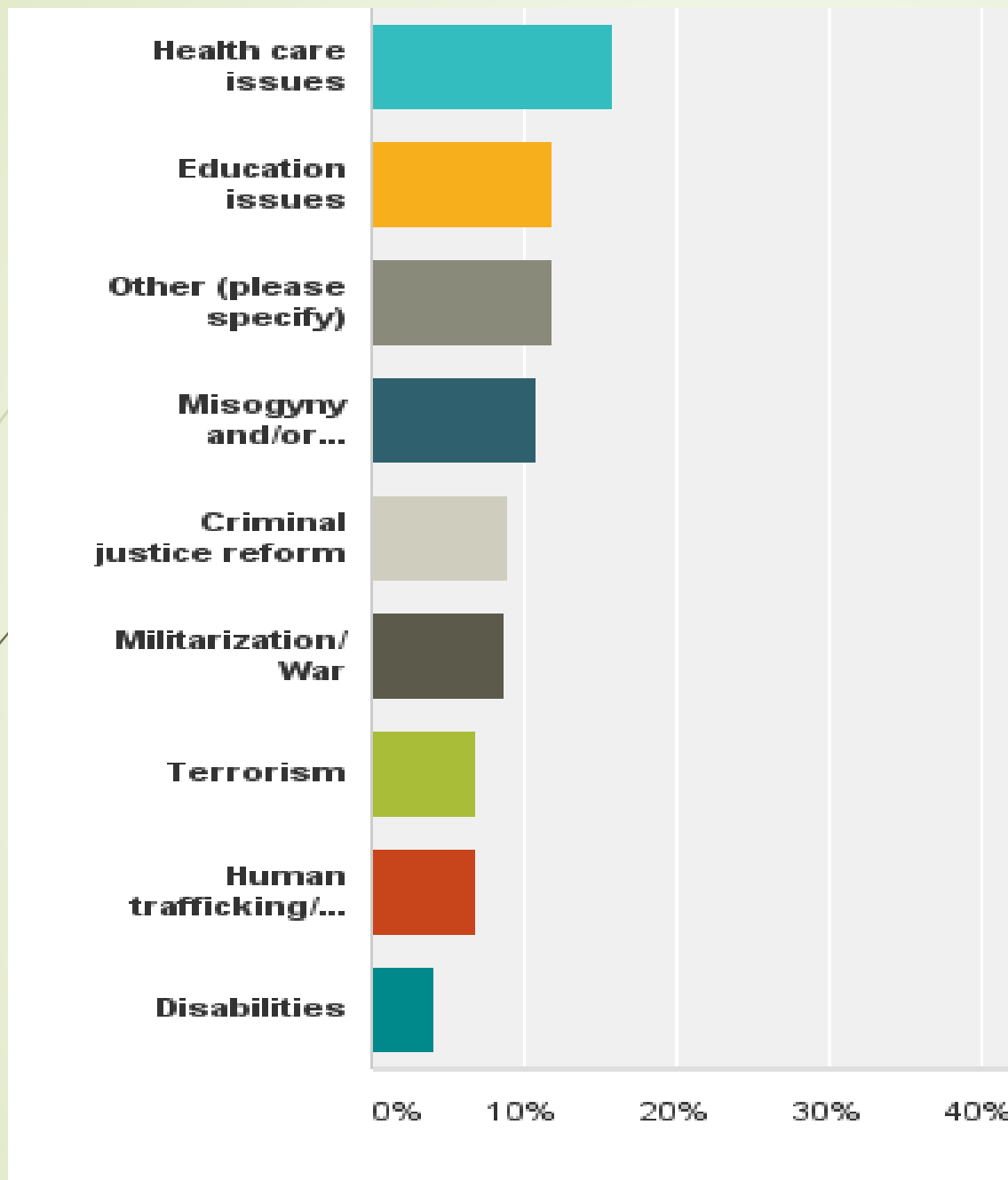
Women’s reproductive health	205	27%
Fossil fuel extraction (fracking, MTR, pipelines, etc.)	141	19%
Critique of capitalism	134	18%
White privilege	100	13%
Rights for LGBTQ	98	13%
Gun violence	96	13%
War/militarization	79	10%
Species extinction	72	9%
Environmental racism	60	8%
Climate change	29	4%





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

TOO 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 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”?

