

# Leading through the sermon

**Hans Austnaberg**  
VID Specialized University

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## ABSTRACT

As the subject of leading through the sermon is to a large extent absent in homiletical literature, this article investigates how the sermon can be used as a tool in leading church development processes. Congregations involved in strategic processes of church development are in focus, and the research question asks what the conditions are in which the sermon can be a tool in leading such processes. The material for analysis is homiletical literature from the last 25 years that combine preaching and leadership, and I understand the leadership of ministers as strategic and spiritual leadership. Sermons can function as a tool in church development processes when ministers are conscious of the possibilities of sermons to do so; the congregation and not the individual is the target audience of preaching; the sermon is firmly placed within the congregation's life system; the external context is engaged; the congregation, through the sermon, is led towards shared goals; and when the ministers prioritise the theological dimension of the congregation in the sermons. The author asks for more research, and especially empirical research investigating to what extent ministers are in practice leading congregations through their sermons.

**Keywords:** Leadership, preaching, sermons, church development

## INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the conditions in which the sermon can be a tool in leading church development processes. It is about the sermon and leadership, and, more specifically, the combination of the two. However, the disciplinary area of the article is homiletics. Preaching is a broad concept, and much in church life can be characterised as such, including hymns, rituals, and actions. The sermon is only one kind of preaching (Harbsmeier & Raun Iversen, 1995, pp. 349-350). This article is limited to the sermon and leadership through the sermon. The congregations in view are those that are involved in strategic processes of church development.<sup>1</sup> A widely used definition of church development is that it is an intentional process to enable the congregation to become better equipped to be what the congregation is called to be and to do what the congregation is called to do. This is an intentionally open definition, allowing each congregation to decide their ecclesiology and how it wants to develop, which Hegstad calls “soft normativity” (my translation) (Hegstad, 2012, p. 12, 18).

The subject of leading through the sermon is to a large extent absent in homiletical literature. Sean D. Cole has written a Doctor of Ministry thesis on leading and expository preaching, and he claims that very few books concern the relationship between leadership and expository preaching (Cole, 2016, p. 136). In his article “Preaching as Christian leadership”, Truls Åkerlund asserts that “leading through the arguably most important ecclesial speech act of all, the sermon, is to a great extent unexplored territory (Åkerlund, 2014, p. 84). Further, Halvor Nordhaug, in his preaching textbook, claims that the pastor should lead the congregation, but that this has to a large extent been a neglected subject (Nordhaug, 2000, pp. 59-61). This is a lacuna to which I intend to make a contribution with this article.

Normally, it is the minister who preaches in the services, and when I talk about leading through the sermon, I envision the minister’s sermons as a tool in leading the congregation in church development processes. This does not need to be understood as an individual undertaking, however. The preacher may cooperate with groups of people in the congregation or with other clergy in preparing the sermon, but as a rule, it is the minister who preaches the sermon. The research question can be formulated as follows: Under what conditions can sermons function as a tool in leading church development processes in the congregation? My material contributing to answering the research question is a literary study. I have reviewed homiletical literature from the last 25 years that combine preaching and leadership. After having analysed the literature, I will discuss crucial conditions for the sermon to be a tool in leading church development processes. But first, I will situate my understanding of strategic leadership.

## THEORETICAL POINT OF DEPARTURE:

### STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP THROUGH SERMONS IN CONGREGATIONS ENGAGED IN CHURCH DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES

Since this article concerns leadership related to the sermon as one of the minister’s main responsibilities, I define this as pastoral leadership. According to Stephen Sirris, there are two main perspectives on pastoral leadership: 1) a narrow understanding, related to the Word and sacraments, and 2) a wider understanding, including an overall responsibility for the

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<sup>1</sup> The concepts “church development” and “congregational development” are used with identical meaning in the article.

congregation (Sirris, 2022, p. 178). I combine the two perspectives by focusing on the sermon (the Word), while having the overall development of the congregation in view. Fredrik Saxegaard talks about symbolising, strategic, and cooperative leadership, and places Word and sacrament within the symbolising category (Saxegaard, 2009). In line with “*Tjenesteordning for menighetsprester*” [Service arrangement for congregational ministers] § 10 in the Church of Norway, I understand the leadership of ministers as strategic and spiritual leadership.<sup>2</sup> I do not then try to narrowly define the concept of “strategy” or “strategic leadership” but understand and use it as a comprehensive term (Sirris, 2018, p. 5). Neither do I explore the strategy literature and discuss content and process, as Jenssen has done in his article (Jenssen, 2019, pp. 6-10). Most of these writers do not mention preaching or the sermon at all in discussing strategic leadership in congregations. Those who do so only mention it in passing.

