

Finding the Right Direction: Ecclesiology from Below

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This paper emerges from the context of parish ministry in search of faithful revitalization of congregations and their ministries. Anyone who has served or led a congregation knows that there are no shortage of strategies that promise spectacular success, indeed, strategies that did deliver spectacular success somewhere. Two surface issues immediately present themselves: while the proposed strategy worked somewhere, with some congregation and leadership, will it work here, with us, with me? Second, and related to that, does this proposal connect to what 'we are' as Christians? Strategies that are not sufficiently linked to the faith as currently known invite what sociologists call the 'subaltern response': fading enthusiasm that results in good strategies not followed, conflicts that subsume progress and a resulting blame game and anger over a strategy that was simply inadequately contextualized for congregation, local theological beliefs and communities.

To frame the issue from the perspective of practical theology, Christian practice fails to intersect Christian belief; how 'what we do' and the 'why we do things' fail to mutually inform each other in the lives of Christian communities. Theologians have long feared the 'little beliefs' of people in congregations, lest they collapse in superstition rather than rationalized faith or, worse yet, the values and beliefs of many congregations reflect the ideology of ruling classes¹ (the fear of Marx [1846], Tillich, Niebuhr, Chopp and others). Evangelicals have long critiqued Liberalism, and Liberals have long critiqued Evangelicalism, that the other subsumes Christian practice to 'mere' culture. Pastors of all stripes have bemoaned the ways in which many congregations are 'stuck' with practices that seemingly have no purpose but have attained a level sacredness for sacredness' sake.

¹ See Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The German Ideology*, 1846 (1970 edition, p. 64); Paul Tillich, "The End of the Protestant Era?" in *the Protestant Era*, 1948; H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 1929 and Rebecca Chopp, 'Practical Theology and Liberation' in Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling's *Formation and Reflection: the Promise of Practical Theology*.

Congregations of all stripes should be concerned with the ways in which the experiences, practices, power and beliefs of non-professional clergy and academics have become problematized in church renewal programs. Stephen Ellingson documented how it was those clergy who were new to their Lutheran congregations in California who sought to introduce the New Paradigm Church techniques (especially flat organizational structure, but also contemporary music, centralized 'management team' control and an entrepreneurial model of leadership) as a way of solidifying power and displacing lay forms of power in congregations.² While there are a variety of faithful strategies by which we unite faith and practice, my concern is for the ways in the struggles for the concrete praxis of Christian life become contestations for power, if indeed the concrete praxis of Christian life is considered at all in Christian congregations.

From the perspective of ecclesiology there exists contestations as to the meaning and purpose of the Church, made more serious because of the lack of dialogue between academic theology, practitioners and religious communities. Top-down ecclesiologies miss the concrete realities of congregational life, serving at worst to disempower congregations from their work or even to rest in mutual disregard. This critique was made clearly by Catholic theologian Nicholas M. Healy when he argued that ecclesiology should not simply describe models of the church, but seek to empower concrete expressions of the church---congregations but not just congregations---- in their prophetic and practical tasks. But the existing ecclesiological models, Healy argued, served as idealized 'blue prints' by which real congregations could only fail. What was called for were not more and better models of what to do, but ecclesiological maps that empowered congregations to locate themselves in Christian history and within the options of the Christian faith, to empower the congregations as theologians. Implicit in his call for theological maps was a relocation of agency from the academy (and, dangerously, from the magisterium?) to the congregation or parish. They need to be empowered as

² Stephen Ellingson, *The Megachurch and the Mainline: Remaking Religious Tradition in the Twenty-first Century*, 2007

constructive theologians, making decisions as to how to lead their practices of the Christian faith.³ Ecclesiologies must be constructed from the bottom up.

