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**READING THE LIVING
TEXTBOOK OF THE CHURCH
AND ITS COMMUNITY**

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Reading the Living Textbook of the Church and its Community: Integrating Congregational Studies within Field Education

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The workshop participants were field educators from the U.S., Canada and New Zealand, many of whom were already familiar with the resource, *Study Congregations: A New Handbook* edited by Nancy Ammerman, Carl Dudley, et.al., the primary resource for this Doctor of Ministry project being reported.

It is difficult to capture the rich exchange of experience and information in this format. I discovered that within the context of the workshop participants, this project was the only attempt to integrate and teach congregational studies within field education. The popular use of the resource was as a primary text in a course introducing students to the social context of the church's ministry.

Below is an outline of the presentation. A complete narrative of the Doctor of Ministry project and its analysis can be found in Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University, or by contacting Isabel N. Docampo at Perkins School of Theology.

The Addendum at the end of the outline is a work-in-progress model for theological reflection using the lenses as they are defined in the *Handbook*. I include it here because, to my surprise, much of the discussion focused on theological reflection. I welcome any comments and suggestions you may have and am happy to engage in conversation with you about this model. I use it with my students every year and gain much from their insights in how to improve it.

Workshop Abstract

Field education has a distinct role in helping persons to develop the capacity to become reflective theological leaders. Therefore, my intent was to develop a model for internship that integrated a church and community study to strengthen and enlarge the students' capacity to engage in critical inquiry. By engaging in such inquiry, the students experience the living text of the church and its community and discover how to think and act as critical theological leaders. The model was tested over two academic years beginning in the fall semester of 2000.

The practicum introduced a new method for guiding interns in understanding and implementing the analysis of the "ministry contexts" requirement in the Perkins Intern Handbook of the Perkins School of Theology. Congregational studies, outlined in the text *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, introduced a disciplined study of congregations and their communities.

The practicum brought out the existence of a barrier to learning created by the students' bifurcated mindset between theory and practice. It also demonstrated how difficult it was for students to take what they learned in practice as information that could inform theory. More exploration of the culture and pedagogy supporting this mindset and its implications for the aims of theological education is needed. It was briefly addressed in this practicum

Workshop Outline

Congregational Studies and Field Education

I chose to integrate the congregational studies model found in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* with our internship experience because its disciplined guide into the church and its community allows the student to have richer experiences and greater growth as a theological leader.

Congregational Studies integrated into the field education experience can make the living texts of the church and its community fully available to students, so they may discover how to think and act as critical theological leaders.

The key to effectiveness is found in the method put forth in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* that values the following:

- Disciplined, participant observation
- Accountability to the church and its leadership
- Public nature of the study -- the study and analysis is conducted by lay leaders and the clergy
- Shared theological reflection

These values support the goals for Theological Field Education and enhance critical thinking skills – i.e. *Thoughtful observation and listening to other perspectives, questioning personal assumptions and their sources, open to new insights.*

Components to an effective field education experience that integrates congregational studies are:

- the role of the field education faculty as teacher/guide,
- bi-weekly class meetings in which the discipline and accountability are learned and honored
- the development of peer teaching
- theological reflection supported by the congregational study, and
- monthly conversations with laity
- final summary report and conversation with the laity.

Biblical Case Study - Chapter 15 of “The Acts of the Apostles”

Early Church’s Dilemma:

- To re-interpret God’s covenant with humanity in light of recent and significant events -- such as the day of Pentecost and others -- occurring since Jesus’s death and resurrection and that were shaping the practices among new Gentile followers. These new practices and events were in conflict with long-held Jewish interpretation of God’s covenant and mandates for worship and life.

Two Key Theological Questions:

- First, were the Gentiles, who were not Jewish, accountable to the Jewish tradition of the circumcision law as a requisite to be a follower of Jesus?
- Second, were the Jewish Christians freed from Jewish tradition through Jesus’s sacrifice and the baptism of the Holy Spirit?

