

THE HERMENEUTICS OF LEADING IN MISSION

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The challenge facing Christian leaders today is complex, especially in light of developments in hermeneutical thinking over the past 100 years. The question before the leaders of congregations is, "How should we provide leadership of Christian communities in helping them address critical issues?"¹ This essay seeks to address this question, first, by introducing a general framework for understanding how Christian communities might engage in discernment and decision making, and second, by outlining a process for this engagement. In developing this framework and process, it is helpful to note the following example of the Faith Community council.²

It had been several months since the council meeting at Faith Community when the issue of how to address the space needs had become so intense. Following that meeting, Pastor Ron introduced the council members to some resources to assist them in using a mutual discernment and decision-making process. At this month's meeting, the members of the council are now engaging the same space problem, but with a very different approach.

Evelyn opened the meeting with an extended devotional Bible study on Romans 12, and invited the council members to reflect together on how this passage might inform their decision-making process. After some reflective conversation, they came to a mutual understanding of the necessity of their becoming a corporate living sacrifice, of dying to their individual agendas, in order to be able to better discern the will of God for their congregation. A time in conversational prayer followed this discussion, with everyone inviting the

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¹ This essay takes up the issues raised in another essay entitled, "Method in Light of Scripture and in Relation to Hermeneutics." It seeks to offer an explicitly Christian approach to leading Christian communities, one which takes seriously the authority and use of Scripture in relation to the hermeneutical turn over the past fifty years.

² This case example of the Faith Community council stands in contrast to a previous case example that introduced the essay entitled, "Method in Light of Scripture and in Relation to Hermeneutics."

Spirit to help them become such a living sacrifice.

John and Bill made a report on the assignment they had been given, which was to do a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis on the congregation and its ministry to its community. They presented a summary of information on both congregational membership patterns and demographic trends, and then offered a summary SWOT of this data. Following this presentation, they invited their fellow council members to engage in a theological reading of this information in seeking to answer the following two questions: "What is God doing?" and "What does God want to do?"

During this discussion, it became clear to the council that God was, in fact, at work in their context. Many persons were indicating a responsiveness to the gospel, and there were many of these that Faith Community was well situated to reach. In addition, there were several advocacy issues the congregation was involved in that appeared to be making a difference in the lives of many community residents. In order to better participate in what they understood God to be doing, they needed to be responsible, as one member put it, "to remove the barriers" in addressing their space problems.

As the implications of this insight began to come into focus, Harold observed that it would be important to bring the congregation into this conversation with the council. Evelyn, with a background in organizational development, offered some useful ideas for designing a process to help the congregation engage in its own discernment process of responding to the council's leadership. This process also addressed how to work through the changes that would be required by the vision that was beginning to come into focus for this congregation.

The evening's meeting closed with Pastor Ron leading a reflective devotional from Luke 14:25-33 on the cost of discipleship, followed by another session of conversational prayer.

THE CHALLENGE OF LEADING IN MISSION IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE HERMENEUTICAL TURN

Clearly the council of Faith Community was seeking to employ a distinctively Christian framework to support the process they were using for their discernment and decision making regarding how to address their space needs. However, before examining this framework and process in detail, it will be helpful to explore a bit further some of the complexities that Christian leaders face in seeking to lead Christian communities in mission.

FROM METHOD TO METHODS

In light of the hermeneutical turn developed over the past century,³ there is no going back to a world that can be framed in seemingly black and white categories. The hermeneutical diversity of interpretations of reality, which are manifest both in the multi-perspectival character of biblical studies and the different methods used by the social sciences, makes this impossible. This means that part of the challenge facing Christian leaders today is learning to engage diverse perceptions of reality by drawing on a variety of methods that can inform the discernment and decision making process. Relying primarily on one method, whether it is in relation to biblical teaching or scientific explanation, is no longer viable, if it ever was. Diverse perspectives, rooted in different methods and the particularities of social location, bring a multi-perspectival dynamic into any discussion. Rather than playing out these differences around power dynamics related to personalities, roles, or the vote of the majority, which is so often the case in congregations, a more redemptive approach is to engage such differences through a process of mutual discernment.⁴ This requires leadership. This requires time.

³ This essay uses the phrase, "hermeneutical turn," as shorthand to explain the shift that occurred in human knowing during the 20th century. This shift involves, primarily, the developments in philosophical hermeneutics which have made us aware of the interpreted character of all human knowing, including the interpreted character of interpretation. The reader should refer to the essay, "Method in Light of Scripture and in Relation to Hermeneutics" for a fuller treatment of this hermeneutical turn.

⁴ This essay employs a biblical understanding that: (a) the church lives within a fallen world, where sin is operative within every domain of life; (b) that redemption and transformation of life are possible through the crucified and risen Christ; and (c) that the Spirit leads the church into ministry that often involves, through suffering service, the unmasking of the principalities and

This requires a mutual commitment among those who are around the table. This also reflects the important theoretical insight offered by Habermas for developing a practice of communicative reason within diverse communities in order to come to shared conclusions.⁵

The utilization of a diverse number of methods for discernment and decision making can be seen in the example of the Faith Community council. The council engaged in actively inviting the Spirit of God into their midst to guide their conversation. They incorporated data from the congregation and context to better inform their decision making. They drew deeply from biblical and theological foundations to frame their interpretation of their situation, and to come to an understanding of how to strategically participate in God's mission within their context. And they drew on theoretical insights from the social sciences to plan a process for engaging the congregation and implementing a change process.

