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CHURCHES, CULTURES & LEADERSHIP

SECOND EDITION

A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF
CONGREGATIONS & ETHNICITIES



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership* by Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martínez.

Second edition ©2023 by Mark Lau Branson and Juan Francisco Martínez.

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AND MULTICULTURAL INITIATIVES

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This [Azusa Street] congregation was different from most black congregations in Los Angeles. From the beginning, Pastor Seymour envisioned it becoming a multiracial, multiethnic congregation. In keeping with that vision, the mission quickly attracted—and for an extended period of time, it welcomed and maintained—a membership that was broadly representative of various racial and ethnic groups: blacks, whites, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans. . . . It included people from all classes. It held the attention of the highly educated alongside the illiterate. . . . Even so, worship at the mission was undoubtedly heavily flavored by the dominantly African American character of its founding core membership. . . . [Also] the revivalist camp meeting tradition so prevalent among whites (as well as blacks) on the American frontier clearly contributed much to the missions, music, preaching, and prayer life.

While the mission was a congregation of ordinary people, they were people who were hungry for God. . . . They were willing, if necessary, to violate social strictures—especially on the mixing of races. For roughly three years, in the teeth of a howling secular and religious press, the people of Azusa Street Mission demonstrated that they could cross these social lines, and bear great fruit as they did so.¹

This account of the 1906 Azusa Street Mission recalls a church whose life stood in stark contrast to society and other churches. This multicultural experiment was short-lived, lasting perhaps three years, but the message of the

¹Cecil M. Robeck, *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 88, 138, 314.

Holy Spirit's radical inclusiveness continued to be an irregular but notable aspect of the Pentecostal movement around the world. There are complex social, theological, organizational, and personal factors in the Azusa narrative, as is documented by historian Cecil Robeck. This complexity places demands on any church that wants to attend to the relationship between theological and cultural issues in its own on-the-ground life; that is why we propose that churches develop more thorough ways of doing what is called "practical theology." This chapter provides a glimpse into some biblical narratives that are relevant to our topic, then sets out a method for our work.

BIBLE STUDY: LUKE 4:14-22—CULTURAL BIAS IN NAZARETH

Luke gives prominence to cultural matters by narrating Jesus' participation in sabbath worship in his hometown of Nazareth. He reads a prophetic text and refers to two other Old Testament prophets in his gospel preaching. Luke's account notes that participants were likely aware of Jesus' ministry in the surrounding region:

Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news about him spread throughout the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

Everyone was raving about Jesus, so impressed were they by the gracious words flowing from his lips. They said, "This is Joseph's son, isn't it?" (Lk 4:14-22, CEB)

The passage that Jesus reads from Isaiah (Is 61:1; 58:6; 61:2), providing a far-reaching conceptualization of God's salvation, is often connected to Leviticus 25 and the Jubilee Year. God's Spirit is the agent of profound healing, release from various debts, liberation from oppression, and the announcement of an extensive good news to those oppressed by the society. In his reading, Jesus does not include the phrases of those passages that deal with vengeance. As commentary, Jesus claims that Isaiah's gospel is now present, implying that his own presence is the fulfillment of this holistic salvation. The reception is described as "raving"—they are hearing that God's intervention has come to them. This is amazing, joyous news! But then there is a shift, because Jesus knows there are barriers to God's grace: "Jesus said to them, 'Undoubtedly, you will quote this saying to me: "Doctor, heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we've heard you did in Capernaum" (Lk 4:23, CEB). In that more communitarian culture, this could be paraphrased, "Jesus, take care of your own people . . . us!" So to clarify God's initiatives, Jesus reminds them of two stories from their book:

He said, "I assure you that no prophet is welcome in the prophet's hometown. And I can assure you that there were many widows in Israel during Elijah's time, when it didn't rain for three and a half years and there was a great food shortage in the land. Yet Elijah was sent to none of them but only to a widow in the city of Zarephath in the region of Sidon. There were also many persons with skin diseases in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha, but none of them were cleansed. Instead, Naaman the Syrian was cleansed." (Lk 4:24-27, CEB)

These stories elicit a shift in emotion, from raving to raging:

When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger. They rose up and ran him out of town. They led him to the crest of the hill on which their town had been built so that they could throw him off the cliff. But he passed through the crowd and went on his way. (Lk 4:28-30, CEB)

The stories about Elijah and Elisha remind them that God's grace had come to a foreign widow and to a foreign enemy commander. As residents in occupied Palestine, living in a town with its own stories of violent Gentiles, situated near a Roman road and about an hour's walk to the regional capital in Sepphoris,² these Nazarene worshipers believe they have a claim on the

²R. Riesner, "Archeology and Geography: Public Ministry of Jesus: Nazareth," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed., ed. Joel Green (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 47-48.

Isaianic promises. But, rooted in his love for his hometown, Jesus addresses their misunderstanding regarding God's intervention. If they were to welcome and participate in the presence of God's new initiative, they could not be left with their ethnocentric beliefs and practices. But as Luke narrates, they understand Jesus' sermon, and it enrages them to the point of attempted murder.

Bible Discussion: Luke 4:14-22

1. Jesus reads several passages from Isaiah. How were these aspects of salvation interpreted in your own heritage and discipleship? How would you characterize their meaning in your current context?
2. Those hearing Jesus assumed that Jesus' ministry of healing would focus on them, so they were not only disappointed but enraged by his references to those they considered "outsiders." Have you had experiences when you or others believed they should be privileged regarding God's blessings? Have you seen anger when people believed they were wrongly excluded from God's mercies?
3. The whole narrative clearly links the presence of God's reign with how we see and engage those who are "other." How does this compare with your beliefs and practices?

BIBLE NARRATIVES AND CULTURAL INCLUSION

Is Jesus' biblical exposition relevant for Los Angeles or Chicago or Charlotte in the twenty-first century?³ We are witnesses to ongoing violent responses against those believed to be undeserving, who are *other*, and whose stories we may not want to hear. What happens when we read biblical stories about cultural boundary crossing and place those stories alongside our own? Though the Bible does not provide us a strategic plan for action, it does provide us with a crucial understanding of what God is doing in the world. As we read about the exodus, the exile, Jesus' ministry, or the earliest churches, we can place these stories alongside our own in order to reconsider our perceptions, convictions, habits, and imaginations. Throughout this book, we work with the Bible as an authoritative text, and we see God's enduring love

³The Hebrew word *shalom* encompasses a whole set of traits: peace, righteousness, justice, welfare, health, and social harmony.

expressed in initiatives to shape a people as a community for loving God and loving neighbors. Through the following chapters we will attend to various biblical narratives. When students, leaders, and churches linger in these stories—study them, discuss them, and meditate on them, allowing the Spirit to speak—we can see our world and our agency differently.

