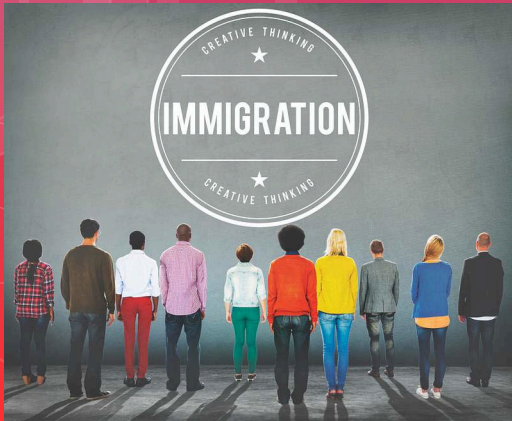




How Can We Heal Our Political Divides?

Approaches for Navigating Divisive Politics within Congregations

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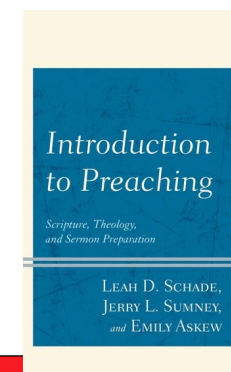
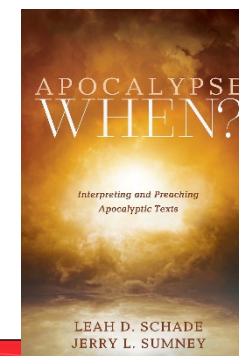
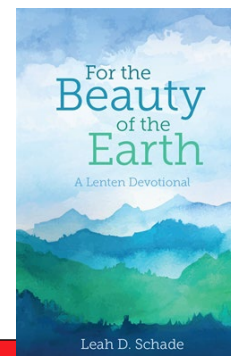
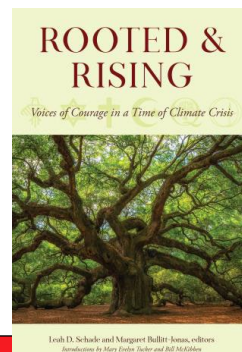
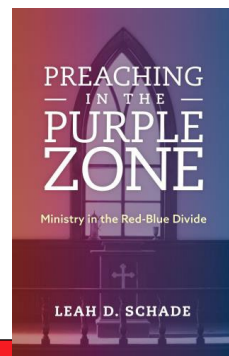
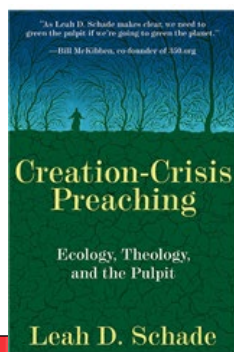


The Rev. Dr. Leah D. Schade

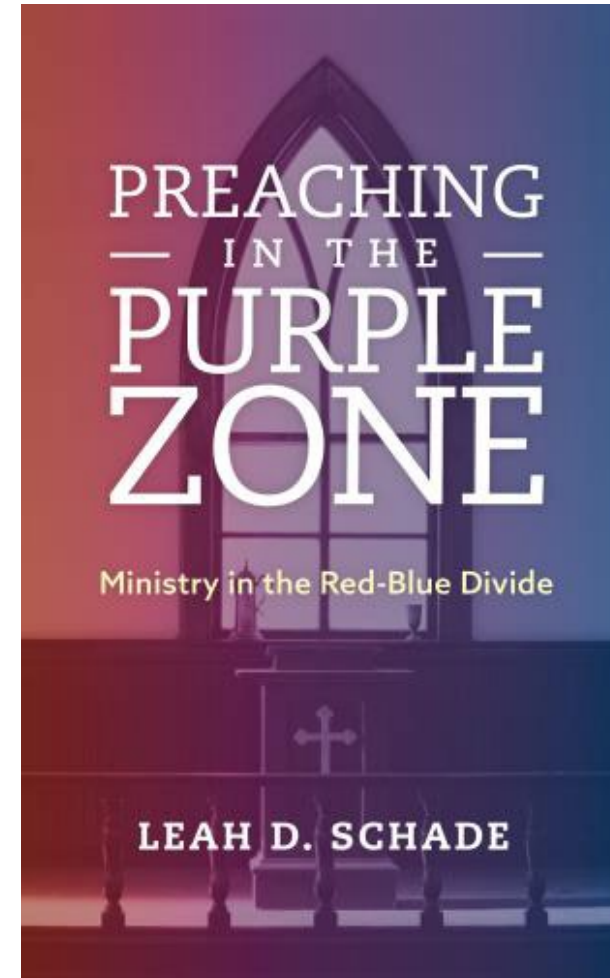
**Author, Speaker, Educator,
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- Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship, Lexington Theological Seminary
- Ordained Lutheran (ELCA) clergy since 2000
- *Creation-Crisis Preaching: Ecology, Theology, and the Pulpit* (Chalice Press, 2015)
- *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019)
- *Rooted and Rising: Voices of Courage in a Time of Climate Crisis* (Rowman & Littlefield, November 2019)
- “EcoPreacher” blog at Patheos: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/ecopreacher/>