Early Church and the Church Today

- Practices develop and events take place challenging long-held tradition and interpretation of God and how God is revealed to humanity.
- The church thus is called into a time of discernment and accountability of its overall vision of God's revelation.
- These practices usually move the Christian church to a re-valuing of its Scripture, tradition and paradigms for God and, as a consequence, of itself.
- Paramount to the discernment process is
 1. coming to a full understanding of the practices,
 2. knowing what they mean to those who practice them,
 3. how and why they were developed,
 4. the purpose they serve the community, and
 5. knowledge of theological history and tradition and scripture.

A congregational study can assist a congregation in this discernment process by providing a process that fosters communication and understanding. Teaching this process as part of a field education experience will equip future leaders in many capacities.

Congregational Studies Integrated into Field Education Experience Outcomes:

- A Congregational study is one way an intern is able to engage in the discipline of being a participant observer to understand more fully the practices and people, what the practices mean, and how they shape the community.
- Congregational studies teaches an intern to analyze the practices of ministry to see how it *may inform* theology, history and Scripture learned in academic courses. It can parallel the discernment process in this Biblical case study.

Congregational Studies – An Overview of the Method and Principles

Principles

- A disciplined study with a systematic method for gathering information beyond intuitive awareness or haphazard investigation.
- Promotes team work with laity - a public study whose data is shared property
- Values the ministry site as a source for greater understanding of God and Christian ministry – theological reflection
- Definition of Leadership: “assist members to develop a vision for their corporate life that is faithful to their best understanding of God and God's purpose for this congregation in this time and place.”

Method

- Lay and clergy team engaged in a self-study. They collect data, conduct interviews, meet community leaders, and discuss the data together.
- Student is the Facilitator; laity are the teammates.
- Student offers for team discussion key theological, urgent questions arising from the team's analysis.
- Frames/Lenses: Five Categories for Observation and Analysis

1. Theology– “the heart of the life of the congregation” reflected in worship style, decision-making process, and mission.
2. Ecology– the congregation’s relation to its social context including political, religious and economic forces as well as its place within the context of its denomination.
3. Culture– understand congregation as a particular group of individuals who have constructed a unique way of life together with rituals, practices, artifacts, stories, heroes and myths.
4. Process– (1) the collective emotional and spiritual legacy of the congregation and (2) what are the implicit and explicit dynamics of relationships and power?
5. Resources– the human and monetary resources and the spiritual and emotional stability of the congregation.

Theological Reflection

- Congregational Studies teaches students how to listen in order to be descriptive of the church and its community
- Congregational Studies teaches students how to guide laity to become self-reflective on its current and future mission.
- Congregational Studies teaches students to suspend assumptions and judgments by first questioning the reason *they hold* these assumptions and judgments.
- Congregational Studies teaches students to reflect upon personal biases and how these affect the questions they pose and the frames they place around their observations.
- Congregational Studies teaches the importance of collecting a wide variety of voices of the congregation and community. It helps the student to move out of a comfort circle of relationships.

Changes to the Traditional Field Education model

- The introduction of the method in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* which uses the five lenses for analysis.
- Adding the requirement to write an initial and final report of the church study and then sharing it with peers and faculty
- Exploring how to engage in theological reflection case studies using the five lenses as an additional resource for analysis.
- Engaging pastoral leadership resources in light of the students’ engagement in a congregational study
- Utilizing the initial report of the congregational study as a resource for the development of the student’s learning covenant.

Contributions of this method to field education

- Gives students a task that engages them immediately with congregation and its greater community.
- Offers students a task to practice guiding laity in theological reflection and thereby enhance their growth in ministerial leadership.

- Makes it more difficult for students to isolate the work in the community from the life of the congregation.
- Enhances students' listening and observation skills
- Enhances students' ability for theological reflection
- Enhances students' ability to begin to reflect *in action*.

