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*Published in:*  
Preaching Promise within the Paradoxes of Life

Published: 01/01/2018

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for pulished version (APA):*  
Pleizier, T. T. J. (2018). Researching the Listener? The Paradox of the Individual in Sermon Reception Research and a Reassessment of Preaching as Caring for the Community of Faith. In *Preaching Promise within the Paradoxes of Life* (pp. 161-168). (Studia Homiletica; Vol. 11)..

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# Researching the Listener? The paradox of the individual in sermon reception research and a reassessment of preaching as caring for the community of faith.

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## Abstract

Empirical research in homiletics tend to focus upon the individual listener. This seems equally true for earlier quantitative as well as for the current dominant paradigm of qualitative research. This paper explores the boundaries between the interest in the (meaning making) individual listener and the community of faith in which preaching has its proper place, as its primary setting is corporate worship. Within the tension between the communal and the individual, this paper explores first the indicators that help to understand preaching as a communal event, rather than an enumeration of meaning-making individuals; and secondly, how preaching can be understood as pastoral communication in the sense that the sermonic event could serve as caring environment for the worshipping community as a whole. The paper closes with an appeal to reassess the paradox of individuality and commonality in homiletical discourse and to broaden the scope of (empirical) research in homiletics.

## 1. Introduction

Since homiletics took its empirical turn, the listener became even more important than before. Put in the object-subject distinction: from object ('address'), the listener became subject ('author') in preaching. The listener as '(co-)author' of the sermon became a leading metaphor in homiletics during the empirical turn.<sup>1</sup> It seems, however, that reception research has become biased towards the individual listener. This article challenges this supposed bias. Positively, I explore the communal dimension of the practice of listening as it appears in empirical studies. This approach fits a larger field of interest in community practices in practical theology. To give one example: in reacting to a therapeutic phase in pastoral theology, Charles Gerkin calls for a 'renewed attention to communal aspects of pastoral care', because the congregation is the 'primary context and agent of care for the people of God'<sup>2</sup>. Gerkin's suggestion could be assessed as a 'turn to the community', of which the

1 The metaphor finds its origin in reception-aesthetics. See for earlier articulations of the subjectivity of the listener as 'second preacher' (Möller) or as writer of an 'auredit' (Engemann): Möller, Christian. "Der Hörer als zweiter Prediger. Zur Bedeutung der Rezeptionsästhetik für die Homiletik". In *Predigen aus Leidenschaft. Homiletische Beiträge für Rudolf Bohren zum 75. Geburtstag*, bewerkst. door Reinhard Ehmann. Karlsruhe: Verl. Evang. Presseverb. für Baden, 1996; Engemann, Wilfried. *Semiotische Homiletik. Prämissen, Analysen, Konsequenzen*. Textwissenschaft, Theologie, Hermeneutik, Linguistik, Literaturanalyse, Informatik Bd. 05. Tübingen: Francke, 1993.

2 Gerkin, Charles V. *An Introduction to Pastoral Care*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997, 92-93.

renewed interest in ecclesial practices and embedded ecclesiologies in current practical theology testifies.<sup>3</sup> In the next sections I explore the question how sermon listening could be a form of 'embodied ecclesiology'. First, some aspects of communality are presented as occur in empirical research (section 2). Further, the concept of social religiosity is used to enlarge the framework of reception research in homiletics (section 3). Next, some indicators for communal-religious meanings are introduced, based upon the research method of 'secondary analysis' (section 4). These thoughts gives some clues how preaching can be seen as a caring environment (section 5) and offer some suggestions for broadening our scope of research in homiletics.

## 2. Individuality and commonality in research

When we review empirical research in homiletics the paradox emerges that preaching as profound communal practice has predominantly been studied from an individual perspective.<sup>4</sup> Reception studies conceptualise listeners as individuals and research methodologies rarely depart from the idea that preaching and worship are corporate practices. Research is guided by questions like: What makes a good sermon - for you? How do you create religious meaning from this sermon? What does it mean for you to listen to sermons? How do certain characteristics of sermons correlate to responses of particular respondents groups among listeners? These questions have guided both quantitative and qualitative research designs in the study of sermon reception. Interviews and surveys, the most commonly used methods in sermon reception research, understandably take the individual as basic unit for analysis. Yet at the expense of the listening community.

