

Hans Austnaberg. *Improving Preaching by Listening to Listeners: Sunday Service Preaching in the Malagasy Lutheran Church*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012. 238 pages. \$71.

The lively evolution of preaching across the continent of Africa is highly significant for the global church. Yet, many of us who seek to understand its preaching can be overwhelmed by the continent's sheer size and the range of content and style its preaching displays. So Austnaberg, a seasoned missionary to Madagascar currently teaching Pastoral Theology in Norway, has done both African pastors and global partners a service by slicing deeply into one region and its aspects in his fine book. He has limited his scope to preaching in the island nation of Madagascar (whose 22-million inhabitants are called Malagasy), and more specifically the preaching of the Malagasy Lutheran Church, one of the largest and most vital Lutheran bodies in the world. With roughly three million members, packed Sunday services, and a healthy upward growth trend, this church is well worth studying and emulating.

In a bold move, Austnaberg trained his sights not primarily on preachers or their sermons, but on the impact of preaching on listeners. Those who have followed various strands of the *Listening to Listeners* project<sup>1</sup> over the years will be heartened to see its lines of inquiry applied to the highlands of Madagascar. The author sought insights into what sermons do to listeners and, "what listeners do to sermons" (26). He interviewed extensively twenty listeners to three sermons, preached in a city, a town, and a rural setting. Using an organizational framework of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* in his own analysis of the three sermons and then the listeners' responses to them, the author portrays a faithful church straining to listen well to the preached Word. He sought to discern what listeners retained, how the sermons impacted them emotionally and volitionally, and how they shaped their convictions. His questions were developed with deep sensitivity to the unique context and worldview of the Malagasy people, and yielded results that may surprise Western readers.

Madagascar boasts a unique and rich rhetorical tradition. *Kabary* is a cherished form of public speaking in which hired, highly trained speakers address audiences at important occasions. It is marked by wit and eloquence, and overtly aimed at persuasion. *Kabary* is so enjoyed and revered in Madagascar that the author had expected more listeners to connect its classic forms and strengths with those of a well-crafted sermon. In fact, many listeners were astonished at the proposal of any overlap, seeing *kabary* as dealing in deception and "decorated words" (131).

Listeners were more pleased when their preachers employed a few of the thousands of proverbs that store and transmit communal wisdom. Proverbs flourish in part because they conveying truth indirectly, avoiding a direct confrontation that would, "close the hearts of the "hearers," as one listener put it (27). Another reflected that she could "see the truth" (127) when proverbs were used. Yet some proverbs advocate practices incompatible with Christian teaching, and listeners wanted their pastor to show discernment. Another listener offered the interesting concern that proverbs may, "enter *too* deeply into your mind" (128) and distract from the core of the message.

A challenge of Austnaberg's project, which causes it to differ markedly from *Listening to Listeners* projects undertaken in low-power-distance cultures, is that Malagasy listeners were highly reticent to criticize their pastors or offer suggestions for improvement. This caused some

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see Allen, Ronald J., "The Turn to the Listener: A Selective Overview of a Recent Trend in Preaching," *Encounter* 64 (2): 167-196.

amusing exchanges as the author pressed in vain for critique, and it may have limited the rigor of the feedback. It may also cause some gripe-weary Western preachers to catch the next flight to Madagascar. In general, the eagerness of listeners to change and grow in response to sermons was quite moving.

This reader was disappointed that all references to preachers used the masculine gender. Granted, all Malagasy Lutheran pastors are male (and in fact listeners expressed a rather distressing desire that their preacher be tall and have a booming voice!), but it would have been astute to acknowledge the leadership of women in the church or of female Malagasy preachers in other traditions. It also was unfortunate that the feedback from listeners was evidently not relayed to the preachers, and so did not help them in the process to improve as preachers, given the implied goal in the title of the book. Austnaberg refers to further projects to close that loop, and given his thought-provoking reflections here, I will be intrigued to see where his research takes him next.

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