These various sources of information - context, congregation, scripture, theology, and social science theory, were all made available through different methods and all contributed to the discernment and decision processes. They illustrate how a variety of methods can inform Christian leaders who are trying to make decisions. The process used to interact with and utilize such diverse sources of information is also multifaceted. There are multiple ways to engage in discernment and decision making. One could start with information from any particular source, and then interact in a variety of ways with other sources. The approach proposed in this essay argues for scripture to be used in an authoritative way. But, when it is used, and how it is incorporated into the discernment and decision making process, is as diverse as the sources of information available from the variety of methods that are used.

powers that have already been defeated by Christ. The framework and process proposed in this essay rely on this understanding as a backdrop, meaning that our efforts and their results, though transformed through the power of redemption, are always imperfect and subject to distortion.

⁵ Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols., trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 and 1987).

KEEPING GOD IN THE CONVERSATION

An essential dimension that Christian leaders must attend to in the midst of a discernment and decision-making process, is how to keep God in the conversation.⁶ This essay argues that it is this dimension that makes Christian discernment and decision making unique. This is especially true when it seeks to incorporate God's perspective into the discussion, both through accessing the teaching of scripture and theologically reflecting on it, as well as in allowing God to function as an acting subject through the presence of the Spirit of God working in the midst of the community.

Interestingly, a number of literatures have emerged over the past several decades that are related to this challenge of trying to keep God in the conversation, all of which reflect the hermeneutical turn in interpretation. Each of these literatures offers insights into the discernment and decision-making process. Each of these literatures incorporates God, though in diverse ways, in some manner into the process. These range across a wide spectrum, from seeing God as being directly involved as an acting subject, to incorporating God indirectly by referencing a Christian perspective within the process. These various literatures are worth reviewing, in general terms, as an introduction to the approach that is being proposed in this essay.

Engaging in Theological Reflection - A body of literature that has recently emerged that attempts to keep God in the conversation, is that which emphasizes the importance of engaging in theological reflection regarding one's ministry experiences. This stream clearly reflects the hermeneutical shift in thinking about God and scripture, from an objective study of such, to a more subjective engagement. Christian leaders utilize theological reflection in order to develop insights, to clarify perspectives, and to come to an understanding of what God is doing in relation to the concrete issues of life. The emphasis is on drawing on a number of sources to engage this process, which usually includes some combination of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

⁶ The use of the word "God" here is intended to refer to a Christian confession of God as a Trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

One of the earliest books in this field was by Whitehead and Whitehead in 1980.⁷ It brought the resources of scripture, tradition, and experience into conversation with context and the concrete practices of ministry in a process of deep reflection. The effort was toward developing a theological imagination within a Christian community for discerning the presence and work of God in its midst.

Others have contributed to this genre, such as Stone and Duke who stress the importance of bringing the human and divine perspectives into creative conversation through a process of theological reflection.⁸ They point out that reflecting on the concrete issues of life facing the church is usually the best way to begin such reflection. Another contribution along these lines comes from Killen and DeBeer who start from a more explicit anthropological perspective.⁹ Theological reflection for them is more the result of insights into life which come from human reflection on life's experiences.

Doing Theology in Context - Another important stream of literature from the past several decades dealing with keeping God in the conversation comes from the field of missiology. Christian leaders utilize this approach to help make the message of the Christian faith more relevant to persons within a particular context. There are several strains within this stream. One comes from Roman Catholic missiologists. Robert Schreiter published what has become a seminal piece on this subject in 1985, entitled, *Constructing Local Theologies*.¹⁰ Drawing deeply from key figures who contributed to the hermeneutical shift in the past century, especially the work of anthropologists, Schreiter develops a working model for how Christian communities in particular contexts construct local theologies. In essence, his model is an adaptation of the correlation approach of bringing the church

⁷ James D. Whitehead & Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1980). This book was republished as a revised edition under the same title in 1995 by Sheed & Ward.

⁸ Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How To Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

⁹ Patricia O'Connell Killen and John De Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000).

¹⁰ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

tradition into dynamic conversation with culture, especially the local culture. He notes a variety of sources within his model that can serve as a starting point for the process.¹¹

Stephen B. Bevans is another Catholic missiologist working in this area of doing theology in context. His primary contribution to the conversation was in noting the variety of models that are used in constructing local theologies. His key work, *Models of Contextual Theology*, first published in 1992 and updated and revised in 2002, offers the reader an overview of six different models.¹² These diverse approaches clearly reflect the transition to approaching human knowing from a hermeneutical perspective. All of them seek to find a way to keep God in the conversation, whether directly or indirectly, but they work from substantially different frameworks of understanding.

Parallel to the work by Catholic missiologists, there have also been contributions from Protestant missiologists in the area of doing theology in context. One of the more influential is Lamin Sanneh, who published a key volume in 1989, entitled, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*.¹³ Sanneh keeps God in the conversation by working from the premise of the inherent translatability of the Gospel, that the scriptures can be translated into any and every cultural context. Using Christianity in Africa as his primary case study, he notes how the dynamic truths of scripture are often set loose in new ways of understanding through the language, thought forms, and world view of the recipient culture. And in turn, there is often a reciprocity to the process as these new insights loop back to reshape Christianity within the original sending culture.

Similar to Sanneh, British missiologist, Lesslie Newbigin, works with the dynamics of how scripture and culture interact. Taking the incarnation as the key biblical referent for understanding how the gospel can become particular while conveying universal truths, Newbigin argues that the gospel always comes to us as a “scandal of particularity.”¹⁴ In this

¹¹ Ibid., 25-36.

¹² Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Faith and Cultures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992, updated and reprinted 2002).

¹³ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

¹⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 72.

scandal, the particularities of local culture do not cancel out biblical truths, but, in fact, properly understood, make them more accessible to our finite understanding.