Healy's initial map---of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theo-dramatic narrative---drew criticism; in part because of difficulties with Balthasar's project and in particular because it was difficult to see how this 'map' was different from the 'blueprints' that he rightly decried.⁴

But the idea of theology serving as a map for practicing Christians has a certain appeal: to specialists in congregational studies it gives a way to account for the importance of beliefs that are important understand a congregation, yet off of the sociological map. The broader humanistic stream of the human sciences has long sought to incorporate beliefs in the understanding of human existence.⁵ The notion of theology as a guide, a source of wisdom has special appeal to theologians who are to often not in the discussion about what congregations ought to do at all. It should be of great interest to pastors and congregational leaders, who will learn too well what happens when a revitalization scheme is attempted that runs contrary to the lived theology of a congregation (you might get fired)!

Such an adventure in constructive ecclesiological maps presumes and makes use of insights from:

- the sociological understanding of the social construction of reality. In this case, following the work of historians Donald Hall and Charles Marsh and sociologist Meredith McGuire, I argue that a lived theological reality is socially constructed by the social and religious

³ Nicholas M. Healy, 'Theodrama and Ethnographic Ecclesiology', a paper delivered at the 1997 meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Francisco, CA and *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 2000.

⁴ See Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time*, 2007. Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory*, 2006.

⁵ The point of Max Weber's *verstehen* sociology. See Fritz Ringer's *Max Weber's Methodology: the Unification of the Cultural and Social Sciences*, 1997. In her book, *Places of Redemption*, 2007, Mary McClintock Fulkerson utilizes the humanistic and cultural conceptions of geography found in *maps of Meaning: An Introduction to cultural Geography* by Peter Jackson, 1989 and *Humanistic Geography: Prospects and Problems*, edited by David Ley and Marwyn S. Samuels, 1978.

practices (which include discourses within the religious tradition, other religious traditions, secular culture and God).⁶

- the ‘open confessionism’ of theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, in which our human social finitude must be acknowledged but which, none-the-less cannot preclude our embrace of the great narrative of God’s grace and love revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Our confession of faith is always bounded, but not determined, by the conditions of human finitude.⁷
- Humility. The knowledge that just as the existence of bad theology does not mean that no theological reflection should be done at all, but congregations will construct a variety of theologies based upon the contexts in which they exist, the practices and values which shape their faith. All of our understanding of theology is provisional!

But just what is an ‘ecclesiological map’? The term is used in different ways, usually as steps in a process⁸ or as a way to apply theological beliefs to a contextual situation.⁹ A good map, I argue, allows the user to discern the territory, plot their journey and not get lost. A good theological map, I submit, does the same. A good theological map is essential for the strategic issues that face congregations in changing contexts. The keys to a good map are that the important terrain is identified and that the user is empowered to make decisions, and the foundational issue for bottom-up ecclesiology is to reflect on the ways in which Christians (not just the professional versions!) are empowered with agency for their concrete praxis of Christian life. To explore the ways this conception works, I will briefly examine three strategies for congregational action that in some way engage the work and experiences of congregations (i.e., the ‘laity’) before reflecting on what is called for in an ecclesiological map that empowers the practical and prophetic actions of Christian communities.

⁶ Donald D. Hall, *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, 1997; Charles Marsh’s ‘Lived Theology’ project, see www.livedtheology.org; Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, 2008.

⁷ See Martin L. Cook, *The Open Circle: Confessional Method in Theology*, 1991, H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 1941 (2006).

⁸ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 1985

⁹ As in Tom Bandy’s *Moving off the Map: A Field Guide for Changing the Congregation*, 1998.

Three Approaches to Engaged Praxis

Organizational Design

Organizational sociology, usually called organizational design, focuses upon the ways organizational structure and processes shape the content and experiences of organizational life and product. While there are a variety of academic schools of thought, purported 'open systems' theory dominated the academy from the 1960s to 1990s.¹⁰

