"Why do we preach as we do?": The Bivocal Ministry of Alan and Eleanor Kreider

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Abstract: Drawing on unpublished reflections by Alan and Eleanor Kreider on their unusual way of speaking together, this article explores the processes involved in preparing and presenting in bivocal mode, the benefits of doing this, and the feasibility of others learning to operate in similar ways. Quoting extensively from this source so that their voices are heard, it also features comments from some who heard them speaking together, testifying to the impact this had on them. The article also considers the profound influence of the Kreiders' research into the Early Church and the encouragement found in the Anabaptist tradition to pursue this approach to hermeneutics and homiletics.

Alan and Eleanor Kreider had an unusual, maybe unique, style of dialogical preaching and teaching. They stood and taught together, listening attentively as each spoke in turn, taking up themes and ideas the other had introduced, emphasizing some, illustrating, clarifying, or nuancing others, offering additional perspectives. To those who did not experience this, it is difficult to explain how they worked together, drawing on shared and thorough preparation, each with their distinctive voice but so well integrated and mutually trusting that either of them could deliver any part of their sermon or lecture. Their approach was so unfamiliar that some listeners struggled to appreciate it, but most were initially intrigued and then enriched and inspired, not only by what they said but also by how they said it together.

On January 11, 2000, a few months before leaving England after thirty years as Mennonite mission workers, Alan and Eleanor preached together in Canterbury in the southeast of England and then explained to the College of Preachers[1] why and how they operated in this way. Alan subsequently sent to me the rough notes of what they said on this occasion (bearing the title "Why do we preach as we do?"). As far as I am aware, these notes have not been revised, reworked, or published anywhere, so they do not appear in the bibliography of Alan's writings. But the notes

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1. See http://www.collegeofpreachers.co.uk/.

provide insights into the process of dialogical teaching, as practiced by the Kreiders, the influences that encouraged them to develop this style of communicating, and reflections on several benefits of this practice. This explanation of bivocal speaking, albeit comprising only their rough notes, deserves to be more widely known.

Alan and Eleanor were shaped not only by their lifelong membership in Mennonite churches and interaction with Mennonite communities—as well as congregations and communities belonging to many other traditions around the world—but also by the historic Anabaptist tradition and by their many years of research into the history, theology, liturgical life, and missional practices of the Early Church. Although they confessed to the College of Preachers that they "stumbled into" their bivocal teaching style, not surprisingly their rationale for this practice owed much to what they had learned from early Christians and from sixteenth-century radicals. There might not be an exact precedent in these communities for what they were doing, but their practice embodied significant insights and principles that were much less apparent in later and mainstream churches. And as they developed this way of speaking together and reflected on its benefits, they recognized that there were also resonances with experiences in the New Testament.

Learning from the Anabaptists

Alan and Eleanor told the College of Preachers that they were products of the "recovery of the Anabaptist vision" in the mid-twentieth century, which resulted from the rediscovery of the sources and stories of the movement, and that the early Anabaptists had impacted them in many ways. They noted two ways in particular that had shaped the way they preached: the communitarian approach to hermeneutics and the emphasis on practical discipleship.

As an example of the Anabaptists' concern about practical discipleship, they quoted the well-known statement of Hans Denck: "No one can truly know Christ unless they follow him in life."[2] Those who heard the Kreiders preach were left in no doubt about their passion to encourage and equip those who would be followers of Jesus. As they said in Canterbury, "The preached word must equip communities of disciples who want to live in a Jesus-kind of way in a world that doesn't appreciate his insights!" But their notes do not indicate that they explored this issue further on that occasion. Was there something about their bivocal style that was especially pertinent to ensuring that preaching majored on application? Having heard them preach and teach together in many

2. Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1981), 87.

contexts, I recall several occasions when one of them would respond to what the other had said by repeating a salient point or poignant phrase in a reflective tone, implicitly inviting their audience to engage more deeply with what had been said and to ponder its significance. The dialogue between them opened up space for further reflection and time to consider how to apply what had been taught.

They said rather more about the Anabaptists' communitarian approach to hermeneutics, suggesting that, if one were to imagine a continuum with individual conscience at one end and community consciousness at the other, the Anabaptist tradition would be oriented toward the communitarian end. This positioning has two implications. First, it gives serious attention to the implications of biblical interpretation for the life of the community, not just individuals. Second, more than one voice is needed to interpret biblical teaching, to comprise a hermeneutical community. Some years earlier, Eleanor had written about what she called "multi-voiced worship"[3]—the way she and Alan preached together was an expression of this.

They quoted another early Anabaptist statement to illustrate the historic concern about this aspect of preaching:

> When someone comes to church and constantly hears only one person speaking, and all the listeners are silent, neither speaking nor prophesying, who can or will regard or confess the same to be a spiritual congregation, or confess according to 1 Corinthians 14 that God is dwelling and operating in them through his Holy Spirit with his gifts, impelling them one after the other in the above mentioned order of speaking and prophesying?[4]

This anonymous Swiss Brethren tract, explaining the Anabaptist refusal to attend the state churches, further complained that:

> all judgment and everything, yes everyone in his conscience, is bound to the preacher and to his teaching, whether it be good or evil . . . no one may speak but the preacher, and thus the congregation is deprived and robbed of all right of judgment concerning matters of the soul, being bound exclusively to the preachers and their understanding, contrary to the word of God.

