From Pulpit to Public Square

Faithful Speech beyond Church Walls

Richard W. Voelz

WJK Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville • Kentucky

"In *From Pulpit to Public Square*, Richard Voelz has crafted an essential guide for clergy navigating the sacred and transformative space between Jesus and justice, pulpits and the public square. In a world that desperately needs the power of faith in matters of fairness, equity, and compassion, Voelz offers clergy the tools and theological grounding to preach the good news of justice with integrity, authenticity, and purpose. He insists on the important truth that our faith traditions are not limited to the four walls of the church but extend to the highways and byways, the public squares, and the places where social transformation happens."

—LIZ THEOHARIS, Director of the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice; cochair of the Poor People's Campaign; and author of *We Pray Freedom: Liturgies and Rituals from the Freedom Church of the Poor* and *We Cry Justice: Reading the Bible with the Poor People's Campaign*

"With a pastoral heart, a professor's precision, and a prophetic clarity, Voelz teaches like no other how to move from preaching in a pulpit to effective public proclamation—theologically, rhetorically, contextually, and strategically. He invites us into his faith-rooted classroom with honesty and hope so that we might learn more clearly what it means to have the skills and courage to speak and do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God in the public square."

—LUKE A. POWERY, Dean, Duke University Chapel, and Professor of Homiletics and African and African American Studies, Duke Divinity School, Duke University

"*From Pulpit to Public Square* is an invaluable resource for proclaimers interested in sharing the disruptive, world-changing gospel with the public. For those who believe 'God so loved the world,' Voelz has written a text that helps us communicate love beyond the walls of the church so that there will be both a hearing and an unsettling of the powers. A much-needed and deeply researched text, *From Pulpit to Public Square* offers a theologically grounded, deeply practical, and unashamedly prophetic training for public proclamation."

—TIMOTHY ADKINS-JONES, Pastor, Bethany Baptist Church, Newark, New Jersey, and Assistant Professor of Homiletics, Union Theological Seminary

"There has never been a time when the moral and ethical voice of the preacher is needed more in the public square. Voelz's excellent and timely book provides theological grounding, practical steps, and inspiring examples to equip and motivate preachers for engaging social issues in their communities. Whether speaking at a rally, city council meeting, press conference, or other civic event, preachers would do well to read *From Pulpit to Public Square* in preparation for this important form of public proclamation."

—LEAH D. SCHADE, Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship, Lexington Theological Seminary, and author of *Preaching and Social Issues*

"*From Pulpit to Public Square* invites us into an expanding conversation about the role and potential of Christian proclamation within society. Voelz thoughtfully explores homiletic methods, theologies, and theories relevant to both hesitant and seasoned preachers alike. This volume encourages courageous readers to connect daily wisdom, ethical commitments, and lived witness in practical ways that profoundly impact our collective well-being—here and now."

—LISA L. THOMPSON, Associate Professor and Cornelius Vanderbilt Chair in Black Homiletics and Liturgics, Vanderbilt University

"Voelz believes in a God as active in the public square as in a Sunday-morning sanctuary. With characteristic humility and hope, Voelz leverages his gifts as a teacher and preacher to equip faith leaders to make their witness accessible and relevant to the public work of justice. To his credit, he does not give simplistic, one-size-fits-all advice. He presses preachers toward questions of depth and conviction, and he provides concrete strategies for collaboration, discernment, and public engagement. Filled with examples and practical tools, *From Pulpit to Public Square* forms preachers who are courageous and wise in proclaiming God's commitment to the vulnerable."

—JERUSHA MATSEN NEAL, Associate Professor of Homiletics, Duke Divinity School

"Voelz's book *From Pulpit to Public Square* is an important contribution to redefining social justice advocacy as a witness to one's faith. Clergy engaged in advocacy often have to publicly justify their actions to critical onlookers. He has provided a valuable resource to justify advocacy in the public square as he connects it to one's faith by a theology of proclamation. His is a practical guide on standing for justice and understanding it as a component of Christian discipleship."

—JIMMIE R. HAWKINS, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Director of Advocacy, Washington Office of Public Witness and Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations, and author of *Unbroken and Unbowed: A History of Black Protest in America* and *The Shaping of Black Identities: Redefining the Generations through the Legacy of Race and Culture*

For those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
whose vision of the world is shaped by God's realm,
and who dare to raise their voices beyond the sanctuary

Contents

Acknowledgments

As this is a book on what I call public proclamation, I want to start by thanking those of you who dare to speak in the public square out of the depths of a faith that is committed to justice, love, truth, and openheartedness. Among you are full-time pastors, bivocational clergy, community organizers, chaplains, politicians, and committed laypeople. Whether we have met or not and whether you are widely known or known only in your community, you have inspired this book in so many ways. I hope that you see some of the marks of your labor in these pages, that it resonates with and affirms your work, and that it encourages you as you continue to speak in the public square. In particular, I want to name the leaders and fellow participants of RISC (Richmonders Involved to Strengthen our Communities) as a significant inspiration for this work. I also thank my dear friends and co-laborers in Milligan for All and want to name Jess Carter, one of our cofounders who passed away in 2024. The work we do together is inspiring, and as you will see throughout the book, I draw deeply from these efforts.

