Collaborative Preaching as Community Theatre

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In this article I will argue that collaborative preaching can be understood as an expression of community theatre. This will be tricky. It involves discussing three potentially unfamiliar and contested categories: collaborative preaching, preaching as performance, and collaborative preaching as community theatre. I want, therefore, to issue some disclaimers. Firstly, I present this article from the specificity of my own context. I am a Scottish Baptist minister and a teacher of homiletics influenced by theories and theologies of preaching associated with the 'New Homiletic'. The applicability of what I say to other contexts, I will leave to those who belong to them. Secondly, I approach this subject as a preacher looking for a conversation partner in performance studies. Thirdly, I think that collaborative preaching is only one expression of preaching and that different contexts and purposes require different approaches. Fourthly, in keeping with the nature of collaborative preaching, I offer this argument as a 'playful proposal'. I am putting it out there for conversation. I believe in the argument but it is not yet a conviction. In turn this allows me to defend weaknesses by saying, 'Good point I still have to look at that!' With these disclaimers I will advance my argument in three moves. One, I will introduce and develop the idea of collaborative preaching. Two, I will introduce and defend the notion that preaching is a performance although I will critique the adequacy of some approaches to describe all forms of preaching. Three, I will demonstrate connections between community theatre and collaborative preaching.

Collaborative Preaching

Collaborative preaching is preaching in which preachers invite the active voiced participation of others into the preaching process. These others can come from the congregation and perhaps even from beyond. Collaborative preaching is therefore an alternative to monologue sermons created and delivered by one person. To be sure, it can be argued that all sermons involve the participation of the congregation as they listen, inwardly consider, and respond to what is said in faith and action. To anticipate the later connection, performance theorist Baz Kershaw would support the idea that there is no such thing as a totally passive 'audience'.

> The totally passive audience is a figment of the imagination, a practical impossibility; and, as any actor will tell you, the reactions of audiences influence the nature of a performance. It is not simply that the audience affects emotional tone or stylistic nuance: the spectator is engaged fundamentally in the active construction of meaning as a performance event proceeds. In this sense performance is 'about' the transaction of meaning, a continuous negotiation

between stage and auditorium to establish the significance of the signs and conventions through which they interact.[1]

Be this as it may, in collaborative preaching preachers intentionally invite others to be actively involved in the preaching process as partners and for their voices and views to shape the event. Such explicit involvement transcends the participation implicit in sermons prepared and delivered by a single voice.

The specific term collaborative preaching is probably most associated with the writer John S. McClure and his book *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet*.[2] In a later book he helpfully summarises the nature of the practice which he advocates:

> Collaborative preachers form small groups of laypersons, from within and outside the church, who meet with the preachers to discuss biblical, theological, and experiential materials for the upcoming sermon…The preacher takes careful notes during the process of sermon brainstorming and prepares the sermon so that it resembles both the form and message of the collaborative brainstorming process. After the sermon is preached, preachers return to these groups for feedback and to begin the process again. In some cases, the names of those participating in these groups are published in bulletins so that feedback will come into the group by way of all those responsible for the sermon. The brainstorming groups change regularly to avoid establishing an in-group. The goals of this type of preaching are many: educating congregations on what sermons are and how they function in the community, increasing ownership of the ministry of proclamation in the church, teaching the Bible, widening preaching's audience, promoting a public form of theology in the pulpit, and symbolizing a collaborative form of leadership in the church.[3]

The strength of McClure's approach is that he offers a concrete practice in which members of the congregation play an active part in shaping particular sermons. McClure's approach can be developed in at least two directions. The first of these relates to the supporting theory and theology of collaborative preaching. In addition to McClure's own work the theory and theology of collaborative preaching is advanced by writers such as Lucy Atkinson Rose[4] and O. Wesley Allen Jr.,[5] albeit under the rubric of 'conversational preaching'.[6] With McClure these writers stand within the postmodern turn in the New Homiletic.[7] These writers, however, are not simply interested in postmodern communicative concerns but also with the nature of

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[1] Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 16-17.

[2] John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

[3] John S. McClure, *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics* (London: WJKP, 2007), pp. 13-14.

[4] Lucy Rose Atkinson, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: WJK, 1997).

[5] O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach* (Louisville: WJK, 2005).

[6] Enoh Šeba discusses some of the similarities and differences between a variety of the authors who support collaborative preaching in 'Exploration of Contemporary "Dialogical Preaching" An Attempt at Evaluation from the Perspective of Croatian Baptists', Unpublished Magister Dissertation 2011, IBTS.

[7] Alan Kelcher, 'Conversational Preaching: The First Postmodern Homiletics?' in *The Academy of Homiletics: Papers for the Annual Meeting* (St Louis: Academy of Homiletics, 2001), pp. 393-401.

the ecclesiology different approaches to preaching reflect and create. Allen, therefore, before discussing his 'conversational homiletic' discusses a 'conversational ecclesiology'.[8] To put that differently, he starts his theological thinking about preaching with theological thinking about the nature of the church as a community of believers engaged in conversations.

