with the tasks of clergy or the life of congregations. The scope of the field includes matters of public importance beyond the church, and often is directed toward shaping public policy and social transformation. In recent years, for example, van der Ven has led a research project on the attitudes of young people toward human rights, giving special attention to the impact of religion on these attitudes. Likewise, Browning recently led a research team that studied the American family and contributed to the highly charged political debate over family values in the United States. These are two of many examples in which practical theologians focus on matters important to the common good and not simply to the church. Indeed, I will argue in this book that the scope of practical theology comprehends the web of life.

It is important to point to the broad scope of contemporary practical theology at the outset, for it allows me to locate this book within the new discussion. The subject matter of this book is practical theological interpretation by the leaders of congregations. It is written for students in master of divinity and doctor of ministry programs, as well as for leaders currently serving congregations. This may appear to be a return to the older clerical paradigm of practical theology. This is not how I understand the matter, however.

Rather, the method of practical theology explored in this book, which includes descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic tasks, may be brought to bear on any issue worthy of consideration. This is apparent in the projects of van der Ven and Browning, noted above. Within the broad scope of contemporary practical theology, focusing on leadership in congregations is only one of many possible topics this field may take up. Yet teaching students and church leaders how to engage in practical theological interpretation is an important goal of theological education. The quality of leadership in congregations has much to do with their long-term prospects and their contribution to public life. This is the specific concern of the chapters that follow. While not the only topic worthy of consideration by contemporary practical theologians, it is an important one.

Finally, three matters of writing practice must be mentioned. First, the cases, events, and interviews appearing in this book are altered to protect the identity of the persons and communities involved. Second, instead of using the cumbersome practice of writing “he or she,” I alternate gender-specific pronouns, using “she/her” sometimes and “he/his” at other times. I have attempted to balance this equally over the course of the book. Finally, I have left all quotations from other writers in their original form, even when their lack of gender-inclusive language may grate on us today.

When my wife, Sally, and I graduated from divinity school, we were copastors of two yoked congregations in the mountains of eastern Tennessee. Our first child was born during our final semester, and since parenting was something we both thought important, we decided to share ministry. Eager but inexperienced, we somehow muddled through the messiness of blending marriage and ministry while living in a parsonage not far from one of our churches. It was a shock at first to hear someone call to you while walking into the Food Lion, “Hey, Preacher...”. As I recall, I was called this more than Sally — they didn’t quite know what to call a “lady preacher,” as they sometimes put it — until they discovered what a wonderful preacher and leader she was and is.

We learned a lot during these years about ourselves, our congregations, and mountain culture. We learned that many decisions in our churches were not made when the church council met but occurred down the road at the gas station restaurant where the farmers gathered for a cup of coffee after their morning chores. We learned the perils of navigating around the “hollers” to visit shut-ins, guided by landmarks like a big oak stump and a couple of rusted-out cars. One of us even had a very nice conversation with an elderly woman just out of the hospital, only to discover as we were leaving that she was Sylvia Leatherwood and we had set out to visit Edra Leatherwood. We learned there are Free Will Baptists, Primitive Baptists, and Premillennial Baptists, as well as Southern Baptists. We learned that
ministerial colleagues, with whom we sometimes conducted funeral services, would point to the casket and tell those gathered: “Right there, that’s why it’s time to get right with God. Not tomorrow, but this very minute. Don’t put it off, for there we all shall someday be.”

It was during those first years of ministry that I fell in love with Christian education. The summer lab schools at Lake Junaluska, an assembly ground of the United Methodist Church, had a lot to do with this. But what I learned about the importance of Christian education to the overall health and mission of a congregation also had something to do with it. One of our churches had been without a Sunday school for over twenty years. There were no families with children in the church, though a lot of young families lived in the area. So I set out to start a Sunday school, beginning with Nancy Boyd, the daughter-in-law of a long-term member. It took a while and all the creativity and energy Nancy and I could muster. But after two years we had a nursery, three age-level classes, and a youth group of young people from four churches. We gradually were becoming known as a church with a future and not just a past, a place with something to offer young families. We even put a swing set next to the covered picnic area where the children could play while the parents shared conversation and coffee after worship. In the past, the church used the picnic area only once a year for a barbecue during homecoming, a gathering of church friends and family.

