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Attending to Local and Diverse Communities: Toward a Theological Learning Community for a Missional Era

Patricia Taylor Ellison and Patrick R. Keifert

In the past thirty plus years we have sought to create a learning community among three groups: local churches, the mini-publics they serve, and the schools that engage in critical theological formation of their leaders. We have created a mutually critical conversation among these local churches, their mini-publics, and these schools of theology by imagining that these schools do theology in, with, under, against, and for local church communities in our mutual work of understanding God truly within the mission of God. We have done so with what we have found to be a number of fruitful prejudices, some of which we hope to share with you. We will do this sharing through a painfully superficial description of some of the methodological assumptions borrowed from contemporary philosophy and social science, with slight hints to theological assumptions drawn in great part from the International Gospel and Our Culture Network Movement and one of its recent developments of which we are a part: the Missional Church Movement.

We begin with a quick survey of our methods and give some specific examples to put some richness, thickness, and particularity to this bare description of methods drawn from philosophy and social-scientific thought. These methods might be broadly described as part of the nova of reflexive modernity; that is, reflection upon the limited success and significant failures of the European Enlightenment's virtuous attempt to establish truth by means of method. These methods reflect Continental and Anglo-American sources, including at least these five: (1) Anglo-American philosophy following the linguistic turn, (2) the social sciences dependent upon that language

theory tradition, (3) Continental philosophy following the hermeneutical turn, (4) critical theory, and (5) the American pragmatist tradition, especially its Chicago school of Aristotelian pragmatism. These philosophical sources make place for previous methods born in a more positivist stage of social science within a cultural anthropology, especially the school inspired by the work of Clifford Geertz. The primary form of this cultural-anthropological approach uses the method of applied ethnography.

Discovery

We have developed a method that invites local churches — and the micro-publics they serve — to be *first interpreters* of their life-world and the societal structures that make up their life in the triune God. We call this a process of spiritual discernment that begins in discovery. Discovery invites these local churches to do their own ethnography as a way of really seeing their demographics and narrating these demographic numbers both within their networks of relationships in their communities and within the biblical narrative. As a shorthand within philosophical options, we speak of Discovery as a rhetorical model for understanding reflexive, postmodern research.

Once again, in this most shorthand manner, the rhetorical model focuses on character. Each speech/act of the local church, its micro-publics, and the critical theological community reveals character. As Aristotle summarized in his *Rhetoric*, each speech/act reveals three characters: Ethos, Logos, and Pathos. Within a spiritual journey of discernment, we invite local churches to discover the character of their own culture, the character of the cultures of their mini-publics, and the character of the word they speak and embody. Following the fruitful prejudice of the GOCN movement, we believe that the local church community is a hermeneutic of the gospel to itself and to those it joins in the mission of God.

Observe for a moment, if you will, the situation in many old-line congregations across the USA. For the past fifty years, a very large number of trustworthy, hard-working middle-class citizens have been living their lives, keeping up their homes, helping their children through school, and attending the churches of their choice. These day-to-day activities have remained so steady, so generally uninterrupted for such a long time, that these good people are thunderstruck when they look up one day and realize that they have aged, their children have left, and their church has shrunk ever so slowly. Suddenly it seems this year the congregation will not be able to pay

its beloved pastor the appropriate salary. The people wonder what happened to cause this new status.

Actually, the general culture of their town, their region, their country has been changing continuously, but, like Edelman's frog in the slowly coming-to-a-boil water, they have not noticed the changes. Equally unnoticed by the average person is the expanded elbow room they have enjoyed on Sunday mornings in their pews. There are still enough people to sing well and make a good long line for communion. But eventually the older tithers are dying, giving way to fewer, younger, generally lower-pledging members. And certain building and program maintenance developments also occur: fewer people show up for spring cleanup days, almost no new women join the women's circles, and it's much harder to find people to serve on the church governing boards.

We can measure these gradual changes by numbers. In fact, many people are content to do only that. And it's true that we can describe and even predict certain things strictly by the numbers. For example, to afford a full-time, qualified, Masters of Divinity pastor in most old-line Protestant denominations in the U.S., given the current average annual giving rates in those denominations, most congregations will need around 200 persons in worship every week. And of course many churches realize they're well under the 200 mark.