Tom Bandy and William Easum are famed church growth consultants who have pioneered the application of organizational design theory in church life. The organizational design theory developed by Argyrs and Schön in the 1960s and popularized by Peter Senge's 1990 *The Fifth Discipline* rediscovered Max Weber's theoretical typology of sources of authority in organization: traditional, charismatic, instrumental rational and value rational.¹¹ Traditional organizations found authority for their life by the traditions of the organization. Charismatic organizations in the charismatic leader and instrumental rational organizations in the rational calculation of costs and benefits. Value rational organizations were oriented to the rationally calculated values of the organization. Value oriented organizations were clearly about what they were about, had lower supervision costs, happier employees and greater ecological fit with the cultural environment. The innovation of these American organizational theorists was to increase management control in corporations by identifying the vision, mission and values of the organization so that employees can initiate plans without constantly getting approval from the higher ups. Bill Easum (*Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers*) and Rick Warren (*The Purpose Driven Church*) applied these insights to congregations,

¹⁰ See Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*, 2008.

¹¹ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, a translation of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der Verstehenden Soziologie*, 1968 (1956). For a description of open system organizational design, see Michael C. Jackson, *Systems Approaches to Management*, 2000. See also Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Learning Organization*, 1990.

arguing that they were, or at least ought to be, 'value rational organizations'.¹² While vision and mission statements increasingly are deemed to be the responsibility of the clergy, the value statements are drawn from laity. The primary role of the clergy is to articulate the vision/mission of the church in order to motivate the members to engage in acts of ministry that implement the mission (and not in governance or control over key activities of the church's life, like worship). The result is a form of theological statement designed to motivate congregational practices (not to necessarily reflect on that theology). If the theology tends to be 'one-off' (not-repeated), it has a purpose not as an end in itself but as a motivator for doing God's work in the world.

This is a very popular strategy for congregational revitalization. But there are significant theological issues with this strategy that are usually not openly discussed:

- it is a strategy for ministerial power as much as it is a strategy for congregational ministry. Warren adds to the mission, vision and value statements a commitment by members to obey the admonitions of church leaders.
- the model steers congregations to particular questions (values and vision, with mission being derivative) and away from other questions (heritage, doctrine).
- Fundamentally it is a 'Christ of culture' model which presumes that congregations ought to fit closely in contemporary culture. If you don't fit the contemporary culture, the congregation lacks buffering structures to shield core Christian beliefs from 'contaminating' cultural influences, as with the change of the traditional evangelical conception of sin to a therapeutic model of feeling broken.¹³
- It is theologically 'thin' (both because it is presumed that 'thickness' might prove alienating to people who are not yet Christian and because the avoidance of complexity works best for highly focused, and in my view, narrow, theological orientations and missions.

¹² William Easum, *Sacred Cows make Gourmet Hamburgers: Ministry Anytime, Anywhere by Anyone*, 1995. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* 1995.

¹³ Kimon Howland Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way*; 2000.

- Given its ahistorical and fluid structural orientation, the creation of theological expression has an inherent class basis which gives power, and ideological legitimization, to people in the 'New, or Creative Class' (like clergy).¹⁴
- There is a deliberate 'ahistoricism' in which the theological and religious history of the congregation is treated as merely a problem to be replaced by a presentist value identity. Theoretically organizational memory is inadequately conceptualized; operationally, the past rarely goes away unless the congregation itself is replaced.¹⁵

The involvement of church members in identifying congregational values and the attempt to focus the life of the church upon its values and beliefs are surely to be commended. There is however, less theological agency or reflection to this model than meets the eye.

Congregational Studies

The modern congregational studies movement seeks to understand congregations as social and religious institutions. Originally rooted in the desire to help churches grow, this orientation shifted to dispassionate academic study and now as a tool for enhancing human liberation. Engaging theological reflection as a part of this process has been a careful, even tentative endeavor. Early social scientists were hesitant to step outside of their areas of expertise. Don Browning attempted to apply theological ethics as a discourse of congregational studies, with the difficulty that few congregations actually engage in formal ethical discourse.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Rothschild-Whitt, Joyce "The Collectivist Organization: An Alternative to Rational-Bureaucratic Models" *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 44 (August, 1979): pp. 509-527 for an analysis of the difficulties inherent in value rational organizations; see Barbara Hargrove, The Emerging New Class: Implications for Church and Society; 1986 for a cautionary note on 'New Class' formation and power. All social classes have a 'social position'! See also Michael H. Montgomery, *On Easter Morning...* Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Chicago Theological Seminary, 2003.

