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Citation for the original published paper (version of record):
Malmström, H. (2015)
What is your darkness? An empirical study of interrogative practices in sermonic discourse
International Journal of Practical Theology, 19(2): 247-270
http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2014-0019

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DOI 10.1515/ijpt-2014-0019

Abstract: This paper is an interdisciplinary (linguistic-homiletic) data-driven analysis of interrogative practices in contemporary preaching, where questions are treated as devices evoking sermon listener engagement. The analysis focuses on the distribution of questions in preaching, the types of questions used, and the location of questions in sermons, all of which are aspects of interrogatives with direct implications for the interpersonal nature of preaching. The investigation concludes by considering preachers' rationale for using questions, highlighting the multifunctional potential of sermon questions. The findings and the discussions in here will contribute to a more nuanced continued discussion within the homiletics community concerning the "place" of questions in preaching.

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel bietet eine interdisziplinäre (linguistisch-homiletische) datengetriebene Analyse interrogativer Methoden in zeitgenössischer Predigt, wobei Fragen zur Einbeziehung der Hörer benutzt werden. Die Analyse konzentriert sich auf die Verteilung von Fragen in der Predigt, die Art der Fragen und ihre Stellung innerhalb der Predigt, was sich direkt auf die zwischenmenschliche Art der Predigt auswirkt. Die Untersuchung bedenkt auch die Begründungen für die Verwendung von Fragen und unterstreicht das multifunktionale Potenzial von Predigtfragen. Die Ergebnisse und Diskussion leisten einen Beitrag zu einer nuancierteren Homiletikdiskussion über den Platz von Fragen innerhalb der Predigt.

Most works in postmodern homiletics acknowledge the highly interactive nature of preaching. For example, Arthur van Seters refers to preaching as "a partnership between preacher and congregation" where both parties "participate in the weav-

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ing into the fabric of the sermon".[1] When offering a sermon, preachers are engaged in a complex social and communicative activity which goes well beyond the proclamation of the gospel, an activity which very much highlights a linguistic "interpersonal metafunction" used to "enact social relationships" as understood by M.A.K. Halliday;[2] in other words, preaching is communication which calls for interpersonally oriented language. While some research has considered such language in sermonic discourse,[3] more empirical work is needed to understand how preaching is rhetorically shaped to engage listeners as co-constructors of sermons.

The research reported in this paper focuses on questions (interchangeably referred to as interrogatives) in sermonic discourse, a good example of engaging and interpersonally oriented discourse. Although aspects of interrogatives have been treated in passing by scholars of homiletics, to date no comprehensive empirical account of questions in preaching has been presented. What is more, existing accounts largely fail to elaborate on the connection between questions and sermon listener engagement, if it is mentioned at all.

Theoretically this study is loosely grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics. Central within this framework is the question of what language *does*, conditioned by the *context* in which it is used. Seen this way, language use is reflective of "choices motivated by intentions to express certain meanings in specific situations";[4] in this paper, the concern is (apparent) interrogative meaning in the specific situation of preaching, and the basic assumption is that preachers' choice

1 Arthur van Seters, The problematic of preaching in the third millennium, in *Interpretation* 45.3, 1991, 267–280.

2 M.A.K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), 34.

3 See e.g. Hans Malmström, Engaging the Congregation: The Place of Metadiscourse in Contemporary Preaching, in *Applied Linguistics* (Advance access) (amu052, 2014): 1–23; Hans Malmström, Preaching in uncertain terms: the place of hedging language in contemporary sermonic discourse, in *Functions of Language* 22.3, 2015, forthcoming. Marta Carretero, The influence of genre and register on epistemic modality in spoken English: a preliminary study, in *Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense* 10, 2002, 11–41; Peter Civetta, The performance of God: religious discourse in the aftermath of 11 September, in *The Journal of Religion and Theatre* 2.1, 2003, 1–16; Eun.-Je Cheung, Analysis of sermons delivered by Korean, Filipino and American pastors: the view of genre analysis, in *RELC Journal* 30.2, 1999, 44–60; Alex, K. Dzameshie, Social motivations for politeness behavior in Christian sermonic discourse, in *Anthropological Linguistics* 37.2, 1995, 192–215; Graham Ethelston, Appraisal in evangelical sermons: the projection and functions of misguided voices, in *Text & Talk* 29.6, 2009, 683–704; Cheryl Wharry, Amen and hallelujah preaching: discourse functions in African American sermons, in *Language in Society* 32.2, 2003, 203–225.

4 Ken Hyland, *Metadiscourse: Exploring Interaction in Writing*, (London: Continuum, 2005), 17.

making with regard to interrogatives is reflective of their desire to engage sermon listeners interpersonally.[5]

The research focus is the *place* of questions in sermons, meaning that I explore the overall distribution of questions in sermonic discourse, question type, as well as the location of questions within sermons. In addition, the discursive functions served by questions in preaching are studied. Throughout, the analysis is based on empirical data in the form of 150 sermons from three broadly defined preaching contexts (Church of England, Baptist Church, and the Roman-Catholic Church) and interviews with 11 preachers representing these three preaching traditions.

There are two objectives with this study, namely to provide a data-driven, primarily descriptive (rather than prescriptive) analysis of the place of interrogatives in preaching, and to provide further evidence in support of a descriptive/empirical homiletics that can supplement "traditional" homiletics research.

Before turning to the actual analysis of questions in sermons, I first explain briefly how interrogatives feature as *par excellence* engagement markers in preaching viewed as interpersonal engagement. I then introduce the data and the procedures used for the analysis.

Questions Evoking Engagement

Inspired by ideas emanating from Systemic Functional Linguistics the present analysis focuses less on language as form and more on discourse as action, what questions *do* in communication, as noted by Ken Hyland.[6] Although his reasoning concerns questions in academic discourse the basic argument is applicable to other kinds of discourse as well.

Ideally a sermon should be prepared so that preachers anticipate their audience, who they are, what they "bring" to the sermon, what their main convictions are, and what their response to claims made in the sermon is likely to be.[7] This kind of listener "inventory" must of course be balanced against the preachers' own objectives for preaching a specific sermon. Arguably, there is a dialogic tension to be found in this act of balance, and preachers can use questions to invite listeners to become sermonic co-constructors, thereby making explicit and projecting "the perceptions, interests, and needs"[8] of the listeners.