I must thank my students who have wrestled with and experimented with pieces of this material. To those of you who have taken the courses Proclaiming Justice in the Church and Public Square and Introduction to Preaching and Public Proclamation, I extend my deepest thanks. You have been thoughtful and creative in thinking about what public proclamation can be, and you have had the courage to raise your voices in our work together. There are too many of you to name here, but I think you will see many of our conversations and your questions, challenges, and ideas in these pages. Thanks for helping me to recognize what was helpful and what needed to be in this book for the sake of others.

I am privileged to have served on the faculty of Union Presbyterian Seminary since 2016, during a time in which so much in our world, the church, and theological education have changed. President Jacq Lapsley and Academic Dean Ken McFayden maintain a faculty culture prioritizing scholarship that "prepares people to be leaders of gospel-inspired transformative change in pursuit of a more just and compassionate

world."[1] I hope that this book complements the seminary's mission to do just that. The staff at Union's world-class William Smith Morton Library was incredibly helpful in locating resources for me, especially Mengistu Lemma and Lisa Janes. I am grateful for the faculty colleagues who gather regularly across our two campuses for writing retreats to hold each other accountable and celebrate our writing. Thanks especially to Rachel Baard, who coordinates these times, and to Christian, Dorothee, James, Josh, Lakisha, and Rubén, who have been cheerleaders in our parallel writing times. Mike Frontiero, who formerly served as the seminary's communications director, comes to my class each year to work with students on media relations. These sessions have also shaped this book. I have completed the book on a sabbatical leave, and I am grateful that the seminary's board of trustees continues this generous practice.

My colleagues across the country and world in the Academy of Homiletics are a continuing source of inspiration and collegiality. I am thankful for the supportive relationships and environment that stimulate new work in preaching and beyond. You have provided many foundations for this book. I am a proud graduate of Vanderbilt University's doctoral program in homiletics and liturgics. The School of the Prophets has had a large hand in shaping my identity and in thinking about the ways that preaching is an important part of a broader world of theological communication. I am ever grateful for my time at Vanderbilt, for my doctoral mentors, and for my #VandyHandL kindred who support one another at every turn.

My faculty colleague Josh Morris read drafts of this book and generously offered comments. Additionally, Josh has used some of this material with his class on Union's Charlotte campus. Gail Davidson and Kristin Peters read the manuscript from their perspectives as congregational pastors, chaplains, and community organizers. These colleagues' insightful feedback has made the book better.

I dared to write this book only because Bridgett Green at Westminster John Knox Press took the time for a generative conversation about my teaching and writing. She helped me see the possibility for the book and encouraged me to follow it. David Dobson provided helpful guidance at the outset of this project. Stacy Davis carefully shepherded the manuscript,

1. "Mission & Vision," Union Presbyterian Seminary, accessed January 15, 2025, https://www.upsem.edu/about/mission-vision/.

and I am grateful for her insights and diligent work in editing the book. Thanks to the entire team at WJK who helped bring this book to reality.

My spouse, Meredith, and daughter, Elly, are sources of joy and energy, and their love grounds me. Thank you both.

I write at the dawn of a new presidential administration (one that triggered a great deal of distress in its first term), amid global conflict, and while we watch a planet literally burning. I am not naive about the challenges of our world right now and the enormity of the work for change before us. However, I am committed to the hope that I find in the story of God's continually unfolding, boundary-crossing, justice-making love. As a homiletician, it will come as no surprise that I think our words still matter. Let me say that again: Our words still matter. Thanks to each of you who have picked up this book, who will interact with it, and who will put these ideas into practice. I hope that what you find in these pages encourages and equips you to be part of God's story with your words beyond the pulpit and out in the public square.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day
Season after the Epiphany, 2025

Introduction

Public Proclamation
Moving Out of the Pulpit and into the Public Square

THREE IMAGES OF THE PUBLIC PROCLAIMER

When I introduce the term "public proclamation," at least three images come up in our popular imagination. First in many people's minds is the image of the street preacher, the person we typically find to be slightly askew, who occupies a very public space and offers very few words of hope but plenty of fire-branded, Scripture-laced condemnation for the vices of the world, overlaid with calls to repentance and naming the unpredictable return and subsequent judgment of Jesus. Growing up on the edge of NC State University in Raleigh, North Carolina, and spending plenty of time on campus as a young person, I became somewhat familiar with the ways of the person who was dubbed "the Brickyard Preacher." The Brickyard is a brick-laden space on campus where many students passed through on their way to classes. The preacher would stand with signs and Bible in hand, eager to blanket anyone who came near with their message of the day. Such preachers continue there and in many similar spaces today.[1]

These preachers are often at the center of controversy around free speech practices on college campuses and in civic spaces, not to mention the street corners for which they are so popular. Various issues emerge when we

1. Avery Davis, "NC State 'Brickyard Preachers' Cause Frustration, Questions among Students, Staff on Campus," *Technician*, October 18, 2021, https://www.technicianonline.com/news/nc-state-brickyard-preachers-cause-frustration-questions-among-students-staff-on-campus/article_d531f7d2-2fde-11ec-86bc-6f2c5c095840.html.

think about the street preacher, but they tend to revolve around a central question: Does this kind of speech belong in public spaces, and if so, what are its limits? Although Stanley Saunders and Charles Campbell have sought to rehabilitate and reclaim street preaching for those of us who are rightly skittish around this practice, many of us continue with the haunting image in our minds because of our encounters as observers or those who have received the sting of that type of preaching.[2]