- *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019)
- Available for sale at LTS table
- <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781538119891/Preaching-in-the-Purple-Zone-Ministry-in-the-Red-Blue-Divide>





Reformation
Media, PA



Spirit and Truth
Worship Center
Yeadon, PA



United in Christ
Lewisburg, PA



Lexington
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY



MINISTRY, PREACHING, AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Three survey sets

Clergy Survey: Ministry, Preaching, and Social Issues (national survey of U.S. mainline Protestant clergy, 2017 and 2021) - Clergy2017, Clergy2021

DOC Congregational Survey: Social Issues and the Church (survey of congregants in 10 Disciples of Christ churches in Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia, 2019 and 2020) - DOC2019, DOC2020

UMC Congregational Survey: Social Issues and the Church (survey of congregants in 10 United Methodist churches in Kansas and Nebraska, 2020 - UMC2020

Clergy Survey: Preaching and Social Issues Surveys

Research team:

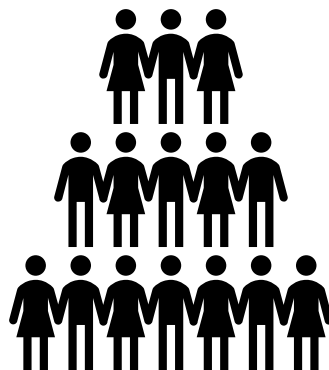
The Rev. Dr. Leah Schade

The Rev. Dr. Amanda Wilson Harper

Dr. Wayne Thompson

The Rev. Dr. Katie Day

MAINLINE PROTESTANT PREACHERS SURVEYED



2017

1,104 respondents

2021

2,059 respondents

2023

791 respondents

Range of topics included:

- **The difference the 2016, 2020, and 2022 elections made in preachers' willingness to address social issues in the pulpit**
- **Reasons clergy list for either engaging social issues in their sermons, or avoiding them**
- **What kind of training and support pastors are seeking to foster healthy dialogue about public issues in their congregations**

Survey Methodology

The survey was designed to represent the total U.S. population of mainline Protestant pastors serving congregations in the United States.

“Convenience sample” and “snowball” distribution through various channels (social media, denominations, state councils of churches, seminaries, preacher groups and networks, etc.)

Geographic locations of respondents

- The surveys included respondents from all 50 states as well as Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico.