Two weeks after the swing set was put in, I pulled into the church parking lot and noticed that something was not quite right. It was the sort of feeling you get when you walk into a familiar room and the pictures or TV has been moved. It took me a minute, but then I realized that the swing set was gone. I hurried out of my car and walked over to the picnic area. Sure enough, four freshly filled dirt holes were all that remained. I walked around to the back of the church building, and there was the swing set — now solidly cemented into its new home. It took a few days to find out what had happened, but this was a small town and nobody had secrets.

Mary Jo James, the longtime church treasurer, had hired some men to move the swing set in the dead of night. One of the men later told me, “She said to dig the holes deep and fill them with concrete. That’s what we did.” The parents were pretty mad. As one of them put it at the next church council meeting, “What kind of church is this? Don’t you want us here? Sneaking around in the middle of the night to do something like this?” The other church members were as puzzled and outraged as he was. They voted to put the swing set back in place, and suspended the meeting on the spot.

jumping in their trucks to go home for sledgehammers and shovels. Some of the men stayed long into the night taking turns breaking up the cement and digging up the swing set, returning it to its rightful place. The next day, it was solidly set in concrete.

The young people were appeased. I was told to visit Mary Jo James. This excited me about as much as a visit to the dentist for a root canal. But visit her I did. I had always liked Mary Jo and appreciated her work as treasurer of the church, a job she had carried out for fifteen years. I admit it did irritate me when she sometimes turned around to shush the children during worship. But more than once she had shared appreciation for the new members and their contribution to the finances of the church. I had no idea what was going on.

As I drove up to Mary Jo’s home, I noticed that she peeked out of the closed curtains to see who had pulled into her driveway. One knock and she was at the door, holding the ledgers in which she had carefully recorded the financial matters of the church over the years. “I quit,” she said, handing me the large stack of ledgers. “I’m quitting the church too. No sense in coming in. No way you’re going to change my mind.” She shut the door, leaving me standing on her porch weighed down with a pile of records lovingly kept for so many years.

I wish at that time I had known something about practical theology. I wish that at least one class of my theological education had given me the knowledge and skills to make sense of what I was experiencing. I realize, in ministry, experience is one of our most important teachers. But experiences like this one in which lives and years of work are at stake can leave us bewildered. Ministry, like life, can be stranger than fiction.

My goal in this book is to teach you a way of approaching situations like this one with at least some knowledge and skills in hand. I cannot promise that you will make the right decisions or take the right actions. Good ministry is never merely a matter of solving problems; it is a mystery to be ventured and explored. But we can journey into this mystery with knowledge and skills that help us find our way as we move along. Or we can stand where I did, on a porch with only my gut to tell me whether I should knock again or leave.
The Core Tasks of Practical Theological Interpretation

Chances are good, if you are the leader of a congregation, that you will someday run into a situation like this one. Over the course of this book we explore four questions that can guide our interpretation and response to situations of this sort:

What is going on?
Why is this going on?
What ought to be going on?
How might we respond?

Answering each of these questions is the focus of one of the four core tasks of practical theological interpretation:

- **The descriptive-empirical task.** Gathering information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations, or contexts.

- **The interpretive task.** Drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring.

- **The normative task.** Using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from “good practice.”

- **The pragmatic task.** Determining strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and entering into a reflective conversation with the “talk back” emerging when they are enacted.

Together, these four tasks constitute the basic structure of practical theological interpretation. I make no claim to originality in my description of these tasks. While the terms may differ, something like each of them is taught in clinical pastoral education, doctor of ministry courses, and courses on preaching, pastoral care, administration, Christian education, and evangelism in schools of theology. Moreover, pastors and church leaders carry out these tasks in ministry.

