This project is a study of the resources, methods, and technologies used by Church of Christ preachers in their weekly sermon development. This study helps to understand the habits of preachers in a way that illuminates how seminary libraries can serve alumni and students (who are, or will soon become, preachers). The research considers three stages of the process: research, composition, and delivery, while attending to three areas of interest: resources, technology, and methodology.

A Demography of Churches of Christ

Churches of Christ are mainly concentrated in the American South (particularly Tennessee, Alabama, and Texas). Despite that density, some argue that Churches of Christ are the most evenly distributed religious body in America. But there is no question that South boasts the largest congregations. Of the 30 largest churches, the northernmost is in Hendersonville, Tennessee and the westernmost is in Lubbock, Texas. In terms of color/ethnicity, Churches of Christ align rather closely to that of the general American population: White 69%; Black 16%; Latino 10%; Asian 1%; Other/Mixed 4%. In terms of

1 Flavil Yeakley, “Good News and Bad News: A Realistic Assessment of Churches of Christ in the United States 2008,” http://www.pureheartvision.org/resources/docs/yeakley/Good%20News%20and%20Bad%20News_A%20Realistic%20Assessment%20of%20Churchs%20of%20Christ%20in%20the%20USA.pdf. Yeakley defines distribution as the number of counties in America with a Church of Christ congregation subtracted from the total number of counties.


3 Pew Research Center, http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/churches-of-christ/. While these statistics lend the appearance of a racially-diverse fellowship, it needs to be noted that congregations remain rather segregated.
gender, Churches of Christ are 60% female and 40% male. The group leans toward conservative politics.

**Theological Orientation of Churches of Christ**

Churches of Christ are part of the Stone-Campbell Movement that emerged on the American frontier during the early 19th Century. Like many renewal movements of that era, Churches of Christ upheld a commitment to restoring the faith and practice of the earliest Christian communities. This vision galvanized around stated commitments of congregational autonomy, adult baptism by immersion for the forgiveness of sins, weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper, and a cappella music in worship. Today, some urban and metropolitan congregations reflect a shift toward a polity and style more similar to Evangelical churches, while a smaller number might lean toward Mainline Protestantism. These perceived shifts are, at the present, probably the largest points of conflict within the fellowship.

**Brief History of Homiletics in Churches of Christ**

The early style of preaching in Churches of Christ could best be classified as rational. Founder Alexander Campbell believed that the task of the preacher was to set out the facts of Christianity. Campbell even went so far as to reject the use of illustrations, suggesting that they watered down the larger message. The debate was an obvious vehicle for this particular commitment. Yet Churches of Christ moved away from debates and embraced an expository style. This trend might be attributed to the significant interest in biblical studies, particularly in the graduate schools that came into form during the 1960’s. During the latter part of the 20th century, the homiletical tradition continued to be expository, but made room for inductive, narrative, and other forms of communication.

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4 Ibid.


6 Other identifying norms would be Arminian theology, biblical literalism, rejection of the supernatural work of the Spirit today, and male leadership in congregations.


Aside from style, other norms situate Church of Christ preachers within the broader context. In terms of personal situation, they are almost always male and very often married. Each situation varies, but in most cases elders of a congregation oversee the employment of the preacher.12 The preacher develops his own sermon material without (in most cases) the guidance of a larger governing group or a lectionary.

Research on Clergy and Sermon Resources

There is not an extensive body of current literature regarding the interaction of preachers and resources.13 A similar research project to this one might be Dwight Huseman’s article that appeared in 1970.14 In that article, Huseman surveyed pastors (mostly Lutheran) about their personal information, parish information, book selection, periodical selection, time management as it pertains to use of resources, subject areas of interest, and use of listed works of significance in classic or theological literature.15 Lately, more scholarly energy has been given to the information-seeking behaviors of clergy during the sermon development process. A leader in this field is Daniel R. Roland, whose dissertation focused on the entire process of sermon development, even as it relates to the minister’s self-awareness and cognitive decisions that influence the process.16


Casey, “Preaching,” 608. In his larger work on the topic, Casey identifies additional traditions that have shaped preaching in the movement including Evangelical, narrative, African-American, scholarly, and political, Saddlebags, City Streets, and Cyberspace: A History of Preaching in the Churches of Christ (Abilene: ACU Press, 1995)

This group is best characterized as both the administrative board and the pastoral shepherding body of an individual congregation. An eldership will most often be comprised of men who are married with children. This governance model does not typify African-American congregations, where the preacher often appoints the elders.