The second image of public proclamation is more immediately present in our current political climate. This image is of the Christian pastor or politician (both typically identifying as male, cis-gender, heterosexual, and white) who publicly prioritizes faith as part of their political agenda and who takes to public rallies (often election-related), television news programs, and social media with a faith weaponized by white Christian nationalism, holding up so-called family values and using faith language to rail against LGBTQIA+ rights, reproductive rights, protections for immigrants, gun control efforts, and more. Recently, pastors like Robert Jeffries and others have made public appearances and turned their congregations into public platforms in support of the forty-fifth president's election and reelection campaigns. Other public leaders, such as former US military general Michael Flynn, have come into the public square through events like his ReAwaken America Tour, speaking faith language intertwined with a white Christian nationalist message.[3] These speakers twist Scripture and Christian theology to demean people groups, argue for harmful public policies that harken back to the Jim Crow era, and prop up authoritarian leadership in government. The rhetoric of these speakers comes across as caustic, adversarial, and, to one degree or another, constructing a worldview at odds with democratic principles and more generous constructions of Christian faith.

A third image is related to the second but strikes us as much more palatable. The charismatic faith leader steps forward in the midst of a protest, mass meeting, or during a press conference, responding to a tragedy or social injustice that has occurred. Their work is to galvanize and energize a crowd that comes from many faiths and no faith tradition whatsoever. They have gathered to respond to whatever the latest crisis in

2. Stanley P. Saunders and Charles L. Campbell, *The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context* (Wipf and Stock, 2006).

3. Beau Underwood and Brian Kaylor, "The Sermon Michael Flynn Hopes You'll Hear," *Word&Way* (blog), July 14, 2022, https://wordandway.org/2022/07/14/the-sermon-michael-flynn-hopes-youll-hear/.

the community or nation happens to be. They stand shoulder to shoulder with an assortment of people: politicians, national organizers, and other faith leaders. A word is needed that can move the crowd toward solidarity, empathy, and action. So much hangs on this moment, and the charismatic faith leader opens their lips to speak with energy, power, and rhetorical flourish. The crowd cheers and participates at all the right places. They are captivated by the seemingly effortless words delivered with no (or very few) notes. Figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, William J. Barber II, and others quickly come to mind. And rightly so, given the roles that they have played in the overlap of US Christianity (or, perhaps more precisely, the Black church) and democracy.

Still, even if this image is more palatable than the street preacher or the white Christian nationalist pastor/politician and even if we find ourselves in full agreement with the content and the methods of the third image, not every faith leader can imagine themselves in that scenario. Few of us will step onto a dais in a public setting with crowds and cameras surrounding us, ready to offer a word that speaks to the masses on some momentous occasion in the nation or in the communities where we work, live, and seek to make a difference. When this third image of public proclamation arises, it might seem intimidating and out of reach for us. Even if we might imagine ourselves as having something to say in those moments, we frame those speakers and those moments as *Not for me!* We have trouble imagining ourselves in that role.

The problems with these images of public proclamation are twofold. In the case of the street preacher and the white Christian nationalist pastor/politician, we question not only their motivations but also their methods. Public proclamation for the street preacher moves the pulpit into the public square for a crowd who does not share the same assumptions or the same faith language and does not willingly gather for a word that not only feels antagonistic but actively harmful, not to mention archaic. For the white Christian nationalist pastor/politician, faith language is weaponized for authoritarian purposes that are harmful to individuals and groups of people and for the work of a healthy democracy.

In the case of the charismatic faith leader, we do not question their motivations. Often, we share their impulse to address the prophetic and pastoral needs of the moment—and we admire their methods. In the latter image, however, public proclamation often feels distant, uninhabitable, and much too large, perhaps like trying on an oversized garment. When I show videos of these occasions in class, students remark to me that these moments feel

"too big" and unimaginable for their own vocational work.[4] While King's speech at the March on Washington in 1963 and William J. Barber II's speech before the Democratic National Convention in 2016 (two of such examples I have shown over the years) are iconic moments, and there is so much to admire in them, my students have difficulty imagining themselves occupying those spaces and those moments in the vocations and communities that lie before them. With these three images in mind, public proclamation either feels too foreign or too distant to make much sense as viable options for many (or most) of us.

A PUBLIC SQUARE, A PUBLIC GOSPEL

This book seeks to chart a way forward that helps public proclamation become something within our reach—whether we find ourselves on the big stage or, more likely, in those smaller, more humble platforms in the path of our various ministries. Whether you are a student preparing for a Christian ministry within traditional clergy roles or outside the church, a chaplain who moves in and out of public spaces, a nonprofit leader, or an experienced clergyperson looking for a resource to help you move faithful speech out of the sanctuary and into the public square, this book is designed to support you as you engage in the work of public proclamation, wherever that might happen.

