

*"Augmenting Practical Theology Methods:
Creating Cultures Where Transformed and Transforming
Leaders Fuel Transformational Change"*

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Introduction

When considering “Leadership for Change,” most practical theologians would simply prescribe the implementation of a practical theology (PT) method. The expressed telos of most methods—i.e., new or renewed praxis—is simply another way of saying “change.” Yet as this essay will assert, the usage of a method is insufficient in and of itself. Most of the more prominent PT methods, including that of John Swinton, Richard Osmer, and Thomas Groome, underemphasize an element central to the success of the method; namely, the ability of participants to competently enact the various steps, which are often quite challenging. Given this reality, it will be suggested that practical theology processes be augmented by necessary competencies and capacities in the participants. Moreover, it will be shown that some of these capacities can be cultivated within the process itself. This happens as each activity becomes developmentally enriched, providing opportunities for participants to change their way of being even as they discern how God might have them change what they are doing.

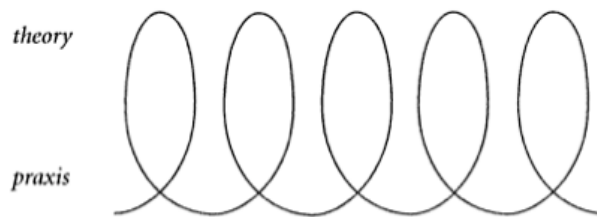
Practical Theology and Change

The discipline of Practical Theology hinges upon an assumption about the relationship between theory and practice; namely, that they are consistently in symbiotic relationship. People do not come to theological reflection as a dry sponge, merely to absorb a theory, and later put into practice. Rather, theological reflection always starts with an existing praxis—a theory-laden

practice—and then traverses through critical reflection towards a more faithful form of praxis.¹

This action-reflection movement not only provides guidance on how to engage a certain practice, but also clarifies the theology upon which the practice finds its foundation. Thus practical theology is both *practical*—it concerns practices—and *theological*—it actually generates theology.² Practice is not subservient to theology, nor are practice and theory distinct. Instead, they are consistently in dynamic interrelationship. As Ray Anderson stated it, "all practice includes theory, and theory can only be discerned through practice."³

In the exploration of this dynamic relationship, practical theology recognizes the telos of an ever-more-faithful form of praxis, whether that be a renewed form of the original praxis or a new praxis altogether. That being the case, the following depiction of this practical theology cycle by Gerben Heitink contains a fundamental flaw:⁴



¹ This term praxis, often employed by practical theologians, refers in its most basic sense to “action.” But more substantially, praxis denotes a form of action that is value-directed and theory-laden. Praxis refers to a practice laden with belief, an act where an assumed telos is bound up within the action itself. Cf. Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 47-51.

² See e.g., Billings, J Todd. 2014. “Undying Love.” *First Things* 248 (248): 45–49. In this article, a systematic theologian muses on the impassibility of God. This profound reflection on a theory related to God was initiated by the Billings’ experiences with terminal cancer

³ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 21.

⁴ Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 154.

This diagram makes it seem as though a community's praxis will stay relatively the same despite multiple cycles of critical reflection upon theory. It fails to stress the way in which this process yields a renewed or radically new form of praxis. In other words, it fails to capture how this work *leads to change*. Practical theology exists for the sake of change—the change that comes about as a result of reflecting upon an existing praxis and making adjustments in order to enact a more faithful one. As such, leaders in Christian communities would be remiss if they did not employ insights from practical theology to lead change in their context.

By grounding all theological reflection in present praxis, practical theology trusts that local Christian communities can learn their way into God's emerging future by reflecting critically and constructively on their current engagement of practices in their setting. It is natural for people to do this work. At all times, the activities we do and the theology we claim are interacting. Consequently, it is not a matter of whether or not Christian communities will engage in some form of action-reflection. It is, rather, a question of whether or not they will do so faithfully and fruitfully.

Leading for Change by Enacting Practical Theology Methods

To ensure that action-reflection carried out well, practical theologians devise processes, often called practical theology methods, for communities to enact. While the various processes have different points of emphasis, they all encourage critical reflection consisting of several common elements: gaining an accurate picture of what is currently happening, followed by analysis utilizing cultural and theological resources, which then leads to a normative prescription

toward a new or renewed praxis.⁵ One can readily detect these elements in the following brief summaries of three prominent practical theology methods:

John Swinton's method found in *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*.⁶

Stage 1: The Situation – a pre-reflective description of current praxis around a practice or situation that requires critical challenge; initial observations about what *appears* to be going on.