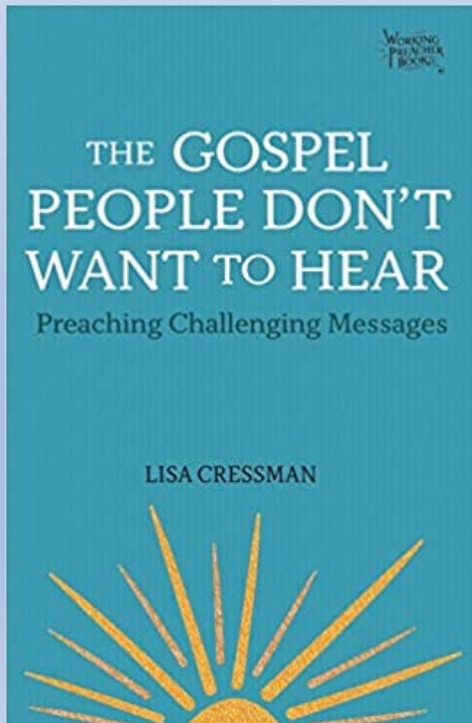
Social stressors of the last six years that contribute to stress in congregations

- White supremacy, Christian Nationalism
- Political polarization
- Social unrest
- Conspiracy theories and disinformation
- Covid-19 global pandemic
- Denominational divisions and strife



“Brittleness” in congregations

When congregations are stressed, they are more “brittle,” meaning that they are emotionally fragile and less receptive to being transformed by the gospel.

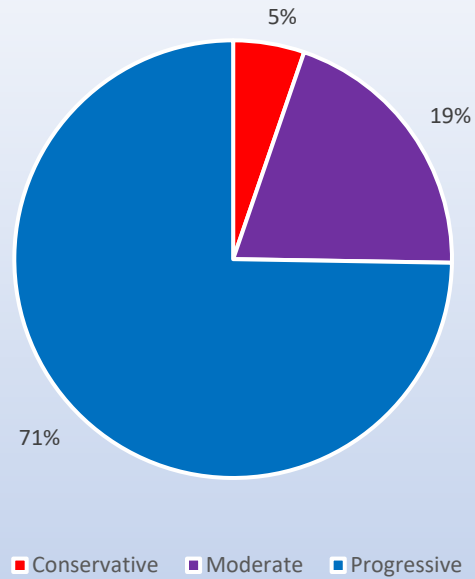


Lisa Cressman: “A brittle congregation is highly stressed. The people are anxious, they rarely laugh, and they are probably exhibiting symptoms of grief, including anger, lashing out, withdrawing, isolating, waxing nostalgic, circling the wagons, overreacting, bargaining, making much ado about nothing, targeting you or another leader (or a problem) as *the* problem, and/or displaying passive-aggressive behaviors”

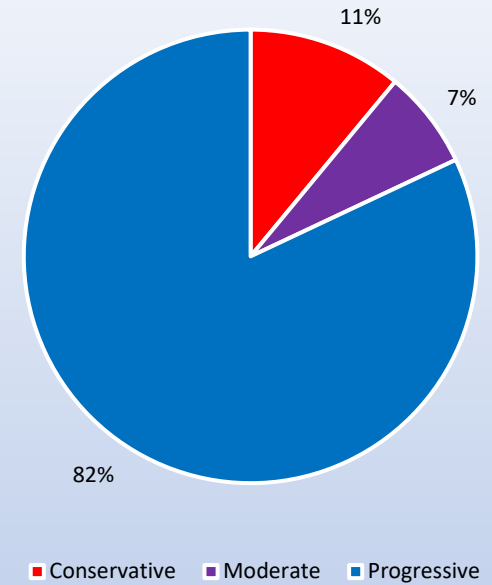
Lisa Cressman, *The Gospel People Don't Want to Hear: Preaching Challenging Messages* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2020), 52-53.