I am a professor and scholar of preaching, and I spend much of my time with students who are preparing for a wide range of ministries. I have a responsibility to students preparing for congregational ministries as well as students who will never step into pulpits. These days, fewer and fewer students in the institution where I teach want to go into congregational ministry. The students who are committed to congregational ministries rarely see their roles as limited to the congregation. They see their ministries intersecting with what is happening in the public square. Rather than lament the reality of a decreasing number of people to train for traditional preaching ministries, I have shifted the way that I teach preaching, spending a few weeks of my introductory preaching course talking specifically about the work of public proclamation

4. For a more in-depth analysis from the perspectives of Black religious leadership, see Kyle E. Brooks, *Chasing Ghosts: The Politics of Black Religious Leadership* (Georgetown University Press, forthcoming).

and emphasizing what are often called "transferable skills."[5] One of this book's claims is that much of what we teach and learn about preaching can be adapted for the work of public proclamation.

Our current context requires our attention to the demands for public proclamation. When we consider the ongoing terrors that unfold in our communities and across our nation and world, faith leaders are anxious to offer a word to the public that meets the moment. Faith leaders bring a hunger to participate in the healing and flourishing of all people, beyond the walls of their congregations. Our media-saturated culture presents an immediacy to the needs of our community, nation, and world. In response, faith leaders are increasingly engaging in community and organizing efforts for housing, education, racial justice, LGBTQIA+ rights, women's rights, climate justice, gun control, and more. They are called to represent families and neighborhoods and as representatives of Christian faith when natural disasters strike or when other acute community needs arise.

But these occasions are not limited to emergency situations. Faith leaders serve nonprofits that seek to garner community support and financial backing for food insecurity, domestic violence response, racial reconciliation efforts, individuals with special needs, and many other ongoing service needs, as well as community justice efforts. They also show up regularly to speak and pray at city council meetings, school board meetings, and state legislative sessions.

In such work, we faith leaders are tasked not only with describing and interpreting what has happened or is happening and the needs of the population on whose behalf we are speaking but also naming a public gospel that forms the basis for hopeful action. Of course, we do so alongside, and on behalf of, leaders of other faith traditions and people with no faith commitments. When I say "public gospel," I do not mean *the* Christian gospel. Ed Farley makes a crucial distinction between "the gospel" and "Gospel." Rather than strictly limited to content or "verbal formulas" about Jesus Christ (the gospel), Gospel for Farley is "the mystery of God's salvific working. . . . It is something to be proclaimed, but the summons to proclaim it is a summons to struggle with the mystery of God's salvific action and how that transforms the

5. I hope that the book is clear that there is much more to public proclamation than just transferable skills, but rather a vibrant conversation about homiletical theories and practices moving back and forth across ecclesial and public spaces.

world. . . . Gospel is—and this is its prophetic element—disruption, an exposure of corporate oppression and individual collusion, and, at the same time, an uncovering of redemptive possibilities."[6] So when I suggest that we articulate a public gospel, we are not laying out in public spaces our doctrinal commitments concerning Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, we are aiming to say something disruptive that often points toward critique of the way things are. Even more, we seek to articulate redemptive possibilities for our common life together that are grounded in our belief that God is at work transforming the world.

The bottom line is this: Faith leaders do not drop their faith commitments at the door. Yet when we are called on to speak publicly, we cannot and do not do so in ways that fully approximate the kind of speaking we do within church walls and, more specifically, in the act of preaching a sermon in the context of Christian worship. As such, each faith leader who enters into the task of public proclamation must carefully consider what we will say and how we will show up, well before we are ever called on to do so. This book is for anyone searching for ways to faithfully speak a public gospel in the public square.

"PUBLIC" AND "PROCLAMATION": DEFINING TERMS

I have used the term "public proclamation" and have offered images that enter our minds, but I have yet to offer a more specific definition of that term. The "public" part of that is easiest to explain. By that, I simply want to differentiate between the kind of communication that faith leaders undertake within, and for the purposes of, Christian worship gatherings, and that which happens beyond them. As some conversation partners are quick to point out, Christian worship is public, and we have far too often kept those distinctions intact to the detriment of all.[7] I do not disagree with the aversion to the distinction, nor the critique. At a basic level, the failure of the distinction has become true even more so in light of how the COVID-19 pandemic propelled most US congregations into digital

6. Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry* (Westminster John Knox, 2003), 81.

7. I credit local Richmond activist and faith leader Allan Chipman with offering this feedback in a conversation, as opposed to my own emphasis on the nonliturgical aspect of public proclamation. See also the work of Cláudio Carvalhaes as it relates to worship and public witness in Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, eds., *A Companion to Public Theology* (Brill, 2017); Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, ed., *T&T Clark Handbook of Political Theology* (Bloomsbury, 2019).

gatherings easily accessible to anyone who might tune in. When I use the term "public" as a modifier here, I am trying to suggest that faith leaders are communicating beyond the physical borders, constituted gatherings, and communicative expectations of regular Christian worship, especially via the genre we have come to know as the sermon or homily. Instead, faith leaders are communicating with and for audiences that inhabit the geographies and architectures of public spaces, for audiences that are often mixed with respect to their types of faith commitments, and for purposes different than Christian worship.