Jesus' focus in the Nazareth synagogue is not unique—other Old Testament narratives also provide grounding for multicultural life: Israel was to bless the nations (Gen 12); the law insisted on welcoming immigrants (Lev 19:33-34; Deut 10:19); God sent Jonah to give witness to Nineveh; other prophets reminded Israel of God's activities and their obligations. The New Testament draws on the narratives of Israel to emphasize that God's inclusive love does not have cultural boundaries. For example, in the early years of the Christian church there were significant debates concerning whether God intended the gospel to be a gift exclusively for Jews (Acts 15). The Holy Spirit's visual and linguistic gifts during the Pentecost festival (Acts 2) had already made it clear that bicultural Hellenistic Jews and Jewish converts were included—but what about Gentiles? Scripture names bicultural persons who played key roles (Moses, Ruth, Paul, Timothy) and Gentiles who are included in the Jewish lineage (Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba). But how is the church to understand its own social composition?

Antioch, the third largest city in the Roman Empire, would be the first place outside of Palestine where the church faced questions about cultures and the gospel. After Hellenist Jewish believers fled Jerusalem because of persecution, some came to Antioch and spoke with Gentiles, who also became believers (Acts 11:19-30; following a conversation among apostles and others in Jerusalem sparked by Peter's experience at Cornelius' house).⁴ The genuineness of their faith was confirmed, and the community began to benefit from extensive teaching. What kind of cultural issues did they encounter? Was there any tendency toward cultural homogeneity in gatherings? Did the Gentiles establish a separate church, hoping to attract more Gentiles by avoiding the discomforts of a mixed congregation? The New Testament only notes the tendency of Jews to segregate, but this was clearly condemned (see Gal 2:11-13).

⁴In Acts 10, God's initiatives with Cornelius and Peter clarified God's involvement and invitation regarding the gospel and Gentiles. We will explore this more in chap. 6.

Among numerous stories, these episodes indicate that God wants shalom to be known across cultural boundaries in a way that embodies face-to-face relationships. The eschatological images of the book of Revelation reinforce this trajectory: “There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9).⁵ Does this help us know God’s intent for any gathering called “church”? If we wish to participate in God’s initiatives, can we minimize this call to alterity and inclusion? What did Jesus envision when he taught the disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10)? Are these mere ideals, while circumstances and reason tell us that homogeneous congregations have too many advantages to forgo?

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STUDY BIBLES WITH ANNOTATIONS REGARDING ETHNICITY AND CULTURE

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In the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Mediterranean, the church repudiated any attempts to create culture-based fellowships. Even when Paul had

⁵We will explore this passage in chap. 11.

a direct word concerning class distinctions in Corinth, his solution was not to form separate worshiping groups but to minimize the effect of their differing habits (1 Cor 11). In Ephesians the churches of the region are instructed to be culturally inclusive in ways that are visible to outsiders—including rulers and authorities of all kinds (Eph 2:11-16; 3:8-10); texts here and elsewhere indicate that this inclusivity was not previously a norm. In addition to theological rationale is a practical matter: the witness provided by this visibility would be undercut if persons of differing cultures were in segregated gatherings.

As the church spread, the topic of fellowship around food received significant attention. Cultural practices concerning meals indicate inclusion and exclusion: Who is allowed into the fellowship at a table? What food is allowed or forbidden? Paul tends to answer these questions with a priority on shaping relationships for trust and inclusion. Rather than endorse occasional events of intercultural life, like an occasional guest speaker or shared meal, the church was to live daily life as a new people whose identity bore witness to the new creation. Through the following chapters we will continue to explore biblical texts, asking if they change how we see ourselves and our contexts.

A church's missional life is at the core of God's gospel engagement with the world. There are numerous ways that congregations shape their relationships and activities to live among strangers, migrants, and those who are excluded by a dominant culture. Pentecost made this obvious: the poorer immigrants living around Jerusalem—Hellenists from throughout the Mediterranean and further east—were the focus of the Holy Spirit, who ministered through their languages and social networks. The Holy Spirit guided and empowered the church to break out of the homogeneous social units of that era.

The narratives and writings of the New Testament show an attentiveness to these social realities, including matters like languages, oppression, access to resources, and how leaders are identified, called, and commissioned. In the streets and alleys of Jerusalem, many early believers sold their houses and pooled their money for the benefit of the church's life and mission (Acts 2:43-47). In Corinth, where the church met in the home of a wealthier family, the economic diversity of the church created significant social distress, which led to new practices that initially lessened social awkwardness (1 Cor 11:17-34), while a later, more profound teaching about money sought

to prompt significant crosscultural generosity (2 Cor 8:8-15). In Thessalonica, Paul and his team took day jobs so they could pay for all the food they needed (2 Thess 3:6-13), while he encouraged the Galatians to share their resources with teachers (Gal 6:6). There is no one plan for all congregations; rather, the Holy Spirit instructs and empowers churches to pay attention to God's initiatives in their own formation in their cultural contexts.

How can churches discern faithful ways of intercultural life? Jesus often used fictional tales; much of the Bible provides poetry; Paul and the prophets often used metaphors. Missiologist and bishop Lesslie Newbigin uses a cluster of metaphors to describe the church as a "sign, foretaste, and instrument" of the reign of God.⁶ If that great eschatological, multicultural congregation of Revelation is one image of God's reign, in what ways might each current congregation be a sign that points to this reality? How can a church's relationships and ministries offer participants and visitors a foretaste of the redemption and reconciliation that is God's full salvation? And how can God shape and empower churches as agents (instruments) for reconciliation and shalom? We believe we are invited into new ways of discovery, imagination, and discernment—that is, into practical theology.

PRAXIS, PRACTICAL THEOLOGY, AND CULTURES

If there is no one ideal strategy or model for all churches, then each particular church, usually in local networks and other associations, must gain competencies and capacities that are specific to its own time and place. To do this, the leaders of a church need to gain skills in theological reflection—this is what is called "practical theology." This is not an approach that selects a theory and then applies it, which is called "theory to practice." The process we propose is messier, and better, than that. If a church is to live in responsiveness to and dependence on God, reflective discernment is a continuous practice, rooted in the current environment and experiences of the church.

During seminary I (Mark) was working as an intern for a nearby university chaplain's office. Because of the ethnic diversity on the campus, I was on the fast track for learning about various ways Christians expressed their faith. My Midwestern, Scots-Irish background shaped me as fairly

⁶Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 60-63.