This ecclesiological trajectory of the theory and theology of collaborative preaching resonates with and invites contributions from those who claim a historic tradition of understanding the congregation as a hermeneutical community. Accordingly, Julie Alliman Yoder's chapter in the book *Anabaptist Preaching* is entitled: 'Collaborative Preaching in the Community of Interpreters'.[9] Here she relates the practice of collaborative preaching to the activities of at least some sixteenth century Anabaptists when they would listen and respond to one another's sermons. In her discussion of sixteenth century Anabaptist preaching she cites Cornelius J. Dyck as she claims that 'One of the great sins for church leaders was to be accused of "running alone"'.[10] Leo Hartshorn in his book *Interpretation as Communal and Dialogical Practices: An Anabaptist Perspective* also argues that 'The sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement manifested dialogical forms of interpretation and proclamation'.[11] Hartshorn, with an ecclesiological concern for the congregation as a hermeneutical community, associates the practice of collaborative preaching with John Howard Yoder's 'hermeneutic of peoplehood' and James Wm. McClendon's 'baptist hermeneutic'.[12] Interestingly, McClure himself makes a link between the type of preaching he is advocating and the 'theologians of communal practice' including 'McClendon'.[13] In their writings neither Julie Alliman Yoder nor Hartshorn are claiming that collaborative preaching finds common contemporary expression in the churches they belong to. They are, however, seeking to encourage such preaching in their tradition with reference to the historic ecclesiology and attendant practices of that tradition. In this way they make a particular believers' church contribution to the wider theory and theology of collaborative preaching.

The second main way in which McClure's notion of collaborative preaching can be developed is with respect to the nature of the activity which can be described as collaborative preaching. Despite what McClure, Rose, and Allen write about collaborative preaching, they yet conceive the preaching event at the point of delivery as a monologue. McClure writes, 'I will not suggest that preachers actually hold

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[8] Allen, *Homiletic*, p. 16.
[9] June Alliman Yoder, 'Collaborative Preaching in the Community of Believers', in *Anabaptist Preaching: A Conversation Between Pulpit, Pew and Bible*, David B. Greiser and Michael A. King (eds.) (Telford: Cascadia, 2003), pp. 108-120.
[10] Cornelius J. Dyck, 'The Role of Preaching in the Anabaptist Tradition', *Mennonite Life* 17, no. 1 (January 1962), p. 23, cited in Yoder, 'Collaborative', p. 109.
[11] Leo Hartshorn, *Interpretation and Preaching as Communal and Dialogical Practices: An Anabaptist Perspective* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2006), p. 44.
[12] Ibid., pp. 118-136.
[13] John S. McClure, 'Collaborative Preaching from the Margins', *Journal for Preachers*, (Pentecost, 1996), footnote 5, p. 41, italics McClure.

conversations from the pulpit or that they attempt two or three party "dialogue sermons"'.[14] While he seeks to ensure the sermon is *'embedded within, and represents an actual interactive, multi-party communication event'* at the point of delivery it is 'a noninteractive, single-party communication event'.[15] In essence McClure's approach invites participation at the point of sermon preparation and not at the point of delivery and response. Even the feedback he proposes is given at the point of preparation for the next sermon.

Allen also argues that the sermon at the point of delivery should be a monologue.[16] He sees preaching in the context of the liturgy as a rightful expression of 'presentation' over and against the 'shared work' of the congregation.[17] He criticises and resists ideas of dialogue and conversation as part of the delivery or response to sermons in the context of worship.[18]

Rose also indicates a commitment to monologue preaching although shows some greater openness than Allen to alternative approaches:

> In discussing preaching as a conversation between the preacher and the congregation, I do not mean to imply that other worshippers beside the preacher should speak during the time set aside in a service of worship for the sermon. Conversational sermons are not 'dialogue sermons' or 'interactive sermons,' although these forms might lend themselves to conversational preaching.[19]

In addition, again albeit tentatively and perhaps under the weight of her own argument, she indicates some support for the idea of 'an official forum time either within the service of worship or immediately thereafter as an opportunity for worshippers to voice their personal responses to the sermon'.[20]

In contrast to the apparent reticence of McClure and his colleagues to support congregational participation in preaching at the point of delivery and response, writers who claim the ecclesiological tradition of the hermeneutical community are rightly bolder in their suggestions for collaborative practice. Hartshorn argues that 'Communal dialogue was more of a practice than a theory within early Anabaptism'[21] and with some sense of irony opines:

> Conversational preaching, by logical definition, would seem to call for, or at least allow for, occasions when the sermon itself involves more than an 'implied conversational partner' and includes actual conversation with real dialogue partners within the sermon.[22]

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[14] McClure, *Roundtable*, p. 8.
[15] McClure, 'Collaborative', p. 39.
[16] Allen, *Homiletic*, p. 39.
[17] Ibid., p. 37.
[18] Ibid., pp. 6-7.
[19] Rose, *Sharing*, p. 96.
[20] Ibid., p. 130.
[21] Hartshorn, *Interpretation*, p. 211
[22] Ibid., p. 207.