"Proclamation" requires more effort. This word comes to us from Latin roots, *pro*, meaning "before," and *clamare*, meaning "to cry out." In its noun and verb forms, it has crossed civic and homiletical lines through the years. In the civic arena, it has meant an official or formal public announcement. There is a sense of authority here, since a proclamation (or "to proclaim") would come via someone empowered to do so on behalf of an individual, group, or institution. Here we might think of decrees, laws, or special messages originating from civic authorities. Consider Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation or a government official's call for the observance of a special day, week, or month on the calendar—such as Transgender Day of Visibility, Memorial Day, or Black History Month—or, on a smaller scale, a day in honor of a respected person in a local community. In this latter sense, proclamations serve communities by raising awareness, giving honor, and setting aside time and resources for special purposes.

When it comes to homiletics, the difficulty increases. As David Buttrick indicates, "Sometimes the term 'proclamation' is regarded as a fancy synonym for preaching. Indeed, in the Greek of the Christian scriptures, *kerysso*, 'to proclaim' or 'to herald,' is often used interchangeably with *euangelizo* 'to preach.' But the noun *kerygma*, 'proclamation,' has taken on special significance in the twentieth century."[8] With regard to this "special significance," Buttrick points to the work of early-twentieth-century scholar C. H. Dodd, who sought to differentiate between two terms. First is *kerygma*, or that which was preached or announced in the New Testament regarding Jesus in early Christian communities. Second, *didache*, the instruction and exhortation that was given to communities that had aligned themselves with the Jesus movement. Buttrick notes the effects that this has had on preaching in that "preachers were called to be 'kerygmatic'; they were 'heralds' who should deliver the same message that

8. David Buttrick, "Proclamation," in William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer, eds., *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching* (Westminster John Knox, 1995), 384.

apostles once declared. From the 1940s to the 1990s, scarcely a book on homiletics appeared that did not refer to Dodd's *The Apostolic Preaching* and the idea of a primitive kerygma."[9] Without getting sidetracked by the details of the arguments behind this distinction, Buttrick points to the difficulty of Dodd's kerygma-versus-didache argument and the problems of making too many categorical distinctions about the nature of Christian preaching.[10]

Ultimately, Buttrick underscores that "what the term *kerygma*, 'proclamation,' does is underscore the character of the gospel as news, good news of a new state of affairs in our world." He continues by integrating the civic dimension of proclamation and suggests, "So the word promotes the gospel as announcement of a radically new human situation inaugurated by God. The gospel is 'public' because it speaks of a new social order. It is 'official' because it is from God. It is 'formal' because it is of ultimate significance. In every age, preaching is proclamation."[11] Likewise, John McClure observes that, for Richard Jensen, "proclamation is an event. It is an announcement that interrupts human existence with a saving word."[12] This is the character of what I mean by proclamation, even as I want to be clear: I do not simply mean that the sermon moves outside the doors of the church and into public space. As with public gospel, when we seek to engage in public proclamation, we are seeking to communicate a new social order "inaugurated by God."

The way that the term "proclamation" has crossed civic and homiletical lines benefits our purposes here and forms one of the book's central commitments. We might consider that for the work of public proclamation, among faith leaders there is a well-considered fluidity to the kind of faith speech that moves out of Christian worship and into public spaces and, perhaps, back again. As previously stated, one of the tasks of this book is to point to the resonances between preaching and public proclamation and to determine how preaching practices might inform the work of public proclamation. With these two words more firmly in hand individually, I now offer a working definition of what they mean together.

9. Buttrick, 385.

10. For more, see also Richard William Voelz, *Preaching to Teach: Inspire People to Think and Act* (Abingdon, 2019), xxii–xxiv.

11. Buttrick, "Proclamation," 385.

12. John S. McClure, *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics* (Westminster John Knox, 2007), 115.

"PUBLIC PROCLAMATION": A WORKING DEFINITION

I want to offer a working definition of what I mean when I say "public proclamation" for two reasons. First, this is a working definition because it continues to evolve for me. In conversation with others, my definition seems to be continually under revision. And as you interact with it, you may have elements that you would like to add, take away, or reword. In fact, I would encourage you to do so. Second, and related to the first, I offer a working definition because I often encounter definitions of one term or another related to preaching and immediately feel both the hubris of the definer and the limits of the definition. I recognize that my working definition emerges from my particular and limited perspectives, experiences, and identity as a white, cisgender, heterosexual man who is well educated and middle-class. With that in mind, I offer the following definition:

> Public proclamation is communication that is intended for the public sphere, grounded in hope, and employing faith-rooted language, with the purpose of working toward strategic goals of offering witness amid trouble, uniting in solidarity, and/or working toward justice and healing.

"Communication"

Let me analyze the elements of this definition individually. First is the idea of "communication." This is a broad term and intentionally so. While for the purposes of this book we are considering oral speech practices, public proclamation entails a variety of methods of communication. In my work with an advocacy group around LGBTQIA+ concerns, we deployed a number of communication modes as part of an overall communications strategy that included print and TV journalism, web presence and social media, billboards, physical presence or disruption (or both), interpersonal communication, and more. In ongoing efforts, coordinating those various modes of communication was absolutely critical. Public proclamation uses a wide range of communicative practices across the spectrum of media. Limiting our definition of public proclamation to verbal speech would be unwise, even as the focus of this book is on public speaking.

I have already mentioned above what I mean by "public," and that distinction remains for this definition. I alternately use "public square" and "public sphere," and for me, there are no functional distinctions.