“plain-spoken.” That is, words had basic literal meanings, conversations were ordered logically and sequentially, and prayer was also to be within these orderly, plain-spoken norms. Then Keith, an African American student and ordained Pentecostal preacher, invited me to a student prayer meeting. After energetic singing and a devotional (brief Bible exposition), the prayers began—and it was neither orderly nor plain-spoken. Because I knew and trusted Keith, and many of these students were also becoming my friends, I was able to bracket my discomfort and reservations—but my mind kept yelling, She can’t mean that. . . . That’s not true. . . . He’s not serious! With numerous voices praying loudly simultaneously, I could see Keith’s hands on a student’s head as he loudly instructed her, “Pray every day; your prayers block the gates of hell. Don’t fail! Don’t fail on a single day or those gates will fail!” This was amid numerous other loud prayers, “Help her, Lord.” “Don’t fail!” As I remember, there were other prayers that did not match my theology—but I did not doubt that these Christian brothers and sisters were genuinely experiencing prayer with our God.

Over the next few days my theological brain argued with Keith: “If her prayers continue or fail, they don’t change the gates of hell. That’s God’s territory.” But something else also happened. I began to remember that Jesus, and many other biblical persons, used language that was similar to Keith’s. Conversations, instruction, and prayers often included metaphors and analogies. Prophets and apostles spoke of sun, moon, and stars falling when empires were being rearranged. Jesus indicated that removing one’s eyeballs would eliminate lust. With these reflections I was able to hear and understand better how this African American group was participating with each other and God in prayer. I was also able to begin a much longer path of changes in my prayer life and how I participate in shaping group prayer.

This approach to practical theology, a continual movement from experience to reflection and study, and then on to new actions and experiences, is what we call praxis. This term is often misunderstood as “practice,” referring to how a concept or theory is first understood mentally then applied in a real-life situation. But praxis is actually the whole cycle of reflection and study on one hand and engagement and action on the other. In my experience of

Pentecostal prayer, my previous concepts about prayer, based in earlier study and experiences, were inadequate for this new experience. As I listened and observed, having already participated in friendship, my knowledge was being changed. So in further reflection and study I was able to see Scripture differently, and even to see and reshape my own personal and ministry practices.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire envisioned praxis as the way to bring significant social change to people.⁷ He contrasted praxis with what he called the “banking” approach to education, in which the teacher simply pours information into the student, and the student’s role is to receive the information and act on it or pass it on to another person. Thus, for students, education is passive (they are not supposed to be creative thinkers) and only perpetuates the cultural norms of those who determine what is to be passed on. Instead, Freire wanted men and women to become “culture-creators”—persons who actually shape their own culture and context—by gaining, through praxis, a more thorough and more meaningful relationship with the world. He wanted knowledge to be more than banked information; he wanted knowledge to serve a life-giving role in nurturing persons and communities to change their contexts as they themselves were being changed through the reflection-action cycle.⁸

Freire saw the need to counter the hegemony of larger social structures, and he believed that a community of persons could gain the capacities to create the knowledge they needed to bring change. He knew that education could either be directed toward conformity to the powerful or it could help everyone become participants in creating the culture they live in. This concept of praxis can help church leaders frame ways for churches to not only understand their ministry context but also to bring about changes in their congregations and in their social contexts.

So in a church, praxis is the constant rhythm that includes study and reflection (including working with theology and other theoretical material) in continual interaction with engagement and action. A church’s capacity to discern and participate in God’s initiatives is increased whenever this rhythm

⁷Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum, 2005).

⁸See Freire, *Education*, 100-101. While conceptually different, Freire’s work is consistent with Aristotle’s emphasis that praxis includes the true ends or meanings in an action. My emphasis is that praxis is a way of life that allows the texts of our past, our current experiences, and the substance of our eschatological hope to be brought to bear, by the work of the Holy Spirit, in our ongoing church life.

is well resourced and intentional. So a church's current way of worship is a praxis, whether or not anyone talks about the theories. A church's worship probably reflects historic traditions and how they convey Scripture. Also, worship reflects the cultural heritage and the current setting. It also reflects the priorities and skills of the worship leaders who have been present over the decades (or more recently), and the aesthetics of leaders and worshipers. So worship is a bundle of practices in which theology, culture, and experiences are already embedded.

Every church also has a praxis concerning how they as a whole view and interact with their geographic neighbors or with persons from different ethnic backgrounds. In what ways do they embody a social existence that emphasizes "Keep together. Take care of ourselves. Be cautious of anything strange"? Or in what ways do they believe and act as if participating in hospitality and graciousness, especially with those who are new or different or marginalized, is the joy and challenge of the gospel? Churches are shaped by habits, which are shaped over decades and centuries by the interaction of reflection and action. Our individual habits and biases are shaped by the habits and biases of the group, whether the group is our church or some other identifiable social influence.

Theologian Pat Keifert often reminds students and pastors, "Experience teaches us nothing!" Then, as questioning looks appear among those who are listening, he continues, "No one learns from experience. One learns only from experience one reflects upon and articulates."⁹ We believe churches benefit when they intentionally reflect theologically on a church's life and ministry. We can learn that some of our habits are full of grace and faithfulness, but other habits show that we need to be converted. This is not a matter of finding new rules or strategies and applying them. Nor do we need primarily to clarify our doctrines in hope that any problems will then be fixed. Instead, we need to look carefully at various factors, converse with a genuine care about the voices around us, gain new skills at thinking, and attend to the Spirit's initiatives.

There are some assumptions behind this method of practical theology. First, we believe the Holy Spirit is present and active in the churches and in

⁹Confirmed by Pat Keifert, email message to the author, November 27, 2008.

the world, including our own neighborhoods and communities. God's love for the world is expressed in the ongoing initiatives of the Spirit as one who loves, heals, counters injustice, teaches, reconciles, and persuades. Second, we appreciate the metaphor cluster by Newbigin that we already noted, that the church is a sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's reign, which provides a way for us to understand each local church and to envision the role of the worldwide church. Third, because the church is to participate in the life and activities of God, we believe our vocation is to discern ways we are to actively enter into God's initiatives in the world. What is God doing in us and around us? What does God want to do?¹⁰ The purpose of theological reflection is to help us be wiser and more faithful in our discernment and participation.

In order to shape an appropriate praxis for leaders and congregations, we propose five interactive steps for theological reflection (see fig. 1.1).¹¹ It is important that leaders engage these steps as personal, reflective work and with a team that participates in awareness, study, reflection, and discernment, all toward new praxes.

1. *Name and describe your current praxis* concerning some aspect of church life. This work of observation and description, focused on a selected topic, sets some boundaries for the process. It also makes you aware that you are beginning with a set of experiences, that you don't begin study as an empty slate. When possible, include multiple voices in the description and welcome divergent perspectives. This step provides an initial description plus current awareness concerning motivations, reasons, assumptions, and consequences.
2. *Analyze your praxis and context, using the resources of your context and culture*, seeking to understand important influences and consequences. This work includes using the perspectives of the social sciences, history,

¹⁰This framework is explained well in Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 59-61.