To see more clearly what each task involves, let us return to the case of the moved swing set. What is going on in this situation? This is the key question of the descriptive-empirical task of practical theological interpretation. Over the course of several weeks I was able to piece together Mary Jo James’s story. She married late in life after many years as a single woman who worked as an accountant for a local business. When Jimmy James’s first wife was killed in an automobile accident, Mary Jo was one of many church members who offered him support. A year later they were married. Mary Jo was too old at that point for children, but, by all accounts, they had ten happy years before James died of cancer. Not long after his death, Mary Jo gave money to the church for a covered picnic area in honor of her husband. Her church friends recall her saying at the time, “Jimmy never liked it much when they put those plaques in the church saying so-and-so had given the money for the ‘Leatherwood’ room. So I don’t want any kind of plaque on the picnic area. We’ll know in our hearts who we’re remembering. Jimmy always did like a good barbecue.” The problem was, as the years passed and new members joined, many people did not remember. They had no idea when the swing set was placed next to the picnic area that it would bother Mary Jo so deeply. Even her closest friends didn’t know how she felt — until she paid to have the swing set moved and the church was in an uproar.

Gathering information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics is the descriptive-empirical task of practical theological interpretation. Often, in ministry this takes place informally. In this case I sought out Mary Jo’s closest friends in the church and asked them to help me learn more of her story and what they thought might be going on. This information was helpful in placing her actions in a longer narrative framework. When Mary Jo allowed me to visit her several weeks later, I tried to gain more information about her perspective. By that time I knew she had given the money for the picnic area in honor of her husband, but I wanted to discern what this meant to her in her own words. How did she interpret the decision to put a swing set right next to the picnic area? While I was drawing her out, I also was listening with a “third ear,” as it is sometimes put in counseling. I attended to her feelings and body language. I looked for signs of depression or other psychological disorders. Beyond Mary Jo, I also began to attend more closely to what was going on in the church as a whole, paying particular attention to any signs of tension between the new, younger members and the long-term, older members.

Much of the time, congregational leaders carry out the descriptive-empirical task of practical theological interpretation along these lines, through informal information-gathering, careful listening, and looking
more closely at patterns and relationships that are taken for granted. Yet, many times leaders may desire to gather information in ways that are more systematic. They might like to build up a demographic profile of new families moving into their area. They might want to develop a clearer picture of what the young people are getting out of confirmation or to evaluate the entire adult education program. A new pastor may decide that she needs to work hard during the first year at understanding her congregation's "culture," using the research activities of congregational studies. A pastor long in a church may believe that his preaching is growing stale and desire ways of discovering life issues his members really care about. There are many reasons for congregational leaders to learn how to carry out the descriptive-empirical task of practical theological interpretation in a more systematic and disciplined fashion. The first chapter will explore further some of these reasons and offer an introduction to research projects and approaches.

Once I had discerned some of the important patterns and dynamics surrounding the swing set episode, I needed to step back and make sense of what I had found. Why did this incident take place? What sorts of theories might help me better understand and explain the patterns and dynamics I had begun to discover? These are the key questions of the interpretive task of practical theological interpretation. At least three lines of interpretation come to mind, two of which I saw at the time and one I detected in hindsight.

While I grew up in North Carolina, my family lived in a midsized city. I attended a state university and a divinity school in the Northeast. My ministry in these congregations, thus, was my first exposure to the mountain culture of eastern Tennessee. Of the many things I learned about this culture that may be relevant to the interpretation of this situation, one thing particularly comes to mind: the honoring of the patriarchs and matriarchs in families, churches, and local communities. This takes place through storytelling, homecomings, memorials, statues, and other rituals and symbolic markers. Such activities and monuments are important ways of building corporate identity and maintaining ties with the past. It is likely that Mary Jo invested the picnic area with this kind of symbolic importance. Treating it casually and altering it without consulting her was, in her mind, quite literally the desecration of holy ground. The cultural context in which this event took place, thus, is an important line of interpretation.

It also is possible to interpret this incident in terms of family systems theory, which has been extended to congregations in the writings of Edwin Friedman and others. In family systems theory, individuals sometimes are portrayed as playing the role of the "identified patient," expressing the pain of the family system as a whole. It is quite possible that Mary Jo's "acting out" was expressing tensions within the system of the church family. Changes were taking place in the church, largely driven by the younger and newer members. These included changes in programming, worship, outreach, and administration. It may be that Mary Jo was not alone in feeling left out and unappreciated. The congregational context, thus, is a second line of interpretation worth considering.