These observations, however, do not imply that the congregation is completely absent. In *Believing in Preaching* (2005) the issue is addressed as 'how preaching shapes the faith community'. Yet the answer is still given in characteristics of individual listeners. The researchers conclude that there are individual faith listeners, those who understand the sermon as addressing the congregation as an aggregate of individual listeners, and communal identity listeners.<sup>5</sup> A few other studies should be mentioned. In a large German study (1980) samples of listeners are based upon styles of preaching and particular characteristics of the congregation; Hennie Pieterse (1991) studied the relationship between congregational types and styles of listening; and the large American study *Listening to Listeners* (2004) added congregational culture explicitly in the interview structure.<sup>6</sup> In these studies the congregation appears as the *context* of preaching, its culture and its type may influence the way people listen to sermons. In other words: in those cases in which the community of faith is operationalised empirically, it functions as a variable to distinguish

3 Illustrative are the new journal 'Ecclesial Practices' and the Swedish volume by Fahlgren, Sune, en Jonas Idestrom. *Ecclesiology in the Trenches: Theory and Method under Construction*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015.

4 Cf. the instructive literature review on sermon reception in Rietveld, David. "A Survey of the Phenomenological Research of Listening to Preaching". *Homiletic* 38, nr. 2 (2013).

5 Mulligan, Mary Alice, en Ronald J. Allen. *Believing in Preaching. What listeners hear in sermons*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005, 128-129.

6 Daiber, Karl-Fritz, H.W. Dannowski, Wolfgang Lukatis, Klaus Meyerbröcker, Peter Ohnesorg, en Beate Stierle. *Predigen und Hören. Band II. Kommunikation zwischen Predigern und Hörern. Sozialwissenschaftliche Untersuchungen*. Predigen und Hören. Ergebnisse einer Gottesdienstbefragung. München: Kaiser, 1982; Pieterse, H. J. C. *Gemeente en prediking*. Halfway House: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1991; McClure, John S., Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews, L. Susan Bond, Dan P. Moseley, en Jr. G. Lee Ramsey. *Listening to Listeners. Homiletical Case Studies*. Vol. 1. 4 vols. Channels of Listening. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004.

between individual listeners. With some exceptions, though, as will be clear in the next sections.

Before I explore some of the issues that surround the relations between the individual and the community (of faith) in the preaching event, I introduce the brief history of empirical (audience) research in homiletics. First there was communication science. War-propaganda during the two world wars on the European continent and the rise of mass media, stimulated the construction of theories of communication. Shannon and Weaver's mathematical model became the dominant paradigm in which communication is understood as sending a message from a sender to a receiver.<sup>7</sup> Homiletically phrased: does the sermon hit the target of the audience? Or from a more audience centred perspective: how could preachers adapt to their audiences in order to be heard? The gospel as information, as earlier empirical studies indicate.<sup>8</sup> Soon, however, homileticians realised that the empirical study of preaching should not be conceptualised cybernetically. On the contrary, the listener is an interpreting subject. In comes the hermeneutical paradigm. Listeners are 'reading the sermon' and craft their own interpretations and meanings from it. It was a short step to the awareness that sermons are skillfully crafted pieces of art and that listeners are not just 'readers' but contribute to the meaning of the sermon. Following the lead of reception-aesthetics, listeners become co-creators of meaning or co-authors of the sermon. The way listeners interact with sermons is conceptualised with help of spatial metaphors, following Martin's seminal article on preaching as 'open work of art',<sup>9</sup> such as 'Deutungsraum' (interpretative space)<sup>10</sup>, 'meditative environment'<sup>11</sup> or 'third room'<sup>12</sup>. Like (postmodern) pieces of art, sermons are open spaces to facilitate individual meaning-making. Though the spatial metaphor suggest commonality, in its conceptualisation the listener has become rather lonely: a meaning-making individual in a pluralist universe.

Would it be time to challenge the assumption of the listener as individual or at least start the discussion in homiletics about its pros and cons? Several reasons could be given for this, each of them worth to be explored in more depth: congregational worship is the natural habitat for preaching; preaching is a social act; contemporary homiletics has stressed the fact that the preacher reads the text 'on behalf of the congregation'<sup>13</sup>; as communicative event preaching constructs community. Is it possible to articulate an understanding of preaching in which not only the individual hearer's faith is shaped but that also acknowledges how preaching sustains and nurtures the congregation *as a community*? Perhaps pastoral theology helps to sharpen our focus here: what is needed to develop a theory of preaching in which preaching is a form of pastoral communication, the sermon as a means of caring for a community, rather than the enumeration of (religious) meanings created by individuals?