In an article on leading changes in church settings, Harald Askeland cites a leadership definition found in Yukl and Lepsinger, which reads: “Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives.” (Askeland, 2012, p. 139). Askeland calls this a preliminary definition as a point of departure, and says that it focuses on influence, mobilising, and action. He further emphasises that when leading processes of development in congregations, this must relate to the identity, ministry, and purpose of the congregation. He proposes four dimensions of leadership: 1) developing identity and values, 2) management, 3) mobilising through motivation, communication, and relation, and 4) action (Ibid. pp. 139-140). Although all these dimensions are important in practice, in this article I especially focus on the first and the third. I will explore the conditions in which sermons can be a leadership tool in developing the identity of and mobilising the congregation.

The context of the strategic leadership I am exploring is that of congregations engaged in church development processes. In the article “What is Church Development Really About?” Lars Råmunddal asserts that both thinking and practice of church development must have a holistic ecclesiological model as its point of departure. He presents one such holistic model with two contexts and two dimensions: the congregation’s historic roots and its contemporary existence on the horizontal axis (contexts), and its theological and sociological dimensions on the vertical axis. There is also an arrow from left to right in the model, which shows that congregations are always changing, intentionally or unintentionally. The congregation thus stands in a double context and lives in two dimensions simultaneously. The theological dimension in the model is above all what New Testament theology points to as the congregation’s identity and God-given mission in the world. The sociological dimension points to the human aspects of the congregation, different people gathered with diverse relations to each other (Råmunddal, 2015, pp. 3-4). After having presented the model, Råmunddal sketches four different approaches to church development, each of them emphasising mainly one side of the model. He pleads, however, for a holistic approach to church development, taking both contexts and both dimensions into consideration simultaneously. They are all part of the same reality, namely the church in its actual shape in the world (Ibid. p. 15). Råmunddal defines congregational development in line with the widely used definition in a Norwegian context (Hegstad, 2012, p. 12), which is that it is to realise what the congregation actually is (its nature and basic features) and what its God-given mission is today (what it does). Opinions will differ as to what strategic approaches are the best and most relevant in each context; this leads to

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<sup>2</sup> <https://lovdata.no/dokument/LTI/forskrift/2016-04-11-1814>, visited 22-09-13. Part two of § 10 reads: “In the distribution of Word and sacrament, all congregational ministers perform a pastoral leadership responsibility and contribute to strategic and spiritual leading in and of the congregation” (my translation).

the different ways in which basic thinking is realised (Ibid. p. 2). I agree with Råmunddal's definition of congregational development, but my specific purpose here is to point to conditions where the leadership potential of the sermon can be a tool in such strategic processes.

## PREACHING AND LEADERSHIP: WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS FOR LEADING THROUGH THE SERMON?

Although Cole and Åkerlund find that few contributions combine preaching and leadership, there are some. I have done electronic searches in Oria and Google Scholar and searched manually in homiletical literature in the library at VID Specialized University. My search for literature focusing jointly on preaching and leadership is delimited to the last 25 years. It struck me that I did not find much, and thus, my selection covers, in addition to Norwegian literature, also literature from the United Kingdom and the United States. I do not claim that my presentation is comprehensive, but I consider that the selection provides a certain overview and gives valuable input to the discussion. I present the contributions in chronological order and do not distinguish between books, book chapters and articles.

