Anger, Fear, and Consequences of Prophetic Sermons:
First Report from the Research Survey “Preaching about Controversial Issues”
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Abstract
This paper is the first report on results from a 2017 survey of 1200 mainline Protestant clergy in the United States entitled “Preaching about Controversial Issues.” The 60-question online survey was designed to assess how preachers are approaching their sermons during this divisive time in our nation’s history. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the results from this comprehensive empirical research point to current trends and emerging issues in preaching. In addition, the information from the survey may yield insights for both clergy and congregations regarding the intersection of religion, culture, and politics, as well as faith and public life in the task of prophetic preaching. This first report focuses on the number of respondents who indicated willingness to preach about controversial justice issues, reasons respondents listed for avoiding social justice issues in their sermons, and negative responses clergy have received in response to such sermons.

Introduction
In the first two months of 2017, I conducted a survey of mainline Protestant clergy in the United States to assess how preachers are approaching their sermons during this divisive time in our nation’s history. Using the platform SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com), I designed and conducted a 60-question online survey entitled “Preaching about Controversial Issues” which ran for six weeks, from mid-January to the end of February. I received responses from 1205 participants in 45 states (with an almost equal number of male and female respondents), well over the 1051 responses needed for a statistically accurate sampling.¹ The survey explores a range of topics, including the following:

- The difference the 2016 presidential election has made in preachers’ willingness to address controversial issues in the pulpit;
- Topics clergy intended to address in the 6 months following the presidential inauguration as compared to the topics they engaged prior to the election;

¹ I calculated my optimal sample size (1051) based on information collected from the statistics and research departments of eight mainline Protestant denominations to arrive at an estimate of the total number of pastors currently serving congregations. While I received responses that represented over 16 different denominations, I calculated my sample pool (67,701) based on the number of active, non-retired clergy currently serving congregations in eight denominations in the United States – United Methodist, Presbyterian Church – USA, Episcopal, Lutheran (ELCA), American Baptist, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ (Christian Church), and Reformed Church in America. The number of responses (1205) exceeded the optimal sample size needed for a statistically accurate sampling at a confidence level of 95% with a 3% margin of error. It is important to note that not all questions were completed by all participants, so the confidence level and margin of error is adjusted accordingly for each question.
• Reasons clergy list for either engaging controversial topics 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.

The results from this comprehensive empirical research point to current trends and emerging issues in preaching. In addition, the information from the survey may yield insights for both clergy and congregations regarding the intersection of religion, culture, and politics with faith and public life. They data also deals with the complex dynamics that gender and sexuality, race, economics, geographic locations, and political leanings of clergy and parishioners alike bring to the task of preaching.2

The value of empirical research in homiletics

Conducting empirical research to study preaching, preachers, listeners, and sermons themselves is not a new method of inquiry in the field of homiletics. Clifton F. Guthrie collected the first major bibliography of quantitative studies and reviewed their methods and findings in 2007.3 The impetus for such a collection was inspired by research conducted for the Listening to the Listeners project directed by Ronald J. Allen from 2000 – 2004.4 This project was a rare example of scholars using scientific methods used to study preaching. Guthrie lamented that “there is a significant absence [in the Academy of Homiletics] of empirical research and a lack of engagement with some of the most relevant theories from the human sciences such as cognitive science, sociology, and experimental psychology.”5 I am hoping that my survey of preachers, which utilizes social scientific methods of inquiry, will help fill that gap.

Guthrie’s grouping of empirical studies by seven major research questions is useful when considering how to categorize my research:

1. What are preachers actually preaching?
2. How often do preachers preach on social issues?
3. Do sermons persuade?
4. How do individual differences in hearers matter for preaching?
5. What qualities in a sermon make it more effective?
6. Does feedback and training help the preacher to preach more effectively?
7. How do people best understand and retain religious messages?

2 Survey questions included all of these demographic subgroups, as well as education level, bi-lingual and immigration status, age, and ministerial status. In the workgroup meeting, I will present slides showing this detailed information.
5 Guthrie, 69.
The survey I conducted is a blend of questions #1 and #2, in that it sought responses from clergy on how often they preach on topics of public concern (if at all), and what justice issues they actually include in their preaching. A modified version of Question #4 is also ascertained in the survey. In other words, I ask: How do individual differences in preachers matter for preaching?

Goals and Methodology of the Survey

There are four overarching goals of this research project:

1) Provide both quantitative and qualitative data that helps survey the landscape of preaching about controversial issues during this deeply divided time in our nation’s history.
2) Provide quantitative data to test theories about how preachers approach controversial justice issues.
3) Offer a contribution to the under-studied phenomenon of Christian preaching using scientific methods that promote self-understanding among homileticians.
4) Provide data for both the Academy of Homiletics and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (both are guilds in which I am a member) that may spark and/or support future research projects.