They could have quoted from other Anabaptist sources to provide further evidence of this antipathy to monovoiced preaching. Hans Murer, for example, reported under interrogation that in some state churches

3. Eleanor Kreider, *Enter His Gates: Fitting Worship Together* (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1989; Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1990).

4. Paul Peachey, "'Answer of Some who are called (Ana)baptists why they do not attend the Churches': A Swiss Brethren Tract," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 45 (Jan. 1971), 5.

people were demanding the freedom to debate and argue with the preachers.[5] It seems that some Anabaptists, rather than absconding from the church services, chose to attend and protest. And there are several documents that testify to early attempts in Anabaptist congregations to hear many voices and to operate as a hermeneutical community.

One such document from the same region was the anonymous tract *The Swiss Order*, probably written by Michael Sattler in 1527 and circulating with the Schleitheim Confession. The text explained how the Swiss Brethren studied Scripture together: "When brothers and sisters are together, they shall take up something to read together. The one to whom God has given the best understanding shall explain it, the others should be still and listen." The *Swiss Order* went on to exhort members of the community to be ready to explain biblical passages to one another, as God granted them understanding. The exhortation to others to "sit still and listen" implies a context where discussion was normal and where some discipline was needed to allow for exposition.

Another example is found in the writings of Ambrosius Spitelmaier, an Anabaptist leader in Nikolsburg: "When they come together, they teach each other the divine Word and one asks the others: how do you understand this saying?"[6] Multivoiced hermeneutics also seems to have been practiced in the congregations associated with Pilgram Marpeck. His colleague, Leopold Scharnschlager, in his *Congregational Order for Christ's Members in Seven Articles*, instructed that the congregations should

> select someone competent from among them and admonish him in a friendly and loving manner to read or speak to them according to the gift he has received from God. Someone may also volunteer to serve out of love. One may follow another in speaking according to the way they receive something, as Paul teaches, and thus exercise his gifts for the improvement of the members [1 Cor. 14(26f.)], so that our fellowship may not be the same as that of the falsely renowned, where only one and no one else can speak.[7]

We see here not only evidence that Anabaptist congregations expected communal hermeneutics but also a further expression of distaste for monovoiced preaching in the state churches. In fact, the historian Hans-Jürgen Goertz has concluded that communal hermeneutics was even more important in the Marpeck circle than among the Swiss Brethren. Commenting on evidence from the *Kunstbuch*, he wrote: "More so than the

5. Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists* (London: Routledge, 1996), 144.

6. Klaassen, *Anabaptism*, 124.

7. *Jorg Maler's Kunstbuch: Writings of the Pilgram Marpeck Circle*, ed. John Rempel (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2010), 406-407.

Swiss Anabaptists, his group privileged the theological and practical importance of consensus, attained through dialogue."[8]

Not all the early Anabaptist communities were as committed to multivoiced participation. In Melchiorite and Hutterite circles biblical interpretation and preaching was usually restricted to designated leaders and those regarded as having a particular spiritual anointing. There are hints of a more egalitarian approach in some early Hutterite documents, including the 1529 *Discipline*, but this branch of the movement, which was determinedly communitarian in other areas of life, seems to have been less communitarian in this regard. There is little evidence from Dutch sources to assess the practices of congregations in that area, although there is an interesting reference in the *Confession* of a disgruntled former Anabaptist, Obbe Philips, complaining about their multivoiced approach. Contrary to the Swiss Brethren's claim that this practice was evidence of a "spiritual congregation," he concluded that the opposite was true: "a reasonable, impartial Christian may truly say that it is no Christian congregation."[9]

That this multivoiced approach was not limited to the early and most enthusiastic years of the movement is demonstrated by an account of an Anabaptist gathering late at night in a forest near Strasbourg in 1576. This account, provided by a Lutheran pastor who had infiltrated the gathering, is hostile and needs to be treated with caution. But it indicates nonetheless that several voices were heard as the gathering reflected together on the Bible.[10] This incident is one of a number from the early years of the Anabaptist movement that Alan and Eleanor dramatized, providing a script that enabled several voices to tell the story together. The Anabaptist Network in Britain has made use of this and other dramas in telling the Anabaptist story to our contemporaries.

Later in their presentation to the College of Preachers, the Kreiders gave examples of ways in which contemporary Mennonites had retained some elements of multivoiced hermeneutics, acknowledging that these practices were variable in quality and effectiveness. But they were not claiming that their bivocal preaching style had historical or contemporary parallels in the Anabaptist tradition. They said: "we know of no other Mennonites who speak as we do."