¹¹This method, shaped by Mark Lau Branson, is based on Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), and Ray Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001). See also Mark Lau Branson and Alan Roxburgh, "Practical Theology and Discernment," intermezzo 1 in *Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions: Confronting Modernity's Wager* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021), 71-80, and Mark Lau Branson, "Disruptions Meet Practical Theology," *Fuller Magazine*, issue 12 (2018), <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/disruptions-meet-practical-theology/>.

the humanities, and philosophy. In the following chapters we will refer to the impact of colonization and our postcolonial era, the resources of race and caste theories, the role of learning communities, the necessity of alterity in action-learning, and the gifts and challenges of immigration and transmigration perspectives. We also learn from studies in organizational and communication theories. The analysis provided in this step can help us see how power is exercised, including *who* has power, what *ends* are being pursued, and *how* it is exhibited. Step two includes looking back to understand the influences that shaped the situation and an initial looking forward, which begins the steps of imagination that will resource new praxes.

3. *Study and reflect on Christian texts and practices*, including Scripture, theology, and Christian history, concerning your praxis and analysis. We believe the Scriptures are uniquely authoritative for churches—that these narratives, prayers, prophecies, and letters show us how God has already spoken to and worked in specific places. Further, we believe that Scripture, when attended to prayerfully, will help us understand our contexts and what God is currently doing among us and around us.¹² For many centuries other believers have read these biblical texts, prayed to God, and worked together in their own locations. From their lives we have creeds, historical accounts, and theological traditions, all available to help us in our own discernment and practices.

The biblical and theological work of practical theology is especially challenging. It is important to realize that no church enters this work

¹²Throughout this book we provide biblical texts along with questions and comments, and we have seen how such texts have been used by God in our own churches. We do not read the Bible as a strategic plan that specifies tactics, but we do believe it creates a consciousness, a way to see and interpret our situations, and sometimes commends practices that help us perceive and act faithfully. We cannot offer here a full account of methods for interpretation or a formula for knowing what to do with a text when we use the practical theology cycle, but we can note books that have informed us. In addition to those we recommend throughout the book that specifically address matters of culture and boundary crossing, we have benefited from Joel Green, *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007); Joel Green, ed., *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011); Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); Stephen Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Glen Stassen and David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003). See also Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership*, especially chaps. 1, 4-7.

as a blank slate. As is emphasized by the practical theology cycle, churches already have experiences and traditions that have shaped how they read (or misread) Scripture, what theological perspectives they claim, and how those affirmations shape (or fail to shape) their current practices. That is, what they access (the Bible and various theological documents) and how they interpret those resources are influenced by their own situation and habits. This contextual approach to materials is also true on the inside of those very materials; the works of Moses and Jeremiah, Luke, and Paul—which were formed inside historical situations—and the creeds and other documents of church history (including systematic theology) are always situated in specific places and times, among particular people, and within concrete events. This does not make them less valuable; rather, it shows how God is invested in the world and its real situations rather than in timeless ideals.

Churches need to draw on their own heritages as well as biblical interpreters and theological resources from outside their culture. For this step, looking back helps a group discover the texts and traditions that shaped the current praxis, whether those perspectives are evaluated as helpful or problematic. Then, in looking forward, study and reflection provides biblical and theological resources that give us an awareness of the Holy Spirit's initiatives, which contribute toward new praxes.

4. *Recall and discuss stories from your church, your own lives, and others in your community* concerning the praxis under review. These may be stories that note your own misunderstandings and waywardness, or you may find narratives that are full of wisdom and faith. Are there testimonies that name God's actions? Are there stories that give witness to God's mercies or disruptions? Looking back, the group reflects on the people, experiences, wounds, and blessings that are relevant to the situation. Then, looking forward, these times for listening and narrating provide resources for lament and celebration, for repentance and hope, as the group moves ahead with discernment.
5. *Corporately discern and shape your new praxis* through imagination, prayer, experiments, and commitments. Because the goal of practical

theology is to discern what God is doing so that we can improvise our way forward, and because our discernment work is always fallible, this process is tentative, asking God to prompt, disrupt, guide, and shape. The group works with the results of steps one through four and makes use of various modes of listening, reasoning, praying, conversing, and testing options. Your heritage may welcome silence, prayer images, prophetic words, or worship. By drawing on your church's traditions of discernment, and by also engaging forms of discernment that may be unpracticed, the group begins to voice imagination or images that draw the group toward experiments. Step five should lead to experiments that provide action-learning, which continues the action-reflection sequence. Focus on what you believe God is doing in your lives and in your context, and experiment with and reflect on alternatives, which will lead you toward commitments to new praxes.

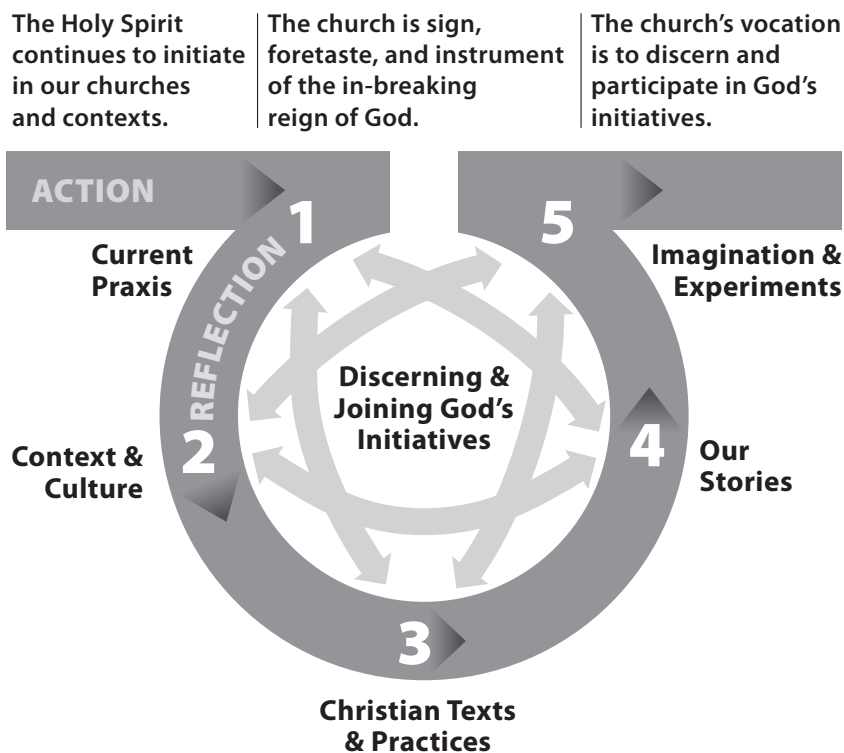


Figure 1.1. Practical theology cycle and assumptions

Practical theology, benefiting from this interdisciplinary interface, can help a church wrestle with its challenges. When congregations name something needing their attention (step one), their leaders create an environment and nurture study and reflection to help them to better understand their social setting, various influences, and the resources of other cultures (step two). Then they also work with biblical and theological materials pertaining to the theme (step three), often by studying those texts in relationship to their own cultural situation.