In 1995, John McClure published *The roundtable pulpit: where leadership and preaching meet* (McClure, 1995). The meeting place about which McClure talks is in the realm of collaborative preaching. His aim is to investigate “the implications of collaborative preaching for congregational leadership and homiletical method” (Ibid. p. 8). He wants to promote an understanding of biblical proclamation “that can become the centrepiece of an effective form of congregational leadership”, and even more “a repaired form of Christian community” (Ibid. p. 11). In order for this to happen, both preaching and leadership have to become collaborative. Such leadership is empowering, McClure claims, and it is important to look afresh at how to prepare and preach sermons and how to lead congregations (Ibid. p. 13, 20). In Chapter Three, McClure spells out what he calls the roundtable pulpit and what this image entails: 1) the preacher as host, 2) a communal event, 3) no privileged voice, 4) an open process, 5) a process with a purpose (Ibid. pp. 50-52). All this reinforces McClure's main point, namely that preaching and leadership must be collaborative.

Five years later, Halvor Nordhaug published *...så mitt hus kan bli fullt. En bok om prekenen* [...so that my house may be filled. A book about the sermon] (Nordhaug, 2000). In a subchapter entitled “The preacher and the leader”, he seeks to make a strong connection between what the minister does in the sermon and the rest of his/her work in the congregation. He claims that if the preacher is unwilling to take responsibility for the congregation, s/he undermines the congregation's confidence and so the sermon is unable to touch them deeply (Ibid. p. 60). He points to what he calls a pastoral leadership area, which includes a special responsibility to sustain the congregation in its basic programme: faith in the triune God, as it is formulated in the Bible and the creeds (Ibid. p. 61).<sup>3</sup>

In Ronald J. Allen's book *Preaching and practical ministry* (Allen, 2001), his main plea is that the sermon is most effective when it connects to the rest of what is happening in the life of the congregation. The sermon must be integrated into the “congregational life system” (Ibid. p. 1). Allen is interested in the “relationship of preaching to other components of ministry in the congregation” and he suggests that preaching could be an important focus for pastors in organising their energy (Ibid. p. 2). In Chapter One, he enlarges on preaching in the

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<sup>3</sup> Nordal accuses Nordhaug of not connecting preaching with leadership studies (Nordal, 2013 p. 10), which is partly true. Nordhaug only touches on this theme, without spelling it out in more detail.

life system of the congregation and gives three criteria by which the congregation can evaluate all aspects of its life: The first of these is appropriateness to the gospel. The congregation needs to understand itself from the standpoint of the gospel (Ibid. pp. 11-12).<sup>4</sup> In a systemic understanding, all parts of a system influence each other mutually, and even though preaching could be a principal focus for ministers, the sermon does not bear the “sole responsibility for the vocation of the church” (Ibid. p. 19). Chapter Four is about “The preacher as administrator”, but it seems that Allen does not distinguish sharply between leadership and administration. He claims that “the goal of leadership is to help the life system of the community serve God”, and that “[P]reaching plays a key role in these systems” (Ibid. p. 72). The call of the leader is to “help the church understand itself and the world in terms of the gospel” (Ibid. p. 76). In teaching the gospel, which is the principal task of the minister, s/he helps the congregation “remember who it is and what it is to do” (Ibid. p. 79). He further asserts that the preacher’s most important contribution is “to help the community understand the gospel as the heart of its life” and, in referring to S. Covey, that the sermon is a “primary means for forming the character of the congregation” (Ibid. pp. 86-87).

William E. Hull published *Strategic preaching. The role of the pulpit in pastoral leadership* in 2006 (Hull, 2006). He surveyed a plethora of homiletical books and articles in the US back to 1935 and found almost nothing on preaching as leading (Ibid. p. 2, 242). He is convinced that preaching can enhance leadership and leadership can enhance preaching, and his aim is to “rethink the preaching task by linking it more closely to the leadership role in the congregation” (Ibid. p. vi). By “strategic” Hull means “how to make the weekly pulpit utterance crucial to the shaping of those plans and priorities by which the congregation seeks to fulfil its God-given mission” (Ibid. p. vii), and he calls this a “critically important but neglected issue” (Ibid. p. viii). His governing metaphor of the church is that of a “pilgrim people journeying in hope towards a goal defined by the promises of God” (Ibid. p. 14). The problem with sermons is that they do not seem to go anywhere, he claims, while they should help the hearers to continue their pilgrimage of faith. Hull pleads for integration between preaching and the programme of the church, and says that “when the pulpit is viewed as contributing a sense of momentum or spiritual thrust to all that a church does, the leadership role of the pastor becomes both inescapable and indispensable” (Ibid. p. 112).