Ibid., 17-23.
Roland’s research is helpful for understanding some of the sermon development process, but more in the internal processes of the minister, and less on the actual materials that the minister selects/consults.¹⁷

Why We Did What We Did: Collection Development and Budgets

Very few seminary libraries have experienced significant growth in collections budgets over the past ten years. Yet while budgets stagnate and shrink, publisher’s catalogs continue to get thicker each season. Therefore, the each day reminds librarians of the reality that they cannot acquire everything. This makes understanding user research habits even more essential.

For North American publishers, the commentary continues to be a vehicle for growth in a competitive print book market. European publishers continue to market monographic series that are often doctoral dissertations and festschriften,¹⁸ yet conservative domestic publishers continue to publish new commentary series.

For example, over the past 20 years, Baker Publishing has introduced: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Biblia Americana (Cotton Mather), Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture, Paideia, Teach the Text, and Understanding the Bible. True, Baker has relatively modest prices on their materials. But still, very few budgets have adjusted to accommodate such growth.

Why We Did What We Did: Preachers as Friends and Collaborators

While Churches of Christ continue to experience a decline in the number of people becoming preachers, that group still makes up the largest percentage of graduating classes at HST (and likely other schools). So, preachers function not only as alumni (who provide valuable feedback), but also as a reflection on what a theological education looks like once it walks across the stage and enters the realities of full-time ministerial work. Sure, many schools like HST pride themselves on sending students into many forms of ministerial service. Yet, the ministry of preaching is unique. The task of a weekly sermon sends a preacher into resources with such regularity that preachers are ideal candidates for questions about collections and technology. Many librarians will still cling to ideals about serving the faculty, students, and curriculum as a first priority. That is appropriate. But friendships with local preachers are valuable for wisdom, publicity, recruiting, fundraising,


¹⁸ A leading example is Mohr Siebeck’s Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2, which at the writing of this paper had published its 414th volume.
and credibility in the church community. They are voices deserving of our attention and worthy of consideration in our institutional mission.

The Survey
During the fall of 2015 we sent an online survey through email to over 4,000 addresses associated with particular congregations. We also used social media (Facebook and Twitter) in addition to multiple private email lists, Google Groups platforms, and ListServes. We received over 530 responses, and believe that this is the largest single survey of Church of Christ preachers in many years.

The survey asked 28 questions that primarily dealt with three major categories: the personal story of the preacher, the resources used in sermon preparation, and the resources used in sermon delivery. We asked about the preacher’s educational background, age, and experience.

1. **Highest Degree Earned:** High School/GED: 5.47%; Preaching School: 9.06%; Bachelor’s Degree: 30.06%; Masters of Divinity: 10.59%; Other Masters Degree: 26.60%; Doctor of Ministry: 8.70%; Ph.D: 5.67%; Other: 3.97%.

This data is critical in view of two particulars of Churches of Christ: there is no ordaining process/requirement for ministers and there is a longstanding suspicion of being an anti-intellectual movement. These percentages are telling for both. It actually indicates that despite there being no formal academic requirement (such as an M.Div.) to preach, most preachers actually hold a high level of graduate education. In fact, the combined number of doctorates in pulpits nearly matches the number of non-college graduates in pulpits. Reports of an anti-intellectual movement have been greatly exaggerated.


These numbers line up with those of many mainline Protestant groups who are suffering from an aging clergy and a shortage of qualified candidates to fill positions. While some may dispute the reasons for the situation, the numbers suggest that the number of preachers over 55 far outweighs the number under 35.

3. **Number of years as the person who handles the majority of the Sunday morning preaching:** 0-5: 20.84%; 6-10: 14.53%; 11-15: 13.96%; 16-20: 9.56%; 21-25: 8.99%; 26-30: 8.41%; 31-35: 7.65%; over 35: 16.06%.

Our next series of questions invited preachers to disclose the methods and technologies they use for both the development and delivery of their messages.