Focusing on Christian Practices - Recently, another stream of literature for keeping God in the conversation has begun to emerge around Christian practices. This literature explores the importance of Christian communities engaging in shared practices. Christian leaders utilize this approach in order to help communities of faith connect their practices with their theological commitments. A volume edited by Dorothy C. Bass in 1997 stressed that these practices need to be rooted in the Christian tradition, and that Christian communities cultivate an active awareness of the presence of God by practicing their faith within these shared practices.¹⁵ Some twelve different practices were discussed by the various contributors, all of which stressed the challenge of trying to understand the presence of God in the midst of the mundaneness and messy-ness of everyday life.

A more substantive treatment of this approach appeared in an edited volume by Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass in 2002. Here the various contributors offer a fuller framework for understanding the importance of Christian practices, which they define as, “. . . things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.”¹⁶ The general direction of this pursuit is shared in common by the contributors. But the multi-perspectival character of trying to interpret and participate more fully in God’s active presence is clearly evident in the diverse views offered for bringing theological understanding to the various Christian practices that are discussed.

Re-imagining Practical Theology - During the past several decades, the hermeneutical turn has also impacted what is known as the discipline of practical theology. Christian leaders utilize this approach in helping understand how theory is embedded within all our practices. Practical theology has a long tradition in the church, with deep roots historically in the Roman Catholic Church from the Medieval

¹⁵ Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

¹⁶ Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 18.

period where it was known as pastoral theology.¹⁷ At that time, a curriculum was developed that dealt primarily with moral theology, ethics, spiritual formation, and confession.¹⁸ Protestants, with their emphasis on Scripture, turned pastoral theology into a curriculum that included preaching, liturgy, pastoral care, catechesis, and diaconal service.¹⁹

An important shift took place through the work of Schleiermacher in the early 19th century with his *Brief Outline for Practical Theology* in 1811, when he set up theological education within the newly formed University of Berlin.²⁰ What had been pastoral theology now became the division of practical theology. Now this *other* division of the curriculum became responsible to apply the truths gained from the disciplines of exegetical, historical, and philosophical theology.²¹ This Enlightenment divide between theory and practice has plagued practical theology ever since.

A more focused conversation about reframing practical theology within theological education also took place during the 1980s and 1990s. Two important contributors to this discussion are Don Browning and Gerben Heitink. Browning's key work, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, attempts a reconstruction of practical theology through employing a revised critical correlation approach. In this approach, he argues that theological reflection needs to be located within practice, that it is begun in a context of practice, and contributes to practice. Rather than thinking about theology as theory applied to practice, Browning asserts that theory is embedded within practice. He uses this practice-theory-practice approach in order to bring text and context into conversation with descriptive, historical, systematic, and strategic lenses.²² His work clearly reflects the hermeneutical turn as he proposes the use of multiple interpretive lenses in

¹⁷ Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains: Manual for Practical Theology*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 92-95.

¹⁸ P. Canisius 1591, *Handbook on Pastoral Theology*, as reported in Heitink, 98.

¹⁹ Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 95-97.

²⁰ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966; originally published 1830).

²¹ Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 43.

²² Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*.

trying to understanding the life and ministry of Christian congregations.

While his work is helpful in framing the multi-perspectival character of engaging the task, his use of biblical and theological texts tends to be underdeveloped in shaping an understanding of a congregation's life and ministry. The limits of Browning's model and his hermeneutical framework become most evident when he engages his third case, the Apostolic Church of God. He affirms that a "vigorous hermeneutical conversation is present in that church," and notes that "the authoritative voice of scripture is at the heart of this conversation."²³ However, it is clear that the way this congregation keeps God directly in the conversation is both beyond Browning's own comfort zone and outside of his preferred hermeneutical approach. At the heart of his hesitancy, there appears to lie the question of divine agency, the extent to which one can truly know God as an acting subject.

Another important re-conceptualization of practical theology is available in Gerben Heitink's *Practical Theology*. He takes his starting point for his approach in the development during the 1960s and 1970s of a theory of action, which recognizes the embeddedness of theory within all human action.²⁴ Drawing on this foundational insight, and adding to it a theological understanding, led him to propose thinking of practical theology as a *theological theory of action*. Such a theory of action has three domains - an interpretive domain that addresses a hermeneutical understanding of texts, an interpretive domain that seeks an empirical explanation of context, and an interpretive domain which seeks to identify and implement strategic action.²⁵ He draws on the communicative action theory of Habermas and the hermeneutical treatment of text and context by Ricoeur to flesh out the fuller dynamics of his proposed theological theory of action.²⁶ The proposal of this essay draws substantively from this work, but adds to it a more focused content regarding a hermeneutically-framed, theological theory of action.

²³ Ibid., 243.

²⁴ Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 124-147.

²⁵ Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 163-166.

²⁶ Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 135-144.

Rethinking Theological Education - A final body of literature worth reviewing regarding how to keep God in the conversation is that associated with rethinking theological education. Christian leaders utilize this approach to better appropriate theology and the continuing process of their own theological education into their ministries. Beginning in the early 1980s, a vibrant conversation surfaced among theological educators about the very nature of what constitutes *theological education*. This discussion was launched by Edward Farley in 1983 with his book, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*.²⁷ He deeply critiqued the classic four-fold division of contemporary theological education, noting its inadequacy to address the substance of theology. He also challenged its tendency to support the clergy paradigm of ministry with its focus on instrumental skills. This had earlier been most clearly conceptualized by H. Richard Niebuhr as the professional "pastoral director."²⁸ Farley's work gave birth to a lively debate, one which was quickly engaged by numerous authors. A helpful summary of this discussion is provided by Robert Banks in *Reenvisioning Theological Education*.²⁹

While the details of this discussion are too extensive to include in this essay, it is worth noting some of the key authors and their contributions. These persons include: Charles Wood who emphasized theology as a process of critical inquiry³⁰; Joseph C. Hough, Jr. and John B. Cobb, Jr. who tried to give more content to Farley's proposal by focusing on Christian identity³¹; the Mud Flower Collective who brought a feminist critique to the conversation with an emphasis on story and the voice of the marginalized³²; Hough

²⁷ Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). See also his later work, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church & the University* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

²⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 80-82.