When Torstein E. Nordal did his master’s thesis on the sermon as a tool in the strategic leading of the congregation (Nordal, 2013), which also includes a small qualitative part, he based his theoretical perspective on Hull’s book. Nordal’s premise is that the minister’s leadership is tightly connected to preaching (Ibid. p. 5). He sought to investigate how it is possible to use the biblical text to lead the congregation strategically, by linking the sermon with the congregation’s chosen priority programmes, values, and visions, to remind the congregation of its identity and purpose (Ibid. p. 8). He does so by analysing five sermons from the Church of Norway.<sup>5</sup> When, in Chapter Three, Nordal presents the role of the sermon in strategic leadership, he uses four concepts from Hull’s book, namely purpose, context, vision, and mission (Ibid. p. 20; Hull, 2006 p. 116). Nordal concludes, after having analysed the five sermons, that he did not find what he expected; but he admits that the sermons may be a part of the general leading of the congregation, even though they are less strategically oriented. He also thinks that he could have found more if he had analysed several consecutive sermons

<sup>4</sup> The second and third are intelligibility in the contemporary world, and plausibility, which means ethical treatment of all in the congregation and in the world beyond.

<sup>5</sup> This is limited empirical material. The aim of qualitative research is not to generalise but to point to possible tendencies that can find a resonance in other settings (Swinton & Mowat, 2016 pp. 45-46).

from the same congregation (Ibid. p. 72). In the national church<sup>6</sup> setting of the Church of Norway, Nordal claims that the sermon must be loyal to what the church council has decided and show that these decisions are theologically well-founded. If not, strategic preaching from the pulpit may become a threat to the breath of the national church (Ibid. pp. 73-74). Nordal sums up his thesis by saying that three things surprised him: 1) None of the sermons reflected the catchwords “purpose”, “context”, “vision”, “goal”, and “mission”, 2) all the sermons had a focus on individual change, and 3) the context of the congregation was almost totally absent from the sermons (Ibid. p. 77).

Truls Åkerlund published his article “Preaching as Christian leadership” in 2014 (Åkerlund, 2014). He understands leadership from a communication perspective and stresses the role of narrative in preaching as leadership. He pleads for a kind of leadership that addresses the congregation as a whole and not the needs and sentiments of the individual (Ibid. p. 88). Preaching is leadership, he says, when it “tells a coherent story, orients toward the future, and uses imaginative language to do so”. He claims that the communication of narratives that provide meaning and identity is a crucial task for a leader, and the proclamation of the biblical narrative redefines reality, which is the work of leadership (Ibid. p. 97).

Sean D. Cole has written his Doctor of Ministry thesis on *Leading churches to fulfil their mission through expository preaching* (Cole, 2016). Through their education, pastors have been adequately trained to preach but they may not be adequately trained to lead through their preaching, he claims. His main argument in the thesis is that “the most effective and primary way pastors lead the church is through expository preaching” (Ibid. p. 137). The pastor as a leader is shepherding the congregation through “reading, explaining, and applying the biblical text in order for the church to fulfil its mission” (Ibid. p. 135). Cole posits three strategic goals of an expository preaching ministry whereby the pastor leads the church to fulfil its mission: 1) to lead the church to live under the authority of the Word, 2) to aim for gospel transformation, and 3) using the sermon as a primary means to communicate theological and missiological direction for the church (Ibid. p. 141). He is occupied with movement and, with reference to Hayford, he claims that the pastor as a shepherd is “not only feeding, but is also taking people somewhere” (Ibid. p. 142). He urges pastors to see their preaching as more than accurate exposition of the text; while this is important, they ought also to see preaching as the primary means to lead the people theologically. The pastor can reinforce the church’s identity by showing how it is derived from particular texts through weekly exposition of the Bible (Ibid. p. 164).