Limitations and Lingering Questions of this Project

- Lenses' Nomenclature is confusing initially to both students and laity
- Requires faculty to allocate time to teach and guide students in the congregational study and its application for theological reflection and ministerial leadership.
- Success is dependent on students' disposition for engaging with the community in a disciplined form.
- Requires that faculty receive training in congregational studies methodology.

Further Questions Raised by the Project

- How do adults learn? What is the role of 'aptitude for learning' or 'disposition for learning'?
- How can a field education experience be transformative learning for adults and how do we guide that? Does engaging students in a congregational study enhance learning?
- Does engaging students in a congregational study enhance teach adults to be reflective in action?
- How does the timing of writing a learning covenant assist or create a barrier to learning?
- Do our theological schools value the congregation and community as resources from which to learn about Christian ministry that informs theology, theory and tradition?
- How do we keep from absolutism and relativism in our work as field educators?

Addendum

**Lenses of a Congregational Study as a
Tool for Theological Reflection**

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Intern's Name:

Date:

Title of Process Note or Verbatim:

Step One: Beginning Theology

The Operative Theology of the Congregation:
{ Indent Paragraph }

The Intern's Theology of Church:
{ Indent Paragraph }

Step Two: Description of Verbatim or Process Note:

{ Indent Paragraph }

(If you are using one you have already written, just note that here and attach it.)

Step Three: Analysis Using Lenses

Culture	Resources	Process	Ecology

Step Four: Your Summary Reflection: Putting it All Together

{ Indent Paragraphs }

Step Five: A Second Reflection

Guidelines for Using the Model

This process uses the lenses described in the method of a Congregational Study found in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, by Nancy Ammerman, et.al.

Step one: Beginning Theology

- Write a brief paragraph (1-3 sentences) outlining a description of the operative theology of the congregation you are studying, as you understand it at this point in time.
- Write a brief paragraph (1-3 sentences) outlining a description of your theology of the church. (You should review your ‘theology of ministry statement in your learning covenant as a reference point. Be mindful to discover if your operative theology is somewhat different from your theoretical one).

Step Two: Description of Process Note or Verbatim

- Write up a process note or verbatim with an introductory 1-2 sentence description. Do not move into reflection. Simply state what happened with enough background information as necessary for comprehension by your peers.
OR
- Re-read a process note or verbatim you have already processed with your mentor pastor. Choose one that still has many unresolved pastoral and theological issues for you.

Step Three: Analysis Using Lenses

- Create four columns with these headings: *Culture, Resources, Process, Ecology*.
- Under each column, briefly describe how you interpret that particular lens influencing the process note or verbatim.

Step Four: Summary Reflection

- Read over once again your theology, the church’s theology and the information you wrote under each column. Many any changes or additions as you deem necessary.
- Take time to reflect on what you have written.
- Your Summary Reflection: Putting it All Together

Write two to four paragraphs summarizing what you think is the primary theological issue at work in this process note or verbatim, and which “lens” is most influencing the operative theology that is animating your and the other parties’ responses.

Things to reflect upon:

- Allow for the possibility that different lenses may be influencing the different parties.
- Allow for the possibility that multiple lenses are at work simultaneously. If so, reflect on why that is happening.
- Allow for the possibility that your reflection on the action taken in your note or verbatim may radically change your beginning assumption of the church’s theology and of your theology.
- Feel free to make changes to your initial analysis of each lens.

Put your reflection paper away and do something else for a day or for a few hours. (In growth group, we will take a break and come back to listen to your peers’ reflection on your work.)

Step Five: A Second Reflection

- Return to your reflection paper, either a few hours later, or the following day.
- Carefully and slowly re-read you have written from beginning to end.
- Sit and reflect.
- Write down if you “see” something new and fresh. If something new occurs to you, jot it down in the appropriate column, or if it is of a general nature, simply add it to the bottom of your reflection paper.

New insights often occur after we walk away from what we are analyzing closely. *Distance helps!*

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