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A university church going online: Traditionality and experimentality in YouTube worship services at the university church in Leipzig

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ABSTRACT: This article will study a religious tradition found at many German universities with evangelical Faculties of theology, namely the university worship service. Headed by a professor of theology titled University preacher (Universitätsprediger) and aimed at an academic community, the sermon has had a distinct academic focus. At Leipzig University, not only the sermon but also music has been pivotal. When the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 forced Germany into lockdown, the Leipzig University church decided to stream the worships on YouTube. I will analyze the online church services during 2020-2021. Given the academic emphasis on the university sermons and the musical heritage at the Leipzig University and its church, I will broaden the perspective and regard the whole worship service as a space of traditionality and experimentality. While the sermon is often regarded as an intellectual experience and the music as an emotional one, I view the sermon and the music and other painted, sculpted or performed art as having agency to communicate with both mind and emotions.

Keywords: University church leipzig, Online university worship services, Covid19-pandemic, Traditionality, Experimentality

The academic worship services at universities in Germany have a long tradition. Their roots can be found in the middle ages and the close relationship between academia and the Catholic Church. Many professors in pre-Reformation Germany were also simultaneously priests or monks. This cooperation between university and church would continue after the Reformation, with many professors also serving as parish priests. As a regular event focusing on the sermon, the university worship service can rightly be declared a specific post-Reformation phenomenon (Albrecht 2013, p. 6 and 8). In 2013, at least 15 German universities had university preachers arranging regular or more infrequent academic worship services (Martin 2013, p. 22). The focus in this article will be on Leipzig University.

1 THE PAULINUM AND UNIVERSITY WORSHIP SERVICES

When the Leipzig University was founded in 1409, it was done so in close relation to the local Dominican monastery and its church dedicated to the Apostle Paul (Mai 2017, p. 90). During the Reformation, the monastery was closed, and its church was secularized. In 1543, Duke Maurice of Saxony assigned the (former) church of St. Paul to the university. Two years later,

the church was officially inaugurated – as an evangelical university church – at a worship service where the reformer Martin Luther himself preached (Hütter 1993, p. 117-119; Beyer 2017, p. 30). For almost 150 years, the church was mainly used for ceremonial purposes within the university and as a grave chapel for professors and students. The church's use was enhanced in 1710 when it was decided that regular Sunday services should henceforth be held (Mai 2009, 90-91, 104-105). In 1968, the more than 250-year-old tradition was severely challenged when the GDR regime blew up the university church to build a purely secular university. For nearly fifty years, the academic worship services were held in the adjacent St. Nicholas Church (Petzoldt 2017, p. 154). However, soon after the German reunification in 1990, the university started planning to remove the university complex erected after 1968. Due to the trauma that the destruction of the university church had caused, the support for rebuilding the university church was considerable. After a long and cumbersome process, a new church, the Paulinum - Assembly hall and university church of St. Paul, was inaugurated in December 2017 (Groop 2019, p. 2021-1023, 1033).

Since its opening, evangelical church services have been held regularly; as a rule, every Sunday and church holiday at 11 a.m. The continuity since the opening year in 1710 is also proudly promoted

on the university's web page (Universität Leipzig, Gottesdienste). The combination of academic theological emphasis and musical excellence has rendered the university service relative popularity, and the services have been well attended, despite a low church membership in this part of Germany.

The academic character of the university church can be approached from several perspectives. Firstly, the university church has never had any members, but those attending its services are either members of another parish or not church members. Secondly, the pastors are university staff. The pastor in charge holds the title of university preacher (Universitätsprediger) and is one of the professors at the Faculty of Theology. Traditionally, only theology professors or other distinguished priests with doctoral degrees have preached at the university services. Nowadays, all ordained staff members of the Faculty of Theology belong to the so-called *Predigerkonvent* (preachers' convention) and can preach in the university church (A. Deeg, personal communication, April 14, 2021). Thirdly, the worship services at Leipzig University are predominantly aimed at an academic audience. This follows a broader tradition of Protestant university worship services in Germany, stressing that the academic sermons have a high academic level. The preacher should not step out of his or her academic context but rather aim the sermon at intellectual listeners (Martin 2013, p. 26 and 29).