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4. Which Bible software programs do you use? Logos: 38.42%; Accordance: 7.37%; Bible Works: 9.74%; None: 49.21%.
6. How often do you use projected slides (PowerPoint, Keynote, etc.)? Nearly every sermon: 58.49%; A few times per month: 9.06%; A few times per year: 17.74%; Never: 14.72%.
7. What organizational method do you use most? Compose in organizational software (like Evernote): 3.09%; Compose in word processor (like Microsoft Word): 82.59%; Write on paper. Old school: 12.19%; None. I just get up and talk: 2.13%.
9. Do your sermons typically come as installments in a series? Yes: 66.79%; No: 33.21%.
10. What is the typical length of a series? 3-4 weeks: 72.55%; One quarter (approximately 13 weeks): 21.08%; One semester (approximately 20 weeks): 6.37%.

This section had the lowest participation, with many respondents skipping the question, particularly the ones regarding Bible study and organizational software. One might take the skip to indicate that they do not use such products. In terms of homiletical theory, the heavy reliance on projected slides might suggest that Church of Christ preachers are staying true to the historic emphasis on preaching as a rational act of teaching and exposition, with less of an emphasis on narrative and storytelling forms of communication, which are often less reliant on slides (like Ted Talks).

The third section of the survey focused on the resources that preachers consult in their preparation. In this section, we wanted to get a glimpse of the preacher’s desk and bookshelf.


More than half of preachers use an Evangelical translation produced in the past 40 years (NIV or ESV). This indicates that many preachers are using a translation other than the one they grew up using. At what point they made the change is not obvious, but it might not have been in college. One might suspect that more than 6.7% of Bible or Religious Studies professors use the New Revised Standard Version. But it hasn’t caught on with the Church of Christ preachers.

12. How often do you use commentaries? Most weeks: 59.05%; When dealing with difficult passages: 31.43%; Rarely: 9.52%.

*Write-in votes for the following commentaries exceeded 5%: Burton Coffman: 13.88%; Gospel Advocate: 7.35%; Tyndale: 6.94%; William Barclay: 5.71%; Pulpit Commentary: 5.71%.

14. How important are the following features in a commentary relative to your preaching?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Less Important</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Weighted Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Application to church life and ministry</td>
<td>46.99%</td>
<td>35.15%</td>
<td>17.86%</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application to current affairs and broad social issues</td>
<td>22.07%</td>
<td>42.77%</td>
<td>35.16%</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>2.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections to art, music, film, and pop culture</td>
<td>2.18%</td>
<td>23.96%</td>
<td>73.88%</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek/Hebrew word studies</td>
<td>58.96%</td>
<td>33.72%</td>
<td>7.32%</td>
<td>519</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help with difficult texts</td>
<td>77.86%</td>
<td>19.03%</td>
<td>3.11%</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification of historical positions on texts</td>
<td>49.02%</td>
<td>39.80%</td>
<td>11.18%</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with Ancient Near Eastern/Greco-Roman backgrounds</td>
<td>45.24%</td>
<td>40.19%</td>
<td>14.50%</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theological implications of the texts</td>
<td>65.23%</td>
<td>27.22%</td>
<td>7.53%</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It seems that the reporting of why preachers use commentaries (q. 14) lines up rather closely to which commentaries they select (q. 13). The four top-ranking commentaries are: NIV Application (Zondervan): 39.11%; Word Biblical (Thomas Nelson): 37.71%; College Press NIV (College): 34.08%; New International Commentary on the Old/New Testament (Eerdmans): 32.12%. The preachers reported an interest in the meaning of texts and their application to contemporary life. There might be something here, too, regarding the use of commentaries to handle difficult passages (q. 12) and the theological orientation of the commentaries. Perhaps indecision on the part of the preacher leads them to consult trusted voices (often Evangelical or of the Stone-Campbell tradition), rather than necessarily trying to grasp the whole scope of the debate as they might do in graduate school.

A related item of note here is the shift in the resources that preachers use when they are in graduate school to when they are in full-time ministry. While Anchor Bible, Hermeneia, and International Critical Commentary are staples of term papers, they are less used in the development of sermons.

15. When you encounter a text that has been subject to significant theological debates
Throughout Christian history, how does that show in the sermon? I often detail the various people and positions: 16.40%; I often allude to the fact that others in history reached different conclusions: 67.21%; I often focus on the position that I believe is correct, without saying much about other positions: 16.40%.