He argues for the development of 'methodologies' for such preaching.[23] Baptist/Anabaptist writers Sian and Stuart Murray Williams provide such methodologies. Building upon their understanding of the variety of communication methods found in Scripture, historical work into the nature of Anabaptist hermeneutics, contemporary critiques of monologue sermons, and postmodern communication concerns, they offer a range of 'multi-voiced' opportunities related to preaching.[24] These opportunities include congregational participation at the point of preparation. They go far beyond this, however, indicating ways in which the congregation can participate at the point of delivery and in response to sermons in the context of worship. Suggestions include allowing interruptions and facilitating reflection and discussion during sermons and encouraging discussion and questions and answers in response to sermons.

Collaborative preaching, therefore, is preaching in which preachers invite the active voiced participation of others into the preaching process. The theory, theology, and practice as advanced by McClure, however, can be advanced by other writers. In this respect the understanding of collaborative preaching I am introducing here is that it is a practice in which preachers seek the involvement of the congregation in the making and interpretation of the meaning of sermons. This participation can be at one or various stages of the preaching event: preparation, delivery, response. These qualifications notwithstanding McClure will remain the primary, though not exclusive, writer to whom I will refer in this article as I discuss collaborative preaching as community theatre.

Having introduced and developed the idea of collaborative preaching I will now proceed to the second stage of my argument. In this second stage I will introduce and defend the concept of describing preaching in performance terms.

Preaching as Performance

To describe preaching in performance terms is not new. This said, for many the term performance continues to have pejorative connotations when applied to preaching. It can be associated with unhelpful and unattractive dimensions of preaching, 'such as focussing mainly on the preacher, or on theatricality, or on entertainment, on things that distract from the Word'.[25] One theorist, H. Herbert Sennett, expresses the difficulty as follows:

> The paradox between preaching (a serious issue for Christians) and performance
> (an assumed way of acting for the pleasure of others) is most intriguing. Can

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[23] Ibid., p. 211.

[24] Stuart and Sian Murray Williams, *Multi-Voiced Worship* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), pp. 63-87.

[25] Paul Scott Wilson, 'Preaching, Performance and the Life and Death of "Now"', in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit (eds.) (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 37-38.

someone be serious about the message and present themselves as a 'performer' at the same time?[26]

The difficulty and paradox acknowledged, there is a body of contemporary homiletical literature in which writers positively present preaching in performance terms. A review of this literature demonstrates that these writers variously defend preaching as performance in relation to: the social sciences, etymology, history, Scripture, art, and theology.

I think these writers are correct in their advocacy of preaching as performance. For me the question is not whether preaching is a performance? The question is what type of performance is any particular preaching event? I recognise, however, the continued resistance to the term. This being the case, I offer the following brief defence of preaching as performance drawing on the insights of performance studies and the preaching as performance writers.

According to Richard Schechner, a leading theorist in the discipline of performance studies:

> 'Being' is existence itself. 'Doing' is the activity of all that exists, from quarks to sentient beings to supergalactic strings. 'Showing doing' is performing: pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing. 'Explaining "showing doing"' is performance studies.[27]

Following this definition, insofar as preaching is an activity of 'showing doing', it is a performance. Of course, in so far as all human behaviour can be so defined, it can be argued that if everything is a performance then nothing is really a performance. Jan Cohen-Cruz, another performance theorist, is helpful here. In her definition she introduces a greater sense of the intentional and public nature of activities which can be defined as performance. She writes that a performance is: 'expressive behaviour intended for public viewing' or again is 'heightened behaviour intended for public viewing'.[28] Despite these modifications to Schechner's perhaps more general definition it would still seem quite appropriate to describe preaching as a performance in these terms.

Carrying the argument forward, Richard F. Ward draws on performance and communication theory to demonstrate the suitability of describing preaching as a performance He does so with reference to the etymology of the word. On the one hand he indicates that 'per/formance', means literally 'form coming through'.[29] On the one hand performance from 'the Old French *par* + *fournir*, means to 'carry through to completion'.[30] He argues that both this '*means*' and '*end*' are precisely

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[26] H. Herbert Sennett, Ph.D, e-mail correspondence with author, 12 November 2007.
[27] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge: 2006), p. 28.
[28] Jan Cohen-Cruz, 'Introduction', in Cohen-Cruz, *Radical*, pp. 1-6, 1 and Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 1.
[29] Richard F. Ward, *Speaking from the Heart: Preaching with Passion* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001=1992), p. 77.
[30] Ibid., p. 77.