Finally, what of Mary Jo herself, in terms of her stage in life and individual biography? Until midlife she lived as a single woman, which in this setting carried something of a stigma. Her marriage to a patriarch of the church and a man of land and wealth issued, not only in an altered social status, but also, in her words, in "the happiest years of my life." When Jimmy died, her most important social network was her friends in the church. Her work as treasurer made her an insider whom key leaders consulted regularly. The fact that no one recognized the significance of the picnic area to Mary Jo may have felt like a blow to the most important relationships in which she was invested. As a widow facing the early stages of old age, these relationships were more important than ever. A psychological line of interpretation, thus, also is worth considering.

Other fruitful lines of interpretation also might be explored. But enough has been said to illustrate the importance of different kinds of theories that bring into focus different dimensions of this situation. The interpretive task of practical theological interpretation draws on theories of this sort to better understand and explain why certain events are occurring. In chapter 2 we examine this task in greater depth, and will offer

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model that will help you analyze and assess theories that may be helpful in your interpretation of particular episodes, situations, and contexts.

The use of theories from other fields like anthropology and psychology is an important part of practical theological interpretation. Such theories, however, can take congregational leaders only so far. As members of the Christian community, they face further questions: What ought to be going on? What are we to do and be as members of the Christian community in response to the events of our shared life and world? These questions lie at the heart of the normative task of practical theological interpretation. In chapter 3 this task will be portrayed as threefold. First, it involves a style of theological reflection in which theological concepts are used to interpret particular episodes, situations, and contexts. In light of what we know of God, how might God be acting? What are the fitting patterns of human response? Second, it involves the task of finding ethical principles, guidelines, and rules that are relevant to the situation and can guide strategies of action. Third, it involves exploring past and present practices of the Christian tradition that provide normative guidance in shaping the patterns of the Christian life.

At the time of the swing set incident, I probably reflected less on this task than on the others. My theology classes in divinity school had focused primarily on church doctrine, giving me little practice in using theology to interpret particular incidents or contexts. Looking back, I can discern a number of theological concepts I might have used to help the congregation interpret these events but will offer only one here. I also can discern an ethical stance that implicitly informed the actions I undertook.

If I was correct in interpreting Mary Jo’s “acting out” as indicative of broader tensions in the church family as it began to change, then this might have been interpreted theologically with the concept of the people of God. More than the organic concept, body of Christ, it implies movement through time, the journey of God’s people into new circumstances and God’s faithfulness in the midst of change.4 Throughout Scripture we find God’s people recalling stories of God’s action in the past, which allow them to discern ways God may act in the present and future.5 A key dy-

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namic is at work here. The recitals of God’s actions in events like the exodus and wilderness wanderings provide identity descriptions of God. Yet these very descriptions of God’s identity are reinterpreted to articulate the new thing God is doing and will do as the people of God continue on their journey.

Normatively, thus, one of my tasks in this situation might have been to encourage this congregation to see itself as God’s people who can trust that God will travel with them as they begin to change and journey toward the future. This opens up certain strategic lines of thinking: preaching and teaching the stories of Scripture in which God’s people recall God’s actions in the past to guide them in time of change and crisis. I also would have done well to discover stories of the congregation’s history when it faced changes or crises and the understandings of God that sustained it in such times. I might have drawn on and reinterpreted these understandings to portray the new stage of its journey as God’s people.

It is worth noting in passing that gathering stories of the congregation’s past leads me back to the descriptive-empirical task. Moreover, I was directed to the concept of the people of God on a journey by my interpretation of the swing set incident as indicative of tension in the church family. This sort of interaction between the tasks of practical theological interpretation is common. They interpenetrate in the living practice of ministry. It also is worth noting that making sense of this episode impacts many forms of ministry. It influences the pastoral care offered Mary Jo, my preaching and teaching, and the administrative approaches I might have used.

