God's Electricians:

Participatory Action Research Methodology as a Model for Missional Leadership in the Suburban Congregation

by

Rev. Dr. Steve Thomason, Ph.D.

Introduction

When I was a young boy most people thought I was quiet and compliant. This was mostly true. My parents, however, new that I was SBD (Silent, but Deadly). They worried most when things were too quiet.

One day I took an SBD adventure and discovered my mother's tweezers. This strange metal object had two prongs. I had seen other objects with two metal prongs. The outlet on the wall curiously had two holes. The other objects with two metal prongs fit in those holes.

I wonder if tweezers fit…ZAP!

That's when I first learned to respect the power of electricity.

The purpose of this paper is to propose that the Religious leader in the suburban context must consider herself a steward of God's power. A helpful, and somewhat playful, metaphor to understand this stewardship is to imagine the leader as an electrician. The movement of God's Spirit in the world is the flow of power in society. Think of this power as if it were electricity. Electricity is the movement of ionized energy and it can be used for destructive or constructive purposes. The way electricity is used is determined by the knowledge, skills, and intention of those who seek to harness this power. These people are called electricians.

The electrician is one who has studied electricity, respects its raw power, and has learned how to channel that power to provide the desired outcomes. There are two ways that the electrician can perceive herself. She can either (a) see herself as an owner and

controller of power, or (b) see herself as a facilitator of power. The owner/controller can be tempted to hoard electricity, use it for selfish gain, and extort those who need it. The facilitator, on the other hand, sees herself as a servant of the people who, through knowledge and wisdom, brings the power to the people who need it so that they can experience a higher quality of life. Further, the electrician understands that the raw power of electricity is dangerous and must be treated with healthy fear and respect as it is properly channeled through the construction of the power grid that evenly distributes the energy to the proper locations.

The church leader is God's electrician. The movement of the Holy Spirit is like electricity. It is the raw power of God. Church leaders throughout history have been tempted to perceive themselves as owners/controllers of power. The modern leadership model supported a command-control, top-down, bureaucratic style of leadership, and the modern church leader often followed suit. This style of leadership tempted the leader to manipulate power to control and, sometimes, extort the church members.

This paper is precipitated by the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Religious Leadership in the Spring of 2018. The focus of this meeting aims at the increasing complexity and cultural challenges facing both religious leadership itself and the formation and teaching of religious leadership.

The tag line of the annual meeting states, "The Academy and the Church stand at a crossroads." I find myself at a similar crossroads as I stand on both the congregational and the academic road. On the one hand, I am a rostered leader in the ELCA and serve full-time as one of the pastors of a large suburban congregation. On the other hand, I hold a PhD in Congregational Mission and Leadership from Luther Seminary and teach, in an

adjunct capacity, Missional Leadership at Luther Seminary. The fact that I stand at this intersection makes this topic vitally important to me personally and, in my opinion, crucial for the future of the local congregation as we seek to form leaders that are equipped to navigate the turbulent waters of discontinuous change that are the norm in our current pluralistic, globalized, and politically volatile civilization.

The focus of this paper is to explore the characteristics necessary for the Missional leader in the suburban Lutheran congregation. I narrow the focus so tightly for two reasons. First, it is not always helpful to make gross generalizations when every cultural context brings with it unique challenges for the leader. Second, the data from which I will draw my suggestions come from a particular experience of the Deep in the Burbs (DITB) research project conducted in 2014 amongst three Upper-Midwestern Suburban congregations from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). While this focus is narrow, I believe the observations gleaned from this experience can have helpful implications for the broader context of the church.

The DITB data indicate that the missional leader would be better served if she understands her role to be that of the humble servant who facilitates God's power, through knowledge and wisdom, to create a democratic and generative community of God's grace and peace. The reason for this proposal will become clearer as the details of the project are explained.

Framing the Project

Permission to Skip Ahead

This section of the paper is intended to provide the theoretical and theological framework for the Deep in the Burbs project. You may be an academic who cares about such things. If so, please enjoy. You may be a religious leader who seeks practical application for how to lead religious organizations in the post-modern suburban context. Feel free to skip this section and jump right to the Implications for Leadership section. No judgment.

The Story of the Question

The Deep in the Burbs project was more than an academic endeavor for me. It is part of the ongoing story of my own spiritual formation as a suburban pastor and missional theologian. I had an experience with the social Trinity that significantly impacted my understanding and practice of spiritual formation and the missional church. I became convinced that the social Trinity and relational ontology was an essential theological framework for cultivating a missional imagination and wholistic spiritual formation. This experience led to a question. I wondered what would happen if other people were exposed to the social Trinity, like I was. Would they have a similar experience to mine, or would it be different? Is there a connection between the social Trinity and spiritual formation? Is the social Trinity essential to a missional imagination for the suburban church?

This is the question that shaped the Deep in the Burbs (DITB) project:

How might an increased awareness and understanding of the social Trinity impact the ideation and praxis of spiritual formation in suburban ELCA congregations?