Alan and Eleanor enjoyed interacting with Christians from many different traditions. Paying tribute to the influence of other traditions—Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, and Liberationist—on their ministry and

8. Goertz, *Anabaptists*, 27.

9. In *The Radical Reformation*, ed. Michael Baylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 225.

10. Paul Peachey: "True Account of an Anabaptist Meeting at Night in a Forest and a Debate Held There with Them," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 58 (Aug. 1984), 292-294.

their approach to preaching, they concluded: "Our approach to preaching is one subvariant of attempts to make Bible reading and exposition more than the work of one mind and one voice."

Learning from the Early Church

Although profoundly shaped by the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, Alan's main academic interest was in the early Christian communities—their lifestyle, worship, writings, witness, commitment to peace, and practices of Christian formation. Most of his writings, including his final and most comprehensive book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*,[11] offered fresh interpretations of what he had learned from his extensive study of the early documents and explored the significance of these early Christian communities for the church today. He was often concerned that his cross-disciplinary approach might disqualify him in the eyes of liturgical, theological, historical, or missional experts. But it was this approach that enabled him to notice what many others had missed in familiar sources and to mine neglected sources for new insights.

As Eleanor was also exploring early Christian sources in her work on liturgy and worship, it is not surprising that presentations on Early Church documents provided early examples of the Kreiders experimenting with speaking together. But, more than this, as they studied these documents they discovered considerable evidence of multivoiced preaching and learning in the early centuries. They gave examples to the College of Preachers: e.g., Origen being interrupted in mid-sermon by questions; Augustine sensing objections and changing course; and even examples from Chrysostom. Years later, when my wife, Sian, and I were writing our book, *Multi-voiced Church*,[12] we were grateful to Alan for pointing us to other examples from the early centuries. He suggested we consult Tertullian's *Apology*, the *Paedagogus* of Clement of Alexandria, and the *Apostolic Constitutions*,[13] which all include indications that early Christian communities were characterized by a range of multivoiced practices, including preaching and learning together.

Mention of Tertullian encouraged us to include in our research the early Phrygian protest movement known to most historians as Montanism, after one of its founders, but known to contemporaries as the

11. Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2016).

12. Stuart and Sian Murray Williams, *Multi-voiced Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), published in North America as Sian and Stuart Murray Williams, *The Power of All: Building a Multivoiced Church* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2012).

13. See, in particular, Tertullian's *Apology* 39; Clement of Alexandria's *Paedagogus*, 2.4; and *Apostolic Constitutions* 2.57.

"New Prophecy."[14] Tertullian was its most famous adherent, although the movement had flourished for many years before it received his endorsement. Hailed as a proto-feminist or, alternatively, proto-charismatic phenomenon, the movement valued the gifts of the Spirit and encouraged both men and women to exercise these gifts. The New Prophecy can be understood as a reaction to increasing institutionalization and the marginalization of multivoiced practices. It may also, however, have provoked a counter-reaction that attempted to safeguard the churches by further restricting participation. By the time the movement was fading out of history in the fourth century, the "Christendom shift" was underway, in which several dynamics resulted in multivoiced practices largely disappearing from the churches.

In a number of significant books and articles Alan explored this shift and its dynamics,[15] arguing that many historians and missiologists had underestimated its impact. Conversations with Alan and others in the Radical Reformation Study Group, which he and Eleanor hosted at the London Mennonite Centre during the 1980s, eventually led me to write *Post-Christendom*[16] and to work with colleagues on a book series entitled "After Christendom," which all reflect on the influence of the Christendom shift on many aspects of church and society and how these might be reimagined in a post-Christendom environment. Thirteen titles are currently available in the series, including Alan and Eleanor's *Worship and Mission after Christendom*.[17]

Alan was a valued conversation-partner as I wrote the book that provides a foundation for the series—and as I prepared a revised and updated version for publication in 2017. Some of his last emails to me contained advice on these proposed revisions. I paid tribute to him in its preface, noting that, although I hoped the book contained few factual errors or irresponsible judgments, it engaged in what Alan called "bunking." He explained that some books engage in "debunking"—critical studies that examine previous research and challenge unreliable conclusions or offer new interpretations of details. These, he said, are important books, providing secure foundations for those who rely on their

14. See further Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

15. Among others, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1995); *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999; reprint Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2007); and *The Origins of Christendom in the West* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 2001).

16. Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004). Revised and updated edition published by Wipf and Stock in 2017.

17. Alan and Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission after Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009; Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2011).

painstaking research. But he reassured me that "bunking" was valid as well—describing the big picture, presenting a framework, identifying recurrent themes, and exploring implications.

Alan was a much more knowledgeable and careful scholar than I will ever be. But he did not restrict himself to debunking, in relation to the Christendom shift or any other subject. He paid great attention to the sources and details that others often overlooked. He also was careful to acknowledge that the fourth- and fifth-century church stood in continuity with the church of the earlier centuries, and that some of the changes apparent at that time had deeper roots. But he nevertheless insisted that the Christendom shift was decisive and far-reaching. Alan may not have engaged in "bunking," but in his lectures, conversations, and writings he painted in vivid colors on a broad canvas. He made Early Church history come alive and convinced many of its relevance for today.