For example, Jesus' focus on reaching his own Jewish people may have had a temporary, contextual purpose, but his explicit connections with Gentiles and his later teaching (Mt 28; Acts 1) are more akin to the situations our churches face. So a church would ask, how do these texts help us understand God's priorities, especially for us?

The study of theology also needs to attend to the contexts of its formulation, so theological expositions that were shaped in homogeneous environments would tend to differ from those formed in heterogeneous situations. That is, if those writing theology were attentive to and in conversation with social diversity, their reading of Scripture and their awareness of God's initiatives would lead them to write theology that speaks to that reality. So a church would ask, What situations were these church leaders facing that shaped their theology? How did these theological presentations help or hinder the church's life and mission? What would help us see and act as God's people in our context? Leaders have important work in helping churches find biblical and theological resources that can inform and challenge their churches' practices, and that work requires a resourcefulness with both literature and with collegial networks. This is done with expectant prayers that the Holy Spirit will give the church the power, courage, imagination, and wisdom to see what God sees, to discern what God is doing, and to care about what God cares about.

We have already written of our conviction that the Holy Spirit engages contemporary churches in discernment and mission. In chapter two we will provide our own theological comments concerning the interface of ecclesiology, diversity, the Trinity, and missiology. In addition, the biblical resources in each chapter are selected for their relevance to congregational life and mission in the contexts of social diversity, with a continuing focus on God's activities.

Even though we have described a sequence for these steps for engaging practical theology, the process is more like a spiral that has multiple entry points and loops. The process may begin when a Bible study leads some church members to ask new questions. Or perhaps someone had an experience in the neighborhood, and this experience motivated new conversations and questions in the church. When several persons realize the importance of the situation, more intentionality (and time) is given to the process. In the middle of the cycle, the process may require a return to an earlier step. For example, if I am talking about my own Scots-Irish roots, I may then need to return to analysis (step two) to learn about the influence of this culture, and to study (step three) concerning my church's history. So I was recalling my ethnic heritage (step four), then I looped back to steps two and three. If God wants to use my pondering for the life of my church, I would engage some other members, probably by going to step one so we can describe how our church lives with its own ethnic heritage as it reconsidered its own context.

Other sequences begin when a Bible study shows us that we need to wake up to local realities or when a discernment process prompts us to listen more to the stories around us. All of these resources—these stories and any gathered information—interact as we attempt to see differently, to ask holy and thoughtful questions, and to discern the way forward. All of these activities continue to emphasize that practical theology has the goal of seeing what God is initiating and inviting us into; these activities are not praxis unless we are continually reshaped by our engagement with God in our context.

Personal Reflections / Group Exercise: Researching Congregational Cultural History

Small teams of participants can each select nearby churches where they can enlarge their seeing, listening, and learning. Churches can be chosen with attention to ethnic variety, traditions, and opportunities for continued relationships. These activities are about being learners—let the members and pastors of nearby churches know that you want to learn about their heritage, their perspectives, their priorities. Ask if you can visit a worship service. Various resources are possible: websites, civic partnerships, publications (archived newspaper articles or

denominational materials), church archives, judicatory records. Here are some possible questions:

- What are the ethnic and cultural roots of the church in the United States and, possibly, in other countries?
- Were there changes in the congregation's ethnic makeup? If so, why?
- Were there changes in the ethnicity of pastors?
- What demographic changes have affected the neighborhood? Did the church ever relocate? If so, were demographic changes considered in the move?
- Is there a relationship between the church's cultural roots and its theological tradition (like Swedish Lutheran or Hispanic Baptist)?
- Ask questions about particular ways that activities, relationships, or organizational structures exhibit the cultural identity.
- What is the relationship between the culture (or cultures) in the church and the culture(s) of the local context?
- During this work, reflect on how you are similar or dissimilar to the people of the church and its context. Were you aware of how you were well-suited or unprepared to understand what you were learning?

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AND INTERCULTURAL LIFE

How can practical theology serve this book's concern for intercultural life in churches? Here is a brief overview of the five steps as they might provide a focus on a specific church's question. Later chapters provide various resources for each step.

1. The church describes its current circumstances concerning ethnic homogeneity or heterogeneity and their relationships and practices among themselves, in their neighborhood(s), and regarding their larger society and geographic context.
2. They analyze their environment, including demographics, history, worldviews, cultural resources like the arts, the sociopolitical forces that shaped them and their context, and the continuing power of racism. (Later chapters expand on this analysis.) What forces have shaped their current praxis? What cultural and interdisciplinary studies could inform new opportunities for intercultural life? How can they deepen their understanding of race and racism?

3. Then as they study the texts of Scripture, church history, and their theological traditions and beliefs (concerning the incarnation, the Trinity, the gospel, God's love for the world, and the meaning of being church), they lay these narratives and beliefs alongside their current praxis and analysis. This allows a rethinking of practices as questions are raised, traditions are reconsidered, and biblical voices are heard. What Scriptures and theology shaped the church's praxis concerning intercultural life in their church and community? What Scriptures and theology can inform new praxes? And, more difficult to see, what are the differences between *espoused* beliefs and *embodied* beliefs (or "theories-in-use")?¹³
4. They tell their personal ethnic autobiographies, the ethnic and cultural story of their congregation, and stories of boundary crossing and of engagement with persons who are different. The insights of the previous steps often create more clarity concerning these narratives.
5. The church prayerfully enters into discernment, asking God, "What are you doing?" and "What do you want?" They shape a new praxis through imagination, planning, experiments, evaluations, and commitment.

These questions indicate the kinds of resources a church needs for engaging the complexities of intercultural life. Initially there needs to be willingness, at least among some leaders and members, to talk about the interrelationship of Christian faith and race, ethnicity, or both. The practical theology cycle clarifies the diverse resources that are needed for this thoughtful, critically reflective process. Even though a church can enter the method at any point, they eventually need to engage each step. In their initial conversations about the church's current praxis, there needs to be a basic honesty about their situation, their practices, their beliefs. This is all subject to analysis and change, but it does provide a snapshot of their on-the-ground realities. Then, when participants begin to do a more thorough analysis (step two), they have the benefits of numerous resources. In addition to basic history and statistics about the church and its context, other cultural resources deepen understanding.

¹³Chris Argyris, "Teaching Smart People How to Learn," *Harvard Business Review* 69, no. 3 (May-Jun 1991).