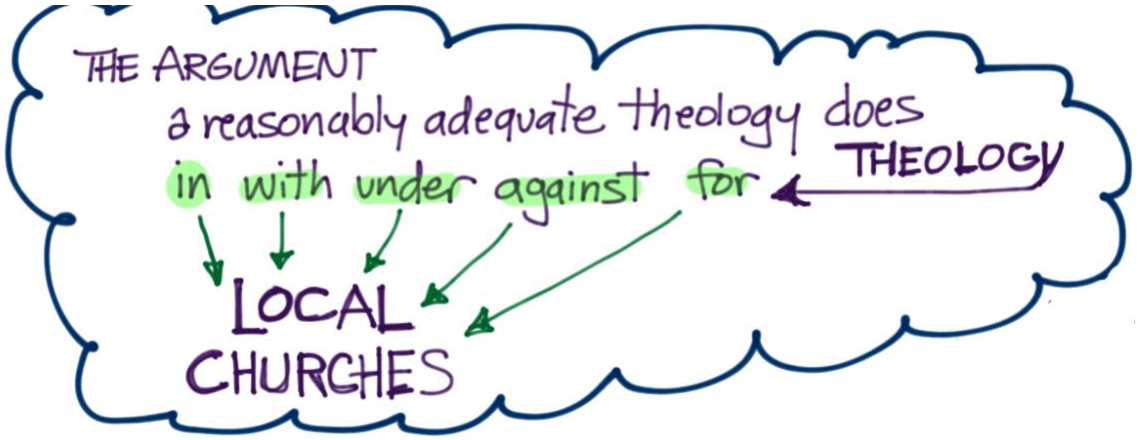

Figure 1. A Reasonably Adequate Christian Theology

I believe that a reasonably adequate Christian theology is done in, with, under, against, and for the local congregation.[1] Theology is not the construction of abstract ideas about God, but is the experience of God at work in particular congregations through communicative action. Therefore, the only way I could explore my question was to figure out how to expose a group of suburbanites to the social Trinity in such a way that I did not manipulate the situation to get them to have the same experience that I did or come to the same conclusions that I did. I decided that the best way to do this was to form a participatory action research (PAR) team. The PAR process is designed to facilitate a communicative, participatory space in which community members can be empowered to dream new dreams for their community around specific issues of importance to them.

I invited eighteen people from three ELCA congregations in three adjacent suburbs to form a PAR Research Team (RT) at the end of February, 2014. We met eight times to discuss and reflect upon our ideas about the Trinity, spiritual formation, and life

[1] I am indebted to Dr. Patrick Keifert for this important understanding of the nature of theology. This is his modification of David Kelsey's assertion that theological education is done *about*, *against*, and *for* the local congregation. David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

in the suburbs. I invited the team to dream new dreams about spiritual formation in the suburban context. The team members created action projects that expressed their new ideas about the social Trinity and spiritual formation. They carried out those projects in their own contexts over the course of seven months. Finally, the team regrouped in November, 2014 and tried to make sense out of what happened in our experiences. We began to claim that the PAR experience itself was Trinitarian praxis that impacted each member of the RT in a unique way. This paper will relate what the RT discovered regarding leadership and why we think it matters for the missional church in the suburbs.

Using Participatory Action Research

The research question raised the issue of methodology. How would I go about creating a space in which this process could happen? Who would I invite to this space? How would I increase their awareness and understanding? How would I guard against using instrumental reason and manipulating the experience so that people would reach the same experience that I had? How could I facilitate a learning environment that cultivated—as much as possible—a safe, communicative, free space where people could engage the social Trinity in their own way and have authentic responses? How could I discern any type of impact, if there were to be any?

I had to continually return to my initial experience of the social Trinity in order to counteract my instrumental tendencies throughout the course of the research project. The social Trinity deconstructs dualistic theism, substantive ontology, and instrumental pedagogical methodologies. That deconstruction within my own understanding is the very thing that I wanted to introduce to the RT. It was necessary, therefore, to establish a

methodology that embodied relational ontology and constructivist pedagogy. The most logical choice of methodology was participatory action research (PAR).

What is PAR?

PAR has its roots in the work of Paulo Freire and the Pedagogy of the Oppressed.[2] It "originated as a challenge to positivist research paradigms."[3] It is also built upon the Critical Social Theory and communicative rationality taught by Jürgen Habermas.[4]

PAR seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it. At its heart is collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves. The reflective process is directly linked to action, influenced by understanding of history, culture, and local context and embedded in social relationships. The process of PAR should be empowering and lead to people having increased control over their lives.

There is a certain irony that I would choose PAR to work with a group of white, middle-class, suburbanites. Hall notes that the first point of PAR is that it "involves a whole range of powerless groups of people—exploited, the poor, the oppressed, and the marginal."[5] The members of the RT were anything but poor, powerless, or marginalized. Why then, did I choose PAR to pursue this research question? Herein lies a theological prejudice on my part. It is my argument that the churched-culture of the suburban ELCA

---

[2] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

[3] Budd L. Hall, "In from the Cold? Reflections on Participatory Research from 1970-2005," *Convergence* 38, no. 1 (2005): 18.

[4] Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*; Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*.

[5] Hall, "In from the Cold? Reflections on Participatory Research from 1970-2005," 12.

congregational context is one that has inherited hegemonic tendencies in the area of theology and practice. The inherited church hierarchy and pedagogical methodologies have fostered a pastor-centered ecclesiology that, I would argue, has oppressive tendencies for the congregational members. While the RT members were not oppressed in a socio-economic perspective, they have been oppressed ideologically through ecclesiastical structures. PAR allowed me, as a representative of that hierarchical power structure, to facilitate an emancipatory space that offered the RT the opportunity to experience liberative thought in theological and ecclesial matters. This, I would argue, is a necessary process for the missional imagination to take root in the suburban ELCA congregation.

How Does PAR Work?

PAR is participatory, it is action, and it is research. PAR is participatory in that the lead researcher is an active member of the group, participating fully in the process of collaborative meaning-making. It is action in the sense that the methodology is built upon the praxis cycle of action-reflection-action. The group discusses a relevant issue, dreams new dreams around the issue, takes action based upon new ideas, reflects upon the action and the implications of the action, reconfigures the ideas based upon the reflection, engages in new forms of action, reflects again, and so on. It is research in the sense that the team reflects upon the process in light of the larger conversation of scholarship around the issues and articulates the newly constructed knowledge through scholarly media for the benefit of the larger academic community.[6]

[6] See Hess, "Collaborating with People to Study "the Popular": Implementing Participatory Action Research Strategies in Religious Education." Stoecker argues that the researcher must take on a different role based upon the needs and composition of the research team. Randy Stoecker, "Are Academics

The Missional Frame

Since I have framed this project in a missional imagination, it is important that I define my use of the term missional. A missional ecclesiology is an understanding that the mission of the Triune God (missio Dei) is to restore and recreate all things according to God's ongoing vision of peace and wholeness for the world. The church is called to be a public prophetic companion with its neighbors, bearing witness to the hope found in God's preferred and promised future.