¹⁵ See Ellingson, 2007.

¹⁶ The 'second wave' of congregational studies in America can be dated with Carl S. Dudley, editor, *Building Effective Ministry*, 1983; Jackson W. Carroll, Carl Dudley and William McKinney, editors, *Handbook for Congregational Studies*, 1986; and Nancy Ammerman et al, *Studying Congregations*. Browning critiqued the early, hesitant and judgmental theological insights in his *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 1995.

Ethical formation happens, but often non-critically. Therefore Brownings's methodology is useful for the scholar seeking to understand a congregation, but not for a congregation seeking to utilize congregational studies.

Mary McClintock Fulkerson is an excellent illustration of contemporary congregational studies. She utilizes postmodern (humanistic) geography to describe the theological work of a congregation in *Places of Redemption*.¹⁷ She found that the people at this congregation did not talk about theology in the terms that one might classically use to talk about theology: no discourses on creation, comparative soteriology or even epistemology. This is in common with other researchers (Nieman, Ammerman) who found a dearth of actual theological reflection in congregations.¹⁸ What she did discover, especially in her interaction with this multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-abled congregation, were extensive practices about this being a particular (value laden) place. She looked at the practices that make for the creation of a sense of place: the practices of formation, worship, homemaking and interpretation.

McClintock Fulkerson was studying the congregation not for the congregation's benefit but for the benefit of the 'wider church' (so that we might learn how to engage multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-abled praxis in our churches). As such, her work did not overtly feed back into the congregation to help them with their practical prophetic tasks, nor was there a dialogue between the broader faith and this congregation. Those were not her roles, but do point to the limitations of extending this method in empowering congregations to think and act

¹⁷ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*, 2007.

¹⁸ James R. Nieman, *Local Theologies in American Protestantism: Proposals Toward a Method for Research*; Ph.D. Dissertation, Emory University. 1997. Nancy Ammerman argues that most Christians are "Golden Rule" Christians, eschewing social action or evangelicalism and emphasizing good treatment of (close) neighbors. See "Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream" Nancy T. Ammerman, *Lived Religion in America*, edited by David Hall, pp. 196-216. 1997

theologically. There is a difference between empowering academics and empowering congregations!

While I am in agreement with her that congregations don't do theology in academic language, I am not convinced that people weren't doing classical theology in other ways: theological processes like traditioning, bordering, and centering point to confessional statements of practice; theological frame setting as a community of liberation that did not use the language of critical theory but the language of functional religious needs points to the alienation of critical theorists rather than the absence of theology.

The essential points are that congregations do not naturally do theology in academic terms. Rather, theology is done in practice and are oriented to that which is essential for the creation and maintenance of Christian community. It may be theology in a second language to many academic theologians, but it is theology none-the-less.

Shared Praxis

Thomas H. Groome is a pioneering Christian religious educator from the Roman Catholic tradition who developed the system of "shared praxis" as a model for Christian religious education.¹⁹ First introduced in the early 1980s, Groome was extending the trends in education that called for reflection upon experience, but no overt dialogue between the Christian faith and our experiences. "Shared Praxis" begins with a focusing experience to frame the congregation or classes attention, and then works through five movements:

1. Naming the present praxis
2. Critical reflection on present action
3. Making accessible the Christian story or vision through Bible study, theology or history
4. Dialectical hermeneutic that connects the appropriate Christian Story/Vision to the participants stories and visions

¹⁹ First articulated in Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*, 1980 and expanded upon in *Sharing Faith: The Way of Shared Praxis: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious education and Pastoral Ministry*, 1991.

5. A decision or response for lived Christian faith.

This is significant for our purposes in that Groome explicitly names Christian story and/or vision as a dialogue partner with personal/congregational stories and visions. The faith 'talks back' to our experiences. Further, at a foundational level Groome calls for a response in Christian practice as the outcome of Christian religious education. Mere knowing is not enough! Finally, Groome extends this model for Christian religious education to all areas of Christian ministry.