Political leanings of clergy v. congregations 2017 v. 2023

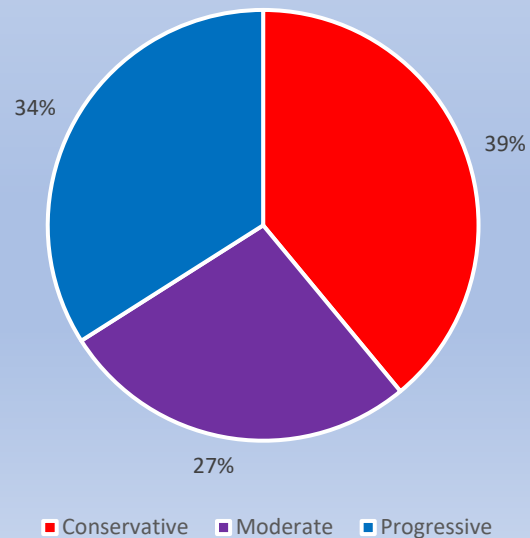
2017 Clergy Political Leanings



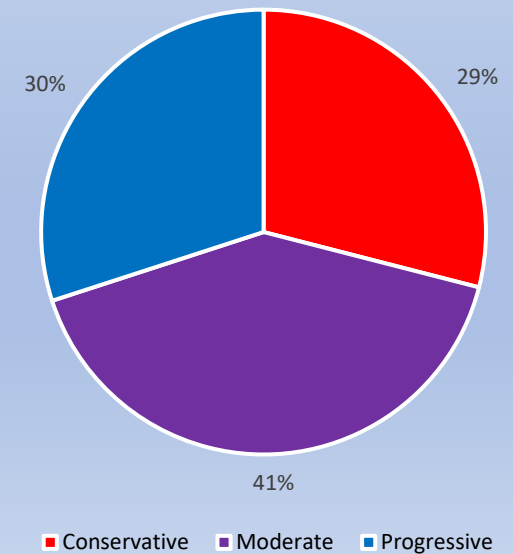
2023 Clergy Political Leanings



2017 Congregation Political Leanings (est by clergy)



2023 Congregation Political Leanings (est by clergy)



How would you assess the level of divisiveness...

Your church

Very or somewhat divided

2021 = 25%

2023 = 35%

Your community

Very or somewhat divided

2021 = 48%

2023 = 69%

2023:

How concerned are you that the congregation will not be able to sustain its ministry beyond the next three years (i.e., unable to keep the building open and/or pay for a minister)?

Very or mildly concerned = 56%

Levels of clergy stress/burn-out reported in 2023

▼ So high that I'm planning to leave ministry altogether	2%	13
▼ High enough that I'm planning to leave my current ministry setting	9%	62
▼ High, but I'm dealing with it	38%	260
▼ Moderate	33%	230
▼ Low	18%	127
TOTAL		692

Half of clergy (49%) are reporting high levels of stress and burn-out.

And yet . . .

There was an increase in the number of respondents saying that their congregation seems willing to DIALOGUE about social issues:

Percent who moderately or strongly agree:

2017: 47%

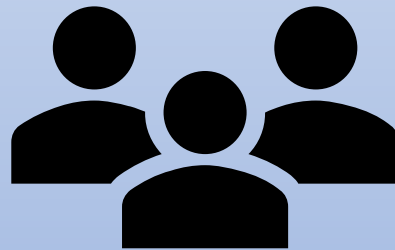
2021: 74%

2023: 70%

How many congregants have observed people talking about current events while in the church building or in Zoom meetings . . .

- DOC CONGREGATIONS – 73%

- UMC CONGREGATIONS – 59%



Congregants are looking for biblical and theological guidance about social issues

- 64% of DOC respondents see their church as a resource for helping them think biblically and/or theologically about social issues
- 76% of DOC respondents said preachers should address contemporary issues “because Jesus and the Bible speak about social issues.”
- 85% of UMC respondents agreed that the church should encourage dialogue and discussion about social issues from a faith perspective

Congregants are looking for biblical and theological guidance about social issues

- **78%** of UMC congregants indicated they believe churches should help their members discuss social issues and host community dialogues.
- **85%** agreed that the church should encourage dialogue and discussion about social issues ***from a faith perspective.***