Stage 2: Cultural/Contextual Analysis – enter into dialogue with other sources of knowledge to discover what is *actually* going on.

Stage 3: Theological Reflection – intentional theological reflection that weighs God's intentions against the significance of what was discovered in stages 1 and 2

Stage 4: Formulating Revised Forms of Practice – returning to the situation, participants use conversation to draw together the cultural/contextual analysis and the theological reflection in order to produce new and challenging forms of practice

In a similar fashion, Richard Osmer suggests model of practical theology with four tasks. As explicated in *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, each of the four tasks has a guiding question and a theological analogue:

Richard Osmer's method found in *Practical Theology*.⁷

The descriptive-empirical task asks, "What is going on?" – since this "is a matter of attending to what is going on in the lives of individuals, families, and congregations," this task calls for *priestly listening*.⁸

⁵ Few practical theologians summarize this telos better than John Swinton, who stresses that practical theology is primarily concerned with God's ongoing mission in the world: "As a theological discipline, its primary purpose is to ensure that the church's public proclamations and praxis-in-the-world faithfully reflect the nature and purpose of God's continuing mission to the world, and in so doing authentically addresses the contemporary context into which the church seeks to minister." (*From Bedlam to Shalom*, 12).

⁶ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006). Although the model presented therein is aimed toward the practical theologian doing research, Swinton avers that the model is based on his pastoral theology.

⁷ Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 34ff.

The interpretative task asks, “Why is it going on?” – since this requires thoughtfulness, theoretical interpretation, and wise judgment, this task calls for *sagely wisdom*.⁹

The normative task asks, “What ought to be going on?” – since this entails “the interplay of divine discourse and human shaping,” this task calls for *prophetic discernment*.¹⁰

The pragmatic-strategic task asks, “How might we respond?” – since this requires implementation of change that must be handled humbly, this task calls for *servant leadership*.¹¹

Osmer recommends that leaders use this model to interpret episodes, situations, and contexts theologically. Both Osmer and Swinton thus provide methods for an individual to implement *within* a community. The next method, from Thomas Groome, includes similar elements as the first two, but also stresses a process for a community to implement together. Indeed, he calls his method “Shared Christian Praxis” precisely because it is a *shared* partnership between leader and participants. The leader, while in charge of facilitation and resourcing, also participates as a “leading-learner” in a subject-to-subject relationship with participants. This stress on *communal* discernment is vital because leading a change in praxis often involves what Ronald Heifetz calls an adaptive challenge. In the face of adaptive challenges, the whole congregation must do the work of change. As Heifetz once stated, “The sustainability of change depends on having the people with the problem internalize the change itself.”¹² Groome’s method affirms that ministry is to be done *with* people (collaboratively), not just *to* them (coercively) or *for* them (without

⁹ Ibid., 83ff.

¹⁰ Ibid., 133ff.

¹¹ Ibid., 133ff.

¹² Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002), 13. Moreover, Groome’s method is appropriate for adaptive change because it works against any flight to authority.” By using a highly participative corporate process, Groome’s method counteracts clericalism, both clerical over-functioning and congregational irresponsibility, by empowering all God’s people to discern and live into a new or renewed praxis.

their involvement). Although originally proposed as a model for Christian education, Groome's approach understands reflection on present praxis as the locus of true learning and faithful Christian action as the telos of that learning.¹³

Thomas Groome's "Shared Christian Praxis" as found in *Sharing Faith*.¹⁴

Movement One: Naming/Expressing Present Praxis — Participants name what is "going on" and "being done," including a sense of the operative values, meanings, and beliefs at work in the praxis.

Movement Two: Critical Reflection on Present Action — Participants analyze whether or not the action reflects the theories they presuppose, often utilizing cultural resources that impinge on their issue.

Movement Three: Making Accessible Christian Story/Vision — in contradistinction to having it imposed in a doctrinaire or 'banking' manner, participants are encouraged to have a personal encounter with the demands and promises of the Christian narrative of past and future.

Movement Four: Dialectical Hermeneutics to Appropriate Story/Vision to Participants' Stories and Visions — In this movement, three narratives collide: the narrative what we think is happening, of the proposed world God presents, and of our past experiences. Participants seek to align the story they tell by asking, "How does the Christian Story/Vision affirm, question, and call us beyond our present praxis?"