Missional ecclesiology has evolved from the conversation in the West around missiology and ecclesiology over the past one hundred years. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were dominated by a Christendom model in which the church sent missionaries into the world to convert heathen nations to Christianity. The intention of these missionaries was essentially pure, as they were carrying out the Great Commission from within their own perspective. However, the subsequent effects of their missionary endeavors often led to colonizing parts of the non-European world into Western European culture and propagating oppression and marginalization of non-European people and cultures in the name of Jesus. A missional ecclesiology recognizes the Eurocentric and devastating effects the Christendom model of missions and ecclesiology has had on the world. It strives to reimagine the nature of the church as not having a missions emphasis, or sending missionaries, but that the church is missional at its core.

A missional church recognizes the polycentric and pluriform nature of the Holy Spirit at work in the world. The church, within this perspective, is the congregation of those who are both gathered around the risen body of Jesus and sent into the world to find

---

Irrelevant? Roles for Scholars in Participatory Research," in *American Sociologcial Society Annual Meeting* (1997).

and proclaim the reign of God in and among all cultures as the church forms an interdependent relationship with all nations. This missional activity is not uni-directional, moving from one central place where God is located and correctly understood to another place where God is completely absent. Rather, it is a polycentric, pluriform, multi-directional movement of God at work in all cultures, in diverse ways, bringing all cultures into generative conversation, in order to bring about peace and unity through the particular incarnation of the risen Jesus of Nazareth and the diverse incarnations of the Spirit within diverse cultures.

The Suburbs

The DITB project is a suburban experience. We must state an important reality regarding the suburban context. There is no such thing as The Suburbs. All suburbs are unique places. However, there are some unifying factors that are characteristic of most suburbs that resonate with the literature regarding suburban studies.

All three suburbs in the DITB project fall predominantly within the bedroom-developing (B/D) classification. The typical B/D suburbanite (again, if that is fair to say) is a member of a middle-class family where both parents (many of whom are divorced and now living in two-house, shared family scenarios) work and the children are involved in multiple school and civic activities. They strive to gain a sense of autonomy, self-sufficiency, and the bourgeois ideal.[7] They spend a great deal of time driving between

[7] Fishman argues that the country estate in near proximity to the city has been a symbol of status that was once only available to the nobility. The rising bourgeois class aspired to acquire such garden spots just outside the city since the late middle ages. Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

work, school, and social activities.[8] They have access to cable television and streaming Internet. Most members of the household have a personal digital device of some sort and often resort to texting as the preferred mode of communication.

The dominant vision of the B/D suburb is: ownership of a detached single-family house; automobile ownership; low-rise workplaces; small communities with strong local governments; environment free from signs of poverty.[9] The modern dogma of fact/value, public/private dichotomy is the dominant vision. The local church is, if thought of at all, one component of the fragmented private world. Living a good life and keeping the family safe is the highest priority. The sociological factors that drive the B/D vision are radical individualism, self-sufficiency, autonomy, personal liberty and freedom, consumerism, and the commodification of goods, services, and people.[10] The research will reveal how the research team members: (a) recognized these factors within themselves, and (b) allowed the social Trinity to invite them into a new imagination.

The ELCA

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is well situated to handle the paradoxical tensions between polarized extremes in the suburban context because the ELCA is a paradox that dwells in paradox. It is, on the one hand, ideally situated to offer

---

[8] This is a significant result of the automobile and zoning issues. Families live so far away from school, places of worship, and entertainment, that it is unrealistic for children to walk to most places. This forces the children to either rely on an adult to drive them to every place they need to go or sit at home and seek self-entertainment. The fact that children travel great distances from many directions to attend school and/or church diminishes the likelihood that school and/or church friends will live within walking distance. These physical limitations have fostered the radical individualism and isolation experienced by many suburban youth.

[9] Allan D. Wallis, "Filling the Governance Gap," *National Civic Review* 87, no. 1 (1998): 103.

[10] The drive for radical individual freedom and space is what drives most suburban communities. Garreau discusses how these values have formed Edge Cities that have redefined the meaning of community based upon these individualistic and utilitarian values. Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

a holding space for the type of communicative, missional imagination that I am arguing in this paper. It is also, on the other hand, significantly hindered in its ability to be that holding space. Let us explore the two sides of this paradox.

On the one hand, the ELCA is well suited to hold paradoxical tensions and communicative space for the missional church. This is true in three ways. First, the ELCA is a political paradox. It is a merger of formerly disparate Lutheran traditions; thus its DNA holds these differences in living tension. The ELCA was officially formed in 1988 by the merger of three Lutheran churches: LCA, ALC, and AELC. Each of those churches was the result of similar mergers in the 1960s.

Second, Lutheran theology is essentially paradoxical, in that part of its DNA is to hold theological dichotomies in tension; e.g. sinner and saint; the God who is hidden and revealed; the Kingdom on the right and the Kingdom on the left; to name just a few. Lutheran theology does not try to prove a definitive "right" answer that disproves the "wrong" answer. Rather, it acknowledges the mystery of the Triune God and seeks to hold these alleged dichotomies in living tension. That is one of the main reasons why I have been drawn to this tribe and why I have framed the DITB research project in the ELCA context. Lutheran theology, I believe, is wonderfully situated to be a holding space for people to encounter the Triune God in communicative action in the context of the local congregation.