5 This is the assumption – whether and how listeners are actually engaged is beyond the scope of the study.

6 Ken Hyland, What do they mean? Questions in academic writing, in *Text* 22.4, 2002, 529–557.

7 Fred. B. Craddock, *Preaching*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 84–98.

8 Hyland, Questions (n. 6), 531.

A fundamentally important general function of questions is that listeners are recognized as people "with an interest in the issue raised by the question [and] the ability to recognize the value of asking it",[9] i.e. listeners are acknowledged as conversational partners rather than people being spoken at. Questions necessarily situate listeners in the middle of the unfolding sermon (more or less explicitly, but questions are always *addressed to someone*) and they are offered the freedom to "finish the work".[10] Even if that freedom is granted them only momentarily, because typically the preachers themselves provide an answer to questions asked, the answer may not be immediate, thus giving the word time to "mature" in listeners and affect them. Regardless, the provision of an answer does not take away the element of interpersonal recognition of listeners as dialogic partners, i. e. the dialogic invitation has already been extended and affected them, and they are consequently already active in the sermonic meaning-making process. One of the informants interviewed in this study, a Baptist preacher, expresses this engaging dimension of sermon questions very succinctly:

> *During a sermon the listeners are rendered rather passive but what you try to do is you try to enter into conversation with them. Questions are absolutely crucial in this conversation because they turn your monologue into a dialogue of sorts. Questions are an instrument for showing listeners that the sermon is about them, they are included, involved. With the help of questions I can teach, I can learn, I can express emotion and conviction, I can add a twist to a narrative, I can challenge my listeners to think in new ways, or together we can re-visit age old questions that are at the heart of our faith. Questions really make a sermon come alive in fascinating ways.*

Material and Procedure

The analysis of questions in sermons is based on data in two forms: sermon manuscripts and preacher interviews.[11] In connection with a large project concerned with the metadiscourse of preaching,[12] I collected just over 400 sermon manuscripts from preachers in the Church of England (nominally Anglican but with significant variations across the confessional spectrum), the Baptist Church,

9 Ibid.

10 O. Wesley Allen Jr. Introduction: The Pillars of the New Homiletic, in *The Renewed Homiletic*, edited by O. Wesley Allen Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 8.

11 An anonymous reviewer correctly pointed out that it is a limitation of the study that only qualitative perspectives of preachers are included, i.e. that listeners were not interviewed to provide an interesting dialogic perspective.

12 See Malmström, Engaging (n. 3).

and the Roman-Catholic Church. For the analysis in this study I used 150 sermons, 50 from each denomination, and only one sermon from any one preacher; that limitation was imposed to avoid data skewing, e.g. if some preachers used significantly more or fewer questions.

I converted all the sermon manuscripts to .txt-files to make electronic data processing easier. To establish quantitative measures in the three samples, e.g. the overall distribution of questions and question types, I used a freely available concordance program called AntConc.[13] To identify questions in the samples with the help of the program I had to assume that preachers had marked questions with a question mark; this way the identification of questions was limited to direct questions (indirect questions are standardly not followed by a question mark), but the advantage was that even declarative clauses which preachers *intended* to be used as questions (presumably using interrogative intonation) were included (though they turned out to be very few). A total of 574 questions were identified in this process and are part of the analysis.

A more qualitative approach involved close analysis, in several respects, of 115 questions in the combined sample (a random selection of every fifth question), for example to establish provisionally what discursive functions questions have in sermonic discourse. All 115 instances were examined in context, and soon a tentative pattern of potential discourse functions started to emerge, although, admittedly, there was a significant element of speculation involved on my part. To confirm or refute my "functional" analysis, I sought the help of 11 preachers (at least three from each denomination) who volunteered to discuss communicative aspects of their preaching based on the manuscripts they had provided. The preacher interviews are best described as semi-structured,[14] because I only used a single question prompt, after which the interviews progressed in a largely unstructured manner, covering many different aspects of communication in preaching, and allowing preachers to focus and/or digress as they saw fit. The lead-in to our discussion about interrogatives in sermons was the following question, preceded by my pointing preachers to questions in their manuscripts: *What did you hope to achieve/What was the purpose of using a question at this point in the sermon?* The interviews were transcribed, after which I revisited the notes taken during my analysis of a cross-section of the sermon sample.

13 Lawrence Anthony, *AntConc (3.2.4m) [Computer Software]* (Tokyo, Japan: Waseda University, 2014) Available from http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/

14 Eric Drever, *Using Semi-Structured Interviews in Small-Scale Research: a Teacher's Guide*. (Glasgow: The SCRE Centre, 2003).

Overview of Findings

Preachers use approximately two to three questions per 1,000 words of preaching, or one question every 90 seconds (Baptist preaching), every two minutes (Anglican preaching) or every two and a half minutes (Roman-Catholic preaching). This general distribution suggests that from the point of view of interrogative practices, preaching is clearly a "hybrid" discourse, quite different from standard conversation, but also unlike written discourse. Various classifications of preaching questions lead to the conclusion that (i) preaching favors questions that ask about external states of affairs/reality over questions relating to internal states of mind; (ii) preaching is more often than not explicitly inclusive, i.e. names the listener or uses inclusive references; (iii) Anglican and Baptist preaching primarily uses open questions where listeners are invited to offer possible answers, whereas Roman-Catholic preaching tends to favor closed questions evoking a closed set of answer options; (iv) preaching uses questions in the opening and closing sections of sermons to almost equal degrees whereas there are few questions in the middle section of sermons. An analysis of the extent to which preachers provide answers to the questions they themselves ask reveals that this happens for 73% of the questions, typically in close proximity to asking the question rather than as a developed response. At least the following nine discourse functions can be associated with asking questions in sermons: (i) engaging listeners in the sermon idea; (ii) guiding listeners in an exegetic/hermeneutic process; (iii) acknowledging listeners' presence; (iv) engaging listeners in dialogue; (v) framing the sermon by creating anticipation and providing closure (vi) hedging; (vii) projecting "misguided voices"/questions; (viii) acting as vehicles for other voices; and (ix) portraying preachers as both teachers and students of faith.