In relation to their practice of preaching, Alan and Eleanor noted in their Canterbury presentation the impact of the Christendom shift. They commented on how "the great Christendom tradition of the long, rhetorical sermon developed, which had been prepared and polished by an individual homiletician in his/her study." They acknowledged that they and many others had been blessed by such sermons, but their research suggested that sermons in the early centuries had been rather different:

> We learned that the Latin root of the word "sermon" is *sermo*, which means conversation. Of course this has changed, and "sermon" has come to mean monologue, but it began as an interchange, as something mutual, as a conversation.

They might have added that the Greek root of the word "homily" is *homilia*, which originally also meant an exchange of views. The Christendom shift resulted in monovoiced preaching by authorized church leaders becoming normative, although throughout the centuries this was challenged by a stream of renewal movements—Waldensians, Lollards, Anabaptists, English radicals, and others—within which multivoiced preaching and learning was rediscovered.[18]

Learning from the New Testament

Whatever the significance of the various historical and contemporary influences to which the Kreiders paid tribute, they were convinced that multivoiced preaching, of which their practice was a "subvariant," had deep biblical roots. They reminded the College of Preachers of the account

18. See further Murray Williams, *Multi-voiced*, 34-40.

in Acts 20 of how Eutychus fell asleep while Paul was preaching in Troas. They first interpreted this mischievously: "What a long sermon! Preached so long that poor Eutychus sank into a deep sleep and fell three stories to what should have been his death. Some people will do anything to escape a long sermon!" They then recalled a different interpretation given by Robert Banks, first Professor of the Laity at Fuller Theological Seminary. He had spoken in their church in England and had "pointed out that the Greek word for Paul's discourse (Acts 20:7) was *dielegeto*, which implied dialogue." They continued:

> When we think of Paul in Troas, or perhaps Paul anywhere else, we don't think . . . of a long monologue: we think of a dialogue, or perhaps a multi-logue—people bringing their questions, and Paul bringing his wisdom and experience and learning to bear. Not a sermon, but a 'surgery' [English for a doctor seeing patients].

But the New Testament passage to which they turned repeatedly was the one that the early Anabaptists frequently quoted—1 Corinthians 14. They described this in Canterbury as

> a liturgical text in the New Testament that the great traditions have almost completely ignored—a vision of participatory worship: "When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up" (1 Cor. 14.26).

This was the passage they would later explore at great length in *Worship and Mission after Christendom*. In chapter 6, they exegete 1 Corinthians 11-14, setting the text firmly in its first-century cultural context.[19] In chapter 7, they trace its significance in pre-Christendom, after the Christendom shift, and in various renewal movements, before encouraging both inherited and emerging churches in post-Christendom to experiment with ways of living into this vision of multi-voiced church life—and giving examples of when and where they had experienced this.[20]

I encountered 1 Corinthians 14 repeatedly in the 1980s when I was involved in various ways in the charismatic movement. This was primarily because the passage said much about the newly rediscovered gifts of prophecy, speaking in tongues, and interpretation of tongues. The style of worship in first-century Corinth appeared to be enthusiastically charismatic and this chapter offered both encouragements and cautions concerning the misuse of spiritual gifts. It also clearly promoted multivoiced worship, which was characteristic of the early years of the

19. Kreider and Kreider, *Worship*, 73-92.
20. Ibid., 93-120.

charismatic movement. Interestingly, however, it did not have the same impact on preaching—sermons were as monovoiced as ever and tended to be significantly longer. Furthermore, as the new charismatic churches grew larger and more organized, multivoiced worship increasingly gave way to more passive gatherings controlled by "professional" worship leaders. For those with some knowledge of church history, there are echoes of similar changes prompted by the Christendom shift and, indeed, of the frequent regression from multivoiced to monovoiced practices after the first generation in many renewal movements.

In their Canterbury speech, the Kreiders also explained how they used the Bible in their joint preparation and presentations:

> We like to start with a biblical text: and we prefer to preach off a text rather than give topical discourses. If someone gives us a topic, we'll find a text to grapple with that deals with the topic.

Although they initially experimented with speaking together on the Psalms, influenced by their Anabaptist tradition they soon moved to the Sermon on the Mount. "We like to preach from the narratives of the Bible," they concluded, "especially the stories of Jesus." As they described the process involved in preparing to speak together, they reflected on the importance of reading the texts aloud. They would first read the chosen biblical passage to each other. At some point they would then turn to commentaries, which they would also read aloud to each other. They confessed to an unusual "hobby"—reading aloud commentaries on holiday, including Walter Brueggemann's *Westminster Bible Companion on Isaiah 40-66*[21] during a visit to the Isle of Arran in 1999, which they said "reads wonderfully out loud!"