One of the chapters in Råmunddal’s book focuses on how preaching can be a tool in building the congregation (Råmunddal, 2020 pp. 425-458). In this chapter, Råmunddal talks about leading congregational development, but the concepts of leading and leadership are mostly implicit. His main research question concerns the special characteristics of preaching that build and develop congregations. Although the purpose of such preaching is to enable the congregation to be what it is called to be and do what it is called to do, Råmunddal’s main interest is to explore the preaching itself and what enables this kind of preaching to build the congregation (Ibid. p. 426). One characteristic of such preaching is that it fosters ecclesial identity. In using this expression, he refers to Brown, which challenges the highly individualistic thinking of western culture. Emphasis on personal development has received too much space at the expense of developing a communal spirituality, he asserts. An important question is whether, through exegetical and hermeneutical work, the preacher is able to explore what the biblical texts say about the identity and mission of the congregation in its context. Creating or fostering ecclesial identity is about creating a common language and a joint understanding

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<sup>6</sup> Norwegian: “folkekirke”.

of who we are and what our mission as a congregation is (Ibid. pp. 430-432). The primary task of the church is to preach the gospel, not to build an institution. Therefore, preaching must be prioritised in building and developing the congregation (Ibid. p. 434). After having described preaching in the New Testament and the challenges for preaching today, Råmunddal has a subsection on the challenges of preaching in the congregation's everyday life. If a congregation starts an intentional process of church development, the challenges become even harder, he claims. For such processes to be successful, they must be integrated into the preaching and the spirituality of the congregation. The preaching can help the congregation to see the importance of the processes from a biblical viewpoint, and integrating the development processes into the preaching can keep them going also in times of challenge. If such processes are not integrated into the preaching, the result may be compartmentalisation, and the preaching can be trapped in its own theological "bubble" (Ibid. p. 448).

In 2020, William H. Willimon published *Leading with the sermon: preaching as leadership* (Willimon, 2020). He starts his book by stating that preaching is the most important leadership activity of pastors, and goes on to say that preaching and leading are inseparable (Ibid. p. 1, 10). His aim is to "show how preaching aids and shapes our leadership and how our leadership provides the context, purposes, and test of our preaching" (Ibid. p. xi). Christian preaching is geared toward the future. It is "a bold, visionary, and demanding call to move toward a world that is to be" (Ibid. p. 10). Christian preaching includes action. Willimon says that a preacher must be willing to "move from proclaiming the gospel to leading the performance of the gospel" (Ibid. p. 17, 19). As for leadership, its rationale is theological, Willimon asserts, and it is necessary only if a group is "under orders to go somewhere" (Ibid. p. 19, 23). It is the identity, purpose, and mission given by Christ to the church that necessitates leadership (Ibid. p. 25). Willimon admits that sermons are not the only leadership tool for pastors, but he lists several features of sermons that lead. They "\*read people into the story of Christ's salvation of the world; \*clarify the purpose and mission of the church; \*recruit and energize people to get behind Jesus' mission in God's world; \*model how to think like Christians; \*motivate and encourage people to draw near to God; \*tell the truth about us and the world through the lens of Scripture" (Ibid. p. 130).

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION: LEADING CHURCH DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE SERMON

The authors above present a plethora of proposals for how preaching can become a leadership tool. They have different points of departure for their writings, and they belong to different traditions. Further, only a few of them write with processes of intentional church development in view. Taken together, according to these authors, much preaching or sermon content may have dimensions of strategic leadership. It is not my task to discuss the differences in the presented literature or to harmonise their varied viewpoints. In this concluding discussion, I rather focus on the conditions for leading through the sermon. What are the significant pre-suppositions for this to happen? In talking about conditions, this also points to the content by which such sermons are characterised. The challenge of the sermon, seen in the context of leading church development processes, is to spell out what a congregation ought to be and ought to do. The sermon can give motivation to engage in developing the congregation. It can furnish a biblical basis for pressing on in the pilgrimage of faith towards the goals set by the congregation, and it teaches the identity and mission of the congregation.