Distribution of Questions in Sermonic Discourse

On the assumption that preaching should be conversation-like,[15] questions are absolutely central to preaching. David Tracy talks of asking questions as the main momentum in conversation: "the question itself must control every con-

15 Ronald J. Allen, Preaching as mutual critical correlation through conversation, in *Purposes of Preaching*, edited by Jana Childers (Atlanta, GA: Chalice Press), 1–22; David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Robert Waznak, *An Introduction to the Homily*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998),117.

versation".[16] In many ways, Tracy's view recalls Bakthin's position: "Life by its very nature is dialogic [conversational]. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions [...] and so forth."[17] This does not stop scholars like John S. McClure, David Buttrick (the very same) and Johan Cilliers to adopt a critical view to questions in sermons. During sermon preparation preachers should, McClure argues, "avoid questions when shaping sermon ideas [because] questions usually indicate that a preacher is not ready to identify a clear topic", instead declarative/indicative statements are the model.[18] In even stronger terms Buttrick goes as far as prohibiting preachers to use questions unless certain specific circumstances prevail: "sharp questions directly addressed to a congregation may not be used except at the start of moves or within some carefully designed rhetorical framework"[19] (although he adopts a slightly more conciliatory tone concerning the use of rhetorical questions, see below). Finally, Cilliers is adamant that good preaching speaks in the indicative: "the good news of the Gospel does not ask, it gives".[20] It is interesting to note that none of these critical statements elaborate any interpersonal components at play in using questions.

As can be seen in Table 1, the distribution of direct questions in the three samples indicate that Anglican preachers use 3.16 questions per 1,000 words, Baptist preachers use 3.36 questions per 1,000 words, and Roman-Catholic preachers use 2.33 questions per 1,000 words. Another way of looking at these numbers is to say that Anglican preachers use a question once every 316 words, Baptist preachers once every 297 words and Roman-Catholic preachers once every 429 words. Converted to speech, and assuming that preachers speak at an average speaking rate of 160 words per minute, this means that preachers use a question once every two minutes of preaching (Anglican), once every ninety seconds of preaching (Baptist), and once every two minutes and forty seconds of preaching (Roman-Catholic).

16 David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 18.

17 Gary S. Morson & Caryl Emerson (editors), *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 60.

18 John S. McClure, *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 54.

19 Buttrick, Homiletic (n. 15), 210.

20 Johan Cilliers, *The Living Voice of the Gospel: Revisiting the Basic Principles of Preaching*, (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2004), 118.

Table 1: Distribution of direct questions overall; raw numbers and occurrences normalized to occurrences per 1,000 words.

	Anglican		Baptist		Roman-Catholic	
All questions (total)	204	3.16	258	3.36	112	2.33
Question density (word tokens)		316		297		429

Since interrogatives in sermons have never been subject to empirical study before there is no "norm" to compare these findings to. What is clear, however, is that questions are much more common in standard conversation than in preaching: Douglas Biber et al. establish that "there is on average one question per every 40 words in conversation".[21] The authors attribute the very high frequency of questions in conversation to the nature of conversation, usually characterized by consistent turn-taking between interlocutors incentivizing conversation partners to ask for and provide information on various topics. Thus, if preachers are hoping to use questions during preaching to mimic a conversation with listeners, significantly more questions can be used. The findings here, however, support the claim that preaching is something of a "hybrid" discourse; it is spoken, but clearly not conversational because there is typically no back-talk from listeners, but clearly also not written because in traditional types of written discourse, such as written academic discourse or news paper discourse, interrogatives are a lot more infrequently used than in preaching: Biber el al. indicate an average frequency of questions in both types of written discourse of around 0.5 occurrences per 1,000 words;[22] Hyland found similar frequencies (0.72 questions/1,000 words) in his corpus of academic texts.[23]

The interviews indicated that questions are essential instruments for listener engagement regardless of denominational preaching context, if for no other reason, then at least as an encouragement to listeners to continue the sermonic conversation and pursue answers to questions individually. There is a notable difference, however, between interrogative practices in Roman-Catholic preaching on the one hand and Anglican and Baptist preaching on the other; the normalized frequency of questions per 1,000 words is substantially lower, Roman-Catholic preaching uses questions more rarely relatively speaking. This

21 Douglas Biber, Stig Johnsson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad & Edward Finegan, *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, (London: Longman, 1999), 211.

22 Ibid.

23 Hyland, Questions (n. 6), 533.

particular finding ties in in interesting ways with findings from another recent study about hedging (expressions pertaining to tentativeness/uncertainty) in sermons.[24] In that study it was shown that Roman-Catholic preaching uses significantly less hedging than both Anglican and Baptist preaching. The lower incidence of hedging results in a narrowing of the interpretative and dialogic space afforded in preaching (because the preaching necessarily becomes more assertive), and it is possible that the lower frequency of questions in Roman-Catholic preaching has the effect of restricting this space even further. Similarly, the relatively higher frequency of questions in Anglican and Baptist preaching can be seen as contributing to a (marginal) widening of the interpretative/dialogic space, which would be consistent with the Anglican and Baptist view that every individual Christian (preachers as well as listeners rather than the Church on its own) has been endowed with the ability to interpret the Bible and offer their own answers to explicit or implied questions.[25]

Different Types of Questions in Sermons

Zack Eswine contends that preachers ask two kinds of questions: communication-oriented questions, and conscience-oriented questions.[26] There are many different kinds of sermon questions, not just two, and any arbitrary classification ultimately depends on what your purpose for classifying is. For Eswine, however, a binary distinction between communication-oriented questions and conscience-oriented questions is meaningful. Communication-oriented questions, Eswine says, "enable our listeners to follow our thought and remain engaged with our message" whereas conscience-oriented questions "gets to the heart of the hearer" and "stings the conscience".[27] Arguably, *all* questions, regardless of how they are labeled, are "interactional" and engage listeners in the preaching event. "Conscience-orientation" is a classification that is difficult to apply more generally to questions in the preaching context; I consider it a *functional* classification. A more appropriate distinction in my view, which is similar to Eswine's but free from functional connotations and with more general applicability, is that between

24 Malmström, Preaching (n. 3).

25 Norman Maring & Winthrop Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2012).

26 Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons That Connect with Our Culture*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2008), 124.