Furthermore, the sermon should be something of an experiment. Interestingly, this experiment is somewhat restricted or directed in its aim. As suggested by Professor Reinhard Schmidt-Rost, it should prove the plausibility of the Christian faith and its relevance for each modern society (Schmidt-Rost 2013, p. 19). This is a view that the former university preacher in Leipzig, Professor Peter Zimmerling, seems to embrace. Emphasizing the hermeneutical function of the academic worship service, he stresses the preacher's duty at the university worship to build a bridge to the critical listener. The sermon should be delivered so that it is understandable to a "religiously unmusical" listener. Thereby the academic worship service and its sermon constitute something of a contact zone (Pratt 1991) – a space characterized both by faith and science, also visited by people who did not consider themselves as Christians, or, as put by Zimmerling, where it is possible to "try out Christianity" (Christsein auf Probe). However, in line with Schmidt-Rost, the sermon in Leipzig should not predominantly be regarded as a scientific experiment, but as a means of using appropriate and creative approaches in order that the critical listener may at least experience [Christian] faith as "somehow plausible" (P. Zimmerling, personal communication, May 31, 2019).

The strong emphasis on music in the university church has long traditions dating back to the organist

and composer Johann Sebastian Bach (Mai 2009, p. 107). The Paulinum - Assembly Hall and University Church of St. Paul - is equipped with two church organs mainly played by the director of music at the University, Professor David Timm, or the church organist Daniel Beilschmidt both acclaimed concert musicians. Moreover, the worship services are frequently guested by musicians performing compositions by Bach and other composers of sacral music.

Building on the centrality mentioned above of the sermon in the evangelical worship service and of music in the Leipzig service, I would, in this article, like to broaden the perspective and view the whole worship service as a space of tradition and experimentality, though with particular focus on the sermon and the music. While the sermon is often regarded as communicating with the human intellect and the music with the emotional side (see, for instance, J. Block 2010, p.532-549), I view the sermon, the music, and other painted, sculpted or performed art as having the agency to communicate with both mind and emotions. Focusing on the digitally transmitted services during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-2021, I study aspects of traditionality and experimentality. In other words, I will draw attention to traditional representations in the online worship services, relating to creed, history, and tradition, but also novel and creative approaches.

2 TURNING DIGITAL

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit Germany and the rest of the world in the first months of 2020, Leipzig University was soon faced with restrictions and various degrees of lockdown. The solution for the university church, like for many other religious communities, was to go digital. People were invited to participate in filmed worship services online instead of attending the ordinary university worship service. Beginning on April 11, 2020, the university church in Leipzig transmitted its worship services via YouTube. During the first year of digital services, between the Easter of 2020 and 2021, 29 services were made available. In time, they spanned between 28 minutes and 1 hour and 4 minutes. Within a month, the worship services were typically visited between 500 and 1500 times (Universität Leipzig, YouTube).

Viewed from the perspective of the title of the book at hand, digitized worship services pose an interesting research challenge. Reaching out and engaging parishioners through online or digital Sunday services was a global challenge during the Covid-19 lockdown when religious communities were forced with short notice to make a quick digital transition (Campbell 2020, p. 3). Most community members counted the days until they could gather in their sanctuaries again. However, voices were also heard of the benefit of

online streaming. For instance, more people often attended the Sunday services online than had attended the services before the pandemic.

Furthermore, while participation in traditional church services tended to be somewhat limited, as Ralf Peter Reimann notes with regard to the churches in Germany, online worship sometimes led to a higher level of activity through personal intercessions posted online and included in the service (Reimann 2020, p. 33). This tally with Heidi Campbell's research on religious communities online. According to Campbell, people who participate in church communities online were essentially "looking for a faith-based social network where they could build relationships, share their faith, and find meaning and value in their interactions and place in the groups" (Campbell 2020, p. 50-51). However, Campbell asserts, "the most common strategy" that religious leaders tended to seek when they went online was that they "transfer their standard offline worship service to an online platform," focusing little on interactivity (Campbell 2020, p. 51).

The Leipzig University worship service fits well within Campbell's description, or what John Dyer calls a "Broadcast Church" (Dyer 2020, p. 53-54). Being a worship community without a registered parish and without parishioners, the university church of St. Paul has a somewhat different character than ordinary evangelical parishes in Germany.

Thus, given these circumstances in Leipzig, the Faculty of theology, the university preacher, and the team responsible for the worship, it could be argued, had relatively large freedom to design an online worship setup that it found meaningful.¹ It was decided to make the online services shorter than the ordinary worship service and focus on the sermon and music. Certain parts of the liturgy did not necessarily have to be included. Previously celebrated every two weeks, Communion was left out (A. Deeg, personal communication, April 14, 2021). In most online services, the credo and the confession were also omitted while there was a stronger focus on reading a bible text, the sermon, prayers, hymns, and music.