Learning to Speak Together

Alan and Eleanor acknowledged these various influences—biblical, Early Church, Anabaptist, and contemporary—on their bivocal preaching. These influences had predisposed them to be open to this way of speaking together and, once they had started doing so, they undergirded the practice by providing deeper foundations for it. But, as they admitted in Canterbury, initially they "stumbled into" this approach: "It wasn't our desire or design to speak like this." Their presentation in 2000 gave them an opportunity to reflect on how they had learned to work together in this way and how they had developed and refined their practice over the years.

21. Walter Brueggemann: *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 2:40-66.

The Kreiders traced the origins of this approach to their exchanges of news with their parents during the 1970s while they were living in London and their parents were in North America. Transatlantic telephone calls were expensive, only to be used in emergencies; so instead, they recorded and sent tapes to each other. Unlike the recordings from their parents, in which each spoke in turn, "we kept interrupting each other. On one occasion we noticed . . . and wondered if that was significant." Reflecting on this, they decided to try speaking together in this way when doing presentations, initially on art and architecture, with both making comments, then on Early Church documents, and then preaching together in a range of contexts. Affirming feedback from those who heard them encouraged them to continue. Alan recalled an occasion when he was speaking by himself and someone commented that, although this person had enjoyed what he had said, the listener preferred it when he spoke together with Eleanor.

Recognizing that the College of Preachers would be interested in the process of preparing to speak together, they explained their approach:

> We read the text to each other, out loud. We sit near each other, both of us with open Bibles, generally the NRSV. We then begin to brainstorm, and one of us (generally Alan) writes down ideas. At first there may be no shape to them. Or there may be questions that we want to think about further. Eleanor is especially strong on images and metaphors; Alan tends to have more organizational instinct. Both of us have pastoral and practical concerns. It can, at this stage, feel like chaos.

The next stage in the preparation process was to read aloud from various commentaries: "we'll look at one or two commentaries to see if new ideas jump out at us. They often do; but the heart of our preparation is in our conversations about the text."

The third stage involved Alan turning to his computer, recording and putting into order the key points from their conversation. Eleanor then worked carefully through the draft that he produced, editing it heavily. At times, she might question the whole thrust of the presentation. More often, however, she would clarify, illustrate, and humanize it. Alan then produced a final draft of the presentation by inserting Eleanor's changes into a full set of notes. This resulted in a joint outline from which they both worked when they gave the presentation.

"It really is the product of both of us," they concluded. "One day the thought came to us: we are a small hermeneutical community!" Like all hermeneutical communities in which different perspectives are shared and taken seriously, sometimes there was disagreement and prolonged discussion before they reached a common understanding. In case their

audience assumed that the process they were describing was easy or seamless, they acknowledged that speaking together was easier than writing the script from which they both operated. "That's the tough part; it's hard for our particular hermeneutical community to come to agreement."

Although there are obvious parallels between this process and how many preachers prepare to deliver sermons, the involvement of two persons with different gifts and insights enriches the preparation. To be sure, as the Kreiders admitted, "it takes some time—doing a solo sermon is lots faster, and it's often what we do when under pressure." Nevertheless, they were convinced that there were enough benefits from working together in this way that it was worth the extra investment of time.

"So what's it like to give the talk that we have prepared like this?" The Kreiders' first reply to this rhetorical question consisted of just one word—"easy!" At least, easy by comparison with the hard work of being a hermeneutical community and agreeing what they would say: "once we have written our notes, giving it is no problem." Their enjoyment of speaking together is evident in what they said in Canterbury and was clear to anyone who heard them. Preparing a talk together did not necessitate presenting it together: "the notes are there: either of us could preach the entire sermon." But they liked giving it together.

What was not obvious to those who heard them speak together was that their jointly prepared script did not specify which of them would present which sections: "we do not specially mark E or A in the margins. We do not know who will start, or who will end the sermon." Perhaps it was this fluidity that made their presentations so lively and engaging. Unlike actors with scripts that specify who says which lines and indicate when to interrupt other actors, "neither of us knows who will say any given bit of it." Bivocal or multivocal presentations involving careful preparation and agreement about who is responsible for designated sections can offer helpful alternatives to presentations prepared and presented by a single person; but it was this uncertainty about who would speak which lines that differentiated the Kreiders' approach from any others I have encountered. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, they report: "on one occasion after we had spoken a woman came up to us and said, ''I'm doing a Ph.D. in rhetoric; but I've never encountered a genre that classifies what you do. What do you call this?'"

Their second response to the question about what it is like to speak together in this way can also be summarized in a single word—"trust." Reflecting on their early experiences, they readily acknowledged the risks involved in this partnership. "Early on in our preaching together we had

the fear, 'But what if he just lets me go on? What if I get stranded?'" Because specific lines or sections are not allocated to each speaker, each must be sensitive to when it will be helpful to remain silent or intervene. The Kreiders indicated two areas in which trust was required—trusting each other and trusting the Holy Spirit to prompt and guide them. It may have seemed, after many years working together, easy to speak together. But this ease emerged only with experience and the growth of trust in each other and in God. They spoke about "developing a sense" of when the other should continue or stop. And, revealing their shared enjoyment of classical concerts, they added: "It's like playing chamber music."