27 Ibid.

questions that evoke either *internal states* (of mind), as in (1), often indexed by words related to cognition, or *external states of affairs* (apparent reality), as in (2).

(1) What is your darkness?
(2) What evidence is there of Jesus' resurrection in particular?

Of the 115 questions that were subject to close analysis, 61% were clearly external questions, 34% evoked internal states, and for 5% it was difficult to decide. If this cross-section is representative of preaching questions in general the tendency is clear: preachers prefer to raise questions pertaining to external reality, thereby ostensibly heeding (New) homiletic advice that sermons should "connect to real-life concerns of the hearers and not drift into abstractions"[28] and "be cast in forms recognizable as real and possible".[29] This is not to say that internal states-questions are unimportant; rather, they may be of service to preachers (as a pastoral strategy) in encouraging listeners to appropriate and cultivate their faith by inspiring inward reflection.[30]

Another kind of classification of questions makes it possible to distinguish between *explicit inclusiveness-questions* and *non-inclusiveness-questions*: this would seem to be particularly relevant in a study concerned with questions as social and communicative engagement. Explicit inclusiveness requires "naming" of the listeners in some form, either by reference to the second person singular pronoun *you* – forms as in (3), or by joint reference through the inclusive first person plural *we* (or forms thereof) as in (4). If there is no reference in the question either to *you* or inclusive *we*, the question can be classified as non-inclusive (this, of course, does not stop it from being implicitly inclusive).

(3) When was the last time you allowed yourself to be surprised by joy?
(4) Do we really need a Saviour?

To determine the ratio between the two types of question, searches for *you* and *we* were made across the samples and then manually confirmed. Table 2 shows the distribution of questions according to this classification across the three samples.

28 Thomas G. Long, No news is bad news, in *What is the Matter with Preaching Today*, edited by Mike Graves (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 148.
29 Fred. B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, (Atlanta: Chalice Press, 2001), 75.
30 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this dimension of internal states-questions.

Table 2: Distribution of questions (percentages (raw numbers)) that directly address the listeners by "naming" them or by using inclusive "we".

	Anglican	Baptist	Roman-Catholic
Explicitly inclusive			
"you"-questions	16% (33)	22% (57)	18% (20)
"we"-questions	18% (36)	24% (61)	21% (23)
Non-inclusive	66% (135)	54% (140)	61% (69)

It is somewhat more common for preachers not to include listeners explicitly in questions asked, Anglican and Roman-Catholic preachers to a lesser degree than Baptist preachers. A first condition for sharing in the preaching event is, arguably, that listeners are acknowledged as interlocutors, placed in the room (church, hall or other facility) and assumed willing to participate.[31] Obviously this happens most clearly with direct reference to *you*, but the use of *you* comes with potentially problematic implications; listeners may be unsure whether preachers are calling upon the general indefinite pronoun, which includes the speaker, or the second person pronoun, which excludes the speaker. Judging from some of the interview comments, preachers are sensitized to the implications of using inclusive/exclusive references of this kind:

> *Sometimes I catch myself saying 'you' and I'd then say: 'Of course I include myself in that'.*

Although the difference is marginal, preachers more often tend to recognize listeners in questions via inclusive *we*, construing preaching as a shared activity and emphatically emphasizing that preachers and listeners approach the sermon contents drawing on a shared set of beliefs and guided by the same rationale. In this way, sermon questions become dynamic platforms for expressing inclusiveness between preachers and listeners. Again, remarks from informants suggest awareness in this respect:

> *I very much use 'we', 'we' and 'us'. 'We' as a people, 'We' as a church.*

> *I'd say we are very conscious of inclusive 'we'. It is very popular in the Church of England at the moment. There is a bit of pressure for that.*

31 Buttrick, Homiletic (n. 15), 258.

Another classification of questions is based on the traditional distinction between "open questions" as in (1) and (2) (to which there is typically no given answer), "closed questions", as in (4) (which can only be answered by *yes*/*no*/*I don't understand the question*/*I don't want to answer the question*), "alternative questions" (which offer two alternative answers) as in (5), declarative questions (where the only cue to the question status is a question mark, and presumably question intonation) as in (6), and "tag-questions" (which are added onto declarative clauses to create a "short" form of question) as in (7).

(5) Do you want to be surprised or left wondering what happened to the rest?
(6) It is intended as a gift?
(7) Christianity is about conveying ten impossible stories before breakfast, isn't it?

A classification of all questions in the sample according to these categories, see Table 3, suggests that Anglican, and Baptist preachers in particular, tend to ask primarily open questions (59% and 70% respectively), anticipating answers drawn from potentially endless options and without guiding listeners towards a specific option. Open questions are less controlling than closed questions in that they influence the listeners less and effectively encourage listeners to think about a given sermon topic (whatever the question pertains to) from a wider range of perspectives decided only by the listeners' own experience. Moreover, open questions typically induce more revealing and reflective responses; applied to the preaching "conversation" this may provoke a more genuine engagement on the part of the listener. Asking open questions during preaching arguably also projects a more unassuming character on the part of the preacher as less is taken for granted concerning the listener by the asking of the question itself.

Again, Roman-Catholic preachers stand out somewhat from the other two preacher groups by clearly favoring closed questions, suggesting that questions are used in this preaching context more to "maintain and reinforce the common ground among the participants"[32] than to invite listeners to provide answers of their own. When preachers ask closed questions there is less room for sermonic dialogue as the answer options are limited; however, this "limitation" also leads to the positive implication that preachers and listeners are members of a community governed by strong convictions concerning certain aspects of faith. In preaching situations where it is important to confirm beliefs, closed questions help preachers in their persuasive appeal.

32 Biber et al., Longman (n. 21), 212.

Alternative questions, declarative questions, and tag-questions are minor occurrences in all three samples; this last finding is further confirmation that preaching is quite unlike conversation since both declarative questions and tag-questions are common in conversation.

Table 3: Distribution of direct questions according to question type (open, closed, alternative, declarative, or tag); raw numbers, occurrences normalized to occurrences per 1,000 words, and percentage of total number of questions.