The university worship services were created specifically for online attendance. They were produced prior to their release date and made available at the ordinary time of a normal university worship service, i.e., 11.00 in the morning. Furthermore, they were filmed in separate takes, and the various parts were subsequently joined together by a producer. At times

this is visible during the worship service as the furnishing may differ from one moment to another.

Along with each worship service on YouTube, an information sheet is provided, with info about the authors behind the compositions, the individuals involved in the service, and direct links to the various sections in the service. Hymn texts were also provided. The participators and sponsors were presented at the end of each filmed worship, and the possibility to contribute financially was announced.

At every filmed service visiting musicians performed. Typically, a quartet or quintet sang the hymns and part of the liturgy, such as the *Kyrie*-prayer, but the same ensemble also performed other compositions. Five times Bach cantatas were performed, and these services were therefore somewhat longer. It is also worth noting that these cantata worship services had more visitors than the ordinary online worship services.

3 TRADITIONALITY

Leipzig University takes great pride in its history as one of the oldest universities in Europe. The university's internet page highlights central historical episodes like the foundation (1409) in close relation to the St. Thomas monastery, the Leipzig Debate (1519) between Martin Luther and Johann Eck, and the importance of reformation. The medieval church of St. Paul takes a central position in the university's history, as does its destruction in 1968 (Universität Leipzig, Geschichte). The university also emphasizes the continuity of university worship services since 1710 and the musical heritage imputed to the university church (Universität Leipzig, Paulinum - Aula und Universitätskirche S. Pauli).

In sermons and speeches in the digital worship services, references to the old church of St. Paul were not particularly made. However, the link to the old church, and its destiny, was visually brought to the fore in various ways. Several online services started with an image of the bronze replica of the old church in front of the Paulinum.



Figure 1. Opening image before one of the worship services displaying the bronze replica of the old church against the Paulinum.

1. While many individuals were actively involved in the work, the worship services were headed by a designated team. The university preacher and deputy university preacher carried responsibility for the ecclesiastic content and the musical director and church organist were responsible for the music. (Universität Leipzig, Gottesdienste, Über uns).

Another way that the (broken) church heritage was displayed was by rendering details in the architecture of the present building and early modern epitaphs with their sculptures and paintings. Some of these conveyed abstract messages. Others were detailed images inspired by biblical narratives. A common scene displayed in the digital university worship was the epitaphs salvaged from the old church shortly before its destruction. Some of these epitaphs had not been fully restored. Instead, they had been repaired only in part, with techniques that, in fact, enhanced their imperfection and broken history. These epitaphs were contrasted against the church architecture, which was an architect's interpretation inspired by the old church. This did not only accentuate the church history of this space, dating back to a medieval monastery but also its interruption during the GDR regime through the destruction of the old church of St. Paul in 1968.



Figure 2. Partly restored epitaphs in the choir.

The sermons in the online worship services were strikingly traditional. They built upon the bible text having been read a moment before – mostly a text from one of the four Gospels in the New Testament. Typically, the preacher interpreted this text in its own context but in close interaction with the present. Therefore, the preacher would often relate to circumstances or characters that the listeners were more familiar with than the actual bible text. At the bottom line, however, the bible text was considered a source of wisdom, or, even more, a source referring to salvation and eternal life.

Professor Rochus Leonhardt's sermon on Palm Sunday 2021 was a good example of this. Describing Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, only to be crucified within a week, Leonhardt drew parallels to business leaders and politicians of today; one week admired and the following week loathed. Similarly, Superintendent Sebastian Feyndt, in his sermon on New Year's Day 2021, sought inspiration from the Apostle Paul. The apostle describes his strong hope despite hardships in his letter to the Philippians (Phil

4:13). Projecting the apostle's challenges on the Covid-19 pandemic, Feyndt implicitly, yet carefully, presented a more durable (Christian) alternative. On March 14, 2021, Dr. Kerstin Menzel also referred to the past, present, and alternative future. Menzel referred to the lockdown too. Building on the text in John 12:20 in the New Testament – where a group of Greeks (maybe unsuccessfully) begged to meet Jesus – she drew attention to a better alternative, namely Jesus revealing his imminent death and resurrection.

I have used these three sermons to illustrate the relation between the past, present, and future in the Lutheran sermon. At the same time, as the sermons in Leipzig were rhetorically well-articulated and built on the academic expertise of each preacher, they were also quite traditional. The preachers scrutinized the weekly text with a solid foundation in evangelical theology, related the theme at hand to other contexts in the past and the present, and cautiously offered a future alternative.