what happens in the preaching event.[31] In preaching the sermon comes as a form comes through the body of the preacher to find its completion in a preached word. He writes, 'Preaching is a performance of the sermon, that is, a vocal and physical action through which the sermon becomes form and image'.[32]

These etymological observations with respect to preaching as performance find supportive theological reflections in the direction of God's self-revelation in the incarnation. Here the work of Charles Bartow is helpful as he advocates preaching as a divine/human event in keeping with the divine/human nature of God's self-performance, in Jesus Christ. He states, 'Jesus Christ...is not only the definitive locus of *actio divina*, he is also the locus of *homo performans*. True humanity is found in him'.[33] In turn, when preachers come as *homo performans* to the Scriptures to preach, they can expect a meeting with the *actio divina* in 'a conflagration of love'.[34] It is not just the preacher who comes as *homo performans* but also the congregation in the act of listening. When the preacher and congregation come together, therefore, in engagement with the performance of the Scriptures, they 'come face to face with the self-disclosure of the divine'.[35]

Such arguments illustrate that positive rather than pejorative connections are possible in a number of directions between the language of performance and the practice of preaching. This case is strengthened further when preaching is discussed as performance in more artistic terms.

In describing preaching as performance in artistic terms the preaching as performance writers draw comparisons with other artistic performances such as painting, music, dance, film, storytelling, poets, and comedians. One favoured approach, however, is to compare preaching with the drama and ritual of theatrical performance. Jana Childers is among the authors who explicitly promote the analogue of preaching and theatre as she asserts:

> They share the essential characteristics and qualities that can be said to be true of art in general: interest and integrity are requisite; distance plays a role; they are mimetic, usually nemetic and may be prophetic as well. In addition, like all performance arts, theatre and preaching are communal in nature and empathy-based.[36]

In turn, resisting the distinction between 'actors who act' and 'preachers who preach' she writes:

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[31] Ibid., p. 77, italics Ward.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997) ,p. 95, italics Bartow.

[34] Ibid., p. 96.

[35] Ibid., p. 122.

[36] Jana Childers, 'Making Connections: Preaching as Theatre', *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*, 4 (2005), pp. 1-7, http://www.rtjournal.org/vol_4/no_1/childers.html, accessed 25 October 2007, 3.

> As artists who operate in the mimetic/nemetic world, they have much in common. And while the question of whether there is anything actors may wish to learn from preachers is an open one, it is clear that there is much preachers may learn from actors.[37]

The 'much' that Childers thinks preachers can learn from actors ranges from the physical aspects of the use of voice and body in delivery,[38] to knowing what is required in order to give an 'authentic' and 'honest' rendition of a text.[39] Sennet, another author who makes a direct connection between actors and preachers notes, among other things, that both have to perform regularly 'on demand' and have to perform in keeping with the 'conventions' of the expected performance.[40] Again in making the connection Sennet's concern is that preachers can learn from actors.

Critique

To be sure, not all of the preaching as performance writers make the connection between preaching and theatre in this explicit way. Be this as it may, in much of the literature there is an implicit if not explicit assumption. On the one hand the assumption is that preaching consists of a preacher delivering a monologue sermon in the context of a liturgical assembly in a building set apart for that purpose. On the other hand the assumption is that that theatre consists of a performer on a stage before an audience in a specially designated building. This double assumption is understandable. It refers to preaching and to theatre in a way we are familiar with. The comparison between these types of preaching and theatre works as the preaching as performance writers demonstrate. Yet, it is also a limited comparison. It is limited in that it narrows the understanding of what constitutes preaching to only one particular expression. It is also limited in that it narrows the understanding of what constitutes theatrical performance to only one particular expression. As a consequence, in order to develop performance understandings of alternative forms of preaching, it is necessary to go beyond the understanding of theatre as advanced by the preaching as performance writers. In this respect I have argued elsewhere that open-air preaching cannot be understood as traditional in-theatre performance but can be helpfully understood as 'radical street performance'.[41] Following on from this, I argue here that collaborative preaching cannot be understood as traditional in-theatre performance but as community theatre.

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[37] Childers, 'Making', p. 3.
[38] Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 57-77, 114-116,
[39] Ibid., p. 51.
[40] Herbert Sennett, 'Preaching as Performance: A Preliminary Analytical Model', *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*, 2:1 (2003), pp. 141-156, 143.
[41] Stuart Blythe 'Open Air Preaching as Radical Street Performance', Unpublished PhD thesis, 2009, University of Edinburgh.

Collaborative Preaching as Community Theatre

In the previous sections I have introduced and developed the definition of collaborative preaching and introduced and defended the concept of preaching as performance. I have also argued that alternative approaches to preaching require alternative analogues than traditional theatre if they are to be understood in performance terms. In this section I will now discuss and demonstrate some of the connections between community theatre and collaborative preaching.