If there is a dominant paradigm in Christian religious education, this is it! But for our purposes, there are some limitations. While Groome is quite clear about beginning with our praxis as an essential starting point in the pedagogical process, when he gets to the subject of ministry, he begins not with present praxis but Jesus as a model for ministry. Not a bad model, I submit, but a methodological ad hoc. While I like how he conceives of the Reign of God (a deep Christo-centric humanism), I am uncomfortable about how the role of people is to make the faith their own, not as theologians who are engaged in faithfully constructing the meaning of their faith. Faith is merely received.

What Groome does in an explicit way is to empower at least the potential of actual dialogue between the faith and our lives, a discourse that leads to the practice of faith.

The Need for Theological Maps

What emerges from such a woefully short discussion of congregational theological praxis are three sets of issues:

1. Strategically, how can we root our analysis of congregations in such a way that take seriously the ways in which actual congregations construct their beliefs, practices and reflections? Such an theological engagement should include the wider Christian faith in a dialogue that is constructive in content and empowering in practice. Only such an engagement with the 'lived theology' of actual congregations will actually empower congregations for their practical and prophetic tasks. Without intentionality of discourse we get ineffective praxis and unread books!
2. More fundamentally, the critical need in ecclesiology is to ground ecclesiology not in organizational structure or size, theological control, mission or identity; but in a recovery of what it means to be

Christian. Crucially for the church in our time is a recovery of that 'unfunded mandate' of the Reformation, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. You can find versions of "pray, pay and obey" in all traditions, and we have to get beyond this. Christians must be given theological agency, not just told what to believe.

3. The adequacy of the perception of theological reality by an individual congregation may be problematic. How broadly and deeply a congregation envisions the work, love and practices of God may be to limited by lack of vision, shame and imagination.

Healy's call for a 'practical prophetic map' is, in my view, the right step since its goal is to empower with theological agency those gatherings of believers who are seeking to live faithfully in answer to god's call in their lives. Congregations do need maps, I submit, as they attempt their practical and prophetic tasks. Maps, I remind us, help us discover where we are in the first place. They help identify the range of options that are before us, develop a plan as to how to get from point A to point B and, implicitly, help us to decide what is important on this particular journey. A mapping ecclesiology may help congregations as they face decisions and tasks that sometimes may be construed as desperately secular (how do we get more people to pay the bills?) but are profoundly theological. Who are we? Whose are we? How can we connect the Gospel to the changing context in which we find ourselves? Just how do we function as a postmodern-evangelical-liberal-charismatic-Catholic-Orthodox-emerging community of faith?

Organizationally, how do we develop or select strategies that are consistent with what we believe and avoid strategies that are inconsistent with our understandings of our faith, doctrine and practice? How, amidst all of the organizational demands for growth and vitality, can we be sure that we are faithful to what God wants from us?

It takes more than one map to get anyplace really interesting. A constructive theological atlas should include:

- a map to help congregations and clergy to identify the vocation, identity, social locations and personal growth strategies of the ministerial leadership. Clergy are part of the equation, but most congregations have known more than one.

- a map of the ideal and material spiritual needs of the communities in which the congregation exists.
- a map of the 'lived religion' of the congregation, with attention to the dynamic processes by which faith is received, reflected upon, expressed and practiced.
- a map designed to provide engagement with the broader narratives, practices and beliefs of the Christian faith.
- maps that can be shared within the whole church ('lay', 'professional', 'academic' and 'judicatory')
- maps that empower action: exploration, self-reflection, and the practical-prophetic tasks of the church.

We have here 15 minutes of time (and each of these maps gets a chapter in the book), so I will focus now on the map of engagement with the broader narratives, practices and beliefs of the Christian faith.

Methodology

This ecclesiological map did not spring *tabula rasa*, but rather emerged through the combination of three sources of inquiry.