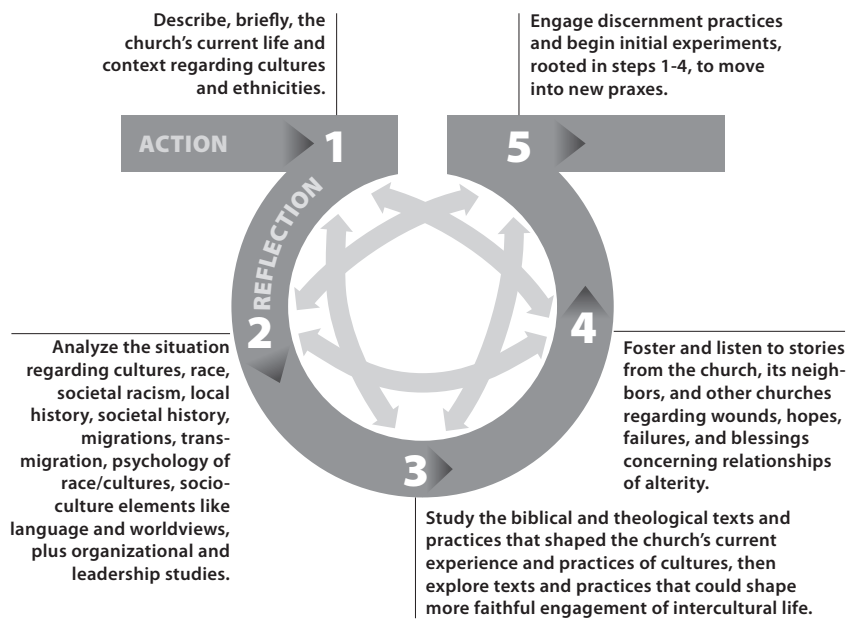


Figure 1.2. Practical theology: church, context, and cultural diversity

As an Oakland, California, church was beginning to deepen its ministry connections with its neighborhoods, members became more aware that they needed to give new attention to their own ethnic diversity as well as the diversity of their context. Through conversations with neighbors and in research at libraries and museums, they learned how their city had been reshaped by World War II. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the US government began a massive plan to create facilities for building a naval fleet large enough to win the war in the Pacific. This plan required the recruitment of thousands of persons, mainly from the South, including a large number of African Americans, which changed the ethnic makeup of these cities.

But the longer-term change was also economic. At the end of the war, thousands of workers were unemployed, many of them African American, and while the United States put millions of dollars into efforts to rebuild Japan and Europe, these western port communities were largely left on their own without adequate manufacturing alternatives or civic resources. As members of the church learned about this history, they gained

new perspectives on the relationship between ethnic diversity and economic disparity. They gained new respect for those involved in the decades-long efforts to, in Jeremiah's words, "seek the welfare of the city." They deepened their own participation with various urban organizations that engaged urban challenges, such as Habitat for Humanity, the Pacific Institute for Community Organizations, and nearby African American churches. In all of these new engagements they emphasized the posture of being learners.

The intercultural relationships inside and among those Oakland churches was strengthened as people studied the region's cultural histories. To deepen their understanding of each other's cultures, that church also discussed movies, novels, and poetry. They visited museums and cultural sites, and participants deepened their relationships and learning alongside churches that embodied other cultures. These resources are all ways of studying and reflecting on the church's life, context, and situation. Many of this book's chapters are developed to deal with the complexities of this analysis. The lessons of cultural anthropology can help us understand each other; the perspectives of organizational and leadership theory can clarify the dynamics we experience. Like the other steps of this practical theology method, analysis is not a one-time activity; it is a continual work of the church.

No church should expect this to be just a matter of strategies and claims of goodwill. Even though more churches in the US report that their worship participants display increased diversity,¹⁴ recent years have also surfaced increased racism, and congregational claims have often proved to be thin. As we will discuss further in chapter three, US society has been shaped by historical forces that spread and morphed over centuries. Theologian Willie Jennings, in his historical and conceptual work on "whiteness," shows how the combined forces of colonization and capitalism were infused with European racial bias as African and indigenous American peoples were subject to the objectifying brutalities that contributed to modern US society. These same racial beliefs, with varied practices, were extended to Asian immigrants.

¹⁴Mark DeYmaz, "New Research on Multiethnic Churches," *Outreach Magazine*, March 29, 2020), outreachmagazine.com/features/multiethnic/53748-new-research-on-multiethnic-churches.html.

Societal, emotional, and practical habits are not easily overcome, and churches are tempted to avoid, minimize, and sidestep the formative power of such racism. Isabel Wilkerson provides an insightful analysis regarding caste in the US and how it has been anchored and shaped by racism. Sociologist Korie Edwards, whose work is invaluable for understanding the depths and dynamics of racism, describes the forces that are at work by which churches that claim to be multicultural remain culturally White. Churches would also benefit from Jemar Tisby, whose work provides an overview of the role of US churches in societal racism and explores the learning and leading required if churches wish to engage the challenges and opportunities in our contexts.¹⁵

Churches must undertake the contextual, interdisciplinary work of step two alongside the biblical and theological work of step three—as we demonstrated in this chapter’s brief exploration into Jesus’ ministry in Nazareth (Lk 4). If a church were using the method we have outlined, then this biblical narrative, among many others, should receive study and reflection. Even though we will engage some additional passages, churches will need more extensive resources. What kind of boundary crossing is embedded in the Gospels, Acts, or Paul’s letters? Our claim is that these texts demonstrate how the Spirit of God continually disrupts believers through alterity—encounters and opportunities embodied in those we consider to be different.

Step three also includes the study of theology and church history. Our concern for creating relationships and organizations that exhibit intercultural life is related to numerous topics of Christian theology, most notably anthropology, soteriology, the Trinity, ecclesiology, eschatology, and missiology. There are also specific matters of Christian discipleship that arise from our theology of sanctification, such as reconciliation, forgiveness, love, justice, truth, self-sacrifice, peace, hospitality, and generosity. Additionally, the narratives of church history and the continuing developments in historical theology are included in the studies of step three. Matters of boundary crossing, encountering cultural differences, dealing with issues of inclusion and prejudice, and the dominance of colonialism are always present in the stories of the missional expansion of the church. In the modern historical notes

¹⁵These authors receive significant attention in chap. 3.

provided in the introduction, we referred to the long record of prejudice and discrimination in churches of North America. There are important stories of inclusion—like those Pennsylvania Mennonites—but they are scarce. In recent years increasingly more US congregations are experiencing various forms of multicultural life, though that diversity tends toward just noting the color of faces on Sundays rather than deeper expressions of cultural inclusion and polycenteredness in all aspects of church praxes. Theological explorations concerning the Trinity, ecclesiology, and the missional core of ecclesiology are especially noteworthy. If church leaders intend to seriously engage our responsibilities in a multicultural environment, they cannot ignore these resources.