I did not in fact engage in this sort of theological interpretation at the time. But in retrospect, I wish I had. Rather, my actions were guided by an implicit theological ethic, an ethic of reconciliation. Even here, however, I worked more intuitively than with the guidance of a clear ethical principle. My thinking at the time went something like this: it is wrong for this long-time church member, who has given so much over the years and is now a widow, to be estranged from the community; this is not the kind of church God wants us to be. I wish I had thought about this incident in terms of an explicit ethic of reconciliation, which has important implications for the congregation’s attitude toward Mary Jo. It cannot simply write her off as a stubborn old-timer standing in the way of progress. It must strive for some sort of reconciliation. This is what God has called the church to do and be.

Without the clear guidance of theological interpretation or ethical principles, I coped with this incident as best I could. I strategized with
Mary Jo’s friends about how to best reach out to her. I also began to realize that I needed to do a much better job of honoring the contributions of the older, long-term members of the congregation in public events and interpersonal communication. Moreover, I began to realize that this congregation offered its members very few resources with which to deal with conflict. It had long bothered me that two members of the congregation whose farms adjoined, with mailboxes only ten feet apart, were caught up in a feud that had begun more than ten years earlier. They literally would not speak to one another! When Mary Jo quit the church, I worried that she might respond in the same way. Bad blood could last a long time in this community. Why had the congregation never taught its members how to resolve its differences in the spirit of Christian love? Or, as I might put it today, why were there no practices of reconciliation present in the church? Exploring models of “good practice” might have provided normative guidance in my leadership of the church.

These kinds of issues open out to the pragmatic task of practical theological interpretation. How might we respond in ways that are faithful and effective? The pragmatic task focuses on strategies and actions that are undertaken to shape events toward desired goals. In chapter 4 we give special attention to the sort of leadership required in situations like the one we have been following. Such leadership requires competence in ministerial tasks like preaching, teaching, administration, and pastoral care. But it involves more. It takes leaders who can see things “whole,” leaders who think in terms of the entire congregational system and the church’s relationship to its context.

We now have before us an outline of the central argument of this book. Practical theological interpretation involves four key tasks: the descriptive-empirical, the interpretive, the normative, and the pragmatic. It is helpful to conceptualize these four tasks with the image of a hermeneutical circle, which portrays interpretation as composed of distinct but interrelated moments. As we have begun to see, the four tasks of practical theological interpretation interpenetrate. Problems emerging in the pragmatic task may open up issues that need to be explored empirically. Theories used to interpret particular events may bring to the fore issues calling for normative reflection. The interaction and mutual influence of all four tasks distinguish practical theology from other fields. The social sciences, for example, do not develop normative theological perspectives to interpret research and, often, do not attempt to shape the field they are investigating. Yet the normative and pragmatic tasks are central to practical theology as an academic discipline.

Often, thus, it is helpful to think of practical theological interpretation as more like a spiral than a circle. It constantly circles back to tasks that have already been explored. Interpreting the congregation’s relationship to Mary Jo with an ethic of reconciliation might have led me to look again at how the congregation handles conflict, the descriptive-empirical task. Practical theological interpretation often circles back like a spiral as insights emerge.

Before proceeding, it may be helpful to clarify three categories used repeatedly in this introduction: episodes, situations, and contexts. I use these categories throughout to distinguish different focal points of practical theological interpretation. They are a convenient way of differentiating units of time and space that are increasingly comprehensive.

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7. While some social scientists do conduct and interpret research in ways that are value-laden, this almost never is based on a theological perspective. Moreover, some view their research as contributing to the common good and offer proposals to this end. My point is that theological, ethical, and pragmatic dimensions are central to practical theological interpretation, distinguishing it from the social sciences. When social scientists include ethical and pragmatic dimensions in their work, practical theology may overlap these features, intersecting them in some ways while diverging in others.
An episode is an incident or event that emerges from the flow of everyday life and evokes explicit attention and reflection. It occurs in a single setting over a short period of time. An episode describes what took place on Mary Jo’s front porch when I called on her. A situation is the broader and longer pattern of events, relationships, and circumstances in which an episode occurs. It often is best understood in the form of a narrative in which a particular incident is located within a longer story. As the ramifications of moving the swing set unfolded over time and included more people, they are best described as a situation.