Third, the ELCA is well situated to hold the communicative space for the missional church because it has a stated vision to be missional. I make this claim based upon the language of the ELCA constitution. Article 4.01 states, "The Church is a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness

to God's creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world." Article 4.02 states that to "participate in God's mission, the church shall...carry out Christ's Great Commission by reaching out to all people to bring them to faith in Christ and by doing all ministry with a global awareness consistent with the understanding of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier of all…working for peace and reconciliation among the nations, and standing with the poor and powerless and committing itself to their needs…to see daily life as the primary setting for the exercise of their Christian calling, and to use the gifts of the Spirit for their life together and for their calling in the world."[11]

However, the ELCA, on the other side, has some inherent elements of its DNA that can sometimes inhibit the freedom needed to structure communicative spaces. Three theological issues challenge the ELCA congregation and hinder its ability to move more fully into the missional imagination. They are: ecclesial identity, the sacraments, and polity.

The first theological challenge is that of ecclesial identity. Lutheranism was born under Christendom in Europe. The church was the center of society in that world. Everyone born within the political realm, of which the local church was the center, was considered Christian and a member of the parish. The ecclesial identity of the parish church is what immigrated to the United States. This worked in the first and second generations of immigrants since they tended to live near each other and established the church in the center of their dwellings. The parish mentality dominated the United States during one hundred fifty years of its existence, thus creating a churched culture. If people

[11] ELCA, "Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Constitutions_of_the_ELCA_April_2015.pdf?_ga=1.41172258.1839545692.1408805828 (accessed April 1, 2015).

wanted to commune with God, they went to church. The trajectory of this identity is still very evident in the suburban context of the RT. There is a great deal of pressure put on parents by the grandparents to get their children baptized and confirmed. This traditionalism is incongruent with the increasing pluralism of the suburbs and creates great tension among the generations.

The second theological issue is that of the sacrament. Lutheran sacramental theology lays a strong emphasis on the belief that the real presence of the risen Christ is in, with, and under the elements of bread and wine. It also closely associates the presence of the Holy Spirit with the Word as it is proclaimed and with the water of baptism. This theology is beautiful and can have some important missional implications. However, it also raises two notable hazards. First, there is a tendency, for the Lutheran, to have a God-in-the-box theology. God is contained within the sacraments and the liturgy. If a human wishes to commune with God she must enter the church and participate in the liturgical structures in order to do so. The RT faced this issue as it explored the role of the Holy Spirit in the social Trinity as it stood in relation to the traditional Lutheran theology. The second hazard has to do with the administration of Word and Sacrament and leads into the third issue.

The third theological issue is that of polity. Article VII of the Augsburg Confession defines the church as "the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered."[12] It goes on in Articles XIV and XV to speak of good order regarding ecclesiastical usages and restricts the administration of the sacraments to those who have been called by the church. The

[12] Philip Melancthon, *The Augsburg Confession*, ed. F. Bente and W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921). (italics mine)

ambiguity of the term good order, combined with the historical tradition of hierarchical power structures within certain episcopal-structured branches of the Lutheran tradition, has created a bureaucratic power structure within the national-synodical structure of the ELCA. The RT experienced this tension as it asked the questions of power and authority in the local congregation.

The Lutheran Suburban Congregation

The RT was a unique combination of stories that gathered in a particular frame of time and constructed a particular set of knowledge. However, the two dominant stories that brought this team together were those of the B/D suburb and the ELCA congregation existing within it. The generalized description of congregations similar to those of RT may read as follows:

The suburban ELCA congregation consists of older, ethnically oriented (Scandinavian) members mixed with younger, transient, middle-class families who have a vague cultural memory of religious commodities such as Sunday School and confirmation. It is connected to a hierarchical power structure of which it is the lowest of three rungs.[13] It is situated in a brick-and-mortar building that was first established to house the religious commodities needed for the Lutheran constituents within the sprawling suburban region. The members travel a number of miles, past other, closer church buildings, from multiple residential communities to gather in the building for liturgical practices that are in keeping with the traditional Lutheran patterns of the proper

[13] The ELCA claims that it is not a top-down bureaucracy, but is, rather, an interdependent partnership of three expressions of the church—the churchwide organization, the synod, and the local congregation. The reality is that, in the American culture which is dominated by neo-Weberian bureaucratic structures, it is difficult to function in any way other than a top-down command and control system.

administration of Word and Sacrament. In the suburban culture of increasing dislocation, the commodification of self, consumerism, and the hectic lifestyle of auto-mobility, social-networking, and self-indulgent consumer-based entertainment, the local congregation is just one small commodity on a vast smorgasbord of viable options for the American consumer of religious goods and/or recreational, self-gratifying activities. The leader who seeks to structure missional spaces in ELCA suburban congregations must be aware of these dynamics and seek ways to fully embrace the paradoxical nature of Lutheran theology and help the ELCA creatively adapt to the ever-changing suburban environment.

Kegan's Orders of Consciousness

Robert Kegan's theory of the Orders of Human Consciousness offers an important theoretical frame for this research project. Kegan asserts that human beings are not "beings," but that the human being is an activity. He says, "It is not about the doing which a human does: it is about the doing that a human is."[14] The activity of being human is the process of making meaning out of experiential data in community. We are relational beings that continually interact in our physical and social environment and make meaning out of those interactions as we develop throughout the course of our lives.[15]

Kegan observes that neuro-typical humans have the potential to evolve through five basic orders of consciousness that alter the subject/object relationship as it pertains to making meaning. Each order is like a filter, or a set of lenses through which the

---

[14] Ibid., 8.