Step four is that of recall, storytelling, and lots of listening.¹⁶ The activities of self-reflection, which are very important for individual Christians and for whole congregations, make it more likely that we can gain new knowledge, discern God's promptings, and become more faithful in our habits and activities. We are already shaped before we encounter new experiences and information—and that shaping can hinder or help our faithfulness. As emphasized by Freire, a consciousness about ourselves and our situation contributes to the possibility that we can be creative subjects instead of just objects. If we are aware of the stories and habits behind us, we may be more capable of building on strengths and finding alternatives to our weaknesses. In the introduction, we both provided a brief personal narrative. Readers need to know that we, as authors, also have perspectives and priorities that arise from our histories. Our knowledge and motivations, our blind spots and our wisdom, are rooted into our autobiographies.¹⁷ Research into a church's cultural roots may include work with church records, judicatory resources, other local publications, and interviews.¹⁸

Several years after the Oakland church began studying the history of its city, they tried two other means for deepening their cultural awareness. Most members were in small groups, each one formed to pursue a particular

¹⁶See Anne Streaty Wimberly, "Called to Listen: The Imperative Vocation of Listening in Twenty-First Century Faith Communities," *International Review of Mission* 87, no. 346 (1998): 331-41.

¹⁷See the section "Personal Reflections / Group Exercise: Writing an Ethnic Autobiography" in our introduction.

¹⁸Concerning interviews, see Robert Weiss, *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

missional engagement in their context. They decided to use some of their weekly gatherings to share what they called their personal “cultural autobiographies.” Some members were already very adept at such stories, but others had to connect with parents and relatives to learn more. At times they were struck by similarities, such as the stories of two young adults, one Mexican and the other Vietnamese, whose families had fled different types of oppression (economic and political) to get to the United States. At other times they became more conscious of the cultural roots behind their differences.

To expand these initial cultural understandings, the church decided to connect personal stories with movies. (This links with the analysis noted in step two concerning our need to use all kinds of cultural resources to understand current and future praxis.) Any group of persons with a shared ethnic identity could select a movie for everyone to watch. After the movie, those who chose the movie were in a “fishbowl”; they were to discuss some questions while everyone else was listening. First, to connect autobiographies with the movie, they talked about how they identified with characters or events in the movie. Then they discussed two other questions: (1) What elements in your culture make it difficult to engage Christian faith? (2) What elements in your culture are parallel to Christian teachings and undergird your faith? The substance of these discussions flowed into numerous informal conversations throughout the church.

The Oakland church’s historical records told the stories of several times when the church relocated. In each situation, the reasons cited for the move had to do with a changing neighborhood. It was never specified that this Euro-American congregation did not know how to engage African American neighbors. As the city continued to diversify, more members moved to the suburbs. Eventually there were few members still living in the church’s neighborhood. After a couple of decades of declining membership, a small, diverse group of adults and families began to re-vision a future in the church. As they studied the history, met neighbors, and studied Scripture, they realized that any hope for being sustained as a multicultural church would require attention to lament. They needed to know the errors of the past; they engaged liturgical rites concerning confession and intercession; they celebrated the hope of friendships and networks that gave them access to a different future.

As part of step four, congregations also need to reflect on these corporate autobiographies—and such reflections can lead to liturgical activities like confession and lament as well as to praise and celebration. Without this church's ongoing analysis and self-reflection, they would not have been capable of welcoming the challenges they would face. This approach to discernment was to become a new praxis, noted in step five.

Step five is a prayerful, creative mix of elements that moves a church to new action-reflection experiments, which shape new praxes. As participants draw on what they've learned, and how they've been formed, in steps one through four, they now focus on discerning God's initiatives and their own potential participation as they pray, converse, listen to God in silence and in the voices of others, attend to prophetic words and images, note the Spirit's warnings and encouragements, then describe and initiate new experiments. In part three of this book, we will provide more details concerning leading profound changes in an organization. Practical theology emphasizes that new initiatives are not primarily just new programs or strategic steps. Rather, all the interactive learning from the other steps comes into prayerful discernment. In step five, a church genuinely seeks to understand God's grace (which is the theological word for what we usually call "initiatives") concerning themselves and their context. This discernment is possible only with an ongoing engagement with the context, in confidence that the Holy Spirit is already at work.

Various chapters of this book concern the cultural differences we have in matters such as relationships, worldviews, and perceptions; all are important as we engage those who are culturally different. These topics are relevant whether difference is inside a congregation or with neighbors. So as a congregation experiments with relationships, personal and shared activities, and theological reflection, it continually employs all the resources of practical theology. A church's basic commitment to discipleship and ministry in a multicultural context, through discernment and experiments, becomes a cluster of commitments and practices that bear the marks of intercultural life.

LEADERSHIP TRIAD

Some approaches to leadership, especially in organizations shaped by hierarchies or by modern management theories, focus on experts who have answers and who can manage and control outcomes. According to these frameworks,

direction is set by the CEO-style pastor, sometimes with the involvement of a board, then those goals are announced to the church and then marketed and structured into organizational life. We believe church leadership requires another approach; we will introduce a basic framework here and provide more details in chapter ten.¹⁹

The work of leadership is to shape an action-learning community that purposes to discern God's activities in and around them so they can participate. This may or may not lead to modern values like efficacy or efficiency or productivity. Christian leaders may not necessarily ignore those organizational matters, but the center and telos of our leadership gives priority to a very different purpose—the faithful and improvisational (and fallible) life of friendship and partnership with God-on-the-ground.

In this work, those in leadership need to attend to three spheres of activities. Each sphere requires that we perceive, interpret, and act concerning specific contexts and situations. Interpretive leadership is about meanings: it provides the resources and guidance needed to shape a community of learners that pays attention to and interprets both texts and contexts, so that the community can discern God's initiatives and the community's vocation and opportunities. Relational leadership focuses on shaping the human connections (internal and external) so that there is welcome and respect for diverse peoples and voices, as mutual love gives them practices of health and synergism. Implemental leadership guides and initiates activities and structures so that a church embodies discernment practices that lead to hopeful experiments and commitments. Even though this description notes separate spheres, they overlap and must remain vitally connected. If they lose their cohesion, then organizational dysfunction results.

Interpretive leadership. Interpretive leadership is about shaping an interpretive community in pursuit of understanding and shaping meanings. What does it mean to believe the gospel? How do the particulars of our theological heritage help us listen to God and participate in how the Spirit is leading? What do we need to know about our context? Interpretive

¹⁹Regarding how many approaches to leadership tend to minimize God's agency, see Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership*; For more on the leadership triad, see Mark Lau Branson, "Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church," in *Missional Churches in Context*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 118-23; and Mark Lau Branson, "Forming God's People," in *Leadership in Congregations*, ed. Richard Bass (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007).

leadership shapes environments and provides resources so a church can engage the practical theology process. Each step includes work concerning observations, conversations, and interpretations—all in service of constructing the meanings needed for giving priority to God’s initiatives and invitations, leading to new imagination, communal discernment, and the shaping of new praxes.