Some readers may be familiar with a more technical usage of public sphere from the work of Jürgen Habermas, who says that it is

> a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public. . . . Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion.[13]

The use of "domain" here is an important concept, as it relates in parallel fashion to "square," pointing to specific kinds of spaces. Whereas Habermas's use of "domain" and the concept of the public sphere is much wider and more conceptual in thinking about society—not to mention more idealistic—we also want to think here about the real kinds of physical spaces in which we might speak and how they relate to the more conceptual thinking about the public sphere. To reiterate what I have already suggested, when I use the term "public sphere" or "public square" here, I do so to indicate a space outside regular Christian worship gatherings and typically beyond Christian worship spaces. I say typically, because we know, of course, that many gatherings where public proclamation happens also take place in houses of worship. For instance, I have gathered with the Poor People's Campaign, a nonsectarian group, in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. And we know that Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech was held in a church, like many gatherings in the civil rights era were, blurring the lines between church and public sphere in many ways.[14]

"Grounded in hope"

The first two elements of the definition have been functional delimitations of what is happening and where. My definition now moves to describing the quality of that communication. The first of these is that this communication is "grounded in hope." I resonate with what many

13; Jürgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere," in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, ed. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson (University of California Press, 1991), 398.

14; This dynamic was true and necessary for Black churches. Black congregations have historically served as communal spaces, but especially in the civil rights era, they functioned in ways that were relatively (but certainly not entirely) safe from violence and threats.

have said about what we generally refer to as "prophetic preaching."[15] That is to say, as those who exhibit faith in the God of Israel and Jesus of Nazareth, I move through this world with the hope that God is not yet done with the work of redeeming the world and that we participate in that hope with meaningful action in our public and private lives. Whether the situations in which we speak require a more prophetic voice or a more pastoral one or whether we favor a more holistic term like "prophetic care,"[16] we tether our speaking to the hope of God's intentions to restore and renew creation and to reconcile humanity to God and one another.

"Employing faith-rooted language"

Closely related is the next element of "employing faith-rooted language." Every faith leader needs to answer what this means for themselves, and many of us will articulate what this means in different ways. I am borrowing and adapting the idea of faith-rooted language from Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel's concept of "faith-rooted organizing." They define this as "shaped and guided in every way by faith principles and practices. Faith-rooted organizing is based on the belief that many aspects of spirituality, faith traditions, faith practices and faith communities can contribute in unique and powerful ways to the creation of just communities and societies."[17] Salvatierra and Heltzel make an important distinction between "faith-based" and "faith-rooted" organizing. While "faith-based organizers use the same basic assumptions and methodologies that would be employed when organizing any other sector of society," incorporating people of faith into "Alinsky-style organizing," faith-rooted organizing "dr[aws] on the deepest wells of the beliefs, values, disciplines and practices of the people of God."[18] Although Salvatierra and Heltzel are talking about differences in organizing strategy, I believe this distinction also makes

15. For an account of the role of hope in prophetic preaching, see Voelz, *Preaching to Teach*, 35–50.

16. Dale P. Andrews used this term. See Phillis Isabella Sheppard, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, and Ron Allen, eds., *Preaching Prophetic Care: Building Bridges to Justice, Essays in Honor of Dale P. Andrews* (Pickwick, 2018).

17. Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel, *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World* (InterVarsity, 2013), 9.

18. Alinsky-style organizing refers to early twentieth-century community organizer Saul Alinsky and his secular model of organizing that many faith-based groups have adapted. Salvatierra and Hetzel are making a distinction about the point at which religious belief and practice become operational in community organizing strategy. Salvatierra and Heltzel, 9.

a difference when we consider public proclamation as well. How and to what degree faith language emerges in public speaking differs among faith leaders, but I do want to suggest that faith-rooted language indicates something different from the kind of public speech by a faith leader that puts the language of faith completely to the side or the kind of faith language deployed in a sermon.

"For the purpose of working toward strategic goals"

The definition next names "purpose." Moments of public proclamation have both an individual purpose, specific to whatever situational moment demands it, as well as a consistent purpose related to an organization, group of people, or community. This signals not only a situation and a relationship but also a rhetorical purpose or quality to the instance of public proclamation. These purposes will vary, and we work later in the book to identify some appropriate possibilities, but a few examples at this juncture would include "to energize," "to galvanize," "to show empathy," or "to mobilize."

Closely related to purpose is "working toward strategic goals." Well-considered public proclamation might begin as a reaction to something that has happened or is happening, but it does not stay there. The best instances of public proclamation are highly integrated with the strategic goals of the organization, group of people, or community on whose behalf we might speak, even when such public proclamations are more improvisational and reactive. Speakers should know what they seek to accomplish in the overall situation of their speaking and how their speaking forms one component of an overall communicative strategy for purposes beyond the moment in which they are speaking.

"Offering witness amid trouble, uniting in solidarity, and/or working toward justice and healing"

I identify three broad strategic purposes, which form a cluster of umbrella terms by which speakers might categorize their work of public proclamation. A speaker might work toward all three strategic purposes, a combination of two, or only one, depending on the situation and the

speaker's role. These terms also serve as pathways for thinking about how instances of public proclamation integrate with an organization, group of people, or community's specific strategic goals.