In terms of methodology, this project involves both quantitative and qualitative research. The survey was designed in response to Leonora Tubbs Tisdale’s book Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach, in which she lists several theories as to why pastors resist preaching about justice issues. The data from my questionnaire not only tests these theories, but also identifies possible ongoing or emerging patterns and/or trends in preaching about contemporary issues. The data may also provide insights into demographic factors that influence prophetic preaching, and yield data that can be investigated by others. In addition, the generalized results from the survey may aid in the pedagogical task of helping homiletics professors and students devise strategies for prophetic preaching within their particular contexts.

There are also qualitative aspects of the questionnaire. For example, the subjective questions in the survey elicited responses that may help us understand underlying reasons and opinions regarding clergy choices in prophetic preaching. In addition, several of the questions included the option for open-ended comments, which allowed for narrative texture to put a human face on the data. Finally, respondents were given the option to indicate their willingness to be interviewed about their answers, and if they have specific stories to tell about their experiences with preaching about controversial justice issues. Nearly two hundred respondents shared their information so that I could contact them for further conversation. I plan to start this phase of ethnographic research in the coming year. This will allow for a deeper dive into the questions and data, and possibly point to areas for future research.

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6 I will be addressing Questions #3, #5, and #6 in my pedagogical work evaluating the effectiveness of sermons preached in tandem with the process known as deliberative dialogue.
How reliable is the data? In preparing the survey, I consulted with two social scientists as well as several colleagues who have utilized empirical research in their own work. I also had several pastors do test runs of the survey before I opened it to the public. My goal was to create a questionnaire with clear language, smooth flow, and unbiased questions.

However, because this survey involves self-reporting by clergy, the questionnaire risks the classic problem of eliciting “socially desirable rather than objective responses from their subjects.” As Guthrie has noted, “Asking preachers via surveys about their own preaching can be like asking folks to calculate their own tax deductions: there is always the temptation to claim too much.” Guthrie goes on to state that questionnaire research needs to be balanced with studies into the content of the sermons actually preached. Thus, to test the veracity of the pastors’ self-reporting about the content of their preaching in my questionnaire, an objective review of their actual sermons would need to be conducted.

Such research, while valuable, is beyond the scope of this project. It is also not the point of this particular questionnaire, because it was not intended to yield data on the actual content of the preachers’ sermons. Rather, I was testing for attitudes, opinions, and expressions of underlying feelings and concerns by preachers. I designed the survey this way in order to investigate Tisdale’s theories about why preachers avoid prophetic preaching, and to provide information that may be useful in the pedagogical task of helping preachers discover and effectively exercise their prophetic voice.

Another thing to note is that this is not a particularly sophisticated survey, in that it does not include things like standardized personality inventories or scales of religious attitudes that would allow one to look for correlations between scientifically verified variables. For some, this may reduce the credibility of the data and lessen the usefulness of the survey. Also, as Guthrie warns, “Survey-style preaching research has too often been weak because questions are loaded or poorly phrased, fail to use proven question forms, or draw from non-random or small samples.” Critics may be able to identify such weaknesses in this survey.

Nevertheless, I think the case can be made that the data from this questionnaire at least provides a snapshot of how a sampling of mainline Protestant clergy self-reported about their attitudes toward preaching about controversial issues at a particular time, what topics they said they are willing to address, their reasons for addressing controversial issues (or not), and the concerns they expressed about consequences of prophetic preaching in their congregations.

As both the Listening to Listeners researchers and Clifton Guthrie have noted, the need for empirical research in the field of homiletics is ongoing. This research project, “Preaching about Controversial Issues,” seeks to contribute to that body of knowledge through generating both quantitative and qualitative data to aid in the study of preaching. I offer this initial report for critique, suggestions, and questions as we consider the future of our field.