²⁹ Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999).

³⁰ Charles M. Wood, *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985).

³¹ Joseph C. Hough, Jr. and John B. Cobb, Jr., *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985).

³² The Mud Flower Collective, *God's Fierce Whimsy: Christian Feminism and Theological Education* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1985).

and Barbara G. Wheeler who placed the conversation into the context of the congregation in order to break free from the clerical paradigm³³; Rebecca Chopp who constructed an approach to theological education around feminist practices³⁴; Max Stackhouse who brought theological education into conversation with globalization, contextualization, and mission³⁵; and David H. Kelsey who reframed the “Christian thing” in theological education as an effort to understand God truly.³⁶ All of these authors were trying to frame an approach for keeping God, whether directly or indirectly, in the conversation about theological education. To do this, there was general agreement regarding the importance of collapsing the Enlightenment divide between theory and practice, and with it the unnecessary and unfortunate marginalization of practical theology. The proposed reconstruction was toward finding some way to re-integrate *theoria* (theological knowledge) with *phronesis* (practical wisdom), and for these to be shaped by *habitus* (personal and communal formation).

DEVELOPING AN APPROACH FOR LEADING IN MISSION IN CHRISTIAN CONGREGATIONS IN LIGHT OF THE HERMENEUTICAL TURN

The point being made above in relation to the various bodies of literature that were reviewed is that understanding Christian leadership in congregations today requires an approach that works from the perspective of the hermeneutical turn. It is the assertion of this essay that such an approach to leadership involves at least four interpretive dimensions that need to be integrated into a common framework. These dimensions are the following:

³³ Joseph C. Hough, Jr. and Barbara G. Wheeler, *Beyond Clericalism: The Congregation as a Focus for Theological Education* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

³⁴ Rebecca S. Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

³⁵ Max L. Stackhouse, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization, and Mission in Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988).

³⁶ David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About A Theological School* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); and *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993).

- **Texts** - In seeking to lead in mission, Christian leaders accept the biblical record and various documents resulting from their interpretation within the development of the historic Christian faith as being authoritative in some way. This fruitful prejudice³⁷ means that scripture is accepted in some way as having a normative role in shaping the life, choices, and practices of a congregation. This use of scripture and the church's historical theological reflections on the faith provide a *biblical and theological framing* of the issues within the process of discernment and decision making.³⁸
- **Context** - In seeking to lead in mission, Christian leaders take into consideration the influence of the social location of a congregation in relationship to its larger cultural context often drawing on social science research to clarify and focus this influence for constructive purposes. The use of theoretical perspectives from the social sciences, as well as, insights from common wisdom, provide for a *theoretically informed* understanding of the issues within the discernment and decision-making process.
- **Community** - In seeking to lead in mission, Christian leaders understand that a congregation is a gathered community created by the Spirit where members need to be in-relation. Such a community engages in multiple shared practices that reflect its Christian understanding and commitments.³⁹ As a Christian community they need

³⁷ This essay draws here from the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, eds. G. Barden and J. Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), especially as Gadamer's idea of "prejudice" is developed and used by Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 184.

³⁸ It is recognized that just stating that scripture provides a normative role obviously does not resolve the problem of interpreting scripture. But this is where the interpretive work of the historical Christian faith needs to be brought into dynamic conversation with the interpretive process. It is also where Christian leaders, following the exhortation of scripture to be in-relation with one another, need to be willing to stay at the table and engage the conversation in the midst of differences and disagreements.

³⁹ It is important to make a distinction between Christian practices and strategic action. The former involves our shared experiences, whether intentionally designed or tacitly present, in which there is embedded both explicit and implicit theology. Strategic action, by contrast, involves an intentionality toward resolution of some issue, or the implementation of some decision. To lead in

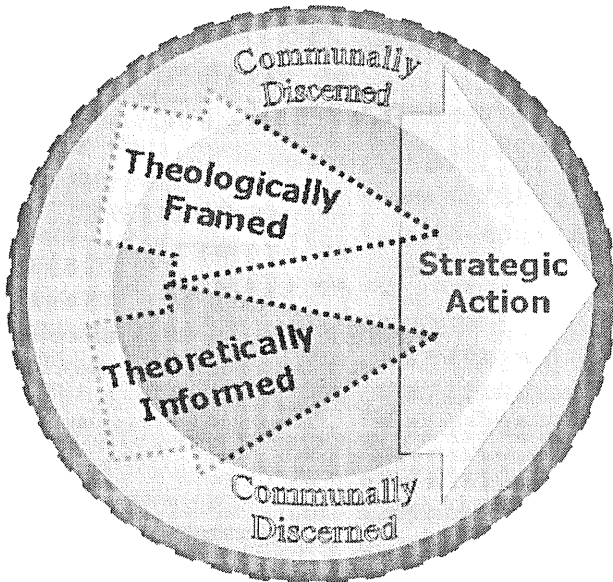
to utilize a discernment and decision process to corporately confess the Christian faith and plan for the ministry of the congregation. Reliance on the Spirit's leading through a process of *communal discernment* maintains God's presence in the process as an acting subject.

- * Strategy/Action - In seeking to lead in mission, Christian leaders make decisions to take strategic action in further shaping the shared life of the congregation. Such action would reflect the normative understanding of the texts, the insights acquired from research within the context, and the wisdom from shared practices within the congregation. Decisions that lead to choices means that the community of faith will engage in *strategic action* that is communally discerned, biblically and theologically framed, and theoretically informed.