[15] I created an animation to help visualize the evolution through the five orders. http://www.deepintheburbs.com/in-over-our-heads-by-robert-kegan/ (accessed February 12, 2015)

individual makes sense out of—or "orders"—the experiential data. The filter is part of the subject/observer that influences how the object is perceived and understood. The filter is not perceived in itself, but is the ubiquitous lens that colors the data. As the individual evolves into the next order, she moves outside of the previous filter, and is able to observe the previous filter as a new object. This new order of consciousness is, in itself, a new filter that alters her positionality as a subject/observer and allows her to perceive the previous filter and make dramatically different forms of meaning than was previously possible. The relationship between these five orders is like the relationship between a point, a line, a plane, a sphere, and a tesseract. Each one is part of, but beyond the previous order. Kegan has also observed that most neuro-typical humans reach the third order of consciousness during adolescence and stay there for the rest of their lives.

There is an important distinction between the first three orders and the last two orders. The first three orders evolve naturally in the neuro-typical child, and most neuro-typical humans begin adulthood functioning at a third order of consciousness. Unlike child development, however, not every adult will automatically progress to fourth and fifth order consciousness.

The following is a brief description of third, fourth, and fifth order consciousness. Kegan uses historical periods in Western history as a metaphor to describe these orders:

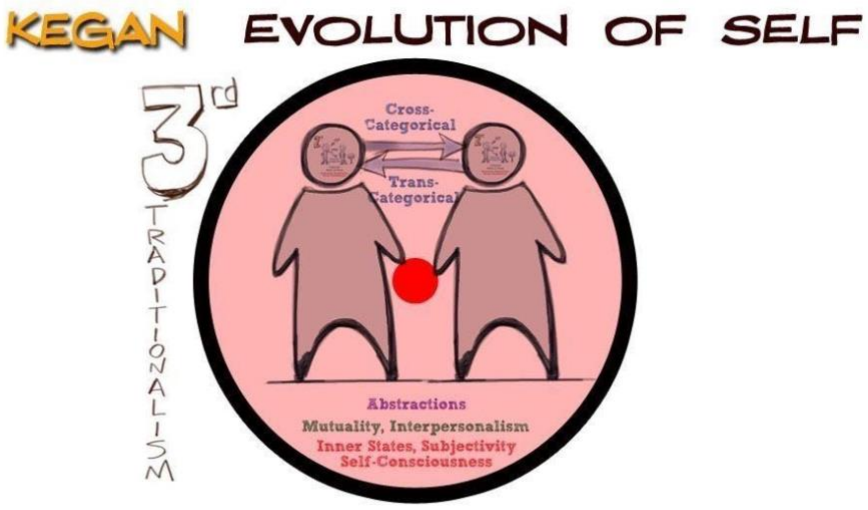

Figure 6. Third-Order Consciousness

Third Order. Kegan describes the third-order consciousness as traditionalism. It is like the time in medieval Europe when the average citizen was born, lived, and died within the same village. Each person knew his or her place in society and knew the rules of that society. The world was comprised of "right" and "wrong" and each person had the choice to either comply with society or to rebel against it. The distinctive feature of this order of consciousness is that the rules of society are the filter through which the individual perceives and makes meaning out of all reality. There are no other societal systems from which to choose, there is only "the way things are." The person operating from third-order consciousness views all other people through his or her own filter and judges them according to that system. It is important to note that this judgment is not born out of bigotry, but out of the intrinsic belief that there is actually only one way to view the world.

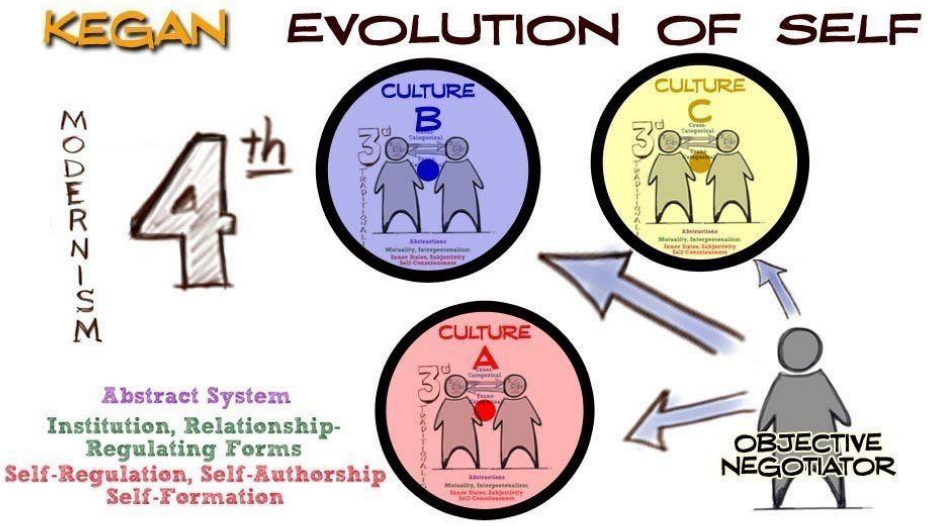

Figure 7. Fourth-Order Consciousness

Fourth Order. Kegan uses the modern era to describe fourth-order consciousness. The twentieth century has brought the modern person into constant contact with multiple cultures and a never-ending stream of data. This barrage of data has caused us, in the modern era, to feel "In Over Our Heads"[16] and unable to cope with competing cultural perspectives and the relationships which are constituted by those competing cultural dynamics. The person in third-order consciousness, when faced with another cultural system different from her own, naturally creates us and them boundaries, declaring her us to be the correct way of perceiving the world and the other's them to be wrong. These harsh boundaries have contributed to violence and bloodshed throughout the centuries of cultural interaction. The individual who evolves into fourth-order consciousness transcends the third-order filter and perceives that her system is one system among many. She then becomes an objective observer of systems. She is a free agent in the world, able

[16] Robert Kegan, *In over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

to negotiate between systems, voluntarily interacting and valuing other systems. This consciousness allows an individual to pursue peaceful transactions with an "other" and to manage modern, plural, realities.