A markedly traditional churchly appearance reinforced the sermons. Dressed in a traditional preaching gown, the preachers were filmed in front of the medieval Pauliner altar. The liturgical colors on the altar cloth and the pulpit – changed during the church year – were prominently visible.



Figure 3. Professor emeritus Rüdiger Lux preaching in front of the Pauliner altar.

While the online worship service can be regarded as a mere online extension of the previous worship service held in the University of St. Paul, I consider it more meaningful to regard it as a completely new (or temporary) space that builds upon old traditions. The digital services offered a stronger focus on central liturgical elements by consciously selecting takes and images (of the Pauline altar, traditional vestments and liturgical hangings, architectural details, and the organs). This had the effect of a stronger focus and potentially fewer distractions. The digital services also offered new perspectives. Finally, the worshiper or viewer could see the organist Daniel Beilschmidt, the musical director David

Timm, or any visiting musicians or singers performing.

The relative focus on churchly attributes and architecture in the online worship service was beneficial in several ways. Firstly, it built upon the cultural memory of Leipzig University and its church history, and it enhanced the centrality and significance of the location. This was further pronounced through the relative exposure granted to the organists, visiting musicians, and singers performing compositions by historic composers connected to the university church in Leipzig. Secondly, it enhanced the authenticity and sacrality of this digitally transmitted space of worship. "Online church architecture, like online ritual," writes Tim Hutchings, "represents a convergence between continuation and innovation, designed in this case in pursuit of the experience of authentic sacred space" (Hutchings 2017, p. 40). The relative emphasis on architecture and artwork, including the Pauliner altar, thus served the purpose of making the online visitor feel at home in a historically founded and theologically conscious digital version of a "real church." Thirdly, the qualified production, the framing in select parts of the liturgy, the music and artwork, and the majestic building – all in a university setting – served as something of a quality seal. The online university worship service should not be regarded as inferior to the ordinary service. Instead, it could be regarded as an alternative with certain limitations but also with potential.

4 EXPERIMENTALITY

The worship service in the church of St. Paul has, for a long time, been characterized by a certain experimentality. This holds true, at least as far as the sermon and the music is concerned. Therefore, online services cannot in themselves be regarded as a medium of innovation but rather a continuation of previous principles. Most of the sermons were experimental in a very similar way as had they been delivered in front of an audience. However, sometimes the online medium offered an enhanced experience. When Professor emeritus Rüdiger Lux on Good Friday in April 2021 decided not to talk to the worshipers but instead talked to God – whose son had that day been crucified – his sermon was not only highly personal and emotional. The sermon was also a good example of an experienced orator mastering the medium, where the visitors could, with relative proximity, follow Lux's message and his movements and facial expressions. One week later, Dr. Timotheus Arndt preached about the disciples encountering the risen Christ, who, upon their master's encouragement, got 153 fish in their net. Using a virtual display inserted next to the

preacher, Arndt could graphically explore numerical and symbolic details from his expertise in Judaic studies. Bishop emerita Ilse Junkermann chose a similar approach on Epiphany Sunday in January 2021. In her sermon, she referred to a painting by the German artist Wolfram Ebersbach. The nearly black painting, visible as a digital insert for part of the sermon, had several scratches revealing a bright layer underneath. To Junkermann, these scars symbolized God's light breaking through the darkness. She also referred to the same theme in Bach's cantata 58, "Ach Gott, wie manches Herzeleid" (Ah God, how much heart-break), thereby creating a bridge to the music performed after the sermon.

While the university parish looked forward to the day when they could return to ordinary worship service routines, the digital medium also offered advantages and new approaches. One of them, already mentioned, was the possibility of framing in on specific details or pieces of art against the church background. At other times, images not relating to the church environment were employed. These images were typically displayed during hymns or musical performances, often tying in with the current theme in the liturgical cycle. For instance, images of various plants were displayed on the Sunday of Sexagesima 2021 when the sermon was based on the bible text about the sowing man. Similarly, on All Saints Day, 2020, images of graves and details on epitaphs were displayed. These images brought an additional meaning to the themes at hand beyond what had been expected in the university worship services in Leipzig before the pandemic.

Behind the medieval altarpiece of the Pauliner altar, the passion of Jesus is depicted. The imagery becomes visible by turning the hinged wings (typically) done during Advent, Lent, and Easter. However, the ordinary worship participants sitting in the main hall cannot discern the details of the artwork. In the services during advent and lent, the altarpiece was only displayed in the background. However, at the commencing of the Good Friday service in 2021, the passion imagery was displayed in relative detail, accompanied by organist Daniel Beilschmidt's playing of Bach's Passion Hymn BWV 621 "Da Jesus an dem Kreutze stund" (When Jesus stood by the cross). This combining of sacral music and artwork reveals the enhanced experience that an online worship service could offer.