Movement Five: Decision/Response to Lived Christian Faith — the emphasis, like other methods, is on a concrete response of renewed Christian praxis, faithful to God's reign (not about a large master plan so much as a next faithful step ... trying something out as a new experimental praxis).

Despite the brevity of these descriptions, one can readily recognize how each method attempts to catalyze rigorous reflection that transforms local praxis. They prescribe concrete steps to overcome short-sighted perspective, faulty assumptions, and simplistic theological interpretation.

¹³ In fact, Norma Cooke Everist claims his "Shared Christian Praxis" model became the standard for action reflection. Cf. Norma Cooke Everist, *The Church As Learning Community: A Comprehensive Guide to Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 176.

¹⁴ Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry The Way of Shared Praxis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998). Out of all the methods summarized here, this method is most likely to be misunderstood because of the truncation caused by summation. While he uses very specific language in the naming of his movements, this language does not speak for itself so much as it invites the curious into a deeper understanding still.

As a result, a new or renewed praxis can emerge, one that changes the witness of the community involved so as to be more faithful and more fruitful.

Augmenting Methods: the Need for Competencies and Capacities

The practical theology methods outlined here not only contain common elements, but each one also makes a simple assumption; namely, that a process—a series of appropriate steps—is sufficient for achieving the desired ends. They may be variously labeled—stages, tasks, or movements—but they similarly presume that the process, faithfully enacted, will lead to ever-more-faithful praxis. This raises a series of questions: Is a faithful *process*, in and of itself, sufficient for achieving such ends? Will a community find their way forward simply by engaging in a different set of *actions*? Will it solely be a matter of changing what they *do* in the face of what seems to be an inadequate praxis?

There are reasons to believe the response to each of those questions should be negative in nature. A simple example should suffice: All these methods, especially shared praxis, require communities to engage in deep dialogue regarding issues where opinions differ and emotions run strong. Regardless of whether the community is trying to name present praxis, express God's intentions, or sort through the options for a new praxis, they will have to do the difficult work of wading through conflicting perspectives. This sort of dialogue requires a high level of emotional and spiritual maturity among those present (or at the very least, among a significant core). For instance, an immature community will struggle to name all the dynamics around their current praxis because participants do not want to hurt each other's feelings, especially if many of these dynamics often go unspoken. This inadequate naming will doom a method from the very start. In such circumstances, prescribing dialogue will be insufficient in and of itself. If the community desires fruitful outcomes from the process, they will first need to build their personal and

corporate capacity to dialogue. Without this capacity and other foundations present, the community's enactment of the practical theology method will fail to meet its fullest potential.

Some methods might assume such foundations are not necessary because the process itself accounts for weaknesses in the participants. However, it seems self-evident that the fruitfulness of any specific step in a practical theology method will be limited by a group's ability to execute that particular step as designed. Or to say it another way: the fruitfulness of the step will be directly proportional to their capacity to enact it. For example, Groome's method hinges on the ability of the community to articulate the Christian "Story/Vision." However, most lay people cannot articulate the Story (scripture, tradition, and church history) and Vision (the characteristics of the coming Reign of God) without substantial divergence, distortion, and deficiency.

In order to enact any of these methods to its fullest potential, a community will thus need a growing set of competencies and capacities. Most methods overlook the requisite qualities of those engaged in the process.¹⁵ They presume personal faculties that may not be present among individuals and fail to see that certain tasks may be impossible for the group to fulfill. It is not enough to enact the process in the face of a challenge. In addition to changing what they *do*, they will also have to change the way they *are*. Any method employed on the local level may only be implemented intermittently (when a current praxis needs to be re-evaluated or when a crisis has precipitated the need for action or change). In between times, communities can prepare to enter into each new iteration with ever-more-faithfulness by fostering those competencies and

¹⁵ It could also be said that changes in praxis require transformation of the very people engaging the praxis. This assertion derives from the language Heifetz uses to describe adaptive change—it requires people to change their "values, attitudes, or habits of behavior"—in other words, their very *way of being*, not just their way of *doing*. [Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 87.] But for the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to say that changes in praxis require transformation of the very people engaging the method.

capacities cultivate an environment that breeds both a readiness to enact the process and a capacity to do it well. Although strictly speculation at this point, a preliminary list of these elements may be attempted. A few items on this list have already been cited as examples.