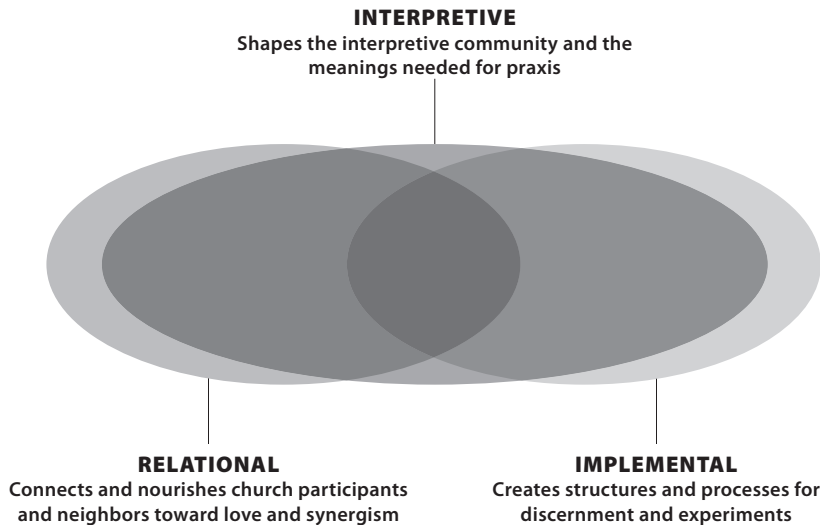


Figure 1.3. Leadership triad

For example, in step two, leaders guide research and analysis that brings new knowledge, new conversations, and new meanings. Leaders help participants use their own knowledge and skills (or to seek additional resources) to see their current praxis in light of sociocultural perspectives, media studies, organizational perspectives, psychological insights, and communication theory. Interpretive leadership is needed in formal and informal settings, in conversations, in preaching and teaching, in writing and praying. Interpretive work is needed at every step of the practical theology cycle. Interpretive leaders do not control the meanings; they build capacities in the group for awareness, truth, articulation, and imagination. These traits become evident in listening, conversing, giving testimony, asking questions, making connections, and clarifying specific, new or old, action-learning options.

Relational leadership. Relational leadership attends to all of the human dynamics among a church's participants and with the world around them. It is notable that Saint Paul gives so much attention to matters of reconciliation, encouragement, patience, collaborative learning, teamwork, and love—all matters of relational leadership. A church is connected to existing social groups among members and within the context: families (immediate and extended), friendships, working teams, prayer partners, neighbors, schoolmates, work colleagues, and civic associations. As participants do the work of practical theology—the repeating cycle of praxis-theory-praxis—they do so among these relationships. And as is a theme of this book, alterity is a priority. Without difference, without persons of varied backgrounds and perceptions and perspectives, we limit the knowledge and discernment that is available to us.²⁰ While there may be individual tasks, leaders are engaging the church in numerous social configurations that require behaviors that serve the goals of faithful learning, discernment, and action.

Leaders need to identify important relationships, create new connections, enlist existing groups, nourish conversations, and give courage for new actions. There will be hard work in facing conflicts and intransigence; social habits will surface that create resistance to the Spirit's promptings. In this relational leadership, the group gains practices of mutuality that provide awareness, initiatives, and resources to shape the church and its contextual connections so that we discern God's life among us, which is visible, tangible, expressive, and redemptive. Often nouns like love, justice, kindness, and care remain abstract as romantic ideals; relational leadership, framed as participation with God, is more concrete, joining in the embodied, tangible, life-on-life expressions of God-with-us.

Implemental leadership. Implemental leadership concerns reforming and shaping activities and structures that are consistent with the priority on God's agency and the interpretive and relational work already described. The organizational structures of a church come from various sources—the habits of its sociocultural context and ethnic heritage, the inheritance from a denominational or theological tradition, the ideas of members over the

²⁰See Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership*, chap. 6.

years, and the numerous resources offered by schools and books and seminars. This implemental work concerns regular practices like worship, governance, and education; it deals with everything from schedules to signage to authority. Implemental leadership draws attention to activities and structures, names the group's habits—including those that either foster or undercut the pursuit of discerning God's initiatives—and tests new options. For example, modern management emphasizes prediction and control; because it operates inside the habits of modernity, God is not an agent (other than, perhaps, a helper). So as implemental leadership helps the whole group discover the sources and consequences of those habits, new experiments and reflection will shape approaches that lead to commitments rooted in God's activities.

Improvisation may be a helpful concept; in jazz or comedy, improvisation refers to a sequence in which something is offered by a participant, then the receiving player or actor works with what was received and passes the still-forming activity on to others.²¹ For Christian groups, we discern what God is giving to us (that's the meaning of the word *grace*), and we participate in those holy actions as we add our own selves and our gifts. That is what it means to participate in *missio Dei*—the mission of God. So implemental leadership uses the resources of the practical theology cycle toward discernment and improvisations.

Leadership is not about an individual or even a small group having great ideas and pulling a church into their vision and strategies. Leadership is about shaping an environment in which the people of God participate in the action-reflection cycle as they gain new capacities to discern what God is doing among and around them. Each participant of leadership teams, those who carry titles and those without such recognition, have specific strengths that serve this triad. As they work together, they can commend and nourish each other's gifts, gain new perspectives and abilities, discover a social imaginary²² that is specific to them and their setting, and engage in the redemptive life of the gospel.

²¹See Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership*, chaps. 1 and 6.

²²A group's "social imaginary" is that set of self-understandings, practices, and expectations that provide their identity and give them a sense of being a group. See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). These matters of group identity will receive more attention in chap. 3.

LEADERS ENGAGING PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

The purpose of our writing is to help church leaders to see differently, to gain the skills and competencies needed for multicultural contexts, and to create learning environments that make God's reconciling initiatives visible and powerful. This priority on discerning God's initiatives, so that we can participate, is the lens through which this entire book is shaped. Leaders can encourage and guide a church to attend to biblical narratives and to ask the Holy Spirit to create new life among us through these texts. We need skills for seeing our churches accurately as the complex and changing systems they are. To do this, we provided a basic method—practical theology—to connect the various aspects of church praxis. Chapter two will provide some specific theological resources, followed by a chapter concerning sociocultural frameworks plus perspectives on the fluid terms of racial and cultural diversity. Then each of the following chapters provides a particular perspective on this ministry—some way to see and act that is particularly important for intercultural life.

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