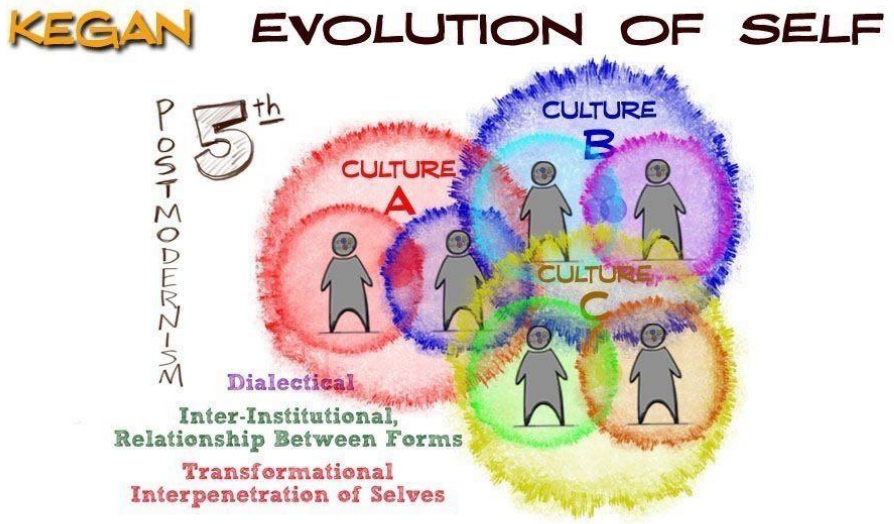

Figure 8. Fifth-Order Consciousness

Fifth Order. Kegan uses the emergence of Western culture into the postmodern era as a way to describe fifth-order consciousness as it emerges from fourth-order thinking. There is a blessing and a curse in fourth-order consciousness. The blessing is that an individual is able to negotiate peaceful transactions between multiple systems. The curse, however, is that an individual cannot see beyond isolation, atomism, a monadist perspective on the world, where while it is possible to observe that there are multiple systems, it is not yet possible to see how they interpenetrate and "make each other up." This isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and nihilism.

Kegan's theory is important for the DITB project as it relates to the missional church. Kegan argues that the activity of human being is meaning-making. We are not

empty vessels that come to church to be filled with knowledge from the teacher-centered ministry of the Word. We are not isolated, atomistic individual substances that randomly float through space in voluntary transactions. We are humans-beings-making-meaning-together. I would suggest that the missional leader is called to structure spaces in which humans can be together to be human. The act of engaging the research team in participatory, communicative action demonstrated the missional church's vocation to invite people into being fully human as we make sense out of the Trinitarian life together.

Implications for Leadership in the Missional Church

The typical Lutheran suburbanite lives under extreme societal pressures to be a self-actualized, successful individual who navigates between a myriad of cultural choices as a radical individual with the power to choose. How can the Lutheran leader of suburban congregations cultivate spaces in which these suburbanites can find help to navigate these turbulent waters? What have we learned from the DITB project that might provide some insight into this question? In this, the final section, I will focus on my personal experience of leading the RT, and its possible implications for the missional church.

I struggled with the power differential inherent within the research process. I was keenly aware of how much control I had over the structure of the room, the framing of the questions, the direction of the conversation, etc. I was also keenly aware of the constant push from some of the team members to ask me to give more direction, more clarity, and more answers. They often felt frustrated by the open-endedness of the process. Honestly, I felt frustrated by it at times and constantly fought the urge to swoop in like the hero-leader and fix everything.

I asked the RT to reflect on this issue. What advice would they give to the church leader based on their experience in the DITB project? We learned four things. First, the missional leader must be aware of the power dynamics and learn to steward the power. Second, the missional leader sets the table, not the outcomes. Third, the missional leader listens. Fourth, the missional leader moves between.

Missional Leaders Steward Power

The first way we can address the question of leadership is to be honest about the issue of power. I faced an ongoing struggle with this issue as I led the RT through the DITB process. How would I handle my power? I entered the project carrying two forms of power.

The first form of power is positional. I am an ordained pastor in the ELCA. The RT was comprised of ELCA members, most of whom are members of the church in which I served. The Lutheran tradition has a history of hierarchical power structures in which the pastor (historically male, exclusively) wielded great control over the various congregational processes. I was automatically imbued with this power in the RT simply because I am a pastor. Further, I was the lead researcher. It was my project, so the position of "leader" also carries with it inherent power.

The second form of power I possessed was cognitive. This was, after all, my research project. I had been immersed in four years of academic study, therefore my head was full of information that the RT did not have. Modern, Western society, being dominated by rationalism and empirical science, values knowledge above all things. Therefore, as Francis Bacon famously said, "Knowledge is power." Knowledge, training, and extended vocabulary tends to intimidate people who are not fluent in a particular

academic discipline and shifts the power to the one in the room who is considered "the expert." I was the "expert" in the question the RT set out to explore and they often looked to me to give them "answers."

The first step to stewarding power is to reflect upon and become aware of the power dynamics. I often underestimate the power I wield in the minds of congregation members. Thus, it is easy to overload people. Here is a common example of such overload. A leader who is unaware of his power may make a casual statement in the course of a staff meeting. The statement was merely an act of thinking out loud. This same statement, when received by less powerful staff members, or church members/volunteers, may be perceived as a directive intended for action. What happens if the staff members act upon this statement, only to discover that the powerful leader has forgotten about it in a few week's time? This may lead to distrust and/or disillusionment with the leader.

Missional Leaders Set the Table, not the Outcomes

We must acknowledge that none of the RT data would have happened if I—the leader of the team—did not set a table that empowered communicative action. This was my research project, after all, and I could have implemented instrumental reason at every step of the way and used my knowledge and skill to manipulate the research team. It was a learning and stretching experience for me to constantly step back and let the process unfold, trusting that God was working in, with, through, against, and for the RT the whole time.