A third significant word in their reflections on speaking together was "space." When a single speaker gives a presentation, there is often a flow of words with little time or space for those who are listening to consider what has already been said. But as they spoke together, Alan and Eleanor not only made space for each other but for their listeners. They recognized the importance of giving each other room to maneuver: "allow gaps; give the other person space to speak." Perhaps they were less aware of how helpful those gaps were to the audience. As they made way for each other at the lectern or microphone, a brief pause, even of only a few seconds, allowed time for listeners to receive more deeply what they had heard. And this was enhanced by the practice that both developed, although Eleanor especially, of repeating a key phrase in what the other had just said—a reflective echo, often with a questioning tone that invited further engagement. Sometimes this gave the impression that what one had said was new or surprising to the other. This was not, of course, the case; but it invited listeners into the conversation.

The development of trust, including a readiness to take risks, together with this commitment to give each other space, also meant that neither speaker was rigidly bound to the script they had worked on together. There was a framework, but "as our trust of each other grows, we are learning when to give the other freedom to go off on a Spirit-inspired tangent!"

A number of times in the Canterbury presentation, the Kreiders made clear that they were still learning to speak together. This was a developing art. There were occasions when this was difficult, especially when they were under strict time constraints and did not have freedom to pause, make space for each other, or pursue interesting side tracks. They recalled an invitation to preach together in Coventry Cathedral that specified no more than twelve minutes. Limited time required that their script was tighter and fuller. Their response to this experience:

> We have discovered: if either of us is speaking separately, we can be freer. Nevertheless, we're learning . . . we have been inspired to

persist in our exploration of a hermeneutic community, a multivoiced worship, a conversational style.

This willingness to keep learning also meant not only heeding feedback from listeners but also inviting expert help. "Once we asked a professional teacher of homiletics to listen to us, and he alerted us to dangers and weaknesses." Unfortunately, the notes of the Canterbury presentation do not record the details of what those dangers and weaknesses might have been. Nevertheless, they did not want to suggest their practice was unduly complex or demanding. "What does it involve? Simple ingredients—thinking things through together; trust; mutuality; a certain self-confidence, and a willingness to take risks."

The Benefits of Speaking Together

While it is abundantly evident that Alan and Eleanor enjoyed speaking together, they also perceived that the practice had benefits for others. Speaking together engaged their listeners, who stayed awake, paid attention, listened well, and were "drawn into our conversation." Even the most captivating speakers can struggle to retain the interest of listeners after a while, especially in a culture prone to all kinds of distractions. Monologues have not entirely disappeared from contemporary society—they continue to thrive in lecture halls, political rallies, and on stage. But changes in educational practices and the media have made many intolerant of this mode of communication. Sermons delivered by one person without opportunity for interruptions or responses may have a long and honorable heritage, but they have serious limitations. There are many ways in which this issue can be addressed by adopting a multivoiced approach.[22] The Kreiders' practice was, as they acknowledged, a "subvariant" of this approach, but a particularly effective one. Many preachers imagine themselves engaging in an implied conversation with their audience. The Kreiders were attuned to this but went further. 'We have tried to incorporate elements of the implied conversation with the congregation. But we also are having a real conversation with each other; and we find the others can enter into this; they often sense themselves involved!'

Second, their practice modeled the dynamics of communitarian hermeneutics. As people watched and listened, some were inspired to have conversations with others about the meaning and implications of the biblical text. Bible study need not be restricted to private deliberations; instead, interpretations could be tested in dialogue with others. The Kreiders reflected on the way listeners were drawn into the conversation:

22. See further examples in Murray Williams, *Multi-voiced*.

"This pleases us: it fits in with our understanding of the church as a place where a community reads the Bible together and then converses about it. The sermon as conversation is thus important to us."

Third, their practice also modeled an egalitarian approach to preaching and teaching. In an amusing section of their presentation they recalled their misunderstanding of what they had heard an expert in communication once say:

> We heard one expert say, and we found this extremely intimidating, that when a speaker speaks, 80 per cent of what is communicated is how the speaker looks and 20 per cent is what is said. How embarrassing! How intimidating! How should we look, how should we dress, should I grow a beard, wear a gown? Then we realized: "how we look" is not what a speaker wears; it's how the speaker *looks* —in their face, at the people, etc. And how we look—we are speaking together, a man and a woman as equals, engaging in conversation about the most important things in the world.

The significance of this kind of partnership varies with context and tradition. In churches that welcome the ministry of women and are familiar with women preaching and teaching, speaking together as a man and a woman might be less noteworthy than in settings where the dominance of male preachers or restrictions on female preachers are still normal. But in many places this partnership—in which equality and mutual submission is modeled so naturally and yet powerfully—encourages increased appreciation for how women and men can work together and enhance each other's contributions.

At the very end of their presentation, Alan and Eleanor mentioned a fourth benefit—the possibility of extending their practice to include others. Both had experimented on occasions with speaking with others. They admitted that the experience had been mixed. "Sometimes it's been easier than at other times; and it doesn't always work. . . . But generally our experience of doing this with others has been good."