Prophetic preaching versus preaching about controversial justice issues

It is important to point out the distinction between Tisdale’s focus on prophetic preaching, and my survey which asks about controversial justice issues in preaching. My survey does not ask preachers whether they engage in prophetic preaching, because definitions of the term “prophetic” vary, and it would have been difficult to account for respondents’ subjective

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8 Guthrie, 73.
9 Ibid, 76.
10 Ibid, 75.
opinions about whether or not their preaching was “prophetic.” Rather, the questionnaire addresses how preachers deal with controversial justice issues. For the purposes of this survey, I defined a controversial justice issue as having the following characteristics (which were shared with participants as they began the questionnaire):

- It affects people and communities at many levels (personal, family, institutional, governmental, societal, global)
- Decisions made about this issue at any level have an impact on other levels
- There are a wide range of opinions about how best to deal with the issue
- Emotions about the issue tend to be very strong for some people
- There are a variety of factors involved in explaining why the issue is a “problem”
- There is a great deal of stake for certain parties depending on how decisions are made at the personal, family, institutional, business, governmental, economic, policy, and global levels, and the power differentials therein
- There is usually a perceived debate about “rights” versus “responsibilities”
- The issue is in some realm of public debate and has some bearing on politics and public policy

Of course, there is a difference between just mentioning such issues in a sermon and engaging in actual prophetic preaching. One can speak about a social justice issue without saying anything prophetic. Yet, as Tisdale notes, just naming a controversial issue in the pulpit can elicit negative pushback. So, in certain contexts, it takes a certain amount of prophetic courage to even mention such topics in a sermon. Thus, the data collected in this survey can be used to quantify attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of clergy engaging in prophetic preaching.

**Preaching about controversial justice issues – by the numbers**

While there are numerous questions to pursue from the survey responses, for this first paper I will examine the following data points:

1. The number of respondents who indicated willingness to preach about controversial justice issues
2. Reasons respondents listed for avoiding controversial justice issues in their sermons

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11 In terms of the term “prophetic,” Tisdale clarifies that she is not speaking of preaching that predicts the future in apocalyptic terms. Rather, she is interested in the type of preaching that is “cutting edge and future oriented (yet not future predicting), and that addresses public and social concerns.” (Tisdale, 3). While she includes definitions of “prophetic preaching” by other scholars, she resists offer her own definition. Instead, she offer “seven hallmarks of prophetic preaching” to help readers understand what makes proclamation “prophetic” (see pages 3 – 10).

12 The following is a sample of other questions I intend to pursue through an examination of the data generated by the questionnaire: Are clergy in conservative congregations more or less willing to preach about controversial justice issues? How does the setting of a congregation (rural, urban, suburban) affect the kinds of issues clergy are willing to preach about? Are clergy in certain denominations more likely to address controversial justice issues than others? What topics do clergy avoid in their preaching, and what reasons do they give? Does the size of a church – or the size of its budget – have an effect on a minister’s willingness to tackle tough topics in the pulpit? Are female preachers more or less likely than their male counterparts to address controversial issues in the pulpit? How do the factors of race, language, and immigration status within a congregation impact a preacher’s choice of topics for preaching? Do clergy feel they have been sufficiently prepared by their seminary education to preach about controversial justice issues? What guidance are clergy seeking as they navigate ministry in light of the increasing divisiveness of U.S. politics, and the divides within their congregations? These questions and more will be addressed using information from the survey.
3. Negative responses clergy have received in response to such sermons

In one question, I asked respondents to indicate how frequently they preach on controversial political or justice issues (Table 1):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I generally do not preach on controversial political or justice issues.</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I only preach on controversial political or justice issues on rare occasions.</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I sometimes preach on controversial political or justice issues (at least a few times a year).</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I intentionally preach on or reference controversial political or justice issues on a regular basis (at least once a month).</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Confidence level = 90%. Margin of error = 3%.)

The data indicates that nearly half of clergy preach on controversial justice issues at least a few times a year, and that one-third of them intentionally tackle such topics in their sermons on a regular basis. This means that, by their own admission at the time of the survey, nearly a quarter of mainline Protestant preachers in the United States rarely – or never – preach about controversial justice issues. One caveat: 89% of respondents self-identified as white/Caucasian in this survey. Thus, the data may more accurately reflect the attitudes of white mainline Protestant preachers than clergy of color. I will be delving further into the data

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13 Many respondents took care to note that their sermon subjects are not necessarily driven by current events, but by the lectionary readings assigned for the day. Many preachers follow the Revised Common Lectionary and took care to note that they will only preach about a specific topic if it is applicable to the biblical text. Other respondents noted that they do not decide what they will preach about until that week, but will often mention current issues as they pertain to the biblical text. Ultimately, many survey respondents indicated that they are intent to keep their focus on the scriptures. As one respondent said, “The top topic I intend to preach on is the gospel reading of the day. If it leads me to preach on any of these topics (and often it does), I will go there.”