7 Shannon, Claude Elwood, en Warren Weaver. *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949.

8 Bartholomäus, Wolfgang. *Evangelium als Information: Elemente einer theologischen Kommunikationstheorie am Beispiel der Osterbotschaft*. Zürich etc.: Benziger Verlag, 1972.

9 Martin, Gerhard Marcel. "Predigt als 'offenes Kunstwerk': zum Dialog zwischen Homiletik und Rezeptionsästhetik". *Evangelische Theologie* 44, nr. 1 (1984): 46–58.

10 Wittekind, Folkart. "Predigt als Deutungsraum. Zum Wortverständnis protestantischer Predigt". *International Journal of Practical Theology* 6, nr. 1 (2009).

11 Pleizier, T. T. J. *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons. A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics*. Eburon Academic Publishers, 2010, 188-190.

12 Gaarden, Marianne, en Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen. "Listeners as Authors in Preaching". *Homiletic (Online)* 38, nr. 2 (2013), 45.

13 Lose, D. J. (2003). *Confessing Jesus Christ. Preaching in a Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 189-90.

### 3. Empirical method in theology and the reassessment of social religiosity

The epistemological basis for many empirical studies is the individual: surveys and interviews are carried out to reconstruct the experiences, attitudes, cognitions, emotions, volitions or expectations of participants in (religious) practices. Two additional methods transcend the individual focus, such as participant observation and focus groups.<sup>14</sup> Interactions between group members (focus groups) or group behaviour (participant observation) create a promising field of study. Participant observation is a way of generating insights in cultures and cultural patterns; focus groups also contribute to the mutual understanding of the participants. Yet the qualitative interview, despite its focus upon the individual, also opens venues to move beyond personal meanings and individual opinions or experiences. Two aspects in research come to the fore. First, methodically the researcher must be open for aspects in the empirical data that move beyond the individual framework. Here methods of analysis are as important as methods for generating data. I return to this in the next section. Secondly, theologically we have to be aware of how the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity silently governs our analyses.

It may be a typical protestant idea: individuals should tell a religious story about their lives and they are supposed to be active participants in faith practices. The human mind becomes aware of God's presence and accepts (or rejects) the promises of God in Christ.<sup>15</sup> The interest in the human mind entails a focus upon individuality and reflexivity. The reflexivity of the self is pivotal in the 'inner dialogue with significant others' through which the individual tries to understand the events in life. By taking the whole idea of religious autobiography and placing it in the relationship with God, the late German practical-theologian Henning Luther, gives a subtle articulation of the protestant position in which the individual understands the self *coram Deo*, both in judgment and in love.<sup>16</sup> Deeply embedded in the Christian idea of religion is the human self and his reflexivity. It is not very surprising that conceptually 'intrinsic religion' is understood as 'mature religion' as defined by Gordon Allport<sup>17</sup> and to be preferred over against extrinsic religiosity or 'immature religion'. Since intrinsic religion is conceptually connected to 'true belief', the methodical interest in the individual by empirical research has a theological foundation. Or as Cohen and Hill state: 'religious motivations that are socially centred can be seen as detracting from individualistic, intrinsic religious identity.'<sup>18</sup> This is strengthened by the fact that in social-scientific and psychological research the dimensions individual-social and intrinsic-extrinsic have become conceptually related. If social religious orientations are explained as extrinsic religious motivations, the individual and the intrinsic are conceptually connected. Recent research in

14 Roest, Henk de. "The Focus Group Method in Practical Ecclesiology: Performative Effects and Ecclesiological Rationale". *Ecclesial Practices* 2, nr. 2 (2015): 235–54.

15 Immink F. Gerrit. *Faith: A Practical Theological Reconstruction (Studies in Practical Theology)*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, William B. Publishing Company, 2005, 156-177.

16 Luther, Henning. *Religion und Alltag. Bausteine zu einer praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. Radius-Bücher. Stuttgart: Radius-Verlag, 1992.

17 Allport, Gordon Willard. *The Individual and His Religion: A Psychological Interpretation*. New York; London: Macmillan Pub Co, 1967. For a critique of the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction, see Kirkpatrick, Lee A., and Ralph W. Hood. "Intrinsic-Extrinsic Religious Orientation: The Boon or Bane of Contemporary Psychology of Religion?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29, no. 4 (1990): 442–62.