16. When an author refers to an earlier source with a footnote to another work, how often do you go to find that resource? Not very often: 44.76%; Somewhat often: 40.00%; Very often: 11.43%; Almost always: 3.81%.

17. I find Greek and Hebrew words in commentaries to be: Essential: 25.10%; Helpful: 67.05%; Helpful, but not worth the time: 6.51%; Unhelpful: 1.34%.


*Write-in answers included Church of Christ publications: Think, Spiritual Sword, Christian Chronicle, Christian Courier, Seek the Old Paths, and Reason & Revelation.

19. Do you consult scholarly journals on a regular basis (at least monthly)? Yes: 21.69%; No: 78.31%.

20. If you answered YES to question 19, how do you access them? Print subscription: 19.01%; Online subscription: 27.27%; Access through University-sponsored student/alumni program, like ATLAS for ALUMS: 53.72%.


Most respondents answered this question (98.1%). Only 20% of ministers consult scholarly periodical literature on a monthly basis. But over half of those who do use it regularly indicate that they do so through a University-sponsored site (like ATLAS for Alums). It seems fair to wonder if ministers would use scholarly periodicals more if they had access and knew how to use that access. This might be an opportunity for seminaries to consider how well they publicize their resources.

The other item deserving of mention is that over 80% of respondents say that they access periodicals in digital form, not through a print subscription. One cannot help but ponder the future of journals that do not have a digital counterpart.

22. How likely are you to use a popular-level book as a primary text for a sermon series (ex. a series on prayer that works through Timothy Keller's, Prayer? Most series I preach I do something like this: 2.49%; Sometimes. Perhaps one series per year: 31.36%; Rarely. I did this a few years ago: 26.58%; Never: 39.58%.

23. What historical authors/works do you consult? Check all that apply: Thomas Aquinas: 15.67%; St. Augustine: 23.40%; John Calvin: 17.88%; Alexander Campbell: 36.64%; G.K. Chesterton: 17.00%; C.S. Lewis: 53.64%; Martin Luther: 25.17%; Charles
Spurgeon: 31.35%; John Wesley: 18.54%; None: 30.68%.

*Write-in answers included Church Fathers, Josephus, J.W. McGarvey, Albert Barnes, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Matthew Henry.

One might notice that Alexander Campbell does not necessarily stand out among the other voices. Of course, Campbell did not publish commentaries in the modern sense, and Churches of Christ regard Campbell as a charter restorer of their movement, but not necessarily as a theological authority, a commitment stemming from the mantra, “No Creed but the Bible.” So, perhaps it is not too surprising. And the love for C.S. Lewis is to be expected as well.

24. *What podcasts do you find helpful in your sermon preparation?*

*Write-in items included This American Life, Andy Stanley, Timothy Keller, Rick Atchley, and John Piper.

25. *What blogs do you find helpful in your sermon preparation?*

*Write-in items included Scot McKnight, John Mark Hicks, Richard Beck, and Wes McAdams.

26. *Do you use the lectionary?* Every week: 2.58% Sometimes: 15.67%; Never: 81.75%.

27. *If you use the lectionary, what lectionary resources do you find most helpful?*

*Write-in items included Feasting on the Word, Text This Week, and Revised Common Lectionary (Vanderbilt)

28. *Are you a part of a preacher's study group to help you in your sermon preparation?* Yes: 12.60%; No: 87.40%.

**Implications for Libraries**

*The Importance of Understanding Historic Strengths*

The collection development policy at HST gives considerable attention to building and sustaining a deep, comprehensive collection in Biblical Studies, particularly in English. This commitment involves strong commentaries on biblical and non-canonical works, significant monographs, Greek and Hebrew tools, catalogs on material culture from the Ancient Near East and Greco-Roman world, and other materials that help to answer the question of what the authors of a biblical texts intended to communicate. These collecting interest bear a strong resemblance to the perceived needs of preachers.

The survey also reflected a religious fellowship that is open to ideas from various

20 Respondents marked Less Important for: Application to Current Affairs and Broad Social Issues (35%); Connections to Art, Music, Film, and Pop Culture (73.86%); and Application to Church Life and Ministry (17.86%).
religious traditions, but also firmly supportive of their own publications. It is interesting to take that breakdown of which commentary series Church of Christ preachers use, and then to lay it over the broader holdings of these series in libraries worldwide. Take, for instance, commentaries on 1st Corinthians.