Christian leaders can most effectively lead in mission in Christian congregations by integrating these four dimensions into a shared process, and by understanding the hermeneutical nature of this process. Such an approach to leading in mission in Christian congregations brings these dimensions into conversation and integration as communally-discerned, biblically-theologically framed, theoretically-informed, strategic action. While developed here as distinct dimensions, it is recognized that all of them weave in and out of one another. Also, while being presented here in a sequential fashion for the purposes of presentation, it is recognized that these dimensions are, in reality, highly interactive such that the process can find its starting point within any of these dimensions. The following alternatives illustrate this, where any of these six sequences can serve as a viable pattern for engaging in discernment and decision making.

Theology - Theory - Action	Theology - Action - Theory
Theory - Theology - Action	Theory - Action - Theology
Action - Theology - Theory	Action - Theory - Theology

mission, Christian leaders need to be deeply informed by Christian practices while also developing capacity to make choices to implement strategic action.



Communionally Discerned - Leading in mission from a hermeneutical perspective involves a gathered Christian community, with the congregation being the most common public and organized expression of such.⁴⁰ This is where the disciplines of ecclesiology and missiology come together within an understanding of the missionary nature of the church, or what today is being referred to as a “missional church.”⁴¹ An understanding of the missionary nature of the church received formative development in the 1960s among Roman Catholics, especially at Vatican II,⁴² but was also developed by a number of Protestant theologians within the ecumenical movement.⁴³ Although displaced for several decades because of a focus on radicalized secularism, this

⁴⁰ It is recognized, however, that there are numerous other expressions of Christian communities that might also utilize such an approach.

⁴¹ Darrell Guder, et al., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). See also Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000).

⁴² See “Ad Gentes Divinitus,” in *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Austin P. Flannery (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975), 813-856; and see also, Hans Kung, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967).

⁴³ See, for example, Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962); J.C. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964); and George W. Weber, *The Congregation in Mission: Emerging Structures for the Church in an Urban World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964).

conversation has resurfaced in the past two decades in the work of Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch, along with the Gospel and Our Culture Network in the U.S.⁴⁴

A missional ecclesiology stands at the core of leading in mission in relation to a hermeneutical perspective. A missional ecclesiology understands congregations as being the creation of the Spirit.⁴⁵ As communities are created by the Spirit, so also congregations seek to be led by the Spirit. To do so, they engage in some form of a discernment process in order to understand their purpose (mission), and how they are being called through this purpose to participate in God's mission in the world (*missio Dei*). In order to do this, they explore and examine the texts of scripture and their confessional tradition to determine how they believe God is leading them, and what they believe God is requiring of them. They also explore their own identity as a Christian congregation to discern how God has been at work in their midst in leading them. This involves carefully examining the shared practices in which they engage, as well as the shared history that they have experienced. The field of congregational studies has been particularly helpful in contributing approaches to this part of the discernment process.⁴⁶

Congregations also engage in some form of decision process for making choices about what they will do to live out the commitments required by their purpose. In doing so, they often engage in research on their ministry location, as also represented by the field of congregational studies, to find ways of translating their understanding of the Christian faith in relevant ways for engagement within this context.⁴⁷ While this corporate process of discernment and decision making is common to Christian communities, it is by no means standard in terms of approach. Clearly, different denominational traditions approach this in diverse ways, as is formalized in their polities, but also often reflected in their ethnic

⁴⁴ See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978); David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); Guder, *Missional Church*; and Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*.

⁴⁵ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*.

⁴⁶ A good example of this is available in Nancy T. Ammerman et al., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 78-104.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 40-77.

traditions.⁴⁸ Exploring such differences and their results would be an interesting subject to pursue but goes beyond the scope of this present essay.

All Christian congregations are situated in a perspectively interpreted world, and as such, need to be aware of the limits of how they make truth claims. There are two dimensions of Christian existence, however, which are available to inform and guide the process of discernment and decision making.

First, as noted above, the Spirit of God is present in the midst of the congregation. According to scripture, it is the work of the Spirit to lead and guide a congregation into understanding God's intent revealed in scripture and to apply this to its local context.⁴⁹ This requires some form of communal activity according to I Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. It is the Spirit who gives diverse gifts to individual members of a congregation, and through this diversity these members are responsible to come to a synergistic collaboration and shared understanding.

Second, it is the character of communal activity that, while being led by the Spirit, it also involves the complexities of different values, biases, interpretations, and power dynamics between members and/or groups within a congregation. How can congregations come to a common mind in the midst of such complexities, complexities that often involve conflict? Rather than engaging in strategies of win/lose, this essay proposes that congregations learn the practice of communal discernment.⁵⁰ While there is a spiritual dimension to this, as noted above, there is also a cultural-historical dimension, one which is best approached from a hermeneutical perspective. Different interpretations of reality are embedded in the complexities of differences among members of a congregation. While not being naïve about human sinfulness

⁴⁸ The strong reliance on representation and democratic process found among many churches with Reformed politics stands in contrast to the strong leader and personality-shaped character of many churches with congregational politics. So also, the directness of debate and articulation of difference often found among congregations with a German or Dutch heritage stands in contrast to the nuanced and more egalitarian approach often found among Scandinavian congregations.

