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# Interview with Prof. Sunggu A Yang



## [Short theological biography]

Sunggu A. Yang, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Theology and Christian Ministries at George Fox University, renowned for integrating homiletics, liturgics, and the arts within theological discourse. His academic credentials include a PhD in Religion from Vanderbilt University, where his work received guidance from influential mentors such as Dale P. Andrews and John S. McClure. Dr Yang has also held prestigious international fellowships and has been invited to speak at numerous global conferences, underscoring his role as a significant voice in contemporary theological education.

Dr Yang's scholarly contributions are marked by his pioneering work in digital homiletics, which explores the theological and practical implications of online preaching. This focus is part of his broader



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interest in how technology reshapes religious practice and community. His publications, which often intersect theological discourse with modern cultural issues, include works that are critical in the fields of practical and missional theology.

Internationally, Dr Yang has been recognised as a research fellow at the University of the Free State, South Africa, and has participated in critical dialogues about preaching and liturgy across continents, including workshop presentations at the University of Tübingen in Germany. His commitment to expanding the dialogue of homiletics beyond traditional Western perspectives is evident in his editorial roles and his contributions to international scholarly publications and conferences. Through these endeavours, Dr Yang continues to shape the landscape of theological education, advocating for a multidisciplinary approach that embraces the complexities of global Christian identity and worship.

**ML: Was this life always the plan? How did it all happen for you to pursue a life in doing theology?**

**SAY:** Choosing to pursue a life in theology was shaped by a series of enlightening experiences and educational opportunities that unfolded over time. My journey through esteemed institutions such as Yale and Vanderbilt, where I was mentored by notable scholars in the field, deepened my engagement with theological studies. This academic path not only equipped me with a profound understanding of homiletics and liturgics but also ignited my passion for integrating the arts into religious discourse. The interplay of these disciplines guided me to a career where I could explore innovative ways of preaching and teaching that address the complexities of modern spiritual life.

**ML: How would you describe and frame your take on what homiletics is all about? What keywords do you opt for in defining preaching (and worship) nowadays?**

**SAY:** Homiletics, for me, transcends the traditional boundaries of preaching, evolving into a dynamic interaction with culture and the arts. It involves crafting sermons that are not only doctrinally sound, but also resonate deeply with contemporary audiences through relatable narratives and engaging delivery. Key terms such as “aesthetic”, “digital”, and “intercultural” are essential in my definition of preaching and worship nowadays, highlighting the need for a message that is both theologically profound and culturally relevant. These concepts encourage a preaching style that is responsive to the diverse and changing contexts in which worship occurs, aiming to connect more effectively with a global congregation.

**ML: What are the influential markers (people, ideas, spaces, and times) on your path till now?**

**SAY:** My path to this point in my career has been influenced by several key markers, including influential mentors, pivotal educational experiences, and diverse cultural interactions. Figures such as Dale P. Andrews and John S. McClure were instrumental during my doctoral studies, guiding my scholarly focus and academic rigour. My time at institutions such as George Fox University and Vanderbilt provided not only education, but also opportunities to engage in meaningful research and community service. These experiences have enriched my understanding and practice of homiletics, allowing me to contribute to the field in innovative and impactful ways.

**ML: How do you see (the disruption of) the “canon” of global homiletics? Which works do you view as compulsory reading for where we are at present?**

**SAY:** The disruption and re-evaluation of the “canon” in global homiletics are essential as we face an increasingly pluralistic world. Works that incorporate critical theories, digital innovations, and global perspectives are crucial for a contemporary understanding of preaching. I consider texts that challenge traditional norms and promote a more inclusive and diverse theological dialogue to be compulsory reading. These resources help us reimagine the role of preaching in society, ensuring that it remains relevant and transformative in addressing the spiritual and social challenges of our times.