14 How does this data compare to other surveys of preachers? According to Guthrie, research conducted by Stark and Glock in the early 1970s indicated that nearly one-third of preachers claiming a liberal political position remained silent on social issues (Stark, Rodney, Bruce D. Foster, Charles Y. Glock, and Harold Quinley. 1970. “The sounds of silence.” Psychology Today, 3 [11]:38-41, 60-61, as described by Guthrie, 82). However, Guthrie also notes that, “Koller and Retzer replicated this study a decade later (1980), challenging what they perceived to be a liberal bias in the first study’s design. They surveyed 232 Protestant clergy in North Carolina asking them about their sermon topics on controversial issues, and their attitudes toward preaching. Their survey showed that preachers ten years into their ministries and in this more conservative context were in fact more likely to preach on social issues. Four out of five believed it was part of their duty to speak about such issues from the pulpit, and only 13% had not preached on any of the topics in a list of twenty key issues of the day,” (Guthrie, 82 – 83, referencing Koller, Norman B., and Joseph D. Retzer. 1980. “The sounds of silence revisited.” Sociological Analysis, 41 [2]:155-161).
set to explore this aspect of race within the survey respondents and how this (along with other demographic factors) affected responses.

Reasons why preachers avoid controversial justice issues

Tisdale suggests the following seven reasons that make clergy hesitant to engage in prophetic preaching:

1. An inherited model of biblical interpretation that marginalizes the prophetic dimensions of scripture.
2. Pastoral concern for parishioners.
3. Fear of conflict.
4. Fear of dividing a congregation.
5. Fear of being disliked, rejected, or made to pay a price for prophetic witness.
6. Feelings of inadequacy in addressing prophetic concerns.
7. Discouragement that our own prophetic witness is not making a difference.\textsuperscript{15}

My questions were designed to compare these reasons with actual clergy responses about their reticence to preach about controversial justice issues.

Tisdale’s reason 1 has to do with principles and intellectual justifications. While the survey contained questions to explore the more generalized rationale for avoiding preaching about controversial issues (which I will explore in a later paper), this paper concentrates on reasons 2 – 5 because they involve the emotional component of actual fears and concerns. Reasons 6 and 7, while also involving an emotional component, have to do with feelings of personal inadequacy and effectiveness. These will also be explored in a later paper.

In one survey question, respondents were given a set of eight first-person statements and asked to indicate which ones make them hesitant to preach about controversial issues. In Table 2, the responses are ranked from highest to lowest according to the percentage of respondents indicating “very much” or “somewhat”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Very much/somewhat</th>
<th>(Response Count - out of 761*)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concern about creating controversy and conflict within the membership</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern that the fall-out from preaching on a controversial justice issue might negatively affect my ability to pastor in this congregation</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern that people may see me as too political if I preached about this</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong possibility of receiving negative push-back if I preached about controversial justice issues</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>414</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{15} Tisdale, 10 – 20.
Concern that some people might withdraw their membership if I preached about certain controversial issues 35% 269
Concern that some people might withhold their financial giving to the church if I preached about controversial issues 33% 250
Concern that certain people might refuse to speak to me if I preach about controversial justice issues 27% 208
I have experienced negative responses or push-back to sermons in which I have engaged controversial issues in the past and not wanting to take that risk again 27% 206
Concern about being asked to leave the church if I preached about controversial issues 21% 163

As I examine the data, it appears that for more than half of the pastors surveyed, the reasons for not addressing issues of public concern boil down to four main fears:

A. Fear about hurting or dividing their congregation
B. Fear about compromising their ability to effectively minister in their church
C. Fear about receiving negative push-back for being “too political”
D. Fear about loss – loss of members, money, and their own positions

While these fears are not exact correlations with Tisdale’s list, they do corroborate reasons 2 – 5 (pastoral concern for parishioners, fear of conflict, fear of dividing a congregation, fear of being disliked or made to pay a price). However, the fear listed in B (compromising one’s ability to effectively minister in one’s congregation) is one not named in Tisdale’s list, which I believe needs to be added, especially since it ranked second in the survey.

Fears that muzzle the preacher’s prophetic voice

These fears were brought into sharp relief recently when I urged my students and other clergy to address the events in Charlottesville, Virginia, in their sermons. On August 12, 2017, members of the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, and white nationalists descended on the city to protest the planned removal of Confederate statues. Their violent rally resulted in numerous injuries and the death of one counter-protester. This event brought the realities of white privilege, white supremacy, anti-Semitism, and racism to the fore in our nation. I wrote a blog piece calling for clergy to preach about these issues in the days after the rally. But a pastoral colleague responded by sharing with me the realities of his church context that silenced his prophetic voice:

“I sit in the middle of a town that time forgot. I’m a ‘blue dot’ in a ‘red’ church. My job depends on my ability to preach and teach the congregation in a way they can

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accept, and any controversial topics could negatively affect my position. I need my job. But I feel like a coward because I’m not able to be as prophetic as I want. The previous attempts by another minister were met with so much backlash that I’m scared to even ‘go there’ with them.”