⁴⁹ See especially John 13 - 16, but also the role of the Spirit in the Book of Acts, and the teaching of Paul in Romans 5 - 8 and I Corinthians 2 - 3.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Kenneth O. Gangel and Samuel L. Canine, *Communication and Conflict Management: In Churches and Christian Organizations* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002).

and the power dynamics of persons seeking to control or subvert a decision process, there are ways to engage the discernment process both constructively and redemptively.⁵¹ This is where critical theory contributes to the process with its ability to unmask hidden agendas and disproportionate power dynamics.⁵²

Open, fair, engaging, and deliberative discourse is essential for such a process to become operative. Here, it is helpful to draw on the influential contribution of Habermas and his theory of communicative reason.⁵³ He proposes that, because communities are constituted by differences in perspectives, being committed to engaging in deliberative discourse is essential for coming to a shared understanding. This concept is also found in the work of both Gadamer and Ricoeur and their emphasis on using dialogue to come to shared interpretive perspectives.⁵⁴ All of these theorists recognize the essential social reality of the interpretive process. When coupled with a Christian understanding of the Spirit-led nature of the discernment and decision process, Christian congregations are in a unique position to come to negotiated interpretations of reality and shared commitments in relation to the authoritative texts and their social context. But to do so, they must be committed to a process of deliberative discourse - *communally discerned*.

Biblically-Theologically Framed - Leading in mission from a hermeneutical perspective in Christian congregations relies on their understanding the texts of scripture and their interpretation over time. It involves both historical studies of the texts as well as the development of particular confessional traditions within the historic Christian faith. The understanding of the texts, through the well-established interpretation of them by Christians over the past 2,000 years, starts with the pre-understanding that these texts are authoritative and normative - the hermeneutical circle. This is an acceptable pre-understanding for those who are Christian, and the interpretive process can usually begin at this juncture.

⁵¹ Kenneth C. Haugk, *Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with Destructive Conflict* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988).

⁵² Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 133-135.

⁵³ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. See also Heitink, 135-137.

⁵⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 367-369; and John B. Thompson, ed., *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 132-149.

For those who are not Christian, this pre-understanding represents a difference of interpretation, where the larger questions regarding the claims that are made for the authoritative and normative nature of these texts need to be considered. Engaging this discussion is essential to consider, but goes beyond the scope of this essay.⁵⁵ The focus here is on leading in mission from a hermeneutical perspective for leaders of Christian congregations.

As noted above, the specific content related to the authoritative and normative nature of the texts of scripture and historical confessions is open for continuous deliberation. However, there are certain interpretive frameworks which have been communally discerned by the church throughout the centuries which function as a guide for Christian congregations as they seek to understand God's mission and their participation in it. Briefly outlined below is one such biblical-theological framework for understanding God's work in the world, which is developed from a missiological perspective.⁵⁶ A brief summary of these six core concepts includes the following:

1. A Triune, perichoretic God who created all that is.
2. A God in mission to all creation seeking to be in relationship with all things.
3. A redeeming God who through Christ seeks to reconcile all in a fallen world.
4. The kingdom of God as the center of God's reconciling work in the world.
5. The church living into the *now* of the kingdom as the sign, foretaste, and instrument of redemption in the midst of unmasking the principalities and powers.
6. The church anticipating the *not yet* of the kingdom in the final consummating work of God.

⁵⁵ Engaging this task moves the discussion to one of apologetics. See, for example, the "Reasonableness of Faith" by Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 128-148; and "Reason, Revelation, and Experience" by Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 52-65.

⁵⁶ A fuller presentation and discussion of this framework is provided in the essay by this author entitled, "Method in Light of Scripture and in Relation to Hermeneutics," 9-10.

These core truth claims within the historic Christian faith provide a basic framework that Christian congregations can use to understand their purpose in relation to God's mission in the world. While some Christian traditions may offer additional, or even some different truth claims, it should be noted there has been an amazing convergence around these core concepts across numerous faith traditions in missiology circles in the past few decades.⁵⁷ In addition, while there are numerous details required to fully operationalized these truth claims within a congregation's discernment and decision-making process, it is critical that a congregation utilize such a larger framework as a foundation for framing an understanding of its purpose - *biblically-theologically framed*.

Theoretically Informed - Leading in mission from a hermeneutical perspective within a particular context cannot be adequately addressed without giving attention to the insights and contributions from the social sciences. Paul Ricoeur is especially helpful here in understanding the relationship between the interpretation of texts and the interpretation of a context as a text.⁵⁸ While scriptural and confessional texts provide helpful insights into understanding the context in which a congregation is located, these texts are not adequate to provide sufficient information about that context for making strategic decisions and implementing strategic choices.

Insights and understanding gained from the social sciences provide such information. In this way, the communally discerned, biblically-theologically framed interpretation of a congregation's purpose needs to be theoretically informed by the perspectives available from the social sciences. But it is critical to note that information from the social sciences is not value neutral, since it also is always hermeneutically interpreted. What is important is to bring these theoretically-informed perspectives that are hermeneutically-shaped into conversation with the hermeneutically-shaped, biblical-theological understanding of the purpose of the congregation.

There is much debate in the social sciences regarding how one is to understand the insights generated through social

⁵⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 144-145.

science research. The complexity of this is evident in the various quantitative and qualitative research approaches that are being used today.⁵⁹ Here is a place, however, where the biblical-theological framework provides some perspective on how to approach the insights learned from the social sciences. Christians understand the world as having been created by God, where God is desirous to bring this world into a reconciled relationship with God's self. God takes the world seriously. Christians, therefore, actively engage the world through Christian ministry, and though they interpret it through a hermeneutical lens, they believe that this world can be truly known, though always perspectivally. This makes information available from the social sciences useful and contributive.

An example of this is the use of organizational theory to understand the dynamics of congregational life. A theory of preference for many today is an open systems perspective, an approach which studies the relationship between an organization and its environment. Within this framework, resource dependency theory is helpful to congregations for understanding their relationship to their context, where a congregation has to secure sufficient resources from its environment in order to maintain viability.⁶⁰ Relating this process to change theory is also helpful for congregations in learning how to respond to or adapt to changes that are taking place in the environment.⁶¹ Each of these theoretical perspectives needs to be critiqued for its usefulness in light of the biblical-theological framework, but it is clear that such theories from the social sciences can be helpful to leaders for leading in mission in Christian congregations.