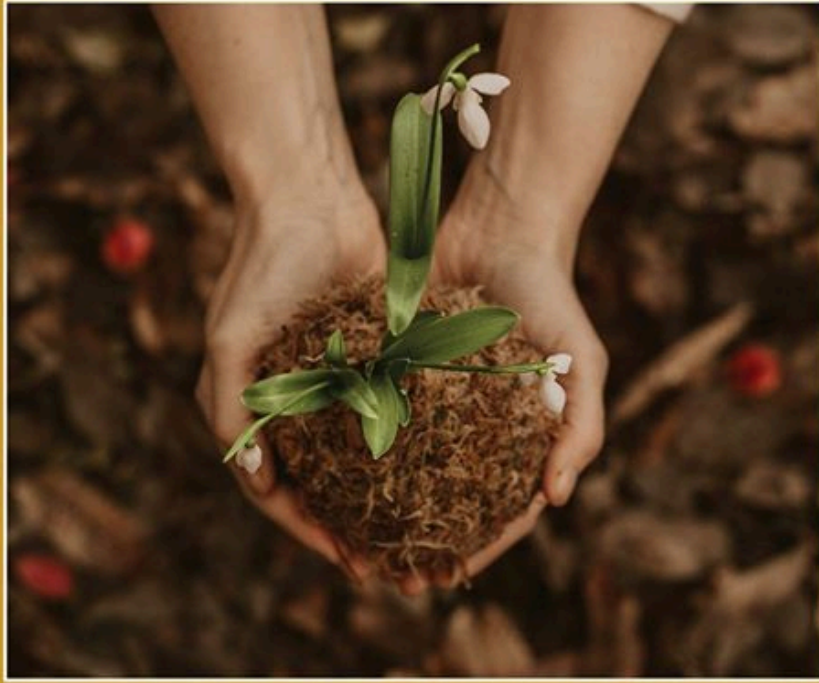
Watch for the lecture in the Festival of Homiletics
on-demand bonus materials:

“Green” Preaching in the “Purple Zone



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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 Philips 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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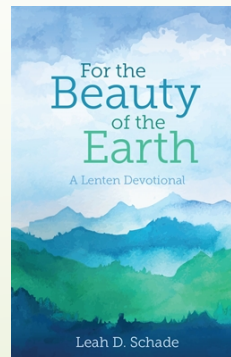
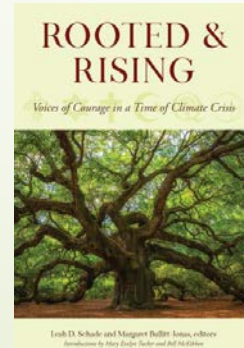
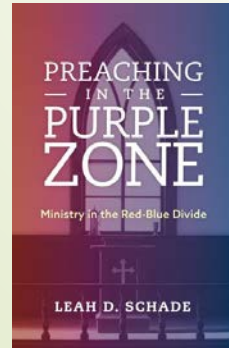
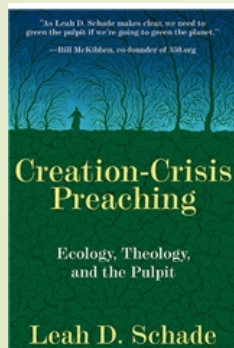
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The Rev. Dr. Leah D. Schade

Author, Speaker, Educator, Researcher



- ▶ Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship, Lexington Theological Seminary
- ▶ Ordained Lutheran (ELCA) clergy since 2000
- ▶ Creation-Crisis Preaching: Ecology, Theology, and the Pulpit (Chalice Press, 2015)
- ▶ 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)
- ▶ "EcoPreacher" blog at Patheos: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/ecopreacher/>



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