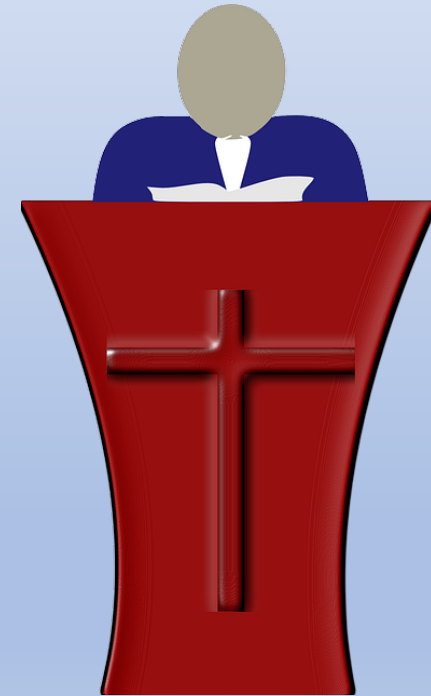
But it's complicated . . .

42% of UMC respondents said they knew of people leaving their church because of disagreements about social issues.



Characteristics of preachers who are MOST likely to address social issues:

- Older
- Male
- Big steeple
- Big budget
- Long tenure



Characteristics of preachers who are LEAST likely to address social issues:

- Younger
- Female
- Clergy of color in white churches
- Clergy in smaller churches with smaller budgets
- Clergy in rural churches
- Clergy new to their congregations or new to the ministry



QUESTIONS SO FAR?

How to Heal Our Political Divides: Tools for Pastors and Congregations



Sources of our divides

Strict Father worldview

- Hierarchical, patriarchal, conservative
- Strong military and criminal justice
- Opposed to gov't reg & gov't mandated social programs
- Negative anthropology
- Social ills due to moral failures, lack of discipline
- Nurturing and compassionate to those in group

Nurturant Parent worldview

- Democratic, inclusive, progressive
- Strong education and social programs
- Opposed to unregulated corporations
- Positive anthropology
- Social ills due to systemic factors
- Abhor violence, hardworking, fairness

Sources of our divides

Working gospels

- American sentimentalism – American civil religion often evoked during times of national crisis and tragedy or at large national events
- American exceptionalism – belief in the divine mission of America as God's chosen nation
- Prosperity gospel – equates God's blessings with individual health, wealth, and success (while downplaying social critique)
- Denominational affiliation – the codified historical theological tenets and beliefs of individuals whose works, writing, and sermons founded a denomination

Sources of our divides

Working gospels

- Evangelicalism – characterized by a belief that the Bible has the highest authority, Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that gives salvation, a Christian is compelled to encourage people to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and personal Savior, and only those who trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior can receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.
- Social justice – the application of Christian ethics to social concerns such as economic inequality, poverty, racism, environment, and equal rights for women and LGBTQIA+
- Identity politics – the use and application of ethnicity, gender, race, culture, ability, or social location as an interpretive lens for Scripture and theology

We can't discuss "politics" because . . .

- You're making me uncomfortable.
- I don't agree with your position.
- You're crossing "church-and-state" boundaries that I think should stay in place.
- Don't challenge my comfort zone.
- You're taking sides when you should remain neutral.
- You're challenging me (and the media that informs my position), and I don't appreciate it.
- I come to church to escape or get a break from the world, not to further engage.
- This is too complicated to talk about or hear preached.
- It's too difficult/painful for me to think about this.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “POLITICS”?

The root of “politics” is the Greek word *polis*, which refers to “community” and “citizens.”

There is a difference
between being *political* and
being *partisan*.

The basic political question :
“WHAT KIND OF COMMUNITY
SHALL WE BE?”



The process by which we answer this question is politics.

Categories of reactions:

- **Emotional**
- **Relational**
- **Principled**
- **Some combination of the three**

Emotional, Relational, or Principled?

- You're making me uncomfortable.
- I don't agree with your position.
- You're crossing "church-and-state" boundaries that I think should stay in place.
- Don't challenge my comfort zone.
- You're taking sides when you should remain neutral.
- You're challenging me (and the media that informs my position), and I don't appreciate it.
- I come to church to escape or get a break from the world, not to further engage.
- This is too complicated to talk about or hear preached.
- It's too difficult/painful for me to think about this.

Pro tip: Meet the person at the level of emotions and relationship instead of only focusing on intellectual principles.