Despite occasional disappointments, and even though no other partnerships could match the ease with which they worked together, these were opportunities to encourage younger and less experienced speakers, helping them to find their voice and gain confidence. As they concluded their address to the College of Preachers, aware of their listeners' concern to equip preachers, Alan and Eleanor celebrated this benefit of partnering with others:

> To work with an experienced preacher; to study the Bible together; to discover that insights into the Scriptures and God's message to the people can come from both. And then to discover that they as a

> tandem can speak in public—that their cadences can rise and fall together, that their compassion and enthusiasm can mirror each other. And when this happens others get caught up in their vision. The result of preaching together can be significant: the empowering of yet more preachers who can preach powerfully on their own.

These were some of the benefits Alan and Eleanor discerned as they reflected on their many years of teaching together.

What benefits have others derived or perceived from this? While writing this article, I asked friends who had heard the Kreiders preach or teach together what impact this had made on them. Here are some of their reflections:

> "I was struck by how unusual it was, how it was an equal partnership, and how in tune they were with each other. Their way of doing things was as much of a message—perhaps more—than the content of what they said."

> "For me, the most striking thing about Alan and Ellie speaking together was that they did it so frequently, and so very well. Alan valued Ellie's gifts, and did not want her to have fewer opportunities to exercise them in public than he had. Their speaking together always seemed to be a natural outcome of their working together, the things they believed, and the way they lived, plus the fact that their teaching about Jesus and following Jesus were entwined in their lives more than in almost any other people I've known. Their personalities complemented one another, and neither appeared to dominate the other."

> "In my memory, it is Alan who, eyes sparkling, suddenly comes into Ellie's sentence—as she pauses for a comma, for breath, but not because she has finished the sentence—with yet another carefully thought-out idea, building their argument. The trust between them, in allowing one another apparently to go 'off-piste' and yet to be able to bring one another back to 'the script' was a wonderful thing to witness. I know how hard they worked together at the preparation of these occasions—I was present once when they were in the final stages."

> "The unspoken challenge was and is, for me, to work harder at relationships, to realize how much more is possible when men and women work together, according to their gifting, and with both respect and love for one another."

Can This Be Learned?

The final question the Kreiders addressed in this presentation was whether others could learn to speak together as they did. Their willingness to invite others to speak with one or the other of them suggested that they believed this was feasible. And, indeed, they strongly affirmed it: "We know that our way of speaking is something that others can learn if they wish." But is this really the case? This is the one aspect of their presentation with which I might take issue.

I raise the question not because their experience of speaking with others was mixed. With more practice, these partnerships might have developed further and approximated more closely their own bivocal method. Nor is it because those who heard them speak together often commented that it was a unique experience, unlike any other partnership they had encountered. Perhaps others with time and incentive could speak together in this way. After all, as they insisted, the ingredients of this approach are quite simple.

Although I never heard them describe it as such, their practice can be understood as a type of performance art. This is not to imply anything artificial or manipulative about how they spoke together, nor to suggest that they were more interested in style than content, or in how they presented than what they were teaching or proclaiming. But several recent studies of preaching that have focused on the delivery of sermons, rather than their preparation, offer helpful insights based on comparisons with other kinds of performance.[23] Preaching is rightly understood both as a divinely inspired activity and a humanly crafted performance. There was an art to the Kreiders' performances, involving the movement of their bodies as well as their choice of words and when to pick up cues from each other. Performance art can be learned, practiced, and developed. But performers also develop their own particular style.

My hesitation about affirming the transferability of this approach relates rather to their status as a married couple and the way in which their public speaking mirrored their private mode of communication. While others can undoubtedly learn to speak together, can those who are not in the intimate and committed relationship represented by marriage achieve their level of mutuality, trust, and liberty? Perhaps lifelong friends who work together over many years can, but this would require them to spend much time together in order to develop the level of trust and to operate as the kind of small hermeneutical community that Alan and Eleanor created. As the couple noted in their Canterbury speech, their way of speaking together in public grew naturally out of their daily private

23. See the collection of essays in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, ed. Jana Childers and Clayton Schmit (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2008).

conversations: "It wasn't our desire or design to speak like this. It represents the way we talk to each other all the time." They had recognized this when preparing recordings to send to their parents many years ago. Perhaps it was this combination of being married for many years and happily interrupting one other in daily conversations that made possible their approach to public speaking. In which case, the conviction that others can learn to speak as they did may be overconfident.

My wife, Sian, and I have spoken together in various contexts over the past twenty years. Only once did we attempt to do so in the Kreider bivocal style—and that was a spoof. In August 2000 we were guests at a banquet organized by the Mennonite Board of Missions for Alan and Eleanor on their return to North America after thirty years in England, just a few months after their presentation in Canterbury. We were invited to pay tribute to them and we did so with a very carefully prepared script from which we spoke using alternate sentences and finally alternate words. They seemed to enjoy this gentle humor as much as other guests. But we have never attempted seriously to emulate their approach. Perhaps the main reason is that we do not prepare presentations in the way they did. Sian would probably enjoy doing this—sitting together, reading aloud from the Bible and commentaries, sharing insights—but I do not find this easy. I prefer to process ideas internally and only compare notes and integrate these into an agreed script once we have both given considerable individual thought to what we will say. Nor do we naturally interrupt each other in daily conversations.