In some countries and contexts the term community theatre indicates theatrical productions of traditional plays put on by non-professional/amateur theatre companies. Here, however, I use the term to refer to 'theatrical activity facilitated by professionals but that springs from, and involves, a local community'.[42] This definition of community theatre is in keeping with what performance theorist Cohen-Cruz calls 'Community-based Performance'. Her definition has the advantage that it includes a wide variety of performance types as possible outcomes of the community collaboration including dance, music, storytelling, protest and what she calls other 'heightened behaviour intended for public viewing'.[43] This broader definition of theatre beyond a play is certainly what a number of authors mean when they discuss community theatre and is in keeping with my own understanding here.

Community theatre is a global phenomenon. Historically it includes the activities of groups such as the Philippines Educational Theatre Association (PETA) founded in 1967, Welfare State International, a UK based group founded in 1968, and the Stut Theatre group in the Netherlands founded in 1977. The activities of the latter (worth mentioning as IBTS relocates to Amsterdam) have included working with different communities to highlight issues of poor housing, disability in the workplace, women's issues, and inter-ethnic tension. While following no particular style from early on it became a feature of Stut productions to use people from the communities they were focussing on as actors in the productions they staged.[44]

At this point an initial if somewhat theoretical connection can be made between such community theatre and collaborative preaching in relation to ritual and art. Cohen-Cruz writes, 'Any community-based performance is situated somewhere between ritual and art'.[45] Drawing on the work of Schechner, Cohen-Cruz describes ritualistic performances as those which are concerned with efficacy rather than entertainment and 'are created with a community to serve a social or spiritual function'.[46] Rituals describe the sort of things that happen in church services and are

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[42] Kenneth Pickering and Mark Woolgar, *Theatre Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 189. The term 'professional' is somewhat problematic but this serves as a working definition. Some of the power and authority issues related to the role of the 'professional' and the local community will be discussed later.

[43] Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, p. 1.

[44] Eugene van Erven, *Community Theatre: Global Perspectives* [Kindle] (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 59.

[45] Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, p. 81.

[46] Ibid., pp. 5, 84.

viewed as stable and reinforcing of identity and tradition.[47] In contrast to ritual Cohen- Cruz presents art as that which asks questions, engages critically, opens up possibilities, and changes perspectives. Art is as committed to the new as to the old and can also present familiar things in a new way.[48] In the regular context of worship and preaching we have practices which in these terms might be described as community ritual performing and proclaiming the communities shared beliefs and truth. Collaborative preaching, however, invites into this ritual through the collaboration of others the potential for question and critique opening up creativity and the new. Rose in fact argues for an artistic understanding of conversational preaching whereby preaching is an art that searches for meaning: 'And the process of creating and interpreting becomes heuristic; yielding unexpected discoveries'.[49] If, therefore, community theatre involves the combination of community ritual and artistic creativity both of these are indeed to be found in the practice of collaborative preaching.

The above connection indicates that the association between community theatre and collaborative preaching can be developed in a variety of ways. Here I will develop the connection in relation to what theorist Petra Kuppers highlights as being three dominant features of the yet varied practice of community theatre. These are: It is **communally created**, gives attention to the **process as well as the product**, and it is a **political labour**.[50]

Communally Created

The first dominant feature which Kuppers identifies is that community theatre is communally created. Community theatre aims to provide performances 'for' and 'with' the community.[51] The term community can be problematic but in general terms the community are those with a shared primary identity or those who gather to explore a common theme.[52] In various ways and to greater and lesser extents these communities provide the sources and inspiration for the content, performers for the presentation, and audiences to give response, feedback, and action.[53]

One strategy in devising the performance involves members of the community involved in not simply conversation and sharing stories but in improvisation and role play to deepen comment and interpretation. Out of these activities the 'text' of the performance is created. Some performances include 'verbatim' comments from the

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[47] Ibid., pp. 84-86.
[48] Ibid., pp. 86-87.
[49] Rose, *Sharing*, p. 113.
[50] Petra Kuppers, *Community Performance: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 4-6.
[51] Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling, *Devising Performance: A Critical History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), pp. 143-155.
[52] Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, pp. 2-5.
[53] The extent of community participation varies from group to group, Heddon and Milling, *Devising*, pp. 136-137.

improvisations.[54] These processes can help create identification with the community among whom the performance will be staged.

Soul and Latin Theatre Group (SALT) which operated for a while in East Harlem in the late 1960s was formed by school pupils who sought professional help to develop community based performances. They created three performances which reflected upon the lives of the group and sought to change attitudes on several issues including the impact of drugs and poor schooling. Through the review of the performances which appeared in the New York Times it was clear that there was a strong connection, shared dialogue and interaction between young black and Puerto Rican performers and the audience of their peers. The reviewer noted that at one point during the performance an audience member shouted 'I had a teacher like that once!' in recognition and encouragement to the performers.[55]

In situations such as the above where local people are not simply the source of ideas for the performance but are actively involved in the performance:

> ...people are what they act and act what they are...You don't start from a text which actors then have to make their own. The actors have created the text themselves, they know how and why; they know what they want to play and what they want to tell their audience...[56]