A Preliminary List of Competencies and Capacities to Support PT Methods¹⁶

Ever-increasing Emotional Maturity — In any practical theology process, participants will need to have a series of hard conversations where opinions differ and emotions run strong. They will increase their collective capacity to have these conversations as they increase their individual emotional maturity (i.e., their ability to manage anxiety created by conflicting viewpoints).

Developing Skill with Dialogue – Most lay participants in a congregation have never received training in dialogue and thus, do not understand the basics, like how it differs from debate or discussion. Yet, this competency can be learned as people practice active listening and humble sharing.

Expanding Familiarity with the Christian Story and Vision – If communities want their action reflection to be fruitful, they cannot wait for the right stage in order to examine God's intentions. Instead, people need to be continually steeped in the Story and Vision. Collectively, a Christian community has to have a conversation in response to this question: "what is it going to look like when God's Reign is fully consummated?" In their shared understanding, they can live from the future forward.

Growing Aptitude for Cultural Exegesis – Since the theories embedded in praxis are not only theological in nature, communities also need to grow their ability to understand cultural influences. They cannot enter a process assuming this skill is present.

Increasing Ability to Surface and Test Mental Models – Most communities are unaware of the disparity between their espoused theology and present actions. Those communities that can surface and test faulty mental models and false consciousness will stand the best chance of experiencing fruitful outcomes.

A Communally-Discerned Covenant – Before entering a process, a group should communally discern how they will be together in the process. This will include how they will interact (with trust, respect, honesty, etc) and how they will discern (i.e. seek the Spirit, question everything, be data-driven, see the whole, etc.) Some methods are mindful of this while others fail to notice its importance.

¹⁶ A full list of competencies and capacities, including resources that would help communities foster them, is under development in a separate project.

While the development of these (and other) competencies and capacities will more than likely ensure the faithful and fruitful enactment of a PT method, emphasis on their necessity leads to an important question: How does one measure the point at which a group of people are adequately prepared to engage the method? When are these competencies and capacities sufficiently developed? If, for instance, such capacities regard emotional and spiritual maturity and if the journey to maturity in those matters is life-long, there is no point at which the people in a community will be perfectly prepared. Any method will, of necessity, be enacted by imperfect people at an imperfect time and thus, in an imperfect manner. To suggest otherwise is unrealistic. At some point, a community and its leaders will have to trust that the current level of preparation is adequate. Moreover, they will have to trust that the Spirit is at work in the process itself.

Acknowledging this does not detract from the importance of developing capacities, but only serves as a caution upon placing undue emphasis on the *completion* of those preparations. Instead, such efforts toward growing the internal capacities of a community must be ongoing and regular. Each act of capacity-building or competency-strengthening lends itself to the next iteration of praxis-renewing. Yet, a community need not relegate its efforts to one-off activities that are specifically dedicated to the development of these capacities and competencies. Instead, they can build development directly into the process itself.

Developmental Enrichment in Every Activity

Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey's latest book, *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization*, paints a picture of how this might play out in organizations like congregations.¹⁷ Although not directed to a religious audience, this text demonstrates how any organization can grow the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual maturity of

¹⁷ Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2016).

its people by ensuring every activity is developmentally enriched. In most institutions, personal development is an “add-on” that takes place in external settings with irregular frequency. Kegan and Lahey, alternatively, draw attention to the ways development can be woven into the fabric of an organization. For this to happen, leaders create a culture that is both demanding enough and safe enough for members to come out of hiding and experience the transformation of their greatest limitations in real time.

They contend that three dynamic elements must be simultaneously present for this to be possible. First, there must be an environment that features high aspirations for development, where it is assumed that adults can grow and that every event provides an opportunity to, as Kegan and Lahey aver, “get bigger.”¹⁸ They label this aspect *edge* because each person regularly identifies a growing edge. For people to be willing to accept the challenge associated with edge, the community must first create an atmosphere of shared trust and safety, which they call *home*. The ideal “home” for receiving challenge will feature a “well-held vulnerability,” their “term for feeling simultaneously as if you are the furthest thing from your most well-put-together self but you are still valued and included.”¹⁹ Finally, the organization must foster a set of practices that encourage ongoing development. Since these practices are built into the routine patterns of the organization, this final aspect is known as *groove*. Each aspect—edge, home, and groove—animates, strengthens, and reinforces the others. When all three are simultaneously present, an organization can be deliberately developmental; that is, they can ensure that every activity is developmentally enriched.