	Anglican			Baptist			Roman-Catholic		
Open questions	120	1.86	59%	183	2.38	70%	40	0.83	36%
Closed questions	68	1.05	33%	65	0.84	25%	65	1.35	58%
Alternative-questions	5	0.08	2%	4	0.05	2%	3	0.04	3%
Declarative questions	4	0.06	2%	2	0.03	1%	0	0	0
Tag-questions	7	0.10	4%	4	0.05	2%	4	0.05	3%
All questions (total)	204	3.16	100%	258	3.36	100%	112	2.33	100%

Rather than distinguishing between open and closed questions, homiletics sometimes divides questions into *opening* and *closing* questions, the assumption being that questions appear either at the beginning of sermons, or at the end.[33] This assumption appears to be correct. After dividing all 150 sermons into three parts (based on the word count for each individual sermon), I looked more closely at all open and closed questions in the sample and noted down in which "part" of the sermon they appeared: first part (sermon opening), second part (middle of the sermon), or third part (sermon closing). Figures 1 and 2 display an almost identical pattern: across the three denominations preachers ask open as well as closed questions almost exclusively during the first and the third part of the sermon (there is a marginally wider spread for closed questions).

Research comments from learning literature indicate that placing questions discourse initially may result in positive cognitive learning effects because expectancy is established.[34] If preachers desire a sermon to be a learning experience, then using early questions is a good strategy. There is a much weaker correlation between positive learning effects and discourse-final questions, lending support

33 See e.g. Richard L. Eslinger, *Pitfalls in Preaching*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996).

34 See e.g. John V. Dempsey & Gregory C. Sales, *Interactive Instruction and Feedback*, (Englewood Cliffs: Educational Technology Publications, 1993), 123.

to Eslinger's skepticism towards this practice: "questions placed at the end of sermons tend to delete immediately from congregational hearing".[35]

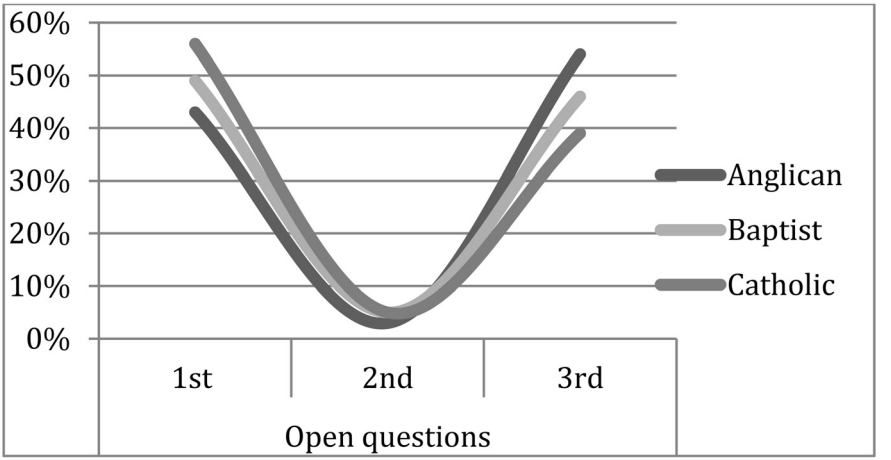

Figure 1: Location of open questions in sermons.

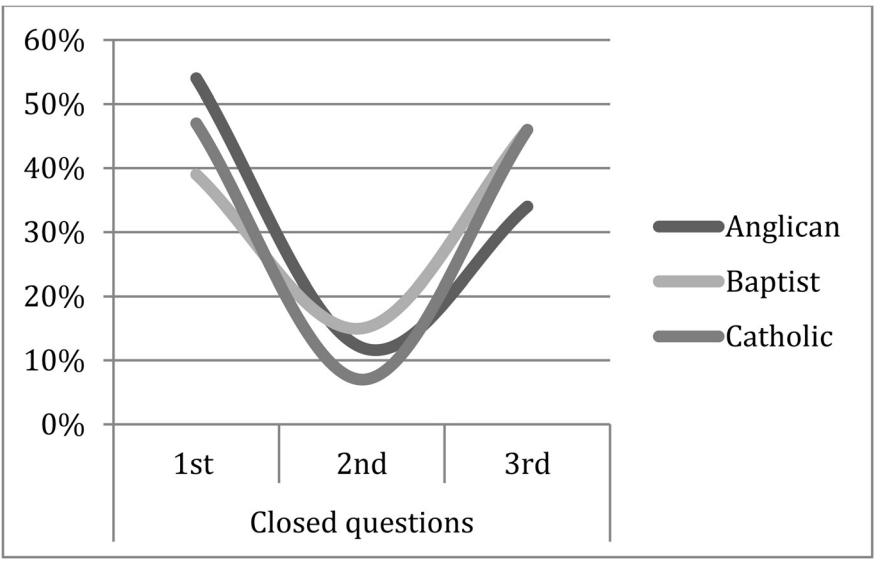

Figure 2: Location of closed questions in sermons.

35 Eslinger, Pittfalls (n. 33), 23.

However, an important motivation for locating questions at the beginning and end of sermons is, I think, the opportunity this affords preachers to create an appearance of conversation. With the help of early questions, preachers frame the sermon as if it was a conversation – a natural conversation nearly always starts with a question (e.g. *How are you? Did you enjoy today's sermon?* and so on). The same reasoning applies to questions in the final section of sermons. Questions standardly mark a transition point in conversation, and by placing questions in the final section, the "transition" from preacher to listener is emphasized. If preachers and listeners are seen as conversants, the "rules" of conversation require the listeners to accept the transition and carry the question forward within themselves for further reflection in pursuit of an answer or, as Eslinger puts it, enabling listeners: "to keep the issue of the sermon open [...] throughout the week ahead".[36]

It is interesting that open and closed questions are used to the same extent in opening and closing sections of the sermon. It would have been natural for preachers to typically open a sermon with an open question, in the hope of generating maximum engagement from listeners by encouraging listeners to reflect on seemingly endless possibilities before answering the question together with the preacher, and close with a closed question, which more firmly establishes a concluding point with reference to a simple yes/no-answer. While the analysis of discourse functions reported on below suggests that preachers use questions with these very objectives in mind (setting the scene, creating anticipation, and providing closure), it appears that their practices do not strategically discriminate between open and closed questions to achieve the objectives.