18 Cohen, Adam B., en Peter C. Hill. "Religion as Culture: Religious Individualism and Collectivism Among American Catholics, Jews, and Protestants". *Journal of Personality* 75, nr. 4 (1 augustus 2007): 709–42, 713.

psychology of religion, however, has challenged this view. Following the 'push toward a more social approach to religion', Van Camp, Barden and Sloan argue that we have to recognize that important collective components in religious traditions are 'internalized and important dimensions of religiosity' while research has neglected the social aspects 'other than its extrinsic benefits'.<sup>19</sup> On the basis of two quantitative studies, they developed a social and individual religiosity scale and identified 'an independent social intrinsic religiosity, which allows a broader, more specific and more comprehensive assessment of the religious experience of diversely religious and diversely motivated range of individuals.'<sup>20</sup>

The research interest in individual versus social religiosity has a bearing upon the study of sermon reception. It should open up researchers of preaching to reassess the individual in relation to 'other minds' and to value collective components, interpersonal commitments and the importance of places of worship. In other words, the centrality of the believing mind, the religious experiences, cognitions, emotions and behaviours of individual believers, churchgoers and sermon listeners calls for another methodical angle: *how do listeners relate to 'others' while listening to a sermon and what corporate commitments are constructed in the preaching event*. These 'others' may not necessarily be the people present in the worship service. The worshipping listener is part of a larger community of faith that comprises the 'cloud of witnesses' and the generations to come.<sup>21</sup> For instance, listening 'for others' is an important indicator for communal-religious meanings in hearing sermons.

#### 4. Indicators for communal-religious meanings

In my PhD research<sup>22</sup> I focussed upon listening to sermons as *religious practice*. One of the findings resonates with the interest in social and communal components as discussed above. In the research design I took the qualitative interview with individual listeners as unit for analysis. In coding and conceptualising the material, however, I found several community-related components and aspects. Attending to interview-fragments in which listeners relate to fellow-believers, to the church community as a whole, or to the way regular churchgoing shaped their faith, I found that the individual listener shows an awareness for fellow listeners and that this awareness is both religiously qualified and intrinsic to the practice of hearing sermons. The following three concept function can function as indicators that point to communal meanings in individual responses to sermons: third-person engagement, experiencing common faith, and anamnetic listening.

**Indicator 1 - *Third-person engagement*:** John drives an elderly lady back home from church. In the interview he said:

"That's something the lady said on the way back home. She said 'I lost a son when he was 17'. She told us how sad that was. 'But I have seen that I have been carried through and have been able to lay it in God's hands.' Yes, I though, yes, she recognized it too. In the sermon. I really liked that."

19 Sloan, Lloyd, Jamie Barden, en Debbie Van Camp. "Social and Individual Religious Orientations Exist Within Both Intrinsic and Extrinsic Religiosity". *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, 2016, 4-6.  
20 Ibid., 22.

21 A reassessment of the classical ecclesiological distinction between the "visible church" and the "invisible church" may be helpful at this point.

22 Pleizier, T. T. J. *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons. A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics*. Eburon Academic Publishers, 2010.

It may count as received knowledge in sermon reception research that listeners in interacting or 'dialogising'<sup>23</sup> with the sermon look for connections with their personal life stories. Listening to sermons is 'lived religion': listeners make sense of life with help of religious discourse. The first example illustrates this twice: both John and the elderly lady interact with the sermon personally. Yet engaging with the sermon is also social, as this example demonstrates. John also interacts with the *listening experience of a fellow-believer*. The way he engages with the sermon is not primary in the first-person singular: 'I recognize this in my life', but also 'third-person singular': 'She recognized it too'. This example is easily multiplied with many others: listeners who talk about members of the congregation: I wish he or she had heard this sermon; parents reporting that they felt overwhelmed when they started thinking about their children when the preacher addressed God's love for little children; how the sermon made them feel grateful for those believers who passed away; or listeners who simply explain that sermons should encourage them to care for others in the congregation. Apparently, there is a way of hearing sermons that goes beyond the individual life story and is not understood adequately when we conceptualised it in terms of first-person involvement. *Third-person engagement* opens up a line of thought that invites researchers to think about social intrinsic religiosity: listeners feel part of a community of faith, they take care of each other, and they share life stories. The fact that listeners refer to 'others' points to a dimension in reception research that goes beyond the individual hearer. When people respond that this sermon was not so much about them, but that they suppose it was a blessing for someone else, we should not dismiss this too quickly but appreciate it first as an expression of belonging to the community of faith and how the sermon contributes to creating relationships within the congregation.