However, even if Alan and Eleanor's particular bivocal style may be unique to them, there is no reason why others cannot learn to speak together and discover the benefits of doing this. Listeners stay awake and are drawn more easily into conversation than if one of us were speaking alone. People express appreciation for hearing different but complementary voices; and in some contexts a man and woman speaking together is significant. And Sian and I learn from each other as we prepare and give presentations.

I have also on numerous occasions prepared and presented jointly with others. Influenced, no doubt, by the same Anabaptist tradition as Alan and Eleanor, for at least twenty-five years I have been committed to multivoiced learning. This has involved pausing in mid-speech to ask for comments, encouraging discussion and questions after sermons, inviting interruptions for clarification or to illustrate points, and occasionally asking someone to interrupt at a specific point in order to stimulate debate. These practices have kept most listeners awake, enhanced attention and concentration, and drawn people into the conversation. I have introduced these and other multi-voiced components when I have

been the sole presenter, but speaking jointly with others has been my preferred approach.

With one or two colleagues I have spoken together often enough to have developed a level of trust and freedom that has meant either of us could probably present sections designated for the other. Especially when we are speaking together on familiar topics, we have a good idea of what each other will say or how we will respond to questions from listeners, and we are also free to interrupt each other and comment on what the other has said.

My experience of speaking together with these colleagues endorses two of the benefits the Kreiders mentioned. First, it has enabled younger colleagues to gain experience and to embrace opportunities to teach or preach in contexts in which they would not otherwise have done. Second, speaking together with female colleagues, as I often do, models healthy partnership between men and women. This has been particularly significant in some denominational contexts and in some nations in which the teaching and preaching ministry of women is unfamiliar or regarded with uncertainty. But I have not attempted to develop the Kreiders' bivocal approach with any of my colleagues.

Maybe, then, this unusual and perhaps unique approach should indeed be understood, as the Kreiders noted, as a "subvariant of attempts to make Bible reading and exposition more than the work of one mind and one voice." Rather than either attempting to mimic this style or simply being in awe of this level of interaction, the challenge is to explore various ways of creating and nurturing small hermeneutical communities, partnering with others to enhance the learning experience for all involved, and inviting more people into the conversation.

POSTSCRIPT: WRITING TOGETHER

Alan and Eleanor not only spoke together; they also sometimes wrote together. While their bivocal approach is not as apparent in their books as in their public speaking, the books they co-authored not only drew on their respective areas of expertise but are also integrated in such a way that it is not easy to discern which voice is predominant in different chapters. In the joint bibliography prepared for *Forming Christian Habits in Post-Christendom: The Legacy of Alan and Eleanor Kreider*[24]—a collection of extracts from their writings joined with responses from many people around the world they had influenced—are three books and three articles they jointly authored. Two of the books they wrote together, and the third

24. *Forming Christian Habits in Post-Christendom: the Legacy of Alan and Eleanor Kreider*, ed. James Krabill and Stuart Murray (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2011).

they wrote together with an Indonesian colleague, Paulus Widjaja. Alan also co-edited some books with other colleagues, including *Coming Home: Stories of Anabaptists in Britain and Ireland*,[25] which he and I co-edited. And he always welcomed conversations with colleagues about what he and they were writing. I was very grateful for Alan's willingness to read and offer comments and fresh perspectives, chapter by chapter, on books that I was writing, and I was honored to do the same for him in relation to some of his books.[26]

I am unsure to what extent my own writing practice has been consciously or subconsciously influenced by the Kreiders' example. But, scanning my bibliography, I note that five of my books over the past seventeen years have been co-authored with four different people. More significantly, almost all of the authors in the "After Christendom" series have chosen to work collaboratively on their books. Four of them have co-authored with colleagues. One convened a small group to help her develop and shape her ideas and to offer comments on each chapter. Another presented draft chapters to his Anabaptist study group and asked for feedback. Most authors have invited the Anabaptist Network steering group, which commissioned the series, to review their initial proposals. Some have also welcomed comments from members of this group on drafts of their chapters as these emerged. This is a truly multi-voiced series of books—and much the stronger for it. All the authors knew Alan and Eleanor and were impacted by their lives and ministry together. It seems that in this form of partnership, too, they have left a potent legacy.

25. *Coming Home: Stories of Anabaptists in Britain and Ireland*, ed. Alan Kreider and Stuart Murray (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2000).

26. I was especially grateful to Alan for alerting this non-German speaking writer to an error in an early draft of my book on Anabaptist hermeneutics, where I used a phrase that I thought meant "life contexts." Alan warned me the phrase actually meant "positions in love-making"!