In the following, I will discuss under which conditions the sermon can become a leadership tool in church development processes. The discussion is based on the review of selected literature, related to other relevant contributions to the themes in question.<sup>7</sup>

### **Awareness of leading through the sermon**

The main purpose of the sermon is to be a vehicle for preaching the gospel of Christ – Christ crucified and raised from the dead – and there is much good preaching (and also some bad preaching). Cole asserts that through seminaries, pastors have been adequately trained in the art of preaching. The problem, however, is that they have not been trained to see the leadership opportunities offered by their preaching. This is reinforced by the lack of literature assisting pastors in how to lead through the sermon. Thus, pastors prepare and preach sermons week by week, but they may not be conscious of the possibilities of leading through their preaching and are thus unable to make use of their opportunities. The sermons analysed by Nordal confirm this. None of the sermons resonated with the catchwords “purpose”, “context”, “vision”, “goal”, and “mission”. I interpret the preaching of the gospel without being aware of the possibilities of leading through preaching, not due to unwillingness, but due to a lack of consciousness of what the sermon can accomplish. Sirris, however, in his research, has encountered pastors who have given up on strategic leadership and only want to concentrate on telling people about Jesus (Sirris, 2018 p. 16). Nordhaug talks about a pastoral leadership area to be filled by sermons, and Willimon states that preaching is the most important leadership activity of ministers. In my thinking, being aware of the opportunities for leading the congregation inherent in week-to-week sermons is the first step in changing what to a large extent has been neglected so far.<sup>8</sup> This may mean that both the teaching at seminaries and the continuing training of working pastors must furnish literature relevant to this theme and provide space for reflection in order to raise awareness of the sermon as a tool in leading the congregation.

### **The congregation as a whole as the target group for preaching**

It seems that much preaching in our western societies has an individualistic focus, and this should be exchanged for a focus on the congregation as a whole. In his modest qualitative material, Nordal found that the sermons had a focus on individual change, which is in line with our highly individualistic western culture. According to Åkerlund, some kinds of leadership only address the needs and sentiments of the individual, while he pleads for leadership that addresses the congregation as a whole. Allen also constantly emphasises the congregation as the target audience for preaching. He asserts that it is the *congregation* that should be helped to remember its identity and mission, and it is the *congregation* that needs to understand itself from the standpoint of the gospel. Råmunddal’s use of the concept “ecclesial identity” firmly underlines this aspect. The preaching must foster ecclesial identity. This may happen if the preacher, in his exegetical and hermeneutical work with the biblical text, is indeed able to explore what this means for the identity and mission of the *congregation* in its local context. This is, of course, counter-cultural for western culture, and it requires a renewed way of reading and performing the biblical story. In fact, the biblical texts were written in a culture far more communal than ours in the West, as also are many cultures in the world today (Lingenfelter, 2008).

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<sup>7</sup> When referring again to literature presented earlier, the references are not repeated. Only new references will be cited here.

<sup>8</sup> I do not claim that ministers in the field do not preach sermons that reflect the proposals in the reviewed literature. They may do so, but I doubt that many of them consider it an important element in leading their congregations. However, only future empirical research can verify this observation.