¹⁸ Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 62.

¹⁹ Kegan and Lahey, *An Everyone Culture*, 154.

This could have profound implications for those organizations engaging in a practical theology process. Instead of relying on preparation to build competencies and capacities, development of some of these skills and qualities could be built straight into the process itself. Each task, stage, or movement could be developmentally enriched such that people experience consistent changes in their way of being.

Deliberate Development in Ridder Church Renewal

The Ridder Church Renewal (Ridder) movement provides a good example. Ridder is an intense, multi-year process for pastors and lay leadership teams in the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC). The process encourages deep reflection on congregational praxis for the sake of missional (re)alignment. Moreover, it recognizes that the ability to enact the reflection content is directly dependent on the development of each person seeking to enact it. While the movement encourages periodic retreats for the sake of personal and congregational formation, its real power resides in the way every activity is developmentally enriched. Primarily, this happens by creating space for internal reflection in the midst of corporate reflection. Participants are asked provocative questions that stimulate growth.

Some of these questions take place toward the end (or in the middle) of an activity: For instance, one of the most oft-repeated of these questions is “How did you be?” This is a shorthand way of asking, “What was your *way of being* as we were *doing* that activity?” For instance, suppose a group of people from a particular Christian community engage in a conversation around their current engagement of local mission. Most PT methods assume the necessity of assessing the current situation. To make progress, organizations must know what is going on (Osmer) or be able to express their present praxis via a fearless inventory (Groome).

Thus, Ridder is not unique for having suggested such a conversation. The uncommon contribution of Ridder occurs as the conversation becomes developmentally enriched. At the end of such a conversation, after participants agree as to what was said about present praxis, participants might be asked, “How did you be?” – i.e., “What was your *way of being* as we were *doing* that activity?” To respond, they must step back and see themselves in action. Someone might say, “I shut down because I was scared of how people might react if they knew how I really felt.” Someone else might say, “I got anxious about the direction of the conversation and decided to intervene strongly in order to bring it back to where I wanted it to be.” Still another person might say, “I was engaged and seemed to be listening and speaking at the right times. That is, until Jack shared his opinion. Upon hearing it, I became enraged on the inside and wanted to scream at him. But nobody would have known that because externally, I just went silent.”

After this preliminary reflection, people are often coached in the moment. That is, they are asked, in a safe environment, to get slightly more vulnerable. In the process, they will mostly likely be asked deeper questions as to where their *way of being* originated and what God might be asking them to learn about themselves and their interaction with others. This internal work requires a deep level of self-awareness and depending on the way in which the reflection is processed, a deep level of authenticity with self and others. Inevitably, this leads to personal transformation in the participant. They grow in emotional maturity, in their capacity to engage in dialogue, in their sensitivity to the Spirit, and so on. The corporate reflection process is strengthened by the individual’s development process.

In addition to a question like “How did you be?” at the end of an activity, participants might be asked a question like “How are you showing up?” at the beginning of an activity. This

simple question makes the activity developmentally enriched, regardless of whether the activity involves cultural interpretation or the creative discernment of a new praxis. By growing self-awareness in the moment, the individual participants are more capable of engaging the activity with rigor, authenticity, diligence, and curiosity.

Conclusion

Practical theology and its associated methods exist for the sake of faithful change. Yet, as this paper has argued, there is reason to consider changing the way people prepare for change. It is not simply a matter of *doing* certain activities. It is about a transformation in *our way of being* so that our way of doing can be greatly strengthened. This requires the cultivation of competencies and capacities that are normally taken for granted in practical theology methods. A preliminary list of such skills and abilities includes an ever-increasing emotional maturity and growing spiritual maturity as well. The development of these (and other) competencies and capacities will lend itself to more desirable outcomes from the action-reflection process.

One way to ensure these are continually developed is to build developmental enrichment into the very activities themselves. This is difficult work that requires the creation of an environment that is both safe and demanding. Yet, Ridder Church Renewal demonstrates one way it is happening in religious organizations. In doing so, a community engages an action-reflection cycle in which they are continually reflecting on present praxis, and all the while, they reflect on their very own way of being. Thus, the action-reflection cycle not only renews the community's praxis, but also the community's people. Transformed and transforming people, in turn, lead transformational change in their respective settings.

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