- Craig Blomberg, NIV Application (Zondervan): 39.11%. Held by 312 libraries.
- Ralph Martin, Word Biblical (Thomas Nelson): 37.71%. Held by 149 libraries.
- Richard Oster, College Press NIV (College): 34.08%. Held by 58 libraries.

These numbers indicate an appreciation of an in-house publication (College Press NIV) that is disproportionate to the reception of that publication in broader circles. While this is likely true among most groups, it seems deserving of mention here, particularly since Churches of Christ do not have large publishing houses to the extent of Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists, to name a few. Yet, preachers seem interested in going out of their way to find resources by scholars they appreciate and trust.

While there is always a temptation to move in various directions and build a collection that with more width and less depth, that impulse should be tempered by the commitment to serve those whom the library presently serves and to let the library serve the advancement of the core mission of the institution.

The Opportunities for Collaborative Composition

There is an interesting dynamic in the research that suggests that preachers are most likely to use technology when it has immediate relevance to their public engagement with the church. Nearly 70% of preachers use projected slides with regularity, in addition to 80% using a computerized word processor and over 20% using a tablet device to preach. Considering that 40% of respondents were over 56 years old, it would be unfair to suggest that the group rejects the use of technology.

But preachers are less likely to use recent technology in ways that might be less public, such as the research, resourcing, and composition of their messages. Two-thirds of ministers do not use any sort of organizational software to collect material for their sermons, while half of ministers do not use Bible study software.21

As libraries seek to engage tactile learning through production (such as maker labs) perhaps theological libraries could facilitate the composition of sermons by offering space. Libraries could feature Bible study software packages on public computers, which would alleviate the cost burden for preachers. This exposure might give visibility to the collection so that they might embrace the benefits of digital access, while taking advantage of access to printed works of higher quality.

There might be creative solutions for helping preachers organize their material (if they wish to do so). Many seminaries teach students to use bibliographic management

21 It is unknown what reasons they might give for abstaining.
tools (like Zotero). Perhaps there would be interest in teaching Evernote to preachers. This, again, would get people in the building and might be the first step in creating a creative ecosystem of sermon composition and collaboration, and might provide a collaborative network for some of the 87% of preachers who do not have a preacher’s study group, but might want one.

**The Importance of Access**

There seemed to be a consensus in the research that preachers had limited time for sermon preparation, so they selected resources that were the most accessible at the moment. The selection of commentaries gives evidence for this. The four most used commentaries (College Press, NICNT/OT, NIV Application, and Word) all display the text of the English translation in small sections throughout the commentary.\(^22\) This arrangement allows a preacher to consult the notes of a commentary while working from an English Bible translation.\(^23\)

The issue of access also came up in the selection of historical authors/works. The third most-consulted historical author is Charles Spurgeon. This does not make sense from an influence perspective. Spurgeon preached for a different denomination, on a different continent, and in a different century that Church of Christ preachers find themselves. In addition, he is merely a footnote in seminary and undergraduate coursework in church history, falling far behind Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and others. So why do Church of Christ preachers use Charles Spurgeon? The answer might be as simple as the fact that Charles Spurgeon’s sermons are the most widely available free resources on Bible study software programs, while Calvin, Luther, and Wesley are more likely to be found on less-accessible platforms that require another step, such as Christian Classics Ethereal Library (ccel.org) or a brick and mortar theological library.

The same could be true of access to periodical literature. More than half of preachers who regularly consult journals access those journals through a University-sponsored program like ATLAS. That number (53%) exceeds the combined total of those who read journals through print subscriptions or personal online access (46%). The ease of accessing such a large corpus with just one password has proven very attractive to active preachers.

Librarians will always have debate the respective merits of quality and access. Whether we like it or not, it seems that patrons value convenient access, and will tolerate any attendant deficiencies in quality. This only increases the needs for professionals in scholarly communications and the digital humanities to continue to envision ways where we can not only make the highest quality content accessible, but also dream of ways to add increased functionality to that content, so that it is no longer a weak substitute, but a value-laden complement.

\(^{22}\) Catalogers will notice that each of these come from the double-seven classification of commentaries.

\(^{23}\) As noted earlier, usually a recent, conservative, committee translation (such as NIV or ESV).