**ML: Perhaps another way to phrase much of the above, is to probe your specific working definition of preaching. What is a (good) sermon? What makes a sermon a (good) sermon? Any subtle nuances and shifts to highlight in this regard?**

**SAY:** A good sermon is one that bridges the divine with the daily experiences of its audience, making theological concepts tangible and actionable. It should engage listeners intellectually and emotionally, prompting reflection and action that align with biblical teachings. The effectiveness of a sermon also depends on its ability to resonate with the cultural and societal contexts of the congregation, using language and metaphors that are accessible and relatable. Subtleties in delivery such as the integration of multimedia, storytelling techniques, and direct audience engagement can significantly enhance the impact of a sermon, making it a memorable and transformative experience for the listeners.

**ML: Any particular wisdom and secrets for when it comes to teaching preaching? What would you say are the key markers (and perhaps also temptations we need to resist) in the pedagogy of homiletics?**

**SAY:** When it comes to teaching preaching, one must balance between imparting traditional homiletic skills and fostering creativity and personal expression among students. Effective homiletic pedagogy involves nurturing a deep understanding of scriptural texts, while also encouraging students to consider their unique contexts and voices. It is crucial to avoid the temptation to impose a singular preaching style; instead, educators should encourage experimentation and diversity in sermon delivery. The key markers for successful homiletic instruction include adaptability, critical thinking, and a commitment to ongoing personal and professional growth, both for students and teachers alike.

**ML: Thus far we have mostly focused upon homiletics, but what about liturgics and (practical) theology in general? How do you see the positioning of homiletics with other fields of study?**

**SAY:** Homiletics serves as a critical nexus between practical theology, liturgics, and broader cultural studies, highlighting its interdisciplinary nature and vital role in theological education. It not only reflects on the practice of preaching but also examines how worship practices can evolve to meet the needs of diverse contemporary audiences. Homiletics encourages a dialogue with other theological disciplines, ensuring that preaching remains relevant and responsive to new social realities and spiritual needs. This positioning is crucial for training ministers who are capable of leading congregations in thoughtful, engaging, and contextually aware ways.

**ML: Congratulations on your most recent (and very timely) publication, Digital homiletics: The theology and practice of online preaching (Fortress Press, 2024). How do you re-define the links between digital homiletics and carnal hermeneutics? What sort of fleshy, bodily, incarnated, inhabited world is embraced when we step into the realm of digital homiletics?**

**SAY:** In “Digital homiletics”, I explore the transformative potential of digital platforms for preaching, proposing that these technologies offer new ways to engage and expand congregational boundaries. This work considers how digital media can maintain the essence of embodied preaching, ensuring that the preacher’s presence is felt, even through virtual platforms. The challenge is to create a sense of community and shared spiritual experience that

transcends physical boundaries, enabling a more inclusive and accessible form of worship. This approach not only broadens the scope of homiletic practice, but also invites ongoing innovation in how we understand and implement pastoral care and spiritual leadership in the digital age.

**ML: How do you see our “here” and “now”? What sort of times and spaces do you sense we find ourselves within? In short, how do you, as a preacher and teacher of preachers, name our present?**

**SAY:** Our “here and now” is marked by rapid technological advances and profound social changes that challenge traditional preaching and ministry practices. As a preacher and teacher, I view these changes as opportunities to rethink how we communicate and connect with our congregations. The current era demands a flexible, responsive approach to ministry that embraces digital tools and addresses the complex issues facing today’s global community. Recognising and adapting to these shifts is crucial for the church’s relevance and effectiveness in fostering spiritual growth and community engagement.

**ML: Lastly, please tell us more about your future research plans. What kind of projects are you currently busy with, and any particular publications we can expect from you in the next few years to come?**

**SAY:** My future research plans are centred on further exploring the intersections of technology, art, philosophy, and theology within the context of preaching. Upcoming projects will delve deeper into how digital platforms influence religious practice and community dynamics, with several publications in the works that examine these themes from various angles. Additionally, I am looking forward to contributing to an edited volume on the arts and preaching, which aims to provide practical insights and theoretical frameworks for integrating creative approaches into homiletic practice. I am currently co-authoring a book that explores the intersection of modern French philosophical trends and North American homiletics. All these works, I hope, will serve as valuable resources for both practitioners and scholars in the evolving field of homiletics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.