A final (conventional) categorizing distinction for questions is that between *genuine-* and *rhetorical questions*. However, this division is unsustainable in the preaching context as virtually no sermon questions are asked to elicit information that is unknown to the preachers (this is typically one of the defining criteria for genuine questions); there is no "elicitation" proper because sermon listeners typically do not answer back, and more often than not preachers already know the answer to the question, and appear eager to provide it. Therefore, by a classic general definition of "rhetorical" question, virtually all questions asked during preaching are rhetorical: they are questions to which no answer is expected, and they are included because the preacher is after some "effect". On occasions when it is clear that the preacher does not have an answer, as in (1), it is arguably still the case that the primary motivation for asking the question is not to gain

36 Eslinger, Pittfalls (n. 33), 22.

information, but e.g. to call listeners to action or reflection, i.e. the question asking is still "effectual" rather than "factual".

Looking again at the cross-section of 115 questions I wanted to find out exactly how often preachers provide an answer to questions they themselves pose. In 73% of the 115 questions analyzed the preacher provides an answer, most commonly immediately after asking the question. Admittedly, this is a practice which helps project an imagined, real conversation with listeners where question and answer are typically adjacent. More rarely an answer is provided as a developed response stretching over more extensive discourse within the sermon. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as soon as questions involve explicit naming of the listener (*you*-forms), it seems more rare for preachers to offer an answer to the question asked. While it is natural for preachers on most occasions to want to provide answers, preachers need to balance any objective they may have to mimic a question-answer type of conversation against their desire to afford listeners the freedom to provide their own answers.

Preachers' Rationale for Using Questions in Sermons

According to Stephen F. Olford, "questions [...] help people to think through the message with you".[37] When Olford talks of the functions of questions in sermons, his focus is on how questions facilitate various cognitive processes, how they help "focus the attention of people on the main truths" [and] focus thoughts on various aspects of a truth or issue".[38]

Initiating thought processes involving sermon ideas was a recurrent theme during the interviews with the practicing preachers concerning their rationale for using questions in their own preaching. For example, this Anglican preacher expressed the following view when we talked about his short but potent question in (8), which concludes a colorful and detailed description of a girl being shot to death in a seemingly pointless act of violence:

> *You know, this was a very passionate sermon, and I think questions are good because they get the hearers more involved in the sermon. I want them to share in my passion for the sermon idea; I want them to take my view and think about what it is that I am really preaching, and the*

37 Stephen F. Olford, *Annointed Expository Preaching*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 208.

38 Ibid.

question helps me to achieve that, I think. We live in a blame culture, and the image I paint there, followed by the question, highlights the fact that assigning blame is not always a straightforward thing.

(8) Who's to blame?

Thus, one function of questions in sermons seems to be to **engage listeners in the sermon idea(s)**, to pull them into the story and share in the preacher's reasoning on a certain sermon aspect.

Another role that sermon questions play is that of **guiding listeners in an exegetic/hermeneutic process**, again clearly involving a cognitive dimension. In (9), the back-to-back questions seem intended to help listeners make sense of a Bible reading.

(9) What are we to make of the suffering? Why does the Evangelist choose to describe it in this way?

When I discussed this example with the Roman-Catholic preacher who gave the sermon it was clear that his objective was precisely that:

The Bible is a difficult read for most people. It is difficult to understand what lies hidden in the wording. I sometimes like to use questions, like I did here, to encourage listeners to study and then offer their own interpretation of a reading.

Other functions of questions seem to relate more to the actual situation of oral delivery, for example by explicitly **acknowledging listeners' presence and engaging in dialogue**, and by (**re)gaining listeners' attention**. Offering a general remark about questions in sermons during our interview, this Baptist preacher said that:

I need to recognize the actual, physical presence of the listeners in the hall. That is, I think, a precondition of good preaching, which is a strange kind of conversation. Questions are useful in that respect because that way I can involve them in a mock dialogue. They are not going to answer me, not these folks, but recognizing them like that at least creates that appearance.

In the preaching conversation preachers are obliged to recognize their audience in a way that is typically not required in standard conversation, where listeners/speakers receive that recognition by taking turns to talk, by explicitly including them in the discourse, and a question can serve this function in two ways; first, as we have seen, by serving as a platform for listener "naming" and exploitation of inclusiveness, but also, simultaneously, by serving as an invitation to join the

preacher in that "strange" kind of conversation. In addition to being an invitation, questions clearly also serve to get listeners whose thoughts may have wandered off back on track, as noted by this other Baptist preacher.

> *It is natural for listeners' attention sometimes to drift during a sermon, in which case they may need waking up. [Laughs] If I notice that happens, I sometimes come up with questions on the spot. It is fascinating how a listener's mind, in its apparently inattentive state, can be called back into action, just like that, when a question is asked. So, not the most noble of reasons for using questions, but surprisingly effective.*

Some functions of questions in sermons are primarily concerned with the "argument" being made, notably by helping to set the scene for the sermon, to make sure that sermon ideas are endorsed by listeners, or to aid preachers to frame claims that stand in stark contrast to whatever is being preached.

Stephen Farris argues that "the most important task of the interpreter is to ask, 'What is God doing in the text'?"[39] Thus, a question is the door through which all preachers must enter the sermon – this is obviously in the nature of preaching as a hermeneutical activity. Over the years, numerous preachers have used the very same question as a sermon opening, apparently taking their "interpreter" role seriously and willing to take listeners along when discovering God in the text. We saw above that questions are indeed most frequently used in the opening and closing sections of sermons, indicating very strongly that questions function to **frame the sermon**, either by **setting the scene and creating anticipation** (hopefully by sometimes asking more concrete questions than "What is God doing in the text?"), or by **providing a sense of closure**, or an "opening" of another kind, at the end of the sermon.

This framing function of questions was confirmed by one of my Roman-Catholic informants when we discussed (10) and (11) which he used as the very first and very last statements to open and close his sermon respectively.

(10) Do you believe that Jesus has died for the world and risen again?
(11) Do you believe he has died and risen for you?