## **The sermon in the congregational life system**

Allen asserts that for the sermon to be a leadership tool, it must connect to the rest of what is happening in the congregation. He calls this “the congregational life system”. There is much stress on this in the selected literature above. Hull thinks that the sermon can contribute momentum and spiritual impetus to all things in the congregation, and when this is so, the leadership role of the minister becomes indispensable. According to Willimon, the preacher should not only preach the gospel, s/he also must perform the gospel, which I understand as connecting the sermon to the other activities of the congregation and being an active agent in performing these tasks. Norhaug claims that if the minister does not take responsibility for the congregation, his/her sermons will not be credible. It is not enough to just “talk the talk”. The minister has to “walk the walk” (Mulligan & Allen, 2005 pp. 17-21). Hull calls it “strategic” when the weekly sermon becomes crucial in shaping the plans and priorities of the congregation, so that it can fulfil its God-given mission. If the programmes and activities of the congregation are cut loose from the weekly sermon, both the sermon and the programmes suffer. The sermon then fails in its ability to ground and sustain the ongoing processes in the congregation, and the programmes will be compartmentalised. Then the different actors in the congregation do their own thing and there will be no overall direction, which then excludes any possibility of leading through the sermon. In investigating church education in the Church of Norway, Hans Austnaberg and Erling Birkedal found that having a holistic view of the different branches and activities of the congregation is of paramount importance (Austnaberg & Birkedal, 2017 p. 182). The challenge faced in this context is the complexity of many congregations and the question of leadership, perhaps especially in the Church of Norway, where most staff are employed by the churchwarden while the pastors are engaged by the bishop. Who then has oversight and keeps all the branches and activities together? There are also other structural challenges in the Church of Norway, related to the sermon in the congregational life system: The lectionary guides the preaching in Sunday services. The positive aspect of this is that many biblical texts form the basis of preaching, and the minister cannot stick to their favourite texts. The challenge is that only a few of these texts relate to leading the congregation, and thus, the lectionary may be a hindrance to leading church development through the sermon. Another challenge is that the sermons in Sunday services in the Church of Norway have become increasingly short, normally about 12 minutes.<sup>9</sup> Little time spent on the sermon may also be the case in other congregations. This minimises the place of the sermon in the service, and thus, the possibility of leading through the sermon.

## **Awareness of the external context**

According to Mintzberg, strategic leadership must focus on how an organisation relates to the environment and how the environment affects the organisation (cited in Jenssen, 2019 p. 3). This means that the context of the local congregation is of the utmost importance. Nordal concludes his investigation by saying that in the sermons he analysed, the context of the congregations was almost totally absent. In researching how congregations worked in a specific church development programme, Sirris found that in the first phase of the work, the actors were oriented towards their context, while in continuing the work, this changed to an internal orientation without communication with the external context. He notes that this is in contrast to strategic work in non-church organisations (Sirris, 2018 p. 21). In the great commission, Jesus sends the disciples into the world: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, [...]”

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<sup>9</sup> Bishop Norhaug stated in 2019 that a sermon ought to be between 12 and 20 minutes (Aftenposten, Dec 28, 2019, p.4), but my general impression from Church of Norway services is that the sermon is seldom more than 12-15 minutes, often considerably shorter.

(Mt 28:19, NRSV<sup>10</sup>). Thus, the context of the congregation is highly significant, both for the preaching and for leading the congregation toward its God-given purpose. In homiletical literature, the context of preaching is constantly emphasised (Hogan & Reid, 1999; Kurewa, 2000). Thus, Mintzberg's notion of *relating* to the environment is too weak in a homiletical setting. It is about preaching the gospel in a way that *affects* the external context and calls people into fellowship with God. In Jesus' words: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (Jn 20:21 NRSV). The congregation is sent by Jesus into the world, into both its near and distant context (Acts 1:8).

### **The significance of movement**

Hull's basic metaphor of the church is that of a pilgrim people who are journeying towards a God-given goal. The sermon ought to help the hearers continue that pilgrimage. The problem is, however, that the sermons do not seem to go anywhere, according to Hull. Allen states that preaching is geared toward the future and is thus a call to move forward. This stress on movement in sermons is in line with much homiletical literature, not least in narrative preaching (Lowry, 2001). This is sometimes conceptualised as discerning the action; the biblical text does not only say something, it does something. This ought also to be so with the sermon (Eslinger, 2002 pp. 24-28). It may be called the function of the sermon, defined by Thomas G. Long as "a description of what the preacher hopes the sermon will create or cause to happen for the hearers" (Long, 2013 p. 127). Likewise, leadership is about movement, influencing others to understand what needs to be done and how to do it. Bård E. H. Norheim and Joar Haga state that "[T]he act of leadership is, by its very essence, directed towards the future" (Norheim & Haga, 2021 p. 4). If the sermon is to be useful as a leadership tool in church development, it must emphasise movement and shared goals for the future.