A context is composed of the social and natural systems in which a situation unfolds. A system is a network of interacting and interconnected parts that give rise to properties belonging to the whole, not to the parts. The congregation as an organizational system is one of the contexts in which the swing set situation unfolded. But this system is nestled within other systems that are local, regional, national, and global. Context, thus, serves a flexible purpose, calling attention to micro- and macrosystems that are relevant to a given case. Moreover, systems are open and dynamic. They are influenced by other systems. Contextual analysis, thus, is an important dimension of practical theological interpretation.

Practical Theological Interpretation: A Bridge Concept

It may also be helpful at the outset to clarify my use of the term “practical theological interpretation.” I use this term to indicate three corollaries of my central argument about the fourfold nature of practical theology: (1) practical theological interpretation takes place in all the specialized subdisciplines of practical theology; (2) the same structure of practical theological interpretation in academic practical theology characterizes the interpretive tasks of congregational leaders as well; (3) acknowledging the common structure of practical theological interpretation in both the academy and ministry can help congregational leaders recognize the interconnectedness of ministry.

Bridging the Subdisciplines of Academic Practical Theology

The first corollary makes the claim that the basic structure of practical theological interpretation is common to all the specialized subdisciplines of practical theology. Attention to the four tasks outlined above takes place in preaching, pastoral care, evangelism, spirituality, Christian education, and other ministerial practices.

Preaching, for example, gives special attention to the interpretation of biblical texts and to proclamation on the basis of this interpretation in the context of worship. As such, it carries out a task that is inherently normative. Yet preaching does not take place in a vacuum. Sermons are crafted with an eye to a particular group of people on a specific occasion in a particular congregational context. Today, many prominent voices in preaching are attending to the cultural and congregational context in which preaching takes place — what I have called the descriptive-empirical and interpretive tasks. Moreover, sermons are performed through bodily gestures and patterns of speech; they use certain forms that offer listeners something to feel, think about, and do during the preaching event. They strive to evoke the imaginations of hearers. The artistry of preaching warrants precisely the sort of strategic thinking and acting brought into focus by the pragmatic task.

The basic structure of practical theological interpretation is found in the other subdisciplines of practical theology as well. This is not to say that preaching, Christian education, pastoral care, and other forms of ministry are identical. Each focuses on a particular task of ministry, which involves specific practices, skills, and concepts. But it is to say that they overlap in significant ways and share a common structure of practical theological interpretation.

Bridging the Academy and Ministry

The second corollary of my central argument makes the claim that the same structure of practical theological interpretation informing academic practical theology characterizes the interpretive tasks of congregational leaders.

leaders as well. As we saw in the discussion of the case study, pastors and other leaders face the focal questions of the four tasks of practical theological interpretation: What is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond? A key pedagogical task of practical theology courses is to educate students in ways that prepare them to carry out practical theological interpretation in their future ministries.

The importance of this sort of preparation is something I learned firsthand when my mother was in a car accident. The accident occurred only a few blocks from my parents’ home. My father was driving them on some errands when a car in front of them suddenly braked and my father could not stop in time. My mother’s head snapped forward and hit the dashboard. She was taken to the hospital and appeared to be fine, so my parents returned home. But later that night she lost consciousness and was rushed to the hospital where she was placed on life support. When my father called, he was so upset that I could barely make out what had happened. I flew home early the next morning and suddenly confronted a life-or-death situation. The accident had precipitated a subdural hematoma in which blood was trapped between the brain and the skull. This is particularly dangerous for older adults on blood thinners like my mother.

My father was emotionally distraught. I was very fortunate that the pastor of my parents’ church, in which I was raised, arrived at the hospital only minutes after I did. He was present when the doctor later told us that my mother had suffered massive damage to all parts of her brain and that her prospects were not good. The doctor recommended keeping her on life support for a few days to see if she showed any signs of recovery. I heard the doctor’s words, but I needed to have our pastor interpret them for me later in the waiting room. When it became clear that my mother would not recover and that the life-support systems were taking over basic functions like breathing, I needed this pastor to help me let go of my mother, reminding me of the certainty of God’s love in life and death. He noticed that it really bothered me that I had not been able to tell her good-bye. So together, we entered her room and confronted her body, suspended precariously over the precipice of life and death on the slender threads of so many tubes and machines. Lifted up by this pastor’s strength, I talked to my mother and we prayed over her. When the life support was removed later that week and my mother died, I was sustained by what we had done; I was also sustained by the beautiful funeral sermon this pastor later preached.