- The ethnographic study of two congregations, both predominantly Euro-American in the same metropolitan suburb in the United States. They were selected so as to control for social class, denominational influence, race and ethnicity. One was attempting to practice the 'New Paradigm' strategies championed by Bill Easum; the other advertised itself as a 'traditional protestant church'. (The latter was the church that doubled in size during the five year study period of 1996 to 2001!).
- The theological insights of H. Richard Niebuhr. It was John Law Epps who discerned that while Niebuhr did write a formal ecclesiology, the corpus of his work did encompass the purpose, nature, identity and challenges for the church in the Twentieth, and I dare say Twenty-First centuries: the challenges of enculturation, being pioneers of the faith, the nature of faith, revelation, ethics, the sovereignty of God and the presence of Christ.²⁰ It is the unsystematic nature of his insights

²⁰ John Law Epps, *The Concept of the Church in the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*; Ph.D. Dissertation, Southern Methodist University, 1972.

and themes that particularly commend themselves to our tasks, for the task of this theological work is to empower the praxis of theological wisdom and not to create a systematic treatise.

- The work of contextual theologians like Schreiter,²¹ Sedmak,²² Bevans²³ and Kim²⁴. This is an exercise in local theology, done not for the edification of theologians but for the embodied praxis of congregations.

This ecclesiological map includes four elements: frames of understanding, theological processes, landmarks of essential themes and strategic models of praxis. By understanding the ‘theological terrain’, congregations may be empowered to plan their explorations and adopt models appropriate to their conception of the Christian faith, their social contexts, community needs and leadership.

Frames of understanding are those hermeneutical presumptions that direct our attention and imaginations to particular understandings of what is important. Our understandings of what ‘church’ is supposed to mean are crucially informed by frames that:

- Reflect our social location. The witness of non-male Euro-Caucasian churches, theologians and pastors is that this is a vital frame for understanding what it means to be Church (and for whom).
- Secular understandings about organizational power, structure and purpose; culture and reality all inform our presumptions about what is possible, and hence shape what churches believe that they can and may do. From the days of adopting Roman military structures, democratic processes to corporate management strategies, secular understandings have always shaped the understanding of how practice happens. Know what yours are, and whether you want them!
- Identity ecclesiologies, which tell us who we are. I have in mind denominational, movement and confessional

²¹ Shreiter, op cit.

²² Clemens Sedmak, *doing Local theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity*, 2002.

²³ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 2002.

²⁴ Hyun-Sook Kim, ‘The Hermeneutical-Praxis Paradigm and Practical Theology’, *Religious Education*, Vol. 102, No. 4, Fall, 2007 pp. 419-436.

understandings which have sub-texts of who is 'real' and hence who is 'not real'.

- Functional ecclesiologies, which tell us what we are supposed to do. Liberation, Evangelism, Missional and Spiritual theologies each direct Christian congregations to specific tasks that the church is supposed to do.

These frames are not in themselves good or bad, they are however more or less adequate to specific Christian communities.

Theological processes describe what the process of doing theology looks like over time in lived communities of Christian practice. Such theology is not a static event. The living narrative of God's love expressed in the witness, sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ speaks to each generation, and each community of faith. Each community of faith makes its own response to that love in its practices, expressions and witness. Such responses may be seen in:

- a. **Traditioning.** We have the traditions (small t) that make up what Niebuhr was fond of calling the Great Tradition (capital T). This Tradition, broader than even Niebuhr conceived it) has never been a static belief set. Rather, it is a movement that has been nurtured by the blood of martyrs, expanded by fresh interpretations (e.g., Luther's recovery of Justification by Faith, Albert Lutuli and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s recovery of nonviolent resistance) and given new life by the work of the Spirit. Traditions are never simply repeated, they are selectively adopted, tested, adapted, and practiced in a process of traditioning, the making of received knowledge present practice.
- b. **Boundary making.** Karl Barth was right in naming the Nazi's as outside the Christian faith. In a world filled with the half-gods of desires, fears and despair, Christians do need to discern clearly the powers of the age. I think of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declaration that apartheid as a sin as an example of essential boundary making. . One of my study churches sought to create 'soft boundaries' between itself and the surrounding culture, not recognizing that their progressive ethical stance on homosexuality served as a 'hard boundary'. What are the boundaries that divide those who are part of this community and those who are not?