On Palm Sunday 2021, Bach's cantata "Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn" (You true God and Son of David) was performed. Due to lockdown restrictions, the choir could not gather to sing its part in the fourth movement. Instead, each singer did what many other choirs did during the epidemic and recorded their contribution at home. The voices were

subsequently combined. Each singer was projected as a separate frame above the four soloists and seven instrumentalists performing in the church choir at the worship service.



Figure 4. Leipzig University Choir performing the fourth movement of Bach's BWV 23 "Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn".

Therefore, while it cannot be denied that the online experience hampered some of the acoustic musical experience, there were also advantages. One of the major advantages, I would argue, was the visibility. The online services provided the viewers with an extraordinary possibility to "come close to" the pastors and musicians. Moreover, since cameras were brought to both organ lofts, everybody could see the organists' efforts in what they had previously merely been able to enjoy as a musical experience. The same holds true for the various ensembles performing, such as Professor David Timm's and saxophonist Reiko Brockelt's jazz performance on February 14, 2021.

5 ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The digital worship services at Leipzig University were not extraordinary in the sense that they offered anything radically different from what had been offered before the Covid-19 pandemic ended ordinary worship services in March 2020. In principle, the organizers continued what they had done before. They put particular focus on the sermon and the music. The worship services can be regarded as performative because they did not have particular elements of communication.

While the online worship services may have been more impersonal in the sense that the attendee sat alone at home, in some ways, they also provided an enhanced focus and experience. For the first time, everybody could see and hear the priest properly during her or his sermon. They could read the facial expressions and experience they – and not the whole parish – were personally spoken to. For the first time, everybody could listen to the sermon in their

own time and from anywhere in the world. For the first time, if something was misunderstood, one could rewind and listen again or look up something that was misunderstood. For the first time, everybody could not only hear but also see the musicians perform.

In this article, I have been highlighting aspects of traditionality and experimentality. I have studied certain features in digital worship services with particular focus on traditional and innovative elements. Leipzig and its university have a long and fascinating history involving personas like Martin Luther and Johann Sebastian Bach. However, it also has a painful history of GDR rule and the destruction of the church of St. Paul in 1968. The connection to the past and the heritage of the university church was seldom verbally articulated in the services during 2020-2021. However, it was presented graphically and musically, arguably more focused than possible at a physical Sunday service.

There is a tradition in the German university churches of relating to the academic setting. The sermon should be directed at critical listeners, with an awareness that many attendees may not be members of any Christian church. The sermons in Leipzig held a high standard. In general, the preachers explored the bible text of that Sunday from their area of expertise. Furthermore, many preachers referred to episodes and characters outside the theme itself, possibly providing an enhanced perception for listeners unfamiliar with the theme from a Christian theological perspective. More than focusing on the sermon as an experiment, in a scientific understanding of the word, the academic focus lied therein that the sermons were aimed at an academic audience. There was a relatively large diversity in how the sermons were delivered. Each preacher approached her or his theme from a rather personal perspective. Therefore, there was an intellectual perspective in the sermons and a personal and emotional one. The sermons were traditional in the sense that they, with few exceptions, were delivered as well prepared, academically solid, theologically considered, constructive speeches, however, with relatively little didactic novelty.

As for the musical representation, there was a strong focus on both tradition and creativity. A profound part of the repertoire consisted of 17th and 18th-century composers. When it came to guest performances, there was a particular focus on Bach. However, each worship service entailed its own distinct musical experience, with a profound level of experimentality. This ranged from new interpretations and improvisations based on old compositions to contemporary music or the musicians' own works.

Seen from the title of this volume – Creating through mind and emotions – one could view the digital worship service as a creative process, where

the sermon relates to the human mind and the music and art relate to her emotions. This would tally with the understanding of the academic emphasis of the university sermon. Moreover, the worship services with a cantata were visited by more people than were ordinary worship services, which was also the case before lockdown, suggesting that some people predominantly attended because they enjoy good music. From a theological or church historical perspective, however, that makes relatively little sense. Church music and church art have played a significant role as agents of theological communication since the church's birth. Likewise, most sermons delivered in the online services studied were highly personal and emotional, and, in practice, the music and the art often interacted. The music covered the same theme as the sermon, as did the artwork and other imagery displayed during a sermon or performing a musical composition. From this perspective, the whole online worship experience constituted a unity where both mind and emotions were engaged and interacted.

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