This pastor is not alone in his fear that addressing controversial justice issues in the pulpit can have serious consequences. As can be seen from the chart below (Table 3), nearly 80% of clergy have received negative pushback of one kind or another when they have preached about controversial justice issues in the past:
Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count (out of 761)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some people reported to me that one or more individuals in the congregation were angry as a result of the sermon.</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I received angry words, letters, or other forms of negative push-back after I preached the sermon.</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
<td>388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more individuals stopped attending worship services for a while after I preached the sermon.</td>
<td>50.1%</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more individuals refused to speak to me for a time after I preached the sermon.</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more individuals withdrew their membership from the congregation after I preached the sermon.</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more individuals threatened to or actually did withhold their financial giving to the church if I preached anymore controversial sermons.</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A controversy and/or conflict arose within the church after I preached the sermon.</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more individuals threatened to or actually called for my resignation from the church as a result of a sermon I preached or because my preaching was seen as too controversial.</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was asked to resign my position as a result of a sermon I preached or because my preaching was deemed too controversial.</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I actually left the congregation or was let go by the church as a result of my preaching about a controversial issue(s).</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above.</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now consider some comments from respondents about what they have experienced as a result of preaching about controversial justice issues:

“I have lost members over the past two years due to preaching about race. There’s only so many losses a small congregation can handle.”
• “I have concern that my boss might berate me or make me apologize for what I’ve preached.”
• “I have received threats in the past and worry that they might be acted upon if I continued to speak as freely as I would like.”
• “I am in the midst of leaving my congregation because they did push back saying I was too political. I chose to leave to avoid causing more issues. I would rather leave than stay and be afraid to speak what I feel God is calling us to action.”

Threats, intimidation, withholding of financial support – it’s no wonder some clergy in certain congregations are afraid to preach about justice issues.

Conclusion
This is not to say that there aren’t justifiable reasons to be cautious when approaching contemporary issues in sermons. Many pastors in the survey stressed their belief that the pulpit is for preaching the gospel, not engaging in partisan politics. And this is true in one sense. But I would argue that such a belief is predicated on the false notion that the gospel has nothing to say about contemporary issues or current events. Instead, I teach my students that there are ways to address issues of public concern without being partisan (promoting a particular political party). I remind them that the root of “politics” is polis, which in Greek refers to “community” and “citizens.” In that sense, Jesus himself was very “political,” because he consistently addressed issues that affected individual citizens and the entire community. I also explain that there are many ways to be faithful proclaimers of the Word without succumbing to quietism or opting for martyrdom. As I will discuss in future papers, addressing controversial justice issues in a prophetic way is often a matter of making strategic and tactical decisions about when and how to do so.

For example, my hypothesis is that, in terms of strategy, the process of deliberative dialogue can be used in tandem with prophetic preaching to facilitate healthy conversation in congregations about the important public issues of our time. After having taught a course to equip students for both the task of prophetic preaching and facilitating deliberative dialogue, student feedback indicates that the sermon-dialogue-sermon process can be an effective strategy for entering what I call “The Purple Zone” – the intersection of the political Red/Blue divide in congregations. The information from this survey, then, will help provide a well-researched

17 It also assumes that parishioners do not want to hear about or engage in discussion about contemporary social issues. However, as the Listening to Listeners project revealed, “Many listeners want the preacher to speak more frequently and with more honesty and directness about controversial issues. Listener after listener insists—‘We need guidance from our pastors in how to think theologically about such matters.’ ‘If you can’t talk about something in church, where can you talk about it?’ To be sure, many listeners want the preacher to move into such territory gently. And a few interviewees say that some such topics should simply be off limits. Nevertheless, the study suggests that many listeners are more ready than preachers realize for sermons to address red-button issues, albeit in ways that are appropriate to each congregation’s context.” (Allen, Ronald J. and Mary Alice Mulligan, “Listening to Listeners: Five Years Later,” Homiletic, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2009, 8-9).

18 Deliberative dialogue is a process developed by researcher Scott London and used by organizations such as the National Issues Forum and the Kettering Foundation which involves face-to-face interactions of small groups of diverse individuals exchanging and weighing ideas and opinions about a particular issue. See: https://www.kettering.org/, http://www.scottlondon.com/reports/dialogue.html, https://www.nifi.org/en/deliberation.
foundation for my book project on this topic, and to develop training to equip clergy with new insights not only for ministering in their congregations, but for engaging in civic and public discourse in their communities.