**Indicator 2 - Experiencing common faith:** In one of the interviews in the *Listening to listeners* project, Helen says: "We have one woman in our church right now who is a mediator on a peacemaking team. Everyone just thinks it's wonderful what she's doing, and we all want to be part of that. [...] What we couldn't do ourselves, and I'm not sure I am ready, but it's nice to know we have someone out there [the preacher] representing us in that way." The researchers add to this interview-fragment the following comment: 'Preaching occurs within a congregation that has a distinctive communal identity. The sermon contributes to the shared commitments of the congregation...'.<sup>24</sup> Community is valued as a community of interpretation and as 'representation' preaching communicates a - supposedly - shared religious identity. Another incident of communal listening can be found in the interview with Cassandra. She says "All preachers, I think, should be about delivering the message of God in such a way that we can all grasp it and understand it."<sup>25</sup> There is a sense of mutuality, that the sermon meant for 'all of us'. Comparing these and other expressions in interviews point to a more deeply trait in hearing sermons: the sermon builds a religious world, with Scriptural texts, metaphors, and references to the human condition. In this world listeners experience recognition and they identify with the metaphors, the narratives, the theological motives that occupy the world of the sermon. They also disagree, start

23 See for this concept Schaap-Jonker, Hanneke. *Before the Face of God. An Interdisciplinary Study of the Meaning of the Sermon and the Hearer's God Image, Personality and Affective State*. Berlin: LIT, 2008 and Gaarden, Marianne, en Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen. "Listeners as Authors in Preaching". *Homiletic (Online)* 38, nr. 2 (2013).

24 McClure, John S., Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews, L. Susan Bond, Dan P. Moseley, en Jr. G. Lee Ramsey. *Listening to Listeners. Homiletical Case Studies*. Vol. 1. 4 vols. Channels of Listening. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004, 43-45.

25 *Ibid.*, 61.

conversations or discussions, or experience together that here something is at stake that concerns them as believers, as a community of faith or as the people of God. Preaching gives voice to the practice of faith of this local community in the here and now. The concept of 'experiencing common faith' points to another paradox in the individual-communal dimension of the preaching event. Individual meaning-making is a hallmark in pluralist societies such as in Western Europe. In homiletics the metaphor of the 'open space' has been employed to do justice to the facts of pluralism and the values of freedom. Plurality of voices and interpretations, however, are not at odds to the idea that in communication, also in religious communication such as preaching, commonality is negotiated, shared and expressed. Perhaps homiletics needs further concepts to articulate how in plural societies, preaching can be unifying, tapping into the larger tradition of the Christian faith, and shaping a community of people that understands itself as followers of Christ.

**Indicator 3 - Anamnetic listening:** Weekly preaching has its heights and depths, but also its trivialities. About heights and depths, listeners tell a lot in the interviews. What makes a good sermon, what makes you feel disappointed, when does a sermon really touches you or how do you feel about mediocre preaching. One of the trivialities, however, is as obvious as unnoticed: if every sermon is part of a larger pattern of preaching, so is sermon listening. The regular listener to sermons, experiences worship and preaching as a practice. One of the aspects of practices is that they consists of regularly recurring activities. James Nieman puts it like this: 'Practices are common by existing in and across time. [...] The regular and repeated performance of practices offers a way for individuals to display who they truly are in relation to others.'<sup>26</sup> As preaching continues through time, so does listening. It is complex to look into this practice-dimension in empirical research. Asking about preaching as such gives abstract or general answers in interviews; but an interview about one particular sermon gives an impression that is too incidental. For the analysis of conversations with listeners, we have to focus on those utterances in which listeners express aspects of the *practice* of listening. One aspect that points to continuity through time could be what I have called 'anamnetic listening'.<sup>27</sup> Listeners report that they need to hear the gospel again. They tell that preaching helps them to support them in their Christian lives or to encourage them to keep in touch with the Christian story. The way sermons work on a deeper level goes beyond recognizing whether the sermon connects to the lives of listeners or whether they are able to create meaning from it. One of the listeners said: "You need Christ. That message should be told over and over again." The idea expressed in this sentence occurs in multiple ways. Take for instance how listeners in the *Listening for listeners* project talk about the purposes of preaching.<sup>28</sup> Aspects such as 'explaining the Bible', 'deepening the relationship with Christ' and the listener saying 'I'm proud that our preacher *every Sunday* (emphasis mine) issues somewhere in that sermon a gospel call', point to a dimension in listening that concerns both continuity and the remembering of the gospel and the larger Biblical narrative. It resembles the anamnetic dimension in Holy Communion: we keep remembering Christ and the Word of God. Hearing sermons, therefore, has more 'duration' than that it is a series of highly illuminative moments. This aspect of listening is connected to the larger story of the Christian

26 Nieman, James, "Why the Idea of Practice Matters", in: Long, Thomas G., en Leonora Tubbs Tisdale. *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p. 22-24.