The first is "offering witness amid trouble." The word "witness" here does a lot of work in that it signals a specific role for faith and faith leaders. Faith leaders stand as representatives of faith communities (whether local congregations, denominations, or denominationally related organizations, faith-based nonprofits, etc.) as well as the beliefs and practices of those faith communities. As a witness in the public square, faith leaders offer a presence that makes claims about who God is and what God desires for our communal life. Notice that I do not say "witness to." I hesitate to offer the "to" or complete the phrase too quickly in this definition because the specific nature of this witness will almost assuredly vary from situation to situation and among different theological commitments. After a natural disaster, a faith leader might speak in order to "witness to God's presence and the power of community in the face of unspeakable loss." In response to instances of racist voter suppression, a faith leader might speak in order to "witness to God's desire for equality." These examples briefly explain why I leave the "to ——" incomplete, though I would suggest that faith leaders contemplate how they fill in the blank for each situation. The other half of this phrase, "amid trouble," signals that something is amiss in the social fabric. While faith leaders might well speak out when things are going well or when there have been successes related to strategic goals (and thus in response to a trouble that has been or is being repaired), more often than not, a present crisis, tragedy, or ongoing need requires attention.

The second broad purpose is that of "uniting in solidarity."[19] In the public square, we cannot assume that all people who gather do so with the same perspectives, assumptions, or commitments, even if the gathering's purpose or cause is front and center. Nor can we assume that all people will be affected the same way. If there is more than one speaker, they usually come from different perspectives and social locations and may be a mixture of representatives such as political leaders, community leaders, organizers, and those affected by the situation, in addition to faith leaders. Moreover, in an era in which faith leaders are seen with suspicion in the public square—and the public sees the church as distant or disconnected

19. I have chosen "uniting in solidarity" over "standing in solidarity" out of ableist concerns for the latter phrase. See AIDS Foundation Chicago, "Style Guide," accessed January 14, 2025, https://www.aidschicago.org/style-guide/.

from many situations—listeners may wonder what, if anything, the faith community has to add. As such, one of the purposes of speaking in the public square might be to unite those gathered in solidarity across differences for the common strategic goals of the gathering, organization, group of people, or community. The choice of "solidarity" matters here because it indicates the fact that differences can and will remain, while people can feel strong ties that knit them together for working toward shared purposes.

The third broad purpose is "working toward justice and healing." Again, faith leaders encounter different situations, and even one situation might have different possibilities for the kind of work that is needed. For instance, a faith leader speaking out after a mass shooting in the community might feel the need to work toward the community's healing or they might call for the community and political leaders to come together to enact commonsense gun laws. A speaker might try to do both. The idea here is that faith leaders are attentive to the situation and the strategic goals of the organization, group of people, or community in a way that holds open the possibility of offering what we have traditionally called "prophetic" and "pastoral" words.

I have also included this wording in particular because of how dismissive people can often be of public speeches as "just words." Here I want to signal that speaking in public is an integral component of faith leaders' work toward justice and healing. I recognize that people are skeptical of clergy and other public figures when it comes to the relationship of words and action. That said, words continue to have power to move people to action. To take a negative example, we see how the words of political and white Christian nationalist leaders led to the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol. Well-planned and timely words have the power to move people to take up the work of justice and healing.

Again, I would encourage you to play with the definition I have offered and to think deeply about the implications of each word and phrase. This definition is not perfect or permanent. In fact, it has changed over the years as I have reconsidered aspects of it. What resonates for you when you read it? What insights do you have borne of your own experiences that would lead you to add to, take away from, or otherwise revise the definition? What excites you? What gives you pause or raises your anxiety?

SIX FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

The chapters that follow emerge out of what I call six fundamental questions for those who are preparing to engage in public proclamation. Some of these questions are answered long before faith leaders are ever called on to speak in the public square. Some questions arise more closely to the speaking moment. Sometimes we have a long time to plan; at other times we do not. The first few questions offer the deeper well from which we might draw when we are called on to speak on short notice. In these chapters, we draw wisdom from the field of homiletics, which is the study of preparation and embodiment of sermons. As such, I hope to offer a more familiar conversation partner to those who have been trained in preaching but not in public proclamation. As I said earlier, I think homiletics has much to offer. I also integrate insights from other theological disciplines, rhetoric, and literature from community organizing. Along the way, I provide examples to help illustrate different concepts and practices.

Chapter 1 invites readers into developing a theology of public proclamation, answering the question: *When I engage in the work of public proclamation, what commitments fundamentally ground my doing so?* This question provides the foundation on which faith leaders will base their speaking. By this, I do not just mean general concepts of justice, God's love, or the like. Rather, drawing on the work of Kelly Brown Douglas, Willie James Jennings, my own work, and others, I identify core concepts that help piece together a theology of public proclamation, or what I call a "communicative public theology," which can support faith leaders in times when they are called on to speak on a moment's notice and to speak amid the arduous work over the long haul.

Chapter 2 recognizes the unique role of speaking as a faith leader and encourages faith leaders to reflect on the question *What is my place in the communicative situation?* Speakers should understand how their own role and power in the communicative situation operate. This is different in the public square than in congregations, where understandings and expectations of pastoral leadership are generally shared among clergy and laity. Those people in congregational leadership may even wonder to what extent they represent their faith communities in the public square. Ultimately, understanding our place in the public square means knowing when we have a great deal of moral authority by virtue of who we are and the situations we face. At other times, our authority is less, and a different approach is needed. Some situations call forth more adversarial positions,

while others build coalitions and solidarity. I offer an analysis of varying approaches to public proclamation, depending on our place in the context, sense of authority, and perceived power in speaking situations.