What is important for understanding leadership from a Christian perspective is to critique these contributions within a biblical-theological framework. God's mission in the world

⁵⁹ See Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie, *Mixed Methodology: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998); and John W. Cresswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003).

⁶⁰ Mary Jo Hatch, *Organizational Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 63-100.

⁶¹ See, for example, the work of John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), which is often referenced in the Christian literature on organizational change.

is not just one more option to consider in making choices about life. God's mission frames the reality of how Christian communities are to live out their lives. Understanding leadership requires careful attention to the empirical explanations provided by the social sciences - theoretically informed.

Strategic Action - In the final analysis, action is required to implement decisions. Leaders must lead Christian communities to engage in some type of strategic action. Such action, however, must be understood as more than just method, technique, or application. Action represents the strategic choice of an intentional community that is trying to shape and give meaning to its collective life. This is where a theological theory of action comes into play.⁶² All action has theory embedded within it. For Christian congregations, it is important to determine communally-discerned strategic action that is both biblically-theologically framed and theoretically informed.

The proposal of this essay, on this point, is informed by the recently developed focus on Christian practices. These were discussed above.⁶³ Christian practices that express some aspect of the communal life of a congregation have embedded within them substantive theological commitments. These practices utilize symbolic representation as a key way for conveying these commitments, both to participating members and to those in the surrounding context. For example, when a congregation engages in the practice of hospitality in relation to its various activities and events, where it openly and genuinely welcomes the other, it is conveying something of its understanding of God as a God of hospitality. It is also conveying its commitment to accept difference and to be open to learning from the other.

Often, for Christian communities, the discernment and decision-making process begins with some action or praxis that requires assessment, which in turn leads to deeper theological reflection and reshaped action. Action is not neutral. Action is not optional. Action is not just about applying some truth. For Christian communities, action carries within it deeply embedded commitments to theological

⁶² Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 148-177.

⁶³ Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*; and Volf and Bass, *Practicing Theology*.

perspectives that are wisely informed by theoretical insights - *strategic action*.

FURTHER DEFINING THE DISCERNMENT AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The previous section provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of discernment and decision making from a Christian perspective. In this section, a more detailed process is presented that can be used by congregations for engaging in communal discernment and decision making to address particular issues. The key question is, "How can congregations come to shared understandings and agreements on strategic action to address specific issues, action that is shaped by biblical-theological frameworks and informed by theoretical insights from the social sciences?" In answering this question, it is helpful to refer to a key passage of scripture which lays out Paul's understanding of how congregations are to engage in communal discernment for making decisions.

DEVELOPING A BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK

Romans 12 follows Paul's lengthy explanation of his understanding of the Christian gospel (chapters 1-8), and his interpretation that this has always been God's message of good news because the true children of Abraham are children by faith (chapters 9-11). In chapter 12, Paul addresses the Roman congregation in terms of how they should now live in light of these mercies of God that have been given. The grammatical structure of this chapter is important to note. In verses 1-2, Paul uses a series of plural nouns and pronouns in relation to variety of singular objects. Their corporate life is to come to expression as singular outcomes.

<i>Plural Subjects</i>	<i>Singular Objects</i>
■ Your bodies	- living sacrifice
■ Your worship/service	- spiritual
■ Your	- mind
■ You	- will of God
■ Latreia – worship/service (OT referent)	
■ Discern – discover, debate, decide.	

Paul is inviting the Roman congregation to understand its unity in the midst of its diversity. By becoming a communal living sacrifice - a singular object - they corporately express true spiritual worship or service (lateria). The referent point for this word “lateria,” is the Deuteronomic sacrificial system given to Israel by God through Moses. In the New Testament, living in reconciled relationship as a Christian community is the equivalent of all the elaborate procedures for service that were required of Israel. Paul is asserting that this reconciled community should be able to come to a common mind in discerning the will of God. This discerning process is to be an active engagement where the participants struggle through their differences to come to a common agreement.⁶⁴ In this way, they are better able to come to an understanding of the will of God, both that which is revealed generally in scripture, and that which is communally discerned and agreed to by a congregation within a specific context.

Interestingly, Paul shifts the language in versus 3-8 to singular pronouns and nouns that have singular outcomes. Here the focus is on helping the members of the Roman congregation recognize and celebrate the diversity of spiritual gifts by which each person contributes to the whole. When each is making a contribution, then the reality of becoming “members one of another” comes to expression, and they realize and experience their inherent unity in the midst of their diversity (verse 5). This communal discernment of the

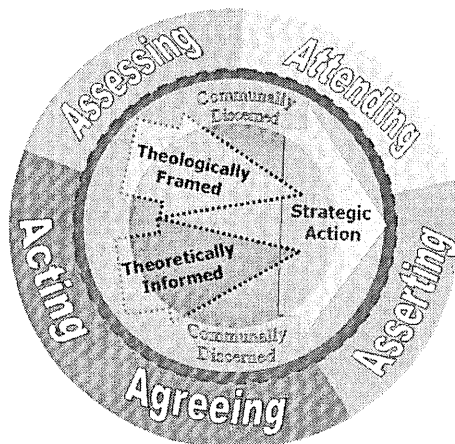
⁶⁴ One should note here the similarity in perspective to that, as illustrated earlier in this essay, which is argued by Habermas (communicative reason), Gadamer (dialogue), and Ricoeur (conversation-discourse).

will of God by a congregation requires dialogue among reconciled members who bring their own perspectival contribution to the process. The intended result is their effective ministry to one another (verses 9-13), and their effective service and witness to a watching world (verses 14-21).