Giving, attendance, and salaries involve numbers and can be quantitatively tracked. But those numbers will not give you the whole story. Although the numbers can tell you *how much* and *how fast*, they can rarely tell you *why* or *what next*. Numbers must be narrated in order to be interpreted. We seek to allow all learners, from scholarly community to local churches to the mini-publics they serve, to gain a sense of their situation and interpret it through both *quantitative* and *qualitative* research lenses.

Quantitative and Qualitative Purposes

Quantitative research uses hypothesis writing and testing to determine the usefulness of its questions, and it uses statistical analysis to determine the validity of its results. Its purpose is *to predict and control*. If a project or experiment can control for enough variables and the resulting data are extensive enough and hold statistical significance and thus have validity, theoretically one can generalize from them in order to predict the future behavior of whatever group is being researched. Qualitative research has two subsets: the

type of research that tries to understand what it means to be a certain kind of person, or place, or thing, called interpretive research; and the type of research that tries to uncover whether a deep systemic distortion has caused repression, called critical research.

The purpose of interpretive research is *to understand*. Thus the research question usually follows this format: What does it mean to be a _____? or What is it like to be a _____? If a project can gather enough thick description, history, story, and metaphor around the question and deeply examine this descriptive data, discovering some significant patterns that can be verified either by other researchers or, better, by the person(s) telling the stories and making the descriptions and thus have reliability, one can claim understanding of the phenomenon.

The purpose of critical research is *to emancipate*. Thus the research question usually follows this format: How are we doing what we do now, how is it failing (or holding us back), and how could it be better? If a project can get current practitioners to be accurately self-reflective, both alone and in groups of peers, to ask their own questions and examine their own answers, and thus have reliability as a foundation for change, one can mutually develop ways of improving the situation toward emancipation from those systemic distortions.

Interpretation

We follow the fruitful conversation between the Anglo-American philosopher of science and human understanding, Stephen Toulmin, and the French phenomenologist, Paul Ricoeur, a conversation that initiated a return to a rhetorical rationality. Following Ricoeur we invite the local church, its mini-publics, and the critical theological community into three moments of interpretation: First Naïveté, Critical Moment, and Second Naïveté. Unlike the practitioners of many so-called scientific, critical methods, we do not believe the critical moment belongs only to the self-appointed critical community of scholarship at the theological school. It also belongs within a mutually critical conversation richly textured in plurality and ambiguity in diverse publics, especially the mini-public of the local church. We have found local churches and their mini-publics quite willing and able to engage in a critical moment regarding their own life; indeed, they are far more able to engage in such a reflexive relationship than most schools of theology. We have found it difficult but worth the effort to find ways in which these com-

munities can and do enter a second naïveté relationship to their own tradition, culture, and society, and their various personal and communal experiences. The rewards of this method for the systematic theologian are extraordinarily fruitful.

Hermeneutics

Once again, following Ricoeur, we take three hermeneutic strategies in forming our critical learning community. While stated in a linear manner, they function more ambiguously and cyclically than this short description allows. We begin with a Hermeneutics of Good Will, or using Wayne C. Booth's terminology, a rhetoric of listening: deep, active listening. We presume, as much as we can, the capacity of local churches to narrate their story far better than we are able. We recognize, often with them, the necessity of a Hermeneutics of Suspicion. These moments of hermeneutical consciousness might be summarized with the Masters of Suspicion — Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud — and the more contemporary analytics of gender and race. Along with Ricoeur, and in distinction from some critical theorists, we also practice a Hermeneutics of Self-Doubt, a hermeneutics that recognizes the diversity, plurality, ambiguity, and mystery of the will, especially the will of the one who wields the suspicions. Here the reality of the location of the interpreter becomes paramount as well. Once again, the academic theological community is more often than not poor at this hermeneutic.