In chapter 3, two questions emerge around understanding the context and the strategic goals of the organization, group of people, or community. *How do I understand what's going on here?* and *What is the strategic goal of the communicative situation?* The first question underscores the importance of both contextual and social analysis that sets the stage for public proclamation. While we might be familiar with congregational exegesis, those who speak also need to understand the systems and actors at work in their public speaking situations.

The second major question encourages speakers to articulate what they hope happens as a result of their speaking, especially as it relates to the larger strategic goals of the movement or organization, group of people, or community for which they speak. In chapter 3, we explore tools for analyzing context and consider small- and large-scale goals as vital tools for preparing to speak.

The next three chapters deal more closely with discerning what to say and how to say it. In chapter 4, the fundamental question is *What are the theological emphases needed for this communicative situation, what do I want to say, and how do I hope people will respond?* When discerning what to say in the public square, faith leaders face a different situation than when in the pulpit. Understandings of Scripture and theology vary—as does their usefulness or applicability—depending on the context in which one speaks. And as chapter 3 indicates, faith leaders need to consider the manner in which they show up in the public square with their faith commitments.

In order to know what to say, faith leaders first need to articulate what "faith-rooted speech" means for them. Additionally, chapter 4 encourages us to be attentive to the kinds of theological questions that are emerging in the speaking situation in order to foster a faith-rooted response. Finally, recognizing some practices that cross over from sermon preparation, we consider how to formulate what is variously called a "core affirmation," "central claim," "focus statement," and other terms, as a way of being clear about what we are saying. As a corollary, we also formulate what is variously called a "central purpose," "behavioral purpose," or "function statement" as a way of articulating a particular purpose for the communication event and how it connects with strategic goals.

Finally, chapters 5 and 6 consider the question *What kind of rhetorical-communicative strategy will best help achieve the goal or goals?* Here also

are some crossovers from sermon preparation, especially in three areas. First, thinking about sermon form or design can help us formulate an overall design for a speech that accounts for the ways that the how of speaking can follow the what. Sermon form also plans for the experience of listening and connects that to the communicative goals. Matters of form and design take up chapter 5. Second, speakers need to think about ways to make their claims concrete. There are connections here with communication strategies from community organizing. Third, but certainly not least, speakers should consider the artistry of language, emotion, and embodiment of speaking. These are not ornamentation or rhetorical flourish for their own sake, nor for manipulative purposes, but are integral to communicational design and conveying passion and authenticity in the speaking moment. These final three matters are the focus of chapter 6.

To help readers personalize and extend each chapter, I have included prompts or exercises at the end of or within each chapter. Prompts are intended to spur reflection on readers' personal situations and beliefs. Exercises are intended to help readers begin the work of public proclamation or deepen reflection on public proclamation, depending on each reader's level of experience. These concluding sections may be helpful for classes or for small groups of faith leaders committed to reading the book together.

A FEW MORE PRELIMINARY WORDS

Whether you are deeply experienced or brand new to the work of public proclamation, whether you are supremely confident or whether you shake in your boots, whether you speak on a big stage or a small one, my hope is that by the time you have finished this book, you will have some insights and strategies that help ground you in the work of speaking up and speaking out in the public square.

Faith leaders are uniquely positioned to offer our voices in the communities where we find ourselves. Our world is in desperate need of faith leaders committed to offering both a word of resistance to systemic evil and faith-rooted hope for all that is going on in our world. Yet we do not do so just because we happen to be ordained or because we have some theological education. If you are reading this book and thinking about speaking out before showing up, then let me raise a caution flag right now—a caution that goes double for people who

walk through the world with tremendous amounts of privilege, as I do. The right to speak in the public square is earned, not given. Showing up with humility and a spirit of collaborative community-building well before the speaking moment is part and parcel of any work in the public square, especially since this work is often intercultural and interspiritual. To do otherwise is to risk harming others.

Finally, a note about the place from which I write. I write this book with no small amount of trepidation. I am a former pastor and a current seminary professor. I do not have a long history of organizing, and you will not find me on the local news or YouTube or on one of those big stages I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction. Because of my social location, it is often better that I show up with a presence of solidarity, rather than with my mouth open.[20] For those who do not know me, I simply want to be honest about my experience. But as I mentioned earlier, I do have experience planning and enacting communication strategy in a grassroots LGBTQIA+ advocacy group as we built that organization from the ground up. And I do have experience as a preacher, as a homiletician, and as someone who pays close and careful attention to how the words spoken by many different people in the public square operate.

Ultimately, I care about helping shape those who take up the work of public proclamation, and I write with the deepest hopes that this book helps each of us contribute to a more just and loving world, because that is at the core of my faith.

20. When interfaith leaders here in Richmond, Virginia, in the summer of 2020 organized local protests against the Confederate monuments and police brutality, a picture of the large gathering hit the news. Not even a fringe of my clergy stole was in the frame. "Richmond Clergy Demand Police End Violent Response to Protests," VPM, June 30, 2020, https://www.vpm.org/news/2020-06-30/richmond-clergy-demand-police-end-violent-response-to-protests.