### **The theological dimension of the congregation is foundational**

In a qualitative study, Sirris has investigated how ministers, churchwardens, and church board leaders understand themselves and each other as actors in strategic work in congregations that have been involved in a church development project. Only in passing do the ministers mention that theological reflection is important; the church board leaders mention theology; but all in all, Sirris concludes that "there is relatively weak theological reflection among all groups". He challenges the actors to see connections and make synergies between what he calls "ideology and practice" (Sirris, 2018 p. 13, 15, 18). I understand ideology to mean the foundations of the congregation and practice, pointing to the activities agreed upon in the development project. Sirris asserts that the strategic work must be connected to theological reflection; it is this that furnishes the reasons why the congregation ought to implement the strategy (Ibid. p. 22). Sirris is not alone in stressing this. In Jenssen's article, where he applies the knowledge base of strategic studies to how the process and content of strategy can be designed for the local congregation, he finds that very little is written about "what is unique about the church context and how this should affect strategic leadership" (Jenssen, 2019 p. 9). He pleads for integrating the theological dimension of the church more strongly into strategic church leadership. In passing, he mentions preaching, prayer, and spiritual gifts, but he does not enlarge on these subjects (Ibid. p. 11, 13). According to Jenssen, the process must be subject to theological reflection, prayer, and listening to God, and he calls for contributions showing how Scripture and spirituality ought to underpin strategic church leadership (Ibid. p. 15, 18). According to Råmunddal, if this is not the case, it may lead to a secularisation of the understanding of

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<sup>10</sup> New Revised Standard Version.

leadership within the church. I understand Robert Banks and Bernice M. Ledbetter's book to point in the same direction – their concern is to investigate what the driving forces behind Christians' views and practices of leadership are, whether they are shaped by core Christian convictions or by wider cultural assumptions (Banks & Ledbetter, 2004 p. 16). The sermon is a primary means to teach and thus establish the theological foundation of the congregation. To accomplish this, the sermon must not stand alone but be consciously connected to the task of leading the congregation. Allen says that in teaching the gospel, the minister helps the congregation to remember who it is and what it should do, which in congregational development language points to the being (identity) and doing (mission) of the church. The sermon provides ample opportunities to form the character of the congregation.

Leading church development processes demands specific strategic skills in both content and process.<sup>11</sup> From a theological perspective, however, this article claims that all strategic means ought to be measured against the congregation's theological-spiritual dimension. The last part of John Swinton and Harriet Mowat's definition of practical theology may be helpful. They see the goal of practical theology to be "ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world" (Swinton & Mowat, 2016 p. 7). From a Lutheran perspective, I would include also creation. Everything in the congregation ought to be evaluated in the light of its participation in what God does, both in creation and redemption. The sermon can provide a significant opportunity for such evaluation.

## SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Under what conditions can sermons function as a tool in leading church development processes in the congregation? This can be done when ministers:

- are conscious of the possibilities to lead through sermons;
- see the congregation and not the individual as the target audience of preaching;
- place the sermon firmly within the congregation's life system;
- engage with and affect the external context;
- lead the congregation towards shared goals; and
- prioritise the theological dimension of the congregation.

The implications for preaching in church contexts may be at various levels: For ministers, it is paramount that they make use of the opportunities they have to lead through sermons. For ordination teaching in seminaries and continuing training of ministers, there is a need for more literature on the subject, to spark reflection and raise awareness of the place of the sermon in church development. Since leading through the sermon is, to a large extent, an unexplored area, there are ample possibilities for further research. I would especially encourage *empirical* research investigating to what extent ministers are, in fact, already leading the congregations through their sermons, and how working preachers reflect on this theme.

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<sup>11</sup> Jessen refers to the content aspect, naming vision, analysis of external and internal matters, position, and choice of and implementation of means. Regarding the process, he mentions formal and informal parts, the importance of the top-manager, and the relation between adaptation and strategic choice (Jessen, 2019 p. 8).

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**Hans Austnaberg** (1956) is professor of Practical Theology at VID Specialized University, Stavanger, Norway. He teaches homiletics and leads the ordination training at VID Stavanger. He has published books and articles on the revival movement in Madagascar and on preaching in Sunday services in the Malagasy Lutheran Church. Related to the Church of Norway, he has done research and published on the Church education reform, congregational development, the role of the minister, and the understanding of baptism. E-mail: [hans.austnaberg@vid.no](mailto:hans.austnaberg@vid.no).

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