- c. **Centering.** If there are boundaries, then there are centers that give the community identity and direction. The confession of Christ Crucified and resurrected by God's will and love is at the center of most Christian communions (although not for some Unitarian communities). Different communions claim different centers (Apostle's Creed, Exodus, etc.)
- d. **Expressions of faith.** Emotional expression is part of human culture; varying by subculture and received practice and cultural norms. How faith is expressed is a theological statement about what matters and how we can and should respond.
- e. **Dreaming** What is our hope? What is our vision of God's future? To many churches have forgotten how to dream, both for themselves and of God's dream for them.
- f. **Journeying.** Is the congregation in search of the Promised Land? Struggling to escape from bondage? Seeking to build a city on a hill? God calls, and we answer, sometimes to new geographies and sometimes to themes of redemption, justice and love.
- g. **Dissent, conflict and (sometimes) reconciliation.** God's portfolio of congregation's is by definition pluralistic, and such pluralism necessitates dissenting voices. Some dissenting voices, history reminds us, prove to be right! And some end up being Orthodox!
- h. **Believing** What is believed? What is really believed?
- i. **Practicing** What is practiced, both in terms of a direct consequence of belief and those other practices that may profoundly shape our faith even if it is not actually part of our formal confessions.

Attention to theological processes reminds us that current silence may not be evidence of a theological deficit; rather, that static models rarely capture dynamic processes and even the most important processes may not be overtly stated. Talking about faith is not as important as living faith.

Landmarks are those decisive beliefs and issues of the Christian faith to which faithful people may have different beliefs, but must none-the-less hear the witness of the broader faith. Congregations will want to identify their own list of particulars, but I would commend:

- Sovereignty of God. How is God 'god' for us?
- Jesus Christ. How do we understand the message, person and event of the One Christians confess as the Christ?
- The Empowering Spirit
- The practice of faith, engaging both God and God's cause, in Niebuhr's famous description.
- The experience of revelation and its meaning
- The practice of love (the ethics of responsibility)
- The interplay of Christ and culture

Congregations may want to add other themes that are essential to their life, what is essential is that such additions be explicitly recognized. While ecclesiological mapping includes a healthy dose of ethnographic description, we do not get to make it up as we go along!

The fourth element of an ecclesial map are those **models** that we employ for being church. Models are the particular ways of fitting together our landmarks, frames and processes in an often coherent plan. These can be models that reflect ancient confessional traditions (e.g. Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, etc.); new movements like the New Paradigm Church, Missional or Emerging Church movements; contextual realities like the Afro-centric church movement or theological models like Evangelicalism or the Progressive Christian Witness.

Using the Map

A congregation makes use of such an ecclesial map by sketching the terrain of its faith, noting what is important and informative to their practice. A map invites conversation about what needs to be explored and helps congregations discern connections, both between the landmarks of faith and between the faith and their concrete practical and prophetic praxis.

Wesley, Tillich and the rest never identified 'newsprint paper' as a source for theological reflection, but identifying beliefs, challenges, questions on the themes of

the theological map (landmarks, frames, processes and models) on (many) sheets of newsprint that can be posted on walls for addition thoughts is a useful way of getting thoughts presented for conversation. Once our perspectives are identified, opportunity may be given for the faith to 'talk back' to our ideas, not in condemnation, but in conversation. Out of this conversation can come ideas about:

- what we want to explore in our search to be faithful to God
- what we want to change about ourselves and our practices.
- what we identify ourselves as called to do and be.
- where we want to go and what we want to do in discipleship, mission spiritual growth as a community of faith.

What is essential is that the map must be shared with the congregation seeking to chart their path of faith. Only then will ecclesiology be truly empowering to the church's concrete prophetic and practical tasks.