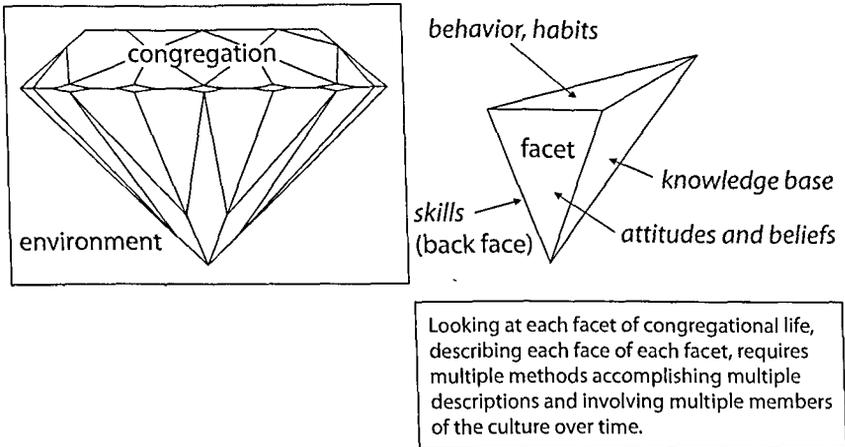
This rhetorical turn is formed within a theological realism indebted to the work of Robin Lovin and Michael Welker for the development of insights first articulated by Reinhold Niebuhr. Within this theological realism, we engage both quantitative and qualitative research methods. We enter the hermeneutical circle, then use this rhetorically framed theological realism to form the beginning points in our quantitative research hypotheses. We develop or draw upon a growing research in congregational studies to shape the questions and protocols for sampling local churches and their mini-publics. At this level our work seeks to provide a matrix within qualitative methods for the rather well-established quantitative methods that promise strong predictive and controlled outcomes.

We join this quantitative study, once again often done by other scholars in the congregational studies movement, to more critical theory models. Here we seek to uncover the systemic distortions that make up the powers and principalities of life in local churches and their communities. We do so

hoping to provide an emancipatory moment in the journey of discovery. We invite the learners, researchers, seekers of truth to interpret these emancipatory moments from their insiders' perspective through applied ethnographic processes.

Ethnography, of course, is a specific social science research methodology under the larger heading of *interpretive research*. The point of ethnography is to achieve what the word literally means, to put a culture into writing (either in print, in pictures, or in electronic media). The culture can be as small as the culture in a circle of three teenagers in a youth program or as large as a social system like an entire church body. The ethnographer has but one aim: to get the *emic*, or insider-to-the-culture, perspective. This aim makes ethnography phenomenological, since it strives to capture the essence of what it means to be *of that culture*. The ethnographer often cannot be an insider to the culture, so he or she must either get the insider perspective by spending a lot of time taking notes, and collecting many stories, or else train and assist local community members to do the same, always testing any emerging patterns or theories with those actual insiders.

For example, a diagram of a study:



If ethnography can be accomplished by insiders to the culture, adding narration to hard numbers such as giving, attendance, demographics, and other usual quantitative measures, the data can be interpreted by teams of insiders *and* outsiders to the culture, using hermeneutics of Good Will, Suspicion, and Self-Doubt. Their resulting interpretations are of the very sort that lead to critical reflection and the uncovering of systemic distortions, in turn often

leading to emancipation from those distortions. In the case of our typical American congregation, they look at the numbers and realize that their numbers mean something. They narrate the reasons for a decreasing budget and attendance, for example. They can see by the numbers that there are shifts going on in life around the church building. As they narrate those shifts, they discover stories of God deeply at work in those shifts. They may even perceive God calling them, the local church, to be at work in ways that may be new to them but ways that are a part of God's mission in their community.

This interpretive research gives initial openness to the local insider perspective gained through deep listening. We fashion with them mutually interesting questions and free them to gather stories from their local church and the mini-publics they serve. We seek to understand what it is like for them to be who they are. We invite them into a conversation about their character, the character of their mini-publics, and the character of the word they seek to embody, and do in fact embody in God's mission.

First Interpreter Possibilities

One of the brilliant aspects of using ethnography as a method by which we understand local and diverse communities is that we build relationships of trust within those communities as well as among the local churches, their mini-publics, and schools of theology. Our data gathering is dependent on interaction and relationships of deep listening to the stories of the place and marrying them as narration to the numbers of the place. Training and then learning from insiders of the culture we wish to understand, we become partners with them as we attend to their communities. As our data collection and interpretation processes move along, we must continually test our learnings with one another. We must admit our surprise to one another. We must own our misinterpretation and mistakes to one another. In this way no members of local churches, their mini-publics, or schools of theology become mere objects of research; they are *first interpreters* of their life within the life of the triune God.

We live in the hope that all of us develop better deep-listening skills, more willingness to be surprised and admit and even celebrate mistakes. This learning process and its result become part of each local church's story, and in turn our story — which the local churches, their mini-publics, and their partner schools of theology own and use to innovate their path forward into God's preferred and promised future for them.