Kuppers, in his articulation of the role of the community in Community Theatre, cites French Theatre Director Armand Gatti: 'The theatre must enable people who have been deprived of a chance to express themselves to do so'.[57]

The involvement of the community at the various points of preparation, delivery, and response offer a source of 'collective genius', and inspiration to the professionals, be they called artists, facilitators, or directors, responsible for bringing the performances together.[58] In turn, these leaders do not see the community simply as a source to be exploited for their individual agenda. Rather the relationship is defined as one of *reciprocity* and the concepts and language of 'participation' and 'empowerment' is common in the literature.[59]

As should be apparent from the earlier discussion the idea of community (congregational) involvement is central in the theory, theology, and practice of collaborative preaching. Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, the language of participation, empowerment, and reciprocity is also used by the advocates of collaborative preaching.[60] McClure captures something of the strong essence of the communal nature of collaborative preaching when he writes:

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[54] Pickering and Woolgar, *Theatre*, p. 98.
[55] Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling, *Devising Performance: A Critical History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), p. 153.
[56] Erven, *Community*, p. 61.
[57] Armand Gatti, 1994, cited Kuppers, *Community*, p. 8.
[58] Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, p. 93.
[59] Ibid., pp. 93-95, quotation, 93, italics Cohen-Cruz.
[60] McClure, *Roundtable*, pp. 11-29, Allen, *Homiletic*, pp. 29-30,

> The word collaboration means 'working together'. It implies a form of preaching in which preacher and hearer work together to establish and interpret the topics for preaching. They also decide together what the practical results of those interpretations might be for the congregation. The preacher, then goes into the pulpit and re-presents this collaboration process in the event of sermon delivery.[61]

There is a strong sense from the various writers that if collaborative preaching is anything it is communal.[62]

In practice McClure is more restrained than some of the examples of community theatre in terms of the actual participation he encourages restricting it to the point of preparation. While his goal is that the sermon represents the content and structure of the roundtable conversations he states that 'It is only with permission and great pastoral sensitivity that you will ever use anything verbatim'.[63] He acknowledges, however, that in variations of his approach some preachers use video testimonials of group members during their sermons or allow group members to come forward and offer portions of the sermon.[64] These examples indicate that the full range of participation encouraged by some community theatre groups has a greater resonance with developments of McClure's collaborative approach including those in the Anabaptist/Baptist traditions discussed above than with McClure's original and more conservative proposals.

The process is as important as the product

The second dominant feature of community theatre which Kuppers identifies is that the process is as important as the product. For some community theatre groups there is a concern to produce a performance of high quality which enables members of the community to speak out publicly on issues of importance.[65] Many groups, however, put a great emphasis on the positive communal and individual benefits of people participating in performance activities. 'Here the aim of the exercise is far less the performance product than the desire to forge a sense of community or to challenge a community through participation.'[66]

The idea behind this stress on process is that through participation with others in performance activities including role play, games, and improvisation, people can become critically aware of their social situations and be provided with the power to transform it.[67] In this respect many community based artists have been influenced on

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[61] McClure, *Roundtable*, p. 48.
[62] E.g. Rose, *Sharing*, pp. 121-122; Allen, *Homiletic*, pp. 16-37.
[63] McClure, *Roundtable*, p. 61.
[64] John S. McClure, 'Collaboration' in *The New Interpreters Handbook of Preaching*, Paul Scott Wilson (ed.) (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), pp. 258-262.
[65] Heddon and Milling, *Devising*, pp. 137, 148.
[66] Ibid., p. 148.
[67] Kuppers, *Community*, p. 6.

the one hand by the liberatory pedagogy of Brazilian Paulo Freire and on the other hand by the theatre techniques of his fellow countryman Augusto Boal.[68]

One development of the above is community theatre companies that promote performance as 'social and personal intervention'.[69] This can include prison based work such as that carried out by the US group Living Stage. In this work the scenarios created are never performed to an outside audience but allow inmates to explore situations relevant to them.[70] Similar long term activity has been carried out by 'Living Stage' with other small groups such as teen-aged mothers with the goal that, through improvisation and complex scenarios, they can provide them with problem solving skills.[71] Although varied in expression, what the above approaches to community theatre have in common is that the process of participation is seen as important educationally and formatively as any end product which may communicate a particular message to a wider audience.