Introduction: Four Tasks of Practical Theology

It is only with the passing of many years that I can look back at this experience and see how this pastor carried out the tasks of practical theological interpretation. I was very fortunate to have a minister educated in pastoral care along these lines, seasoned by years of experience. Not only did he draw out the story of what had happened, but he also was there to interpret for me the doctor’s diagnosis and prognosis. He helped me realize that in the midst of this crisis my father was too distraught to face the decisions before us and that I needed to take over more of this role than I ordinarily might have. He interpreted these terrible circumstances biblically and theologically without any jargon. He gently reminded us of the promises of God and asked us to stand on these promises. He recognized my need to say good-bye and led me to actions that allowed me to do so.

I offer this very personal story to underscore the importance of ministry adept in practical theological interpretation. Theological education that equips leaders to carry this out is engaged in far more than an academic exercise. It is preparing people to provide leadership in the face of life-or-death decisions.

The Web of Life: The Interconnectedness of Ministry

The third corollary of my argument makes the claim that acknowledging the common structure of practical theological interpretation in both academic practical theology and ministry can prepare congregational leaders to recognize the interconnectedness of ministry. In the personal example just described, it was no accident that the pastor who offered such helpful pastoral care also preached just the right sermon for our situation. Ministry in its various forms is interconnected.

Unfortunately, many contemporary schools of theology do not prepare leaders to grasp these interconnections. This is a by-product of specialization in the academy, which has resulted in sharp divisions between scholarly fields and subject areas in the curriculum. In practical theology this often results in courses that focus exclusively on one form of ministry like preaching, pastoral care, or Christian education. What gets lost in this educational pattern is the interconnectedness of ministry in the congregational system and the congregation’s interaction with its context.

A helpful perspective on this issue is offered by pastoral theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore. She describes the focus of practical theological
Interpretation as the "living human web," drawing attention to various forms of interconnection. Just as the strands of a spider's web are interconnected, so too are the bonds that link individuals, families, congregations, communities, and larger social systems. This image also reminds us of the World Wide Web, which creates information flows connecting individuals, communities, and systems around the world.

Miller-McLemore develops this image, in part, to correct the individualistic, therapeutic focus of pastoral care in the past century. This is too narrow, she argues, for it does not attend to the interconnections between individual crises and broader patterns in families and communities, which often create such crises in the first place. Pastoral care, thus, does more than offer healing, sustaining, and guiding to individuals in need, the widely influential definition of Seward Hiltner. Rather, it attends to the web of relationships and systems creating suffering through ministries of compassionate resistance, empowerment, nurturance, and liberation.

I want to extend Miller-McLemore's helpful image with the work of Fritjof Capra. Capra reminds us that social systems are located in an interconnected web of natural systems. It is important, thus, to think in terms of the web of life, not just the living human web. Capra offers a "new synthesis" of the life sciences in which living systems share three characteristics: a pattern of organization, structures that embody this pattern, and processes by which a living system takes in, transforms, and creates output in its interactions with other systems, renewing its own pattern and structures as it does so. These characteristics are found in all living systems— from cells to organisms to social systems to the entire planetary system. Moreover, living systems are nested in other systems, which together make up the web of life.