As noted earlier, this process assumes the presence of the Spirit to lead and guide a congregation, through its leaders, into discerning the will of God in relation to its particular context, and into making strategic choices to implement this understanding. The Spirit's leading involves the giftedness of all God's people, and this diverse giftedness, with its inherent multi-perspectival views, contributes to the communal character of discernment and decision making.

FRAMING A PROCESS

The following process is suggested as a way to operationalize the discernment and decision making required of congregations for leading in mission.⁶⁵ These steps assume that there are specific issues which must be addressed, or problems which must be resolved, things that are regularly before Christian congregations. While these steps are discussed here in a sequenced manner, they are, in fact, interactive in character and often fold back into one another in the actual discernment and decision-making process.



⁶⁵ The work by Whitehead and Whitehead, *Method in Ministry* has helped shape the understanding of this process as presented in this essay. They stress three phases - attending, asserting, and deciding

Attending - This phase of the process involves giving careful attention to the context, both the context of the congregation and that of the larger community within its cultural milieu. The key question is, "In light of the issue to be addressed, or the problem to be solved, what can be learned from giving careful attention to the situation as it is presented?" This is where the hermeneutical nature of human knowing comes into play. If communal discernment is utilized, there will usually be a variety of interpretive lenses used to try and understand what is going on. The goal is to achieve what Clifford Geertz describes as a thick description of reality.⁶⁶ Attending is the part of the process that includes both listening to the various perspectives, and also testing these against one another through using a type of triangulation process found in mixed-method research.⁶⁷

It is important in this phase of the process not to prematurely engage in decision making regarding various interpretations. This can often be a difficult discipline to exercise in communal discernment within congregations, because there often are persons who want to move quickly to take action because they believe the course of action is obvious. One other important dimension of the attending process in Christian congregations is to read the interpretation of the situation from a theological perspective. In understanding God as an acting subject in the world, the following two questions are helpful in gaining a fuller perspective on God's presence and activity: "What is God doing?" and "What does God want to do?"

Asserting - This phase of the process involves testing alterative strategic choices for action, but doing so in relation to both biblical-theological frameworks and theoretical insights from the social sciences and common wisdom. It is critical to always assess potential action in terms of how it conforms to or might flow out of a biblical-theological understanding. This is where the texts function in an authoritative and normative way. It is also critical to bring theoretical information from the social sciences and common

⁶⁶ Although Gilbert Ryle was the first to use the phrase, "thick description," Geertz was certainly the one to popularize it. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

⁶⁷ T.D. Jick, "Mixing Qualitative and Quantitative Methods: Triangulation in Action," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 24 (December 1979): 602-611.

wisdom to bear on possible strategies. It is helpful to bring a variety of such perspectives into the discernment process so that the multi-perspectival character of interpreting life and explaining a situation can be considered.

It is also helpful to consider a variety of strategic choices in the discernment process and the possible implications of each choice. Sometimes the action of choice will be more tactical in nature, and thereby have a shorter planning window for implementation. At other times, the action of choice may be more systemic in nature, requiring a longer planning window.

Agreeing - This phase involves the process of coming to a communally-discerned agreement on the strategic action of choice in light of biblical-theological foundations and theoretical insights. Foundational to this process for a Christian congregation is the role of prayer, which invites the active participation of the Spirit into the discernment and decision process. Attention should always be given to three things in coming to a communally-discerned strategic action. First, the action should be intentionally founded in a biblical-theological framework so that in leading in mission there is a clear understanding available regarding how this action relates to or flows from God's mission and the congregation's participation in it. Second, the action of choice should be informed by the best available insights from the social sciences which bear on the strategic action that is being planned. And third, the implications involved in a strategic choice should be considered relative to the amount of change required to implement it, or the amount of disruption that it will most likely create within the congregation.

Acting - This phase of the process involves the implementation of the strategic choice that was communally discerned and agreed to. An implementation plan should have already been developed during the agreeing phase of the process, and should include both action steps and a time table. Usually adjustments along the way in implementing a strategic action are necessary, which means that leading in mission requires constant attention for leaders of Christian congregations.

There are three dimensions that are important to the

implementation process. These are: (1) having a proactive communications strategy that keeps people regularly informed of what is happening; (2) providing active prayer that supports the action that is being implemented; and (3) engaging in regular feedback regarding progress being made, which allows for adjustments to the process when necessary.

Assessing - This phase of the process builds on the third dimension of acting that is listed above. It involves a thorough review of what took place in the implementation process of the strategic choice that was made. Efforts to learn from this process, both in terms of what worked and what didn't work, are important to consider. Depending on this assessment, a refocused strategic choice might be determined, which would take the congregation back through the process starting with attending. Or new realities that emerged in light of this previous strategic choice might need to be addressed through a process of communal discernment.

SUMMARY

Leading in mission in a congregation is a complex but essential task for Christian leaders. Doing so requires an awareness of the hermeneutical character of the interpretive process of determining choices for action and discerning what strategic action to take. Doing so also requires a commitment to the communal nature of decision making within the interpretive process, one that is grounded in biblical-theological perspectives which are informed by insights from the social sciences. In the opening example of this essay, the council of Faith Community utilized such a framework for addressing their space problem. In addition, they also utilized the initial steps in the discernment process that are developed in this essay. Drawing on a framework such as this and developing a discernment and decision-making process in light of it, are foundational for Christian leaders who are seeking to lead Christian communities in mission. This is especially so for Christian leaders and communities who acknowledge and embrace the interpreted and perspectival nature of human existence and the inherent risk involved in trying to faithfully respond to God in the aftermath of the hermeneutical turn.

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