> *By opening with that question I wanted to rouse the listeners and at the same time indirectly introduce the sermon theme, which was "doubt". Some people these days find the idea of Jesus' resurrection troublesome, and so did some of the disciples back then. [...] By calling upon the listeners with a question as the very last thing, I wanted there to be a connection to the opening but, more importantly, I wanted to encourage them to ask that question, confident that they*

39 Stephen Farris, *Preaching that Matters: the Bible in our Lives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 122.

also have a reassuring answer, and hopefully my sermon has helped them in coming to that answer.

In an ambitious report in this journal, Gerrit Immink talks about the impact of the New Homiletic paradigm on preacher stance, noting that "a more traditional assertive discourse is now renounced, and a more indicative [...] way of speaking is welcomed".[40] Questions can be used productively by preachers to **contribute to a more tentative discursive expression**, thereby **making the discourse more acceptable** to a postmodern mind. I would argue that questions share a pragmatic affinity with so-called hedges, i.e. expressions like *perhaps, might*, and *maybe*, whose purpose it is to signal "tentativeness and possibility,"[41] "plausible reasoning rather than certain knowledge", and to recognize "alternative voices and viewpoints" [to] "withhold commitment and open up dialogue".[42] We can see this e.g. in (12) where the assertive force of the proposition (*We all seek the pain and suffering like Jesus did*) is attenuated by the framing of the utterance with the hedge/epistemic adjective *perhaps*, but then the attenuation is further amplified by the question that follows.

(12) Perhaps we should all seek the pain and suffering like Jesus did, really welcome it into our lives. Or what do you think?

What the preacher is suggesting is obviously an unattractive proposition by most listeners' standards, and to reduce the risk of listeners' rejection of the proposal, the hedging is used to accentuate that listeners are free to make their choice. The effect of introducing the question that follows is almost exactly the same – listeners are explicitly encouraged to make the call for themselves on the basis of what they believe is best. This function of questions applies in two ways for the preacher and the listeners: the preacher avoids "dogmatizing" and "pontificating",[43] and listeners are allowed "to 'apply' the word spoken to their own lives in their own ways without it being dictated".[44]

This "hedging" function of questions was brought up by several interviewees but expressed most clearly by this Baptist preacher commenting on (12):

40 F. Gerrit Immink, Homiletics: the current debate, in *International Journal of Practical Theology* 8.1, 2006, 101.
41 Ken Hyland, *Hedging in Scientific Research Articles*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1998), 1.
42 Hyland, Metadiscourse (n. 4), 52; 49.
43 Paul S. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, (Atlanta: Chalice Press, 2004), 123.
44 Wesley Allen Jr, Introduction (n. 10), 8.

> *Questions, I think, tend to take away the firmness of the word, indicating that there is no one simple answer. By presenting something as a question I think they [listeners] are more likely to accept, for example, a difficult message as was the case here.*

Another function of questions which is very common to many genres of religious discourse is **projecting "misguided voices"**, essentially presenting an argument by invoking "emphatically contra-Christian" points of views,[45] as in (13) where the preacher obviously takes up a mock polemic position, quite opposed to his own, actual, preaching position.

(13) Why should anyone believe this stuff? Rising from the dead – ludicrous. And we don't really need a Saviour anyway, do we?

Preachers use argumentation in the sermon, David Brown says, to lay "the groundwork for (the) listener to respond [...]".[46] This response to the preacher's persuasive appeal is conditioned by the listeners' assuming the preacher's frame of reference. The practice of drawing on "misguided questions" is an effective way for the preacher to anticipate potential objections (however extreme) held by the listeners. In addition, simultaneously, preachers construe a polarity of beliefs where it becomes important for the sermon listeners to "belong" to the right camp, i.e. to accept the preacher's world view/allow themselves to be persuaded, as remarked by this Anglican preacher when asked to comment on (13):

> *The sole purpose of those questions is rhetorical. By expressing something that is blatantly opposed to what we believe, in a way I reconfirm our [emphatic] shared faith. Having said that, there may be people in the congregation that really do struggle with questions like [emphatic] these, and then that's a way for me to address them and guide those people in the right direction. Doing that may also make it easier for them to accept the sermon.*

Thus, the strategic introduction of a rhetorical "counterbalance" to the preacher's frame of reference might actually increase the likelihood of successful argumentation, of "acceptance of the ideas of the sermon".[47]

When preachers draw on misguided questions in their preaching, this is a way of evoking an imaginary "other" voice in addition to their own. Not only imaginary voices enter the sermon this way and for these purposes; even if a

45 Ethelston, Misguided (n. 3), 684.

46 David Brown, *Transformational Preaching: Theory and Practice*, (College Station: Virtualbookworm.com Publishing, 2003), 476.

47 Wayne McDill, *Twelve Essential Skills for Great Preaching*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 132.

sermon may be perceived as typically monologic, preaching "involves voices in addition to the preacher and the congregation".[48] Questions sometimes serve as **vehicles for "othervoicedness"**. Sometimes the preacher's objective appears to be to directly render a biblical dialogue (much of which is based on a question-answer pattern), to allow God to speak directly to listeners through Scripture, often as a rhetorical lead-in to a particular sermon point, as in (14); other times the source of the question is someone other than a biblical person, as in (15), where the Roman-Catholic preacher uses a question attributed to a CERN physicist to introduce the sermon theme.

(14) Pilate asks Jesus a question "Are you the king of the Jews?" Now, Jesus, does not give a straight answer, so let's dwell on this question for a little while. Jesus was no "king" by the criteria of the time, yet [...].
(15) I recently read a report where a physicist working at the Large Hadron Collider in CERN asked a really pertinent question: "What do you think we can find at the actual core of the Universe?".