A similar concern for the process as much as the product can be observed among the advocates of collaborative preaching. For McClure it is the process of placing people face to face in conversation which can: 'slowly pry open the private realm by placing people in a context in which otherness, rather than homogeneity, is valued and taken seriously' (20). Indeed when McClure in his definition given above talks about the 'goals of such preaching' he is not primarily talking about the content or form of particular sermons but about sermons produced through a particular process of collaboration. It is the process of collaboration which in his thinking can have the impact of:

> educating congregations on what sermons are and how they function in the community, increasing ownership of the ministry of proclamation in the church, teaching the Bible, widening preaching's audience, promoting a public form of theology in the pulpit, and symbolizing a collaborative form of leadership in the church.[72]

Indeed he argues that it is through this approach to collaboration in preaching that preachers can, 'influence the ways that a congregation is "talking itself into" becoming a Christian community', because it is through conversations that communities are formed.[73]

While not necessarily discussed in these terms, one of the central concerns for the other collaborative preaching authors is also the process of preaching. This concern is more than one of 'style' but also more than one of how preaching is 'viewed'.[74] It is a matter of how preaching is practised and the way in which this

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[68] Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, p. 98.
[69] Heddon and Milling, *Devising*, p. 154.
[70] Ibid., p.155.
[71] Ibid.
[72] John S. McClure, *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics* (London: WJKP, 2007), pp. 13-14.
[73] McClure, *Roundtable*, p. 50.
[74] Yoder, *Anabaptist*, p. 119, italics Yoder

practice reflects and can play a part in forming particular types of community. So, for example, Rose wants an approach to preaching that reflects the 'multivalent' nature of a congregation and challenges through its method the traditional gap between preacher and congregation indicating instead 'solidarity and mutuality'.[75] The process creates new 'power arrangements'.[76]Allen in turn wants an approach to preaching which reflects and enables the sermon to become 'a significant contributing factor to the ongoing conversations owned by the community'.[77] In such writings the way in which preaching is conceived and practised is clearly regarded as important as the content of any particular sermon in expressing and forming the ecclesiological nature of the congregations among whom the preaching takes place.

Political Labour

The third dominant feature which Kuppers highlights concerning the nature of community theatre is its political nature. This political nature can be discussed on two fronts.

The first way in which community theatre can be regarded as political labour is in the desire to bring about socio-political change in wider society. It may be 'by no means universally true that devising with a community necessarily produces more politically explicit material'.[78] Yet many community theatre groups have sought to challenge the status quo and bring about socio-political change in society. This tendency is apparent in some of the groups already mentioned.

From a global perspective the previously mentioned PETA has been one of the most politically successful community theatre groups.[79] As a network of community based theatres it challenged the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos from 1967 until its fall in 1986. Subsequently it turned its interests to the impact of local, national, and global policies on the everyday life of citizens.[80]

In more general terms community theatre is political because it seeks to 'change the world'.[81] It does so by 'facilitating creative expression as a means to analyse and understand life situations, and to empower people to value themselves and shape a more egalitarian and diverse future'.[82]

The second way in which community theatre is a political labour is the way in which it seeks to critique the practices of traditional theatre. This critique, among other things, challenges the 'hierarchical' relationships of traditional mainstream

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[75] Rose, *Sharing*, pp. 4-7, 21-22.
[76] Ibid., p. 97.
[77] Allen, *Homiletic*, p. 15.
[78] Heddon and Milling, *Devising*, p. 138.
[79] Zarrilli et al, *Theatre*, p. 433.
[80] Ibid., p. 434.
[81] Kuppers, *Community*, p. 8.
[82] Kuppers, *Community*, p. 6.

theatre.[83] This involves, not least, reconfiguring the understanding of the relationship of the professional artist/facilitator to the community participants.[84] In practice artist/facilitators involved in community theatre appear to differ as to the extent to which they share decision making power, creative genius, and aesthetic control with the community participants.[85] One negotiated approach is artist/facilitators seek to view the community participants as partners, listening deeply and valuing the contributions which are made. In turn, however, the artist/facilitators bring their own individual genius, albeit fed by the community interaction, to the performances and also their expertise to enable people to discover and achieve what they want to do.[86] This does not, of course, remove all the tensions related to power and control. Yet it affirms a partnership based on dialogue and difference but with respect for what each brings. Accordingly:

> Artists must be as sensitive to their differences from community participants as to the common ground they share. All involved must genuinely appreciate what the others bring to the collaboration, or why do it? [87]

The political nature of community theatre, therefore, involves renegotiating the power relationships between the professionals and the communities among whom they work in a more egalitarian direction.

In terms of the political concern to directly address issues and change society, the collaborative preaching authors do not have too much to say. It may be, to draw again from the world of community theatre, that the very diversity which such an approach encourages militates 'against a clear political commitment'.[88] This said, McClure clearly supports the desire for 'preaching that displays urgent prophetic, evangelical, and pastoral commitments' in the face of 'pressing environmental, social, and psychological issues'. [89] Yet, he argues, that rather than the lone voices of preachers 'shouting in the wilderness' what is required are communities empowered to engage with such issues like the 'base Christian communities in Central America'.[90] McClure's approach, therefore, resonates more with the community performance approaches which aim to empower people and communities through the process than the approaches which seek to produce a socially direct product.