27 Pleizier, T. T. J. *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons. A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics*. Eburon Academic Publishers, 2010, 257-261.

28 Volume 'Believing in Preaching' (2005), Chapter 1.



faith and the practice that listeners participate in binds them to those who have come before and those who will follow. It connects the listener to the community of faith that is broader than this local congregation. Hearing sermons is like tuning into a conversation that is going on from the beginning and shall be for ever. It roots the individual listener's experience in a larger communal framework of salvation-history.

## 5. Preaching as pastoral communication?

Sermon listening is a very personal activity. Yet the three concepts above show that the preaching event also assumes, creates and sustains relationships. These relationships concern the present body of believers as 'third-person listening' demonstrates. In listening to the sermon connections are created between listeners that have a caring dimension: listeners share life stories or they wish other churchgoers a redeeming listening-experience. Preaching can also help listeners to connect to the larger Christian story. This has two sides. (1) Anamnestic listening points to the phenomenon that listeners reconnect to their own connection to the Biblical narrative. Anthropologically, anamnestic listening is a connection of the listener to his or her own religious self: I need to hear again about Christ, I need to hear again these stories from the Bible. The sermon is not a source for 'new' information, it is also a source for renewal and transformation of the self. This is not to be equated with the connection listeners make with their own life stories. This reconnection to the religious self functions as a means to remain faithful. The assumption is: "when I do not hear this over and over again, I am in danger of losing my religious self". The sermon therefore is a means for listeners to care for their own souls, to maintain their religious identities in feeling connected to the larger Christian story. (2) Experiencing common faith connects the listener to the religious identity of this particular community ("This is why I come to this church") but is understood by listener in a broader sense: this is what we believe as Christians. Homiletic literature uses notions like 'witness' or 'confession' to point to this phenomenon. Preachers are custodians of a mystery that is at the heart of the Christian faith and every sermon again is a means to help the community of faith to enjoy the gospel and to stand in awe of it. Thus besides an opportunity for listeners to maintain their religious identities in reconnecting to the Christian story, preaching is also a place where the common religious identity is cared for. These aspects of preaching, that the sermon assumes a common identity and cares for it; that the sermon creates caring relationships between listeners; and that the sermon cares for the listener in that it could sustain his or her religious self, provides a new understanding of preaching as pastoral communication.

## 6. Discussion and perspectives for research

The three indicators for communal religious meanings could be used as conceptual hypotheses to broaden the area of sermon reception research. Methodically, secondary analysis<sup>29</sup> may be helpful in exploring the boundaries of existing research. For an example I take an interview-fragment published by Marianne Gaarden en Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen based upon an empirical project in Denmark, similar to my own research. They refer to a listening experience by a 46-year-old inmate, accustomed to going to church: "Sometimes . . . I move into another story about how the text actually is supposed to be understood. Sometimes I feel like I am in contact with those who wrote it [and it is as if they are saying]:

29 Whiteside, Mary, Jane Mills, en Janya McCalman. "Using Secondary Data for Grounded Theory Analysis". *Australian Social Work* 65, nr. 4 (december 2012): 504–16.

'Hey listen, this might be what the text says, but that's not how it should be understood.'<sup>30</sup> This listener creates a dialogue between the sermon and the way he got used to understanding the Bible. The authority of Scripture is put in relational language. His conversation not only includes the tradition he has been raised in but he even creates a virtual dialogue with the biblical writers themselves. It makes us aware that the dialogue with the sermon has communal aspects that go beyond individual life experience. Comparing empirical data to concepts that have emerged in the field creates new avenues for reflection and broadens the scope of research. Analysing data from different angles challenges our paradigms, brings in new perspectives, and creates ample opportunities for researchers to discuss methods, approaches, and theoretical views. Broadening the study of sermon *listeners* to sermon *listening* and to the *listening community* enables us to explore the rich field of sermon reception research in more detail and with more nuances. It also opens up possibilities to relate homiletics to other fields such as communication studies, psychology of religion and pastoral care.

30 Gaarden, Marianne, en Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen. "Listeners as Authors in Preaching". *Homiletic (Online)* 38, nr. 2 (2013).