The concept of the web of life extends Miller-McLemore's initial insight and proves helpful to our understanding of practical theological interpretation in three ways. First, it reminds us that focusing exclusively on individuals is too limited. We must think in terms of interconnections, relationships, and systems. Miller-McLemore's critique of the individualistic focus of recent pastoral care is applicable to other forms of ministry as well. Second, this image draws attention to the interconnection of various forms of ministry. Experienced pastors are the first to recognize that their preaching is deeply connected to the level of biblical literacy they can presuppose in the pulpit, fostered by the teaching ministry. This, in turn, is connected to the quality of Christian education offered in the home, which, in turn, is related to parents' spirituality, and so forth. Ministerial tasks are part of an interdependent whole. Third, this image reminds us that congregations are embedded in a web of natural and social systems beyond the church. When health-care systems force the elderly to choose between buying medicine or food, this impacts the congregation's care of older adults and its mission as an advocate of justice. When a small town's zoning commission is controlled by real estate developers, resulting in numerous strip malls and housing developments that reduce the wetlands, pollute the air, and overload the sewage system, local churches are caught up in these changes, whether they like them or not. Taking account of the web of natural and social systems in which congregations are situated is an important part of practical theological interpretation. Systems are nested within systems. Practical theological interpretation, thus, is deeply contextual. It thinks in terms of interconnections, relationships, and systems.

To summarize, practical theological interpretation is an important bridge concept in this book. It creates a bridge between the subdisciplines of academic practical theology and between the academy and the church. It draws attention to the web of life in which ministry takes place. This perspective potentially opens up a new way of thinking about congregational


10. For an excellent example of pastoral care that takes account of this living human web, see Pamela Couture, Blessed Are the Poor: Women's Poverty, Family Policy, and Practical Theology (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).


leadership that integrates the various tasks of that leadership. This is found in the model of the congregational leader as interpretive guide.

Congregational Leaders as Interpretive Guides

While a doctoral student at Emory University, I had the good fortune of studying with the pastoral theologian Charles Gerkin. I was his research assistant while he was writing The Living Human Document, and he later was a member of my dissertation committee.¹⁵ One of Gerkin’s most important contributions in the final part of his career was to develop a new model of pastoral leadership: the pastor as interpretive guide.¹⁶

In part, this model reflects the movement away from a hierarchical view of pastoral authority in many churches and denominations during the modern period. The social trends that brought this about include the following:

1. The rise of public education during the nineteenth century and the expansion of high school and college education during the twentieth century. Pastors are no longer the most highly educated persons in their communities. Indeed, they often have far less social status than other professionals like doctors, psychiatrists, and lawyers.

2. The spread of democratic values and governments over the past two centuries, which encourage people to think for themselves and hold authorities accountable, including pastoral leaders.

3. Greater cultural pluralism in many Western nations, including religious, lifestyle, and ethnic diversity. People have freedom to choose whether or not they will affiliate with a religious community and how much or how little they will participate. Pastors no longer automatically have special authority because everyone goes to church. Rather, they must “earn” their authority.

4. The secularization of modern institutions, which pressures religion to remain in the private sphere of personal meaning and family life. This compartmentalization of religion to a very narrow sphere of life results in the perception that pastors have neither the right nor the competence to address issues in other areas of life, like work, politics, public education, and so forth.

Gerkin argues that these trends created a new social context in which “the pastor’s right to be heard and taken seriously is defined more in terms of the parishioner’s perception of both the reasonable wisdom . . . of what is said and the quality of relationship communicated.”¹⁷ As he notes, this is not altogether a negative development. What pastors lost in hierarchical authority, they gained in access to the everyday experiences and problems of ordinary people. Too often in the past, people hid their personal issues and questions from the pastor and put on their “best Christian face.” In our present social context, Gerkin believes, “a relationship of mutual exploration and reflective consideration of options may be possible” between pastor and people, facilitating greater freedom and honesty on both sides.¹⁸ It is this new understanding of pastoral authority that Gerkin seeks to capture in his model of the pastor as interpretive guide, a kind of “master model” that runs across and, potentially, integrates the various tasks ministers carry out. Both sides of this model are important: the leader as guide and as interpreter.

We often think of a guide as someone who plays a key role in an outdoor vacation, like rafting down the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. The guide has traveled the route many times and knows where the most dangerous rapids and the best places to stop for the night are located. She also must be a good judge of the people on a particular trip — their physical capabilities, stamina, and prior rafting experience. All this is implied in Gerkin’s model of interpretive guide, with one important difference. The pastoral guide does not take people on the same old trip but travels with them into new territory. Together, they must learn the lay of the land and


¹⁷ Gerkin, Widening the Horizons, p. 99.

¹⁸ Gerkin, Widening the Horizons, p. 99.