MORAL FRAMEWORKS

**CARE
V.
HARM**

**FAIRNESS
V.
CHEATING**

**LIBERTY
V.
OPPRESSION**

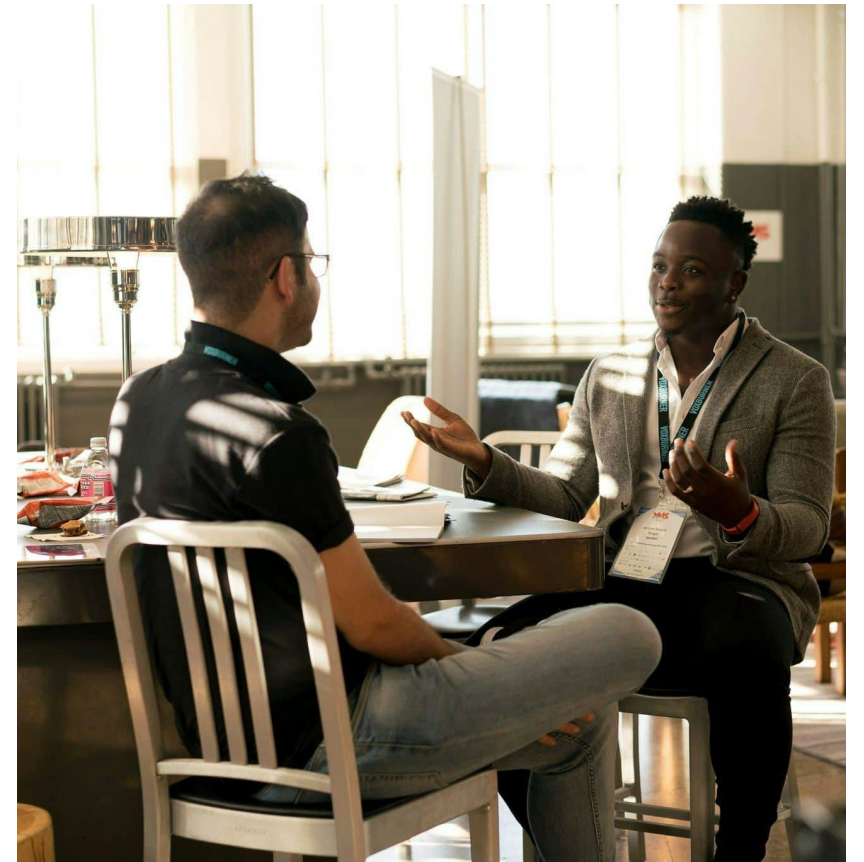
**LOYALTY
V.
BETRAYAL**

**AUTHORITY
V.
SUBVERSION**

**SANCTITY
V.
DEGRADATION**

Ask questions, follow the sacredness

- “Can you tell how you came to this position?”
- “Can you tell me a story that illustrates why this is a concern for you?”
- “Tell me more about that.”
- Affirm that the value(s) undergirding their position is a good one to have.
- “It sounds like fairness is important to you. It’s important to me, too!”
- Share what values are important to you and try to build bridges of shared values.





Focus on Belonging

- “Belonging is about a state of being connected and in relationship without breach. Belonging conjures a sense of being in relationship with someone or something,” Lisa L. Thompson, *Preaching the Headlines: Possibilities and Pitfalls* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021), 79.
- Name belonging as a core human need to create bridges between people who are working from different moral foundations, occupy opposing worldviews, or utilize different working gospels.

Cultivate Trust

- 1) Nurturing relationships.
- 2) Articulating boundaries for civil behavior along with reminders of our trust and respect among those in our churches.
- 3) Encouraging the sharing of stories to humanize the difficult issues with which we are grappling.
- 4) Listening deeply and reflectively.
- 5) Moving beyond negative generalizations and stereotypes about the side with which we disagree.
- 6) Pointing out how God is working – even within the complexity of our most difficult issues – to bring about new life and renewed hope.