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the very many possible reasons preachers may have for drawing on "intertext" in this way,[49] but the analysis made it plain that questions are highly productive for preachers in driving a multivoiced discourse forward for many reasons, as evidenced by this comment from the preacher of (15):

> *I had actually read what that scientist said and thought that it added some intellectual clout to a point I was trying to get across to the congregation. Reading that piece actually made me rewrite the opening of the sermon. [...]. The question form made it natural for me to then shape the sermon around an answer to that fundamental question of our being. I can actually think of no better, more natural way to introduce another voice in sermon; you cannot, for example, use citations like in a theological journal.*

Finally, another function of sermonic questions that came up in several of the interviews is related to perceptions about the preacher's person, namely how questions help **portraying preachers as both students and teachers of faith**. As teachers,[50] preachers exploit a semi-authoritative position to pose questions in

48 Allen, Preaching (n. 15), 2.
49 But see Malmström, The "other" voice in preaching: intertextual form and function in contemporary English sermonic discourse, (to appear in *Journal of Communication and Religion*)
50 See e.g. Thomas G. Long When the Preacher Is a Teacher, in *Journal for Preachers* 16.2, 1992, 21–27.

order to affect their audience with a clear teaching objective in mind. Example (16) turned out to be a good illustration of this function of questions.

(16) What is the evidence that is apparently so compelling?

When asked about what role the question served in the sermon the Baptist preacher commented:

> *I was exploring the events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. I wanted to take the hearers through all the evidence that exists in this respect, piece by piece. The question is the starting point of a section of that sermon that is shaped quite a lot like a mini-class, you know, I ask questions, we study some writings together, not just from the Bible, and then we conclude something on the basis of that.*

A reversed perspective is evident in (17):

(17) What can we learn from this conversation about Jesus?

Here the preacher adopts a more unassuming position and asks a question which emphasizes that he is on a journey together with the listeners, exploring possible answers rather than in a position to provide definitive answers. The Anglican preacher in question confirmed this interpretation, saying:

> *I never ever ask questions from a position of authority, preaching does not work that way in my view. Rather my reason for doing this here is to stress that I am on a journey just as much as they are. I am also learning from our readings and our conversations. In other words, I do not always have answers, but together we can perhaps approach truth as it is revealed to us as disciples.*

Concluding remarks

In many ways this study can be seen as a response to the call from Gerrit Immink, Theo Pleizier, Clifton Guthrie and others for more empirical research in homiletics.[51] Despite ambitious work like that by John S. McClure and colleagues on the Lilly-project,[52] empirically grounded investigations are scarce within homi-

51 Immink, Homiletics (n. 40); Clifton F. Guthrie, Quantitative Empirical Studies of Preaching: a Review of Methods and Findings, in *Journal of Communication and Religion* 30, 2007, 65–117; Theo Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons: a Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics*, (Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers, 2010).

52 John S. McClure, Ronald J. Allen, Dale P Andrews, L. Susan Bond, Dan P Mosely & G. Lee Ramsey, Jr., *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies*, (Atlanta: Chalice Press, 2004).

letics. It is also notable that this kind of research into aspects of preaching from neighboring disciplines has been quite limited, for example, the linguistics studies cited in this paper (see footnote 3) almost represent the sum total attention devoted to preaching from within that research discipline. From the discipline of sociology, Robert Wuthnow also notes that we know little about "the ways in which religious discourse is actually put together".[53]

Paul Scott Wilson talks of homiletics as a discipline that helps preachers "prepare sermons with greater economy, skill, and insight".[54] Arguably, real "insight" is unattainable simply on the basis of theoretical studies; in order to further homiletics as a research discipline, and advance preaching practices, we must rely on data-driven description of large(er) samples as well as introspection based on singular case studies. This important piece of interdisciplinary research will hopefully inform a more nuanced discussion in homiletics concerning interrogative practices and functions of questions in contemporary preaching, and it may spark further interest in religious discourse analysis.

An obvious shortcoming of the present study includes the size of the empirical sample; it is difficult to generalize on the basis of only 150 sermons and 11 preacher interviews, and the choice to base the functional analysis primarily on informants' self-reporting can also be called into question. As can the choice to limit the study to an investigation of preachers only, excluding a qualitative analysis of listeners' reaction/engagement with sermonic questions. However, hopefully this selective data and the systematic approach used to analyze it is enough to provide a somewhat representative snapshot of preacher' interrogative practices in sermonic discourse that may generate further discussion.

Notwithstanding these negatives, the study clearly highlights the interpersonal and multifunctional nature of interrogatives in sermonic discourse. The following short comments and tentative recommendations can be offered as a result of the investigation:

If conversation between people really is a "model" for preaching (and not *just* a metaphor), homiletics (and preachers themselves) should consider the extent to which questions are used in sermonic conversation and use more questions rather than fewer questions. The density of interrogatives indicated by the investigation here suggests that preaching has a long way to go before it resembles standard conversation where questions are the driving force of the discourse. One possible reason for prescriptive restrictions being imposed on questions in preaching

53 Robert Wuthnow, *Rediscovering the Sacred: Perspectives on Religion in Contemporary Society*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 55.

54 Wilson, Preaching (n. 43), 153.

could be that the interpersonal "potential" of interrogatives has hitherto not been considered.

In other respects, however, it appears that preachers use questions strategically to mimic conversation. We notice, for example, that questions are located discourse initially and discourse finally to cast the sermon as a whole as a conversation, with an interrogative "opener" and a "transitional" question in the closing section, effectively prompting listeners to reflect on the basis of the sermon. In a similar way the eagerness with which preachers provide answers to questions, rather than leave them unanswered, suggests that preachers are anxious to leave listeners with the impression of a conversation having taken place.

Homiletics would definitely benefit from a more profound discussion concerning the many different types of questions that exist, and how preachers, in their interpersonal endeavors, can use different types of questions productively conditioned by different preaching purposes. For example, in a sermon reaching out to people who typically are less prone to feel included in a churchy context (e. g. preaching to "once-a-yearers") the cumulative inviting effect of an open question that explicitly names the listeners or draws on inclusive references would be a lot more welcoming than a closed question (or no question at all) with no explicit reference to the listeners.

The previous comment hinted at one of the very many interpersonally oriented discourse functions that can be associated with questions (acting as a communicative platform for making explicit references to listeners), and the functional analysis provided in here highlights many more. Preachers would be well advised to take the functional versatility of questions into account when preparing sermons, and homiletics should spend more effort elaborating the rationale for drawing on questions during preaching.

Acknowledgements: The Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences (grant number: LS10–1230: 1) funded the research reported on in this article.