With respect to the political dimension of reconfiguring relationships between the preacher (artist/facilitator?) and the congregational community more can be said. McClure's book *The Roundtable Pulpit* has the subtitle, *Where leadership and Preaching Meet*. For him collaborative preaching is about modelling new forms of leadership. He wants to challenge 'alienated forms of clergy-laity relationships'

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[83] Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, p.95.
[84] Ibid., p. 94.
[85] Kuppers, *Community*, pp. 95-102; Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, pp. 94-97.
[86] Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, pp. 92-96.
[87] Ibid., p. 95.
[88] Heddon and Milling, *Devising*, p. 138.
[89] McClure, *Roundtable*, p. 11.
[90] Ibid., p. 12.

where leadership can be 'formal, impersonal, and instrumental, centering on task accomplishment and conformity, to policies and rules'.[91] Like the community theatre practitioners he wants to challenge and change 'hierarchical patterns of relationship'.[92] In these patterns the interpretation of the Word is located in a professional guild.[93] In contrast he wants to create a context where 'power is shared' and people are 'instructed by one another's differences'.[94] While this resonates with some of the negotiations found in community theatre, the same tension remains of what then is the role of the 'professional'. McClure argues the preacher should function as 'host'. [95] As host they allow for a variety of voices to contribute and if necessary for the sermon to go in a different direction from the one the preacher would choose if it faithfully represents the community discussion.[96] Be this as it may, he argues, like some of the community theatre practitioners, that if the collaboration is genuine the professional (preacher) should bring their own distinctive contribution to the table:

> It is essential that preachers assert their own instructive 'otherness' as well. Preachers choose moments to express clearly their premises and thoughts. Otherwise the preacher would not be a presence *in the homiletical conversation*, only a referee or facilitator *of the conversation*. Preachers, as ministers of the Christian church, ensure that the homiletical conversation is rooted in the gospel story focussed on the mission of the church. They exercise leadership both by *welcoming* all followers as equals and by *engaging* them deeply *in* conversation about Jesus Christ and what it means to be a Christian in today's world.[97]

Following on from this the preacher seeks to 'persuade' the congregation of a particular direction but from a word rooted in the communal discernment process.[98] Rose, as already noted, is concerned to challenge the gap between preacher and congregation.[99] This gap she relates directly to issues of power.[100] In her own proposal she seeks a context of 'nonhierarchical' relationships.[101] This means challenging the idea that only the ordained should preach and she suggests they re-envision their role as those who ensure preaching occurs.[102] This would involve regularly inviting others 'particularly laity' to preach.[103] In so far as Rose thinks that sermons are essentially tentative 'interpretations' 'proposals' and 'wagers', issues of the authority of the preacher do not really come in to play to the same extent.[104] Yet,

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[91] Ibid., p. 20.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid., p. 22.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., pp 25-29.
[96] Ibid., pp.56-57.
[97] Ibid., p. 54, italics McClure.
[98] Ibid., pp. 56-57.
[99] Rose, *Sharing*, p. 90.
[100] Ibid., pp. 97-98.
[101] Ibid., pp. 122-123.
[102] Ibid., p. 123.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid., pp. 99-107.

this approach also means that she seeks to protect the individual and biographical contribution of each preacher in the contribution they bring.[105] She asserts this over and against McClure's argument that sermons should be shaped not so much by the preacher but by the collaborative group discussions.[106] Despite all of this theory, however, it is not actually clear how some of this would work in practice where the real issues of power come into play.

Allen, in his discussion of the role of preaching, privileges the conversations of the community over that of the sermon. This said, he argues strongly that the ordained preacher brings something distinctive which should be recognised. This distinction lies in 'the training and equipment preachers bring with them'.[107] Their training, preparation, ordination allows them to see 'differently' and enables them to bring the experience of the whole of life into conversation with the Christian tradition.[108] In turn it is on this basis that congregations grant them 'privilege and authority'.[109] Yet this privilege and authority for Allen involves preaching serving the wider conversations.

With Allen, therefore, as with the other collaborative preachers, we see the political attempt to negotiate in a less hierarchical and more egalitarian direction the role of the 'professional' in relation to community while retaining something distinctive which the preacher brings. Similar ideological struggles are apparent among community theatre practitioners and the role of the artist/preacher.

Conclusion

The practice of collaborative preaching is an expression of community theatre in so far as the two practices find several points of connection regarding their emphases and concerns. These connections can be illuminating and, if pursued further, potentially instructive regarding alternative ways of facilitating congregational participation in the meaning making of sermons. The practice of collaborative preaching is one which does resonate with an Anabaptist/Baptist ecclesiological understanding of the hermeneutical community. Yet the comparison with community theatre highlights areas with which congregations may have to wrestle if they were to adopt this approach as part of their preaching approach. This is the case not least in relation to collaborative preaching as political labour and the questions it raises about the nature of the role and authority of preachers.

The Revd Dr Stuart Blythe, Rector-designate, IBTS.

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[105] Ibid., pp. 124-127.
[106] Ibid., p. 131, footnote 1.
[107] Allen, *Homiletic*, p. 45.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.