Hierarchical, top-down, command-control leadership styles place the leader at the head of the pack, leading the charge, making the decisions about where to go next. The

missional leader sets a table and invites the stakeholders of the organization to sit, talk, listen, and dream together to discern God's preferred and promised future. This type of leadership requires the redirection of power from the front, to the center. The table would not exist—the parameters of the conversation and the safety of the space—without the proper stewardship of power within the leader's position.

Missional Leaders Listen

The modern suburban lifestyle is so fast-paced that many people find it hard to listen. Listening is a spiritual practice of slowing down that is absolutely necessary for the church to exist in a maelstrom of voices shouting in our pluralistic reality. Missional leaders must set the example and listen to God, to the church, and to the world. The nature of PAR is to create space for people to listen to each other. Thus, it is an excellent methodology for the missional leader.

We listened in a few ways in the DITB project. First, we experienced Dwelling in the Word to begin each meeting. This allowed us to listen to God through each other. Second, we stopped to write in journals periodically during the meetings, and the RT members were invited to keep a journal throughout the entire project. This allowed us to listen to God through ourselves. Third, I asked open questions and allowed space for lively conversation in which people learned to listen to opposing viewpoints. This allowed us to listen to God in public spaces.

Dwelling in the Word revealed two aspects of listening that are contrary to the normal suburban lifestyle. First, it invited the RT to slow down. They were, at first, frustrated with the fact that we dwelt in the same text for three sessions. The modern, suburban mind is used to taking in data in short bursts and then moving on to the next

thing. The slow process of dwelling in the same text was foreign to the team. Additionally, the text was read twice during each session. The slowness of the process, according to their reports, opened up pathways of awareness that they had not experienced before. They said that the slowing effects of the exercise allowed them to be more focused on the task of the discussion of the project once we got to that portion of the meeting. Without the discipline of slowing, they said, they may not have been able to get the fullness of the DITB project.

The second aspect of listening the Dwelling revealed that is contrary to the suburban lifestyle is to be open to the other. The typical white, middle-class, suburbanite is used to being in a place of power and privilege in society. This is true of the RT. Each of them are leaders in their own way, whether it be in work, church, or the fact that they all are parents. People who experience agency in society tend to speak at others and share their own opinion, rather than stop to listen to the other. The Dwelling in the Word exercise invited the RT into the uncomfortable, and unfamiliar space of listening intently to the other. The fact that each person was invited to represent his or her conversation partner's thoughts and words to the large group compelled the individual to listen in a way that all of them confessed was unnatural for them.

The Trinitarian praxis experienced in the DITB project created spaces in which the RT could reflect. This reflection allowed them to become more aware of the filters (the structural frame or operating system) through which they were previously making sense out of their experiences. The reflective action further allowed them to reframe how they approached the questions that we were asking throughout the project.

Missional Leaders Move in the Middle

The final way that we can address the question of missional leadership is to understand the pluralistic dynamic of the suburbs and the skills necessary to navigate the communicative zone that exists in the space between seemingly polarized dichotomies. The typical suburbanite is constantly faced with a myriad of options at every level of life: ranging from mundane choices between brands of cereal to the profound choice of which faith tradition—if any—in which to participate. These choices form a perplexing array of apparent dichotomies.

Every dichotomy appears to have two extreme and opposing views on either end of a continuum. Most of human history is the story of opposing sides going to war over which side is correct and best for the world. Often times a move toward peace is the move to find a spot in the middle between these extremes. This, however, is not peace between the two poles, but is the creation of a completely new perspective that is neither one side nor the other. This is almost never acceptable to either side, and it simply perpetuates the ontological gap between particular spaces on the continuum.

An image emerged in my imagination as I progressed through the DITB project that has helped me to understand the implications for leaders as we help people navigate these dichotomies. Imagine that there is a pendulum that swings between two extremes. It does not stop in one middle place on the continuum, but continually moves back and forth between the extremes. As the pendulum swings it creates a field of energy between the two extremes. The movement of the pendulum is both a particular object—the flat disc itself—and the field of energy created by the perpetual movement between the polar extremes. I would suggest, as illustrated in figure ___, that the space between the polar

extremes is the communicative zone. It is a dynamic energy that keeps the tension of the two extremes in constant dialogue, thus creating life in the third space it creates. Further, it is another image of Trinitarian praxis. I witnessed the communicative zone form within the RT as we engaged in communicative action through the various modalities of our shared project.

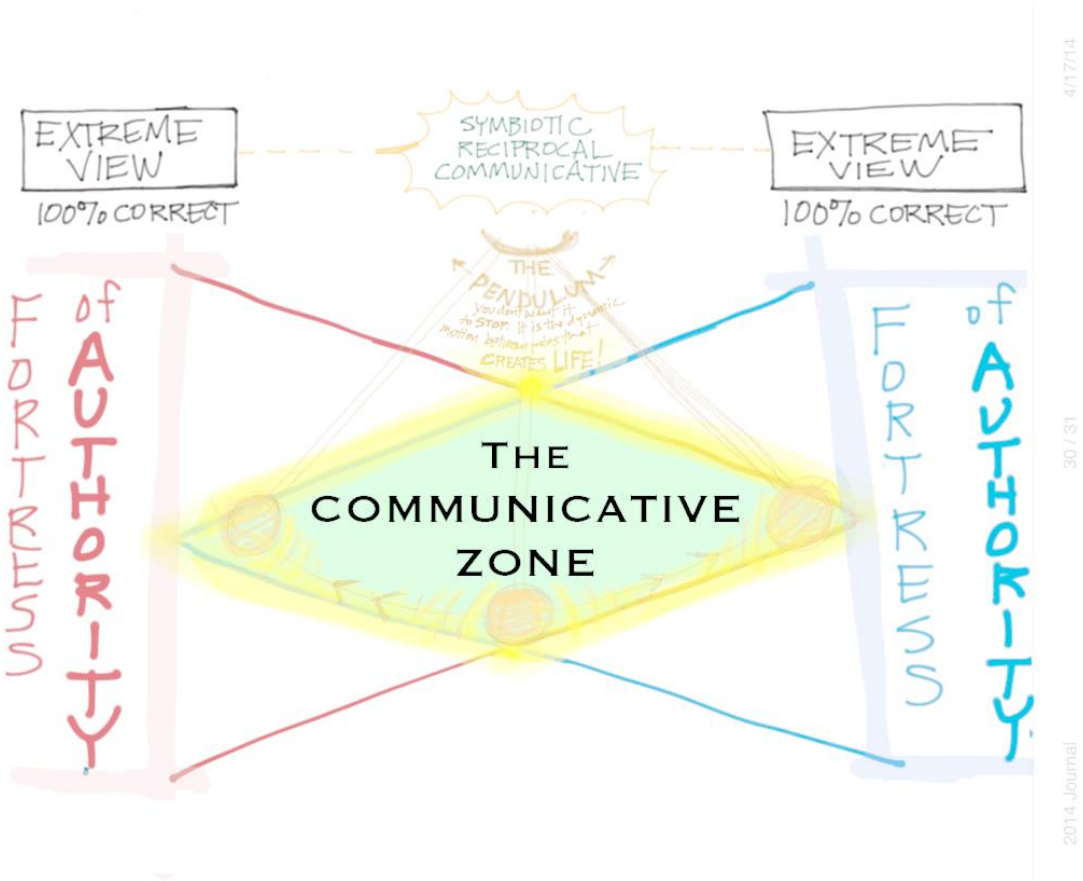

Figure ___. The Communicative Zone

How does this discussion impact the suburban leader? Here we can look to Kegan for help. Kegan uses historical timeframes as an analogy to help us understand his orders of consciousness. I will add to that analogy and use a caricatured image of the small town vs. the suburban context to further describe these orders. The small town is third-order

consciousness.17 It is a single, homogenous system in which every member understands her particular role in society. Suburban life exemplifies fourth-order consciousness. The suburban landscape is comprised of thousands of radical, atomistic, autonomous selves moving through the chaotic, ever-changing transactionally based networks. Each connection is a consciously chosen, transactional relationship that is accidental to the primary substance of the individual self. Fourth-order consciousness recognizes that there are multiple systems, and each one of these systems are equally valid, and equally meaningless in the larger scheme of the mechanistic universe, in which the detached, objective observer and wielder of power can have free reign. This lifestyle ultimately leads to isolation, loneliness, abuse of power, and the high potential for violence and oppression. These autonomous entities experience an ontological gap between that which is the "other" and this gap can often be terrifying.

This is the challenge facing the missional leader in the suburbs. Most of the members of our suburban congregations are either third-order thinkers overwhelmed by the suburban lifestyle, or fourth-order thinkers experiencing increasing levels of isolation. What if God is calling us, as the missional community, to dwell in the communicative zones between these autonomous entities and myriad of choices that exist in society? What if we are called to stop and reflect on these relationships and to notice the movement and agency of the Holy Spirit between these seemingly polarized extremes?

---

[17] I am drawing an analogy to the caricature of the small town as a geographically homogenous space as opposed to the caricature of the suburb which is fractured and multi-faceted. It would be naïve to suggest that all small-town people are third-order and all suburbanites are fourth-order. The reality is that individuals within all geographical locations will be spread along the continuum of the orders of consciousness for various reasons.

We are not asked to abandon our faith cultures, but are invited to open ourselves to the interfaith dialogue, to be willing to listen to each other: to dwell in the world and the words of the stranger. Kegan claims that fifth-order consciousness realizes that all the apparently disconnected systems are, in fact, interconnected and interdependent. It is impossible to be autonomous. The apparently radical extremes need each other to exist, and are actually created and sustained by the pendulum that swings in the field of the communicative zone. This is fifth-order consciousness. This is a picture of relational ontology. This is the life of the Trinity.

Figure 19. Fifth-Order Consciousness and The Communicative Zone

Here, again, we see why the ELCA may be an ideal space for the missional imagination, as I mentioned in chapter two. Lutheran theology upholds the tensive energy

of paradox and has the theological imagination to cultivate the communicative zone in society. Could it be that the Lutheran pastor, leading in a fifth-order, missional key, might be able to structure spaces that lead to God's peace? I would argue that this is the framework for a missional spirituality in the suburbs. Who knows? If we step into the spaces between, we just might meet the Spirit of the Living God in the suburbs.

WORKS CITED

ELCA. “Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.” http://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/Constitutions_of_the_ELCA_April_2015.pdf?_ga=1.41172258.1839545692.1408805828 (accessed April 1, 2015).

Fishman, Robert. *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*. New York: Basic Books, 1987.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30th anniversary ed. New York: Continuum, 2000.

Garreau, Joel. *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*. 1st ed. New York: Doubleday, 1991.

Habermas, Jürgen. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. 2 vols. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.

Hall, Budd L. “In from the Cold? Reflections on Participatory Research from 1970-2005.” *Convergence* 38, no. 1 (2005): 5-24.

Hess, Mary E. “Collaborating with People to Study "the Popular": Implementing Participatory Action Research Strategies in Religious Education.” *Religious Education* 96, no. 3 (2001): 271-293.

Kegan, Robert. *In over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Kelsey, David H. *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School*. 1st ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992.

Melancthon, Philip. *The Augsburg Confession*. Edited by F. Bente and W.H.T. Dau. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921.

Stoecker, Randy. “Are Academics Irrelevant? Roles for Scholars in Participatory Research.” In *American Sociologcial Society Annual Meeting*, 1997.

Wallis, Allan D. “Filling the Governance Gap.” *National Civic Review